The Silent Vernacular: 
A Personal Study Into the Meaning in 
Architecture 
An Architectural Thesis 
by Brian A. Hauff
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The Silent Vernacular:
A Personal Study Into the Meaning in Architecture

An Architectural Thesis

by
Brian Alan Hauff

"A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Architecture"

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Submission of Paper
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Brian A. Hauff

Statement of Permission to Copy
I am in debt to a great many people I have come to know the past four years in Montana. I have learned a great deal about myself since I left school at Minnesota (I was not accepted to their school of architecture). I guess I thank everyone for giving me a chance when I needed it. I thank my roommates for putting up with my moodiness and critical spirit; I thank Sean for his discipline (I hope some of it will rub off on me) and Mike for introducing me to William Stafford and his poetry. I thank the professors I have had for their insight. I thank the many people I have the honor to call my friends, especially Neil, Van and the first person I met in Montana: Jade. I thank my parents and sister for always being there for me. Finally, I thank the One who brought me here in the first place, Jesus Christ: my Shepherd and my best Friend.

Acknowledgments
"The world is collapsing around our ears...
I turn on the radio,
so I can't hear it..."

"Radio Song"
-- R.E.M. 1991

The quotes used in this article are chosen to show how I am exploring the meaning of architecture to me at this time. It seems to me that from the media to every other facet in our society we have reached a crossroads. A crossroads that has us stumped. How did we get where we are right now (in both society in general and in architecture)? Where are we going and why? These are the sorts of questions that I need to demystify for myself. I have researched from different sources (philosophers to preachers to composers to poets) and different types of sources (essays, devotionals, poetry, film, television, music, etcetera). I have tried to be as open and as honest as possible with the use of my sources, always quoting to the best of my knowledge in the context of what has been written; though as with any human being, I have my biases due to my experiences, what I have learned to be true in myself and others and my ‘worldview’ or how I find meaning in our existence as human beings.

This thesis to me, therefore, is a culmination of all these things. In architectural terms I am searching for the 'silent vernacular'. In terms of my life, I am coming to grips with how I can and cannot positively make a difference in my world through the realm of architecture.
the silent vernacular

1

Quiet and composed standing in integrity, Whispers
Of a life long forgotten.
Simplicity in life and form:
Desired by many,
Known by few.
Hoarfrost and fog and weathered wood on the prairie.
The craft and precision of old callous hands, Beaten
not broken.
Building the same way he leads his life:
Quiet and composed.

2

The building now much older, forgotten, sits in decay
The man now much older, forgotten, sits
watching television.
What happened?

3

The man peers out of a window to the building.
He remembers not as much the place
as the essence,
Not as much the wood itself
as the texture,
Not as much its purpose,
    as the afterglow at twilight.
The silent vernacular...

Quiet and composed.
There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.

— Thomas Aquinas

I'm so full of feeling
I'm so full of feeling
I can easily believe
I must be sentimental.
But when I mull this over,
I see it's all in thought,
I felt nothing whatever.

All of us spend
One life living it,
Another, thinking it.
And the only life we have
Is split between
The true one and the false.

But which is true
And which is false
Nobody can explain.
And as we go on living,
The life we spend's the one
That's doomed to thinking.

— Fernando Pessoa

My Thoughts
So the reader may ask, "What does any of this have to do with architecture?" The answer is it has everything to do with architecture!

My most memorable vision of the silent vernacular is the family farm on the prairie. The family farm has the sort of qualities that can be defined best for me in the built form as an agrarian acropolis or an "agropolis". In much the same way the Acropolis of Athens, Greece sets itself apart from the rest of the city, the family farm in middle America separates itself from the land encompassing it. Amidst the rolling plains, this bastion of civilization and humanity would settle greeting its passersby in much the same neighborly attitude that is given the estranged and lost in hospitality. The value of belonging, home and family run deep.

