



MUD-Lab Toolkit Vernacular Study

Vernacular studies are a way of aiding our understanding of the physical context of a site, in terms of the built form and its features, and working out how interventions can best respond to this context. They are about understanding the language of different areas, the typical features, similarities, and what makes areas distinct. This toolkit is a step by step guide on how to approach vernacular studies and make use of them to inform our analysis.

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The MUD-Lab Toolkit

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To reference this MUD-Lab Toolkit please use the following:

'Manchester Urban Design LAB (2020) '*MUD-Lab Toolkit: Vernacular Study*' accessible at www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/mudlab

Disclaimer: This handbook does not replace the practical session

A

Introduction: What is a vernacular study?

The Oxford English Dictionary describes vernacular as being “the language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people of a country or region” - a little like a regional accents. The dictionary describes vernacular as being of domestic or functional architecture – the typical homes and buildings of a community. In urban design terms, a vernacular study is concerned with both definitions looking at regional and local differences in architectural styles, features and building types.

Every town and city is a reflection of its location. Whether that is through the typical house or dwelling, the historical development of that place or through the local geography providing variations in the local stone, brick or even topography, there are differences. Therefore every town, village or settlement is subtly different. Being able to identify these subtle design cues is an important reflection of place.

For example rows of red brick terraced housing based on a strong rectangular grid interspersed with large industrial buildings means that you are likely in the heart of a post-industrial in the north of England, whilst a series of stone built towers and three and four storey buildings cascading down the side of a hill coupled with vineyards and hard public squares is more likely to be in Tuscany, Italy. Even looking at modern cities a strong waterfront skyline of high-rise towers built right along the water-edge clear indicates you are in Shanghai, Hong Kong or Singapore.

Essentially vernacular studies **unpack and explain the local language of the built environment**. There is no strict methodology for undertaking a vernacular study only a series of topics and techniques that you may wish to use but the onus is on the author of the study to visually represent these features and local built characteristics – not to simply record them in the written word.

B

Why are vernacular studies important for Urban Design?

Vernacular studies are a way of aiding our understanding of the physical context of a site, in terms of the built form and its features and working out how interventions can best respond to this context. The vernacular study is a design tool, not an end in itself. Vernacular studies are often paired with character studies, as in part, the setting of different character areas is a response to some of the built features that are present within a particular area.

It's important to note that there is significant overlap between the character areas and vernacular studies, both dealing with the physical appearance of the townscape, but whereas the character study will include a wider range of elements such as land use, accessibility, socio-economic factors and barriers to movement, the vernacular study is concerned only with the **'typical' elements** that make up the appearance of the buildings and spaces – the types.

Therefore, the vernacular study seeks to understand the **features of a place** at all levels of urban design – the city, the neighbourhood and the street. It can draw together notions of legibility, permeability, scale, mass and local detailing, or alternatively simply augment these separate studies. Finally the vernacular approach is designed to ensure that when intervention is made, there is a positive response to this context. That does not mean that the technique favours the pastiche intervention, far from it, but understanding what makes an individual area 'special' helps the urban design to consider the appropriateness of any intervention proposed.

C

A step-by-step approach

Vernacular studies are a way of aiding our understanding of the physical context of a site. The following are three steps to conducting a successful vernacular study. Make sure you consider each carefully to be successful.

Step 1 – Determine the purpose and scope of your study

Three questions to ask when arriving at your scope of your study:

A. Is this a stand-alone study or does it link to other forms of analysis – like a character study – and what will it eventually be used to do?

- B. Does this study relate simply to a discrete area – such as a conservation area or defined neighbourhood – or is a wider townscape assessment looking at trends?
- C. What level of detail should the vernacular study focus on – responding to what you already know about the neighbourhood or site?

Some advice:

As mentioned, a vernacular study will vary in its scope depending on the nature of the project that you are undertaking, and also the purpose that you wish to use it for. If it is in support of developing proposals for a particular site, it may be that the role of scale, mass and architectural features may have more of a role within your vernacular study. If it is in support of a character assessment then, it may have a much wider scope. Remember that the vernacular study is not always simply a stand-alone study like character or legibility studies, and in most cases, as an urban designer you will include ‘vernacular’ elements to augment other elements of your analysis – drilling down to the specific detail.

