Vernacular architecture workshop set

By ED CULLEN
Advocate staff writer

Builder Sid Gray could have used the information in talks at this weekend's preservation workshop when he began trying to learn historical restoration 16 years ago.

Gray, who learned historical restoration the hard way, organized The Foundation for Historical Preservation's "Roots of Vernacular Architecture: From the Field to the Classroom," set Friday and Saturday at the Louisiana State Archives Building and the Lone Burden Conference Center at LSU's Burden Research Plantation. Both buildings are situated on Essen Lane. The Rural Life Museum is part of the Burden Research Plantation.

In putting together the speakers' list for the workshop, Gray got help from Jay Edwards, associate professor in LSU's Department of Geography and Anthropology. Edwards was helpful when Gray was starting to learn enough about old buildings to do the first of 18 restorations he has done in the Baton Rouge and New Orleans areas.

This weekend's talks have an academic bent, but Gray says there are topics of interest, too, for the Sunday driver. Sunday drivers, if they're not foundation members, should be prepared to part with $15 for Friday evening's lecture at the state archives building, 3851 Essen Lane, and $30 for Saturday's day-long talks, tour of the Rural Life Museum and jambalaya lunch at the Burden Research Plantation, 4560 Essen Lane.


Friday, Dell Upton, associate professor of architectural history at the University of California, Berkeley, gives a talk titled "Common Places: Understanding the Vernacular Landscape." Upton's slide presentation begins at 7:30 p.m.

First, it's helpful to understand the meaning of "vernacular architecture," a term Upton has always tried to avoid defining. When pressed, however, Upton will say the term refers to folk buildings, for example. He'll say vernacular architecture has become a catch-all for "the study of kinds of buildings that were thought to have been neglected by traditional architectural history." In short, vernacular architecture is that which is not high-style architecture.

Finally, Upton will say, "Vernacular architecture studies will have reached maturity when we have defined an inclusive approach to the study of all architecture that will eliminate the need for such an exclusive label as vernacular architecture."

That's Friday evening.

Saturday, there's coffee and registration at 9 a.m. at Burden Research Plantation. Edwards is the first speaker at 9:45 a.m. with a talk titled "Learning About Louisiana's Vernacular Architecture."

At 10:30 a.m., Eugene Cree, professor of architecture at Tulane University, gives a talk called "The Use of Vernacular Architecture in the Teaching of Architecture."

Gray speaks on "Up Close and Personal: A View from the Field" at 11:45 a.m. At 12:30 p.m., Jonathan Fricker talks on "Efforts by the State to Preserve Vernacular Architecture."

Lunch follows and, then, a tour of the Rural Life Museum.

Registration fees may be paid either at the door or at the foundation's office, 900 North Blvd.

It's fitting that talks on vernacular architecture be held in Baton Rouge, home of Fred Kniffen, LSU Boyd Professor emeritus of geography and anthropology.

"As it is now framed and practiced in North America, the field of vernacular architecture descends fairly directly from the work of cultural geographer Fred Kniffen," writes Camille Wells, editor of "Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture," published by the University of Missouri Press.

"It was Kniffen's idea that folk housing forms might be used to track the course of migrating culture" from the eastern United States and Midwest to Louisiana where Kniffen spent his teaching career. What Kniffen sketched and theorized his students and their students have more..."
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fully developed.

A little Kniffen, however, goes a long way in Louisiana. With an introduction to Kniffen's house types and a knowledge of the origins of those house types, drives over the Louisiana prairie west of Lafayette and through the Felicianas become outdoor museum tours.

A passing knowledge of Kniffen's work explains why there are houses on the Louisiana prairie that are equally at home in Iowa and why some well-to-do farmers' houses in the Felicianas resemble planters' homes in the Carolinas.

Cultural geographers use Kniffen techniques to help them decide how affluent a Louisiana planter might have been and at what stage of his time on the land that improved status began.

Kniffen thought he'd found clues in the way home builders added to their houses.

If nothing else, the foundation's two days of talks may increase awareness of the fewer than 30 pigeoniers in the state and the handful of structures in Baton Rouge dating from the early 1800s. Pigeoniers are fancy wooden or wood and brick towers in which squab was raised for the table by French planters. In France, only the nobility was permitted to keep game. Pigeons were considered game. The tradition crossed the Atlantic with French colonists.