This past week [12-20-91], some friends and I drove around eastern South Dakota. Though I was born and raised here, some of these county highways were completely foreign to my memory. As we drove, the view seemed to go on to infinity and the only objects in the distance were trees, an occasional water tower and a more frequent grainery. One small town that I remember had a grainery as the tallest structure in the town as well as the tallest object for miles. For what seemed like hours, nearer and nearer we approached the grainery as we drove down our two lane road. It gave me a taste of the silent vernacular. The grainery's place was secure, though the town surrounding it like many in the midwest was dying. I have a friend who worked for the census bureau in 1990. From his findings, South Dakota's population is the same now as it was in 1920. At that time scores of towns thrived. Their growth came
from homesteaders from back east or maybe immigrants like my family – Germans who lived in the Ukraine near the Black Sea. Since then, the lure of the city and the lack of any promising future for most young people has driven them away.

Should we as architects be happy at the change, bringing America's brightest students to the cities in the name of progress leaving the backward small town life with out-of-date values? I don't really know. Then again, what does any of this have to do with architecture, anyway?

In the same time span, though not directly related, as our small towns and farms have dried up and the life of the silent vernacular with them, our values have changed drastically, mostly for the worse. In the same way, the human exodus from small town middle America, with its old fashioned ways and values, escapes to the fast paced urban scene; the buildings left behind show the effects of neglect, a lack of care for things past, a reflection of the devaluation of the human being.

The philosopher Jean Baudrillard has some rare insight into our society in America and an understanding of how we as a society in America got to the point we are today. In his book, *Simulations*, Baudrillard takes a look at society from the enlightenment of the Renaissance to the present. He sees three distinct levels of precession in thought: first is the era of counterfeit which is representing or copying of an original. This process was by hand, one at a time and slow. This era lasted generally from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution.

The second precession in thought is the era of (re)production. With the Industrial Revolution came mass production which was meant to make our lives easier and more efficient. Walter Benjamin calls this a change in the value of things: from that of a cult value (e.g. a fixed statue in a temple) to that of an exhibition value or a mercantile law of value (e.g. like that of a mechanically reproduced painting). The change is profound: from one of value of an object in a set atmosphere to one of value by how many exact copies can be made and sold in no set atmosphere. In architecture it is a transformation from that of the 'Arts & Crafts' mentality to one of the 'building as machine' mentality. This change occurred not only in objects, but also in people and how they view themselves. From something having character and personality as an automaton of the original (counterfeit), the object is a robot with no personality and only purpose is that of work: (re)production.
Instead of promoting individuality, it promotes the masses. The worker in the era of (re)production loses all identity in the scheme of things. The silent movie Metropolis filmed in the late 1920's portrays the future in such a way. Personal issues are compromised for the betterment of the whole and of utility. The leading thinkers of this time made this clear: Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and John Stuart Mill. Though at times, their thoughts were taken out of context (e.g. social Darwinism), these thinkers reflect the wide range of thought of the time.

As the Second World War came to a close and the Cold War began, a third precession in thought emerged called the era of simulacra. This begins with the use of the computer, the binary code of 0/1. It is a change from a world of (re)production in pure series to that of a non-origin "operational configuration"--from a mercantile law of value to a structural law of value: a hyperreal. "Digitality is its metaphysical principle (the God of Liebniz), and DNA its prophet." [Baudrillard p.103] It is the land of scenographic episodes, sound-bytes, question/answer, feedback, the 0/1.

"The very definition of the real has become that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction...The real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal...which is entirely in simulation." [Baudrillard, back cover]

This binary of 0/1 is the "tactical doubling of monopoly". In all domains duopoly is the final stage of monopoly: economics, world co-existance, democrat or republican, the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City: binary regulation. Walter Benjamin speaks of this hyperreality in the former Soviet Union:

All this can be easily applied to the film, where transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade. In cinematic practice, particularly in Russia, this change-over has partially become established reality. Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves—and primarily in their own work process. [Benjamin p.232]

In America something similar has occurred—television shows that create a dramatazation of events that actually happened. Instead of informing the public about the events of the world, this hyperreality is acted out for our
enjoyment. The loss of life, defamation of character, etcetera becomes intriguing and entertaining statistically, and yet the actual reality is that someone has been murdered, someone’s private life has been destroyed by the media, etcetera. Our world would be a very different place if we did not have to deal with the simulated reality of television. [See Appendix A: Note 1]

Christian Bergum speaks of how simulacra has saturated nearly every facet of our lives:

*In society the precession of simulacra can be found engendering the populace. Most notably in political life, the polls that beforehand were merely representation of popular opinion, now precede the final vote cast. The polls engender the populace, and the populace feeds the polls, and who is to say which has influenced which more when the final decision is cast. Instant feedback, question/answer, become not the modes of disseminating reality, but become hyperrealities without origin and are themselves exchanged for the real. Everywhere in society and art there is simulation, except in architecture. Soon the precession of simulacra may determine the future character of contemporary architecture as well.*

[Montana Architectural Review, p. 30]

In trying to design the silent vernacular, we can become frustrated because in many ways it is more foreign to our lives and way of thinking than that of the hyperreal, the sham: "drive thru architecture". We need to ask the question, "why?". Why am I designing in this manner and is it valid or not? Am I addressing the *essence* of architecture or just superficially skimming the surface? Do I desire to design drive thru or strip architecture and if so, why am I wasting my time thinking about people or places or materials since they are all irrelevant anyway? Maybe drive thru architecture is *the* ideal, which in many ways it is the truest paradigm of simulacra in architecture we have. Because of a lack of integrity and a desire for higher profits, drive thru design is for our convenience the same design nearly everywhere, guaranteed delivery in thirty minutes or less, bastardizing an already illegitimate hyperreal landscape where actors on television are intimately more
real to us than our next door neighbors. Appearance and performance are the only things that give people value, right? We are evolving into more intelligent life forms, right? Simulacra is our savior...Then again, "why ask why?"

The silent vernacular should not be a nostalgic and trite yearning for the way things were, but for a significance in our lives as well as our architecture that is timeless. Christopher Alexander seems to me to be one of the most honest theorists when it comes to speaking of "the quality without a name". He does not assume he has achieved this quality in every project or in any one project. He does say that showing precedents that are only a vague resemblance to this quality are more harmful than good. The silent vernacular is the same way. It is not meant to stress a certain time or place, but those qualities which have been with human beings from time immemorial. A quiet confidence in a faith far greater than our finite selves.

We as human beings have totally lost touch with what is real. One of the reasons I feel it is so difficult for us to "be ourselves" is because we have never had a real grasp of who we are or who we were created to be in the first place. We all have our masks to hide who we really are; we are afraid of showing who we really are and becoming vulnerable for fear of rejection, embarrassment, whatever. The silent vernacular, when listened to intently, speaks to us in the same way. As my poem tries to illustrate, the silent vernacular has an honesty and an integrity about it. In our culture of glitz and pomp, we have missed this essence. Whether we want to admit it or not, simulacra has to some extent distorted our view of reality, so it is essential that we step back and evaluate where we are on a personal level first. Integrity as a human being as well as an architect is not inborn; integrity is learned. To grasp the design of the real, the silent vernacular, is to look into one's soul. Simulacra of today thrive off of reputation. The silent vernacular is only concerned with character. A wise man once said, "reputation is what people think you are...character is who you are...". The character of human beings and the essence of the silent vernacular both involve sacrifice.

The silent vernacular can be a philosophy about life as much as a way to finding meaning in architecture. It is, however, a way to bring fun back into design and learn a
little about our selves as well. It gives us not a list of do's and don't's but the very opposite: a marvelous freedom with the challenging responsibility of contextual substance and purpose. It is appropos to designing the urban edge of middle America - a dying and integral treasure of our society and civilization.

Here is what people have said about this essence, this silent vernacular:

"...an architecture that stands against, or in contrast to, the culture-wide trend to ephemeralization and relativism - as a kind of last bastion of dumb reality and foil to it all - constitutes the more appropriate, timely, and potentially more esthetic response. This, of course, is my position, and my plea."

— Michael Benedikt, p.64

"...In the past, human life was intimately related to things and places. In spite of hardship and social injustice, man generally had a sense of belonging and identity. They experienced a world of qualities and meanings. Thus it became a common world, which formed a basis for sharing and participation. 'To our grandparents,' Rilke says, 'a house, a well, a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their cloak still meant infinitely more, were infinitely more intimate,—almost everything was a vessel in which they found something already human there. Now empty indifferent things are intruding, sham things, dummies of life...'"