Typically, a vernacular study would begin by examining the larger, strategic level before progressing to more detailed matters. Traditional it begins by looking holistically at a neighbourhood or Settlement setting in terms of the streets and spaces – the townscape – before then going on to look at the building groupings in terms of scale, mass, roofscape and details – the buildings and detail. In each case you are setting out to arrive at a series of dominant or distinct features, sometimes known as Archetypes. In some cases you may only decide to study either the townscape level or simply the detail, but in most cases you will look to both levels.

When deciding what to study, you should tailor your vernacular study to the obvious differences in an area – some of which you may have already arrived at based on previous analysis techniques. Even an area that has a certain homogeneity; such as the terraced streets around Manchester; will reveal subtle differences. In such cases the vernacular study may include more elements towards detailed end of the scale looking at individual building features, decoration and even fenestration (the pattern of windows).

Step 2 – Determining what to include within your vernacular study

Three questions to ask when developing the content for your study:

- A.** How should we ensure that we arrive at balanced and comprehensive series of Architypes and do not overly focus on detailed matters?
- B.** What sort of types should we be interested in and how can we organise them so that they link together effectively?
- C.** What topics are more related to townscape typologies and what might be a matter of detail?

Some advice:

In order to help you gather your thoughts regarding a neighbourhoods or sites vernacular we recommend the use of a matrix or table. An example of a typical vernacular assessment matrix included on the following page. Remember that you should adapt this as required for your project, and in some cases omit or add additional types or elements.

An assessment matrix has a number of benefits. It helps ensure that you showcase a rounded assessment, looking across a number of different elements to arrive at your archetypes but also ensures consistency. If you are conducting a number of studies, it makes sure that you are comparing 'like-for-like'. For example if you wanted to link this to a character study then you could undertake a different matrix for each of the character areas, or explore how some of the townscape types could be delivered within the character study, and your vernacular study is simply focused on the 'detail'. The following gives four areas (or types) where you might collect information to support your vernacular study:

- **Urban Form** - The way that the buildings and spaces relate to the topography and the landscape, the pattern of the streets and spaces, including plot size and urban grain
- **Routes and Spaces** – The hierarchy of streets, spaces and routes coupled to the types and nature of public spaces, parks and even the nature of key junctions or nodes
- **Buildings** – The dominant scale and mass of certain types of building, their uses, age taking account of historical patterns, remnants and styles
- **Details and materials** – The materials that are dominant or typical for the area including walls and roofs, any details are architectural features and landscape treatments

Step 3 – Field collection

Three questions to ask before you undertake your field work:

1. What should be looking for when we visit an area / site to undertake a vernacular study – how different is it to a normal site visit?
2. What methods or techniques should we be collecting this information and how much detail should we go into?
3. Should you undertake this alone – or would visiting the site as a group or pair assist with the quality of the study?