— Christian Norberg-Schulz p.11

This view by Christian Norberg Schulz may be perceived as limiting the scope of my philosophy. The silent vernacular is not limited to an agrarian or rural society - this is simply the environment which I as the writer am most capable in explaining the silent vernacular. The silent vernacular can also be applied to the urban context as well.

Another misconception which may arise for the reader is if my aim or goal is to recapture traditions and harken back to eras long forgotten. This is not the case at all, though it may be misconstrued as such. Traditions trace back to a philosophy centered on one's own
accomplishments resulting in a pride in those accomplishments. This pride is detrimental because its basis is in a world view which says a person has value based solely of what he or she "does" (performance) or on what he or she "looks like" (appearance). Both are a value system based on conditional circumstances. A careful examination of our society in America would support this statement. Traditions in culture are not wrong in and of themselves, but when traditions and pride in oneself become a value system in order to filter how we view the world, they have then been taken out of context. The silent vernacular is not based upon a pride in one's own accomplishments and traditions, but it is based on a humility in one's accomplishments. Whereas a traditions/works based mentality results in a conditional value system which eventually leads to bitterness and frustration, the silent vernacular/gift based mentality is the result of an unconditional value system which eventually leads to peace.

To clarify, an analogy could be made to my own life: Christianity the religion compared to Christianity the relationship. The religion is based in tradition and myth and is seen as a list of do's and don't's to someone outside this faith. The religion is also seen as based on works which is consistent with most people's world view in various cultures. The relationship is based on the historical person known as Jesus of Nazareth. The relationship is seen as a deep felt need for a "savior" realizing the spiritual bankruptcy that results from not having this relationship. I have experienced both first hand and know the difference. To someone unfamiliar with this difference, the religion and the relationship of Christianity are the same. In the same way, traditions/nostalgia and the silent vernacular may appear the same to the casual observer, but in essence are quite different indeed.

A more tangible example would be the Shaker settlements around the United States. Granted they are a religious-based organization, yet their buildings both in their interiors and exteriors evoke the silent vernacular.
Next Time

Next time what I'd do is look at
the earth before saying anything. I'd stop
just before going into a house
and be an emperor for a minute
and listen better to the wind
or to the air being still.

When anyone talked to me, whether
blame or praise or just passing time,
I'd watch the face, how the mouth
had to work, and see any strain, and
sign of what lifted the voice.

And for all, I'd know more—the earth
bracing itself and soaring, the air
finding every leaf and feather over
forest and water, and for every person
the body glowing inside the clothes
like a light.

—William Stafford
from *An Oregon Message*, p.25

"...Each design must catch, with the utmost rigor, a
precise moment of the flittering image, in all its shades, and the
better you can recognize that flittering quality of reality the clearer
your design will be...That may be the reason why only marginal
works (a quiet dwelling, a holiday house miles away) have been
kept as they were originally designed. But something remains.
Pieces are kept here and there, inside ourselves, perhaps fathered by
someone, leaving marks on spaces and people, melting into a
process of total transformation."

—Alvaro Siza 1979
from *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*
"The dumb and inexplicable features of old and/or vernacular buildings, otherwise so straightforwardly organized, are often precisely those things that attract us to inhabit them. Offering opportunity rather than giving direction, they are indifferent to our designs on them. They were before us, they are 'wrong' in a way that challenges us to possess them creatively: they seem realer if not 'better' than anything we could design from scratch, and that is why, increasingly, we like them."

--Michael Benedikt, 1987
from For an Architecture of Reality p.52

The silent vernacular is a name simply given to an essence that has roots in other lands and yet is uniquely American. The concept of the homestead, starting from scratch and making do with what you have are a part of this essence. It may have different names but the same essence. Unlike some of these authors I have quoted from, I feel it goes much deeper than designing in a more meaningful way. It is one way to look into the depths of our souls and see ourselves for who we are. That inner peace that cannot come from ourselves, but is beyond our human comprehension.
One of the goals I have for myself in this thesis is to define (if possible) what the silent vernacular really is. I have been asked to clarify the silent vernacular and to answer the question: "is the silent vernacular 'good' or 'truth' and if so, then 'why'?". My answer goes back to the poem "the silent vernacular". We of the late twentieth century western world, have as a general worldview come to the conclusion that there is no spiritual realm and that life as we see it in the physical realm is all there is. This is something I find interesting because I hear a great many people speak about the 'spirit of the place' or the 'spirit of the age' as if the buildings or places had a spiritual side we as human beings lacked. When the buildings of the family farm were built with "simplicity in life and form", the reality of a spiritual realm to the common man or woman was something taken for granted with them. Traces of this shift in thought go back to the theories of Marx and Darwin: these ideas are not in the libraries and laboratories of today, but have influenced every facet of our society, taken far out of the context that either Marx or Darwin had intended. These two theorists are obviously not the only two, but are probably two of the top five most influential people of the last two hundred years of western civilization.