VERNACULAR STUDY – Information collection matrix and checklist

Townscape Archetypes			
A. Urban form types		B. Route and space types	
A.1: Setting and topography – Any areas that are identifiable because of the landscape setting or relationship with landform or topography		B.1: Route and paths – Beyond the standard hierarchy, and also considering uses addressing the route, set-back, width and modal types	
A.2: Morphological features – Street or grain patterns that are particularly common or dominant (such as linear form, grid pattern, irregular / informal)		B.2: Public space and parks – Dominant types and nature of spaces found within the area (good and bad) including parks, squares, SLOAP etc.	
A.3: Plot size and ratio – The size of the individual plots, and the relationship that the built form has with the size of these plots (the ratio)		B.3: Junction and nodes – Distinct of different types of junction (or interchange) or node, based on modes, scale, importance to the city	
Dominant / distinctive urban form archetypes (Summarise these matters in a maximum of 4 archetypes)	1. 2. 3. 4.	Dominant / distinctive route and space archetypes (Summarise these matters in a maximum of 4 archetypes)	1. 2. 3. 4.
Building and detail archetypes			
C. Building types		D. Details and materials	
C.1: Scale and mass – Are there types with common height, scale or mass, focus on trends not just the same number of storeys that are equal		D.1: Dominant materials – The materials used most commonly in the area – think about walls, roofs and other built features, including colour	
C.2: Use of buildings – Are there distinctive / dominant types of building associated with are particular use or role (e.g. Industrial buildings)		D.2: Building detailing – Are there common architectural or design features including elements of fenestration, decoration and roofs	
C.3: Age of buildings – Building types identifiable because of the age or historical context or palimpsest (e.g. railway architecture)		D.3: External landscape details – Common boundary treatments, areas of hardstanding or paving, role of trees, hedgerows	
Dominant / distinctive building archetypes (Summarise these matters in a maximum of 4 archetypes)	1. 2. 3. 4.	Dominant / distinctive detail and material archetypes (Summarise these matters in a maximum of 4 archetypes)	1. 2. 3. 4.

Some advice:

Site visit work is perhaps the most important aspect of delivering a successful ver-

vernacular study. There is a temptation to try and undertake such a study using on-line tools and mapping programmes, but actually the vernacular study relies on the way that you may experience a space – what draws the attention and what might be dominant feature or typology. This is difficult to achieve without a site visit.

You will likely have your matrix (see stage 2) with you when visiting the site, but don't be tempted to simply record 'answers' on this sheet. Take a series of photographs or undertake sketches of some of the elements that are important, which can help illustrate and augment the study when you come to present your study. Where this is relevant, such as with route typologies or plot sizes, take certain measurements to augment the detail which sits behind the study.

As a general point, whilst a vernacular study undertaken alone is better than none at all, the very best studies are undertaken in pairs or groups to avoid bias. Since the vernacular study approach relies so keenly on individual perception, having two separate assessors or assessments to discuss, compare or contrast views always distils the greatest quality of the response. This has the added advantage of not simply relying on one person to notice all the important complexities within the townscape.

D

Presenting your study

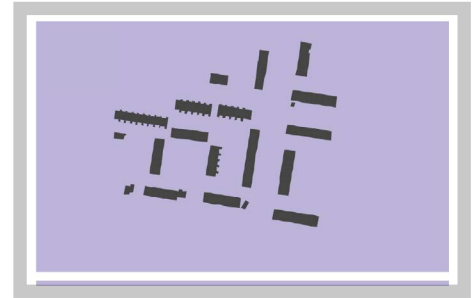
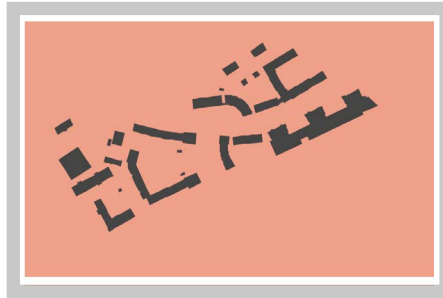
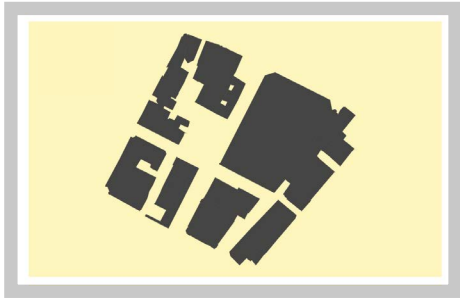
There is no right or wrong way to present a vernacular study, and what is included really depends on what are the important archetypes that you have identified from your field work.

Remember that in most cases it is unlikely that you will present this as a stand-alone study or element of your work, and its most likely going to be integrated with a variety of other analysis ranging from morphology assessment, through to just forming a detailed component of your character study.

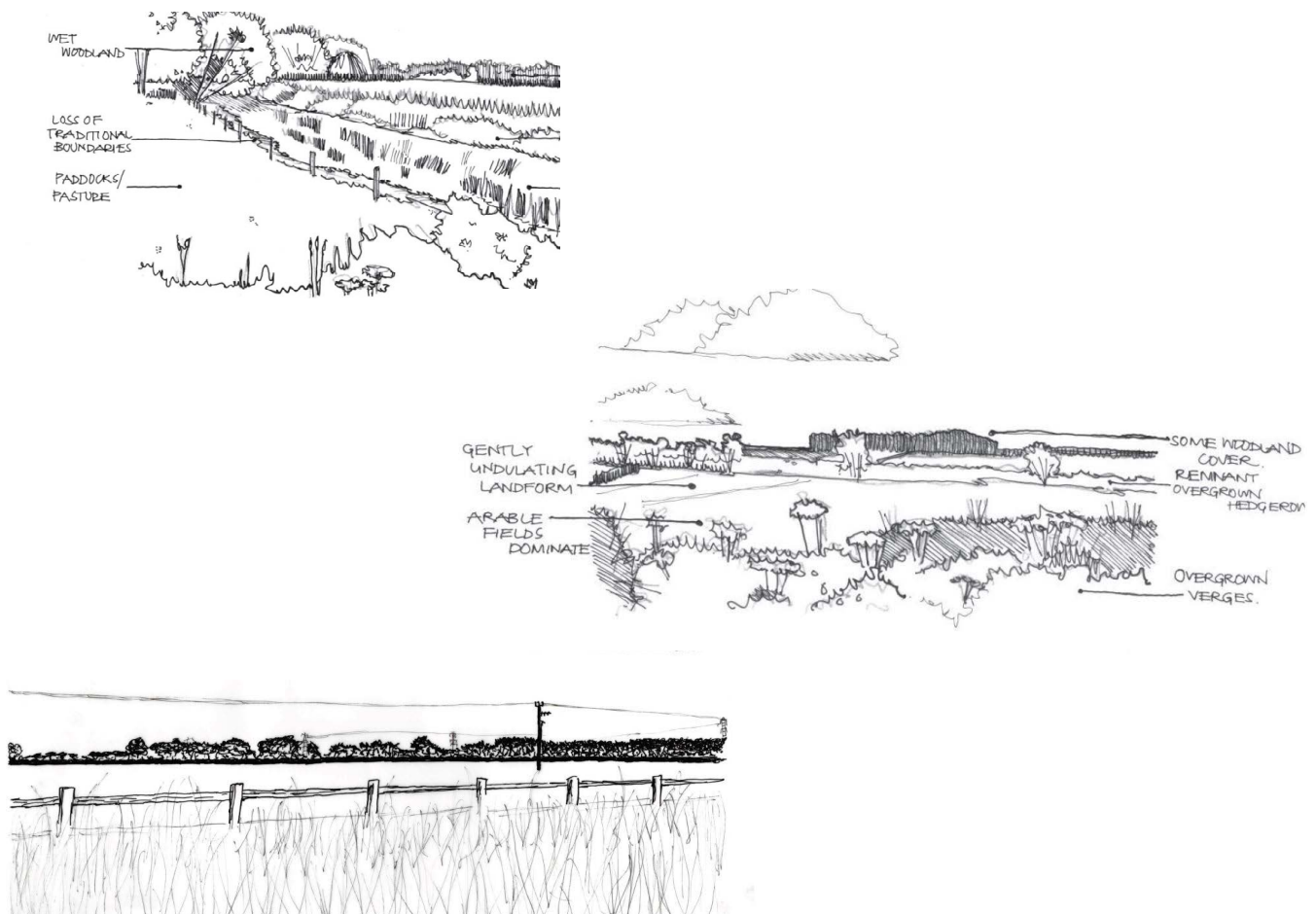
However you choose to integrate this work, a vernacular study should be presented graphically as opposed to being a piece of extended writing or text. Photographs are the most simply way of showcasing vernacular, however these are only really acceptable where they are well captioned and labelled.

Set out below are number techniques that you might use to showcase your vernacular study:

- **Extract from the figure ground** – This is often used where the pattern or grain of the built form is a distinctive feature of the vernaculars features, especially a strong grid or where informality is distinctive.