For this reason as well as numerous others, America is not a spiritual nation, America is a secular nation. By buying into the theories of Marx and Darwin as well as other modern thinkers, we are not only in some ways incapable of understanding the silent vernacular in its original context, we have also lost a part of what it means to be "human". [See Appendix A: Note 2]

Is this "good" or "bad"? I will let the reader decide. What I do know is that my generation is the most educated generation of people in recorded history, and regrettably the most lost when it comes to meaning and purpose in our lives.

If we as designers are able to see the problems of suburbia, homelessness, etcetera, we are surely able to see that the answers or lack thereof have not been in the best interests of those concerned in our country. We need to (even in school) deal with these issues now so that we do have a well thought-out answer for when such a tough problem arises. We won't be able to, however, if we don't begin to ask ourselves "why?" in school when it comes to the fundamentals of design. If we are not willing to take risks in school when all we are risking is a mere grade, chances are that we won't care enough about homelessness or any other
problem to make any significant impact in changing matters for the betterment of society. Our designs will simply be more of the same fantasyland architecture with ephemeral mentality.

I have four points that I feel, if implemented, could go a long way in providing understanding and meaning in architecture and an answer to some of the problems stated above:

1. We can be teachable. We can be open-minded to what we have been missing in ourselves and our architecture: a true spirituality that free us up to be our true intended selves. When we as students and professionals are less concerned with grades and awards and more concerned with the well being of our fellow men and women, we will find a treasure immeasurable.

2. We can be honest with ourselves and others. When our philosophy doesn't measure up to what we thought it would, that is O.K., we just need to acknowledge our error (at least to ourselves) and move on. If we can simply be honest about why we design the way we do, instead of glossing it over, we will have far more meaning in how we design. We should let our architecture be goofy and dumb at times and serious at other times.

3. We can use the best ideas of modernism with a postmodern frame of reference. Modernism in the sense of Kenneth Frampton's use when referring to "critical regionalism", and post-modern in the sense of discovery with an historical emphasis: understanding what made people in America different from us in attitude and action only a few generations ago; what gave them a spiritual meaning and one of its by-products, what I call the silent vernacular.

4. The fourth point is probably the most important and the most difficult. Because of the influence of an elite few in architecture in America, the published project has become far more important than a building which really "works" and "takes on a life of its own". [paraphrasing professor Frank Sun] Until we hold our peers accountable in some real way for what is designed, the first three points will be difficult to implement.

We have numerous examples of this quality, this silent vernacular. Some are designed; most are not. It is silent because it does not need to show off to be noticed; it is vernacular because of its origin that is real: its materiality, its dumbness, its emptiness, its simplicity. From Frank Gehry to Fernau & Hartman, from Steven Holl to the Stageberg Partners, from California to Georgia, from Minnesota to Massachusetts, each drew from this essence and the freedom it allows to design.
"Critical regionalism will on occasion, insert reinterpreted vernacular elements as disjunctive episodes within the whole."

- Kenneth Frampton
from The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture

Precedents
This essence of the silent vernacular has been on my mind for quite some time. The one project that got me thinking about it is the Prairie Pavilion in Lac Qui Parle County, Minnesota. The setting is the Great Plains and the buildings (a main sitting room and viewing deck connected by a bridge) rest at the top of a ridge on the Lac Qui Parle River. It was designed by the Stageberg Partners of Minneapolis. Robert Bly, the poet from Minnesota, describes the scene far better than I could in "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River":

I
I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota.
The stubble field catches the last growth of sun.
The soybeans are breathing on all sides.
Old men are sitting before their houses on carseats
In the small towns. I am happy,
The moon rising above the turkey sheds.