- **Annotated photographs or field sketch** – A sketch from the field, or a more considered sketch taken from notes and photographs is useful as it allow you to prepare an image in such a way as to draw attention to a certain feature or archetype. Below the sketches focus on the landscape typology:



A typical view showing the gently undulating landscape interspersed with woodland and hedgerows dividing fields

- Labelled elevation** – A useful technique for showing the building archetypes. Hand drawn front elevations of properties which are either coloured or labelled to show materials, details and fenestration patterns



Figure 5.1. - Large Manorial Farmhouse Sketch

Large Manorial Farmhouse: These are the largest and most grand looking buildings in the village. Typically these are associated with the farmsteads which collective form the historic form of the village, however, there are one or two examples which are not linked to farm complexes. Usually these are very symmetrical wide frontage, built to three storeys with a very narrow front to rear footprint. Curtain walls surrounding garden areas are common associated features of this archetype along with decorative front doors.

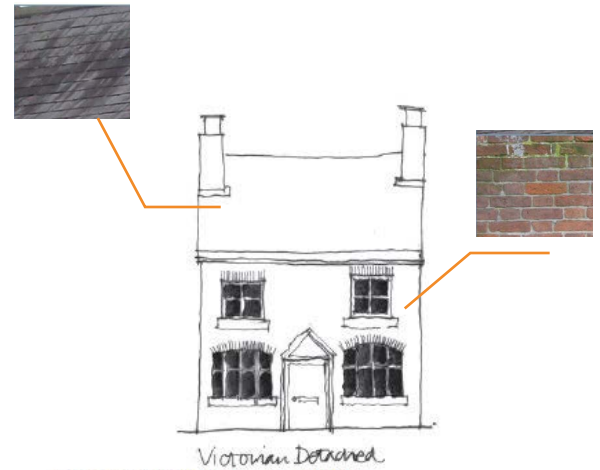
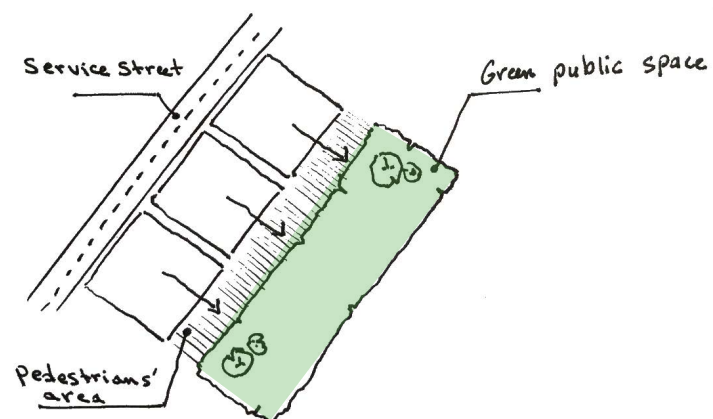
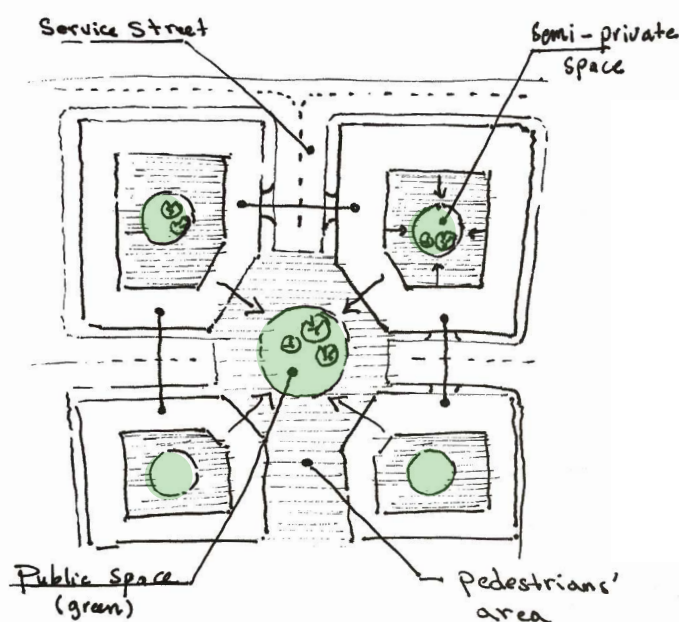