II
The small world of the car
Plunges through the deep fields of the night,
On the road from Willmar to Milan.
This solitude covered with iron
Moves through the fields of night
Penetrated by the noise of crickets.

III
Nearly to Milan, suddenly a small bridge,
And water kneeling in the moonlight.
In small towns the houses are built right on the ground;
The lamplight falls on all fours in the grass.
When I reach the river, the full moon covers it;
A few people are talking low in a boat.

Steven Holl's design for the Berkowitz Residence in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts is another example. The setting is the plains just off the shoreline. Steven Holl drew from the whales that beach themselves on shore in setting the stage for his design of intricate "rib-like" wooden railings.

Frank Gehry's contribution is his own house. The eccentric and contextual qualities made in remodeling this turn of the century Californian bungalow merit that feeling of "dumbness", materiality and playfulness that can be the silent vernacular.

Precedents: I
Sea Ranch, CA is a place I visited this summer. It was off the beaten path to some extent which made it a little more enjoyable. There was a quiet serenity about the buildings here: all of wood, weathered by the ocean mist. It felt like the prairie being swallowed up by the ocean. It looked as if it really fit into its site; it had a timeless quality and I loved it. The forms were simple. The light was subdued in the afternoon fog. It lived and breathed and melded into the landscape.

The Tompkins/Miller house by the San Francisco firm of Fernau & Hartman displays the materiality and simplicity in a much more formal way than that of Gehry. Richard Fernau says, "Architecture is such a contingent, circumstantial art, and vernacular work shows how that fact can be interesting rather than frustrating." [Fernau, p.98] Frank Gehry and Fernau & Hartman help to illustrate some of the options available that could be used to integrating our suburbs as communities rather than satellites of no real reference or center.

A few more examples can be found by looking at the Reid house by Clark & Menefee of South Carolina, the Gainesville, GA Dental Clinic by Reynolds/Lord & Sargent, Inc. of Georgia, and works by James Cutler of Washington state. In an answer to affordable housing as well as the esthetics of the silent vernacular, the work by Mockbee-Coker Howorth Architects in Mississippi has given hope to some serious issues and inspiration to me as well.

Each of these in a special way has helped me understand how to deal with architecture in a small scale.

On a larger scale, the work of Alvaro Siza has given me interest in compositional and form arrangements for my project. Especially his design for the Faculty of Architecture buildings at the University of Porto, Portugal. He may have found a way to deal with a hyperreal city such as Porto with the acropolis-like placement of the buildings on the University campus. Siza's work has provided me with what I need to hopefully take my theories of the silent vernacular and apply them to this hyperreality called an architectural thesis.
When I first started this thesis, many of my precedents were of high style architecture. In the last few months I have come to have a greater appreciation for buildings and places that are more akin to the family farms of South Dakota. These are the Shaker settlements around the United States especially the one at Sabbath Day Lake in Poland Spring, Maine. The people, buildings, and spaces seem to glow with the silent vernacular.

Precedents: III (Addendum)
To discover a meaning in architecture that I can understand and desire.

To share what I have learned in my total experience of going to school in Montana.

To define the "silent vernacular" (if possible) and to design with it in mind using the philosophy I have discovered.

To be open, honest and real with myself in my thesis so that I do not have to compromise my values for the sake of the project.

To have a presentation that evokes the qualities of the silent vernacular.

To have fun.

The Goals
The site I have chosen I believe fits the realm where the silent vernacular is most appropriate. This realm is the urban-suburban fringe. Instead of fingers of satellite suburbs moving into the countryside, we should try to enclose our cities with true communities in the best sense of the word.

The idea of how the silent vernacular could give an historical context to the urban-suburban periphery came to me as I walked through my site: save the farmhouse, it is an abandoned assemblage of buildings and trees that whispered this quality to me. This farmsite is located just five minutes southwest of Sioux Falls, South Dakota; it is on the verge of becoming yet another suburban finger reaching into more prime farmland from this town of just over 100,000 people. The buildings, though neglected, gave off such a presence to me that I knew at first sight it was the site I had been searching for.

The following photos are from satellite of 1: southwest Sioux Falls, and 2: a zoom-in shot of my site. I may include site photos in this brief, depending on the quality of the copies I can achieve.
The project program is one I first heard of this summer. I was privileged to work for the developer-architect, Chris Bergum, on undergraduate internship. A project he began toward the end of the summer was a two-fold answer to a problem. Two non-profit organizations had a difficult time finding a site upon which to build separately. They decided that they would work together and found a site upon which they both could acquire together and build separately to fit each of their needs. The site also provided for possible expansion in the future. What I have decided to do is take this program and apply it to the site I have found back in South Dakota.

The first organization is High Desert Questors, a group designed to find and construct affordable housing for the physically handicapped (especially those who are bound to wheelchairs for movement). The second was a church I attended named Grace Bible Church, a small and relatively new group who had been renting space weekly to meet at an inn near the site.

The current needs for metropolitan areas like Sioux Falls have given me the impression that a higher priority housing need is general low to middle income housing. This is one which I myself feel more qualified to design because of working for Chris Bergum. My design will be phase one of a multi-phase housing project for low to middle income families. Of my precedents, the designs by Mockbee-Coker Howorth helped convince me of this. The design of the church or more appropriately called a worship center would be of a small scale, but could help give the project a sense of hierarchy.

The size of the houses will range in scale from about a 1000 square foot footprint to 3000 square feet with three to four designs to choose from. The houses and storage sheds are arranged in a clustered pattern separated from the automobile creating family groups of three to five houses. These groups will each enclose a communal park and will define a neighborhood. In this example, a worship center will be one of the groups in the neighborhood. The worship center will include a 100 seat chapel, a secretary’s office, a pastoral study, a daycare/nursing area, two classrooms, a fellowship hall, and restroom facilities.
The climatic considerations are quite simple. I was born and raised here and have come to know the seasons: winter with its bitterly cold wind and the warm humid summer months. Humidity is high (>60%) most all year round. This is middle America, the midwest, America's breadbasket. The wind blows most of the time, from the northwest in the winter and from the south in the summer. The sun angle ranges from 23 degrees altitude at noon in the winter to 69 degrees at noon in the summer. 

South Dakota is called the "land of infinite variety". No where in all the places I have lived have I seen more change as far as weather is concerned.

To handle the climatic conditions, I propose to make the solution as natural as possible to free up the design. The northwest needs to be protected from the winds with a wind break of trees. I am suggesting trees that are strong, relatively fast growing and analagous to the area: silver leaf maples. These can also be used to shade those houses hit with the hot afternoon sun. The southern winds should be used as best as possible. The southern exposure of the houses should be used in a passive solar fashion as well. With these few criteria, I hope to provide an adequate climatic solution. [See Appendix B for detailed Climatic Data.]

After reading from the books of Christopher Alexander, I decided to create a "pattern language" that I could refer to when designing. The numbers refer to where they can be found in the book: A Pattern Language. My pattern language for the silent vernacular is as follows:

6 the countryside
9 scattered workplaces
14 identifiable neighborhood
17 ring roads
24 sacred sites
28 eccentric nucleus
37 house cluster
45 necklace of community projects

The Program: II
The pattern language continued:

49 looped local roads
60 accessible green
66 holy ground
69 public outdoor room
75 the family
81 small services w/o red tape
89 corner grocery
99 main building
105 south facing outdoors
115 courtyards which live
121 path shape
122 building fronts
128 indoor sunlight
135 tapestry of light and dark
139 farmhouse kitchen
140 private terrace on the street
150 a place to wait
155 old age cottage
163 outdoor room
169 terraced slope(?)
171 tree places
174 trellised walk
180 window place
190 ceiling height variety
193 half open wall
196 corner doors
198 closet between rooms
200 open shelves
204 secret place
212 columns at the corners
217 perimeter beams
222 low sill
223 deep reveals
227 column connections
230 radiant heat
235 soft inside walls (gypsum plaster?)
237 solid doors with glass
238 filtered light

I hope by using these parts of a language that I will create a cohesive vocabulary for the silent vernacular.

The Program: III
My Land

Strong and generous
The yellow of your fields
The daily bread.
The green of your woods
The hope.
The long still nights
A just rest.
After hard work.
From under the clods
A flower is born.
Tender is your name
Umbria.

— Gabriella Vannucchi
from Daniel Lang: Trees/Water/Silence

Appendices
Appendix A: Quotes & Notes

Quote 1

What is new in America is the clash of the first level (primitive and wild) and the 'third kind' (the absolute simulacrum). There is no second level. This is a situation we find hard to grasp, since this is the one we have always privileged: the self-reflexive, self-mirroring level, the level of unhappy consciousness. But no vision of America makes sense without this reversal of our values: it is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America's reality! The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts — these are America, not the galleries, churches, and culture... Let us grant this country the admiration it deserves and open our eyes to the absurdity of some of our own customs. This is one of the advantages, one of the pleasures of travel. To see and feel America, you have to have had for at least one moment in some downtown jungle, in the Painted Desert, or on some bend in a freeway, the feeling that Europe had disappeared. You have to have wondered, at least for a moment, 'How can anyone be European?'

Jean Baudrillard, 1988
from his book, America

Note 1

In urban design last semester [Autumn 1991], our task was to revitalize the downtown area of Spokane, WA. My partner and I designed what turned out to be a parody of Universal Studios in the design of a pedestrian village. We called our design approach 'facadecture' because that is what it was: a theatre district created in the essence of a theatre. The "stage" was the pedestrian promenade which had this facade atmosphere full of neon and color; the "backstage" was made to look like a real backstage with all the pulleys, trusses and cables visible. It accentuated the feeling of public and private — hyperreality with no real historical origin. It was created as an anomaly to the previous functions and atmosphere of the site. Depending on the circumstances, simulacra can be used to one's advantage.
The silent vernacular holds akin to some in the Ruralist artistic movement which began in 1844:

*Ruskin had advised young artists, as he might have advised young Christian men to go to the mission fields, to go to nature; not just because it was a subject worthy of art but because of its moral value, because it was God’s handiwork and so revealed His purposes. 150 years on the Ruralists see nature if not exactly demonstrating Christian morals and faith, as at least bathed in a divine light. In their more exalted moods they feel at one with their great and much invoked mentors William Blake and Samuel Palmer; seeing every hill, wood, blade of grass, blade of corn as invested with a spiritual presence; within the words of another of their heroes William Wordsworth,

'A sense of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky and in the mind of man.'

— Christopher Martin
from "In the Secret Garden: Autumn with the Ruralists" 1991

The "silence" of the silent vernacular has been best revealed to me by the French philosopher Simone Weil who was a part of the resistance movement in France during World War II. It reveals how the silent vernacular has less to do with architecture than with life. The quote is from Simone Weil: an Anthology:

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport them to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. Space opens up. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes to the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity, there is a silence, a silence that is not an absence of sound but that is the object of a positive sensation more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing that silence. . . . Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more poignant and clearer than on that first occasion when he took possession of me. [Weil, p.25].
Appendix B: Project Summary

Thesis has been an interesting experience to say the least. I can say that accurate assessments of my work at this time would be premature. I can say however that it was not as glamorous as I naively expected and as my colleague Paul Siderius has emphatically stated, it is overrated.

I feel in some areas I have accomplished what I set out to achieve. I see this thesis as untraditional as far as precedence would serve at Montana State University. It is meant to apply an untested theory I had concerning architecture. Too many of us, including myself, think we can change the world through our architecture — if not change the world, at least place our egocentric imprint upon it. We as architects need to learn to be servants and not masters of our profession. If we value people over our own pride and selfishness, we will see the silent vernacular alive in our work as well as ourselves.

My hope is that this thesis will allow people, especially future students at Montana State University, to ask themselves "why?" "Why am I in here in architecture?" "Why am I here at all?" To have solid answers to these questions is to have a treasure more valuable than gold.


6 Avshalomav, Jacob (b. 1919). I Saw a Stranger Yestere’en. Choral Composition with Violin Solo. [Recording of the St. Olaf Choir, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN].


Bibliography: I

These sources are not only quotes, but all the influences that to the best of my knowledge could have a reasonable impact on my project.


Bibliography III: Addendum