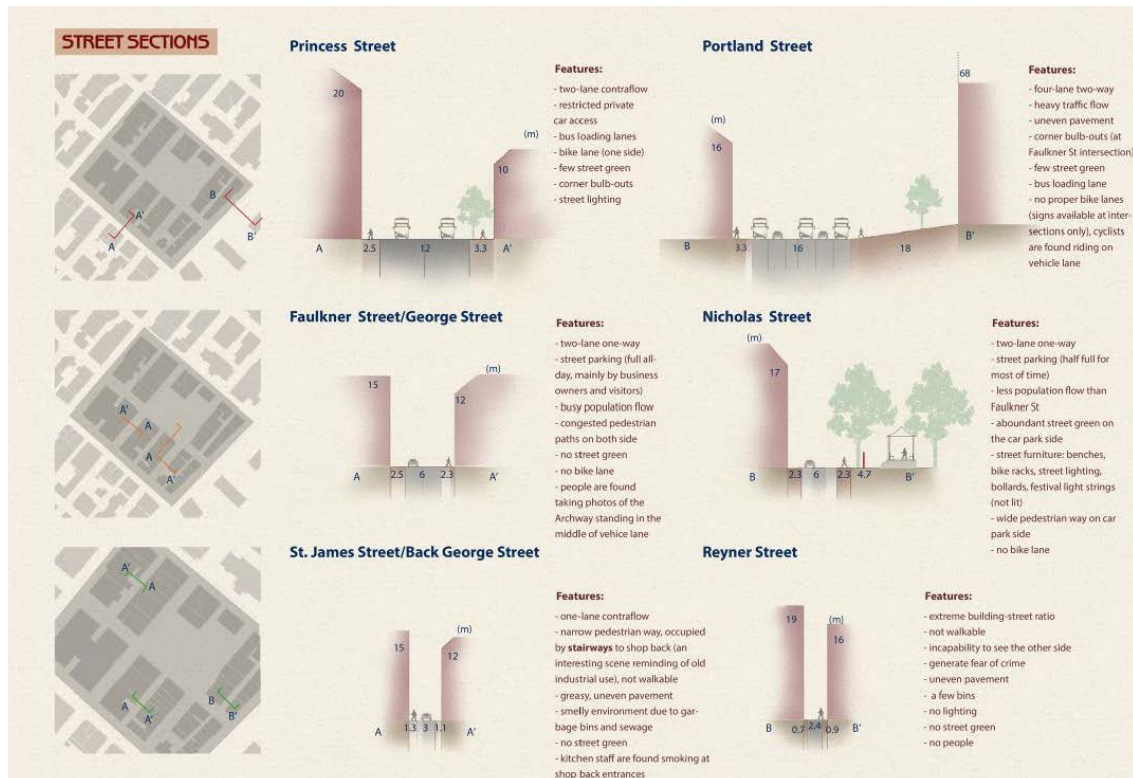
Figure 5.2. - Victorian Detached Sketch

Detached Dwelling (Victorian): The typical detached dwelling in Thrussington dates from the Victorian period. They are distinct from the large farmhouse since they are only two storeys in height. However, the symmetrical design approach is retained. This type includes a series of properties built to a similar style into the early years of the 20th century. Arch topped windows are often a distinctive feature of a number of these properties as shown in the accompanying vignette. Many of these properties have decorative Flemish bond brickwork.

- Sketch plan** – A 2D sketch plan of a small extract of the area of study, which can be potentially useful for showing plot relationships, methods of enclosure or even the relationship between streets and buildings



- **Cross-sections** – The most effective technique for looking at street and space archetypes, the cross section allows you to showcase so many attributes for typical streets within the study area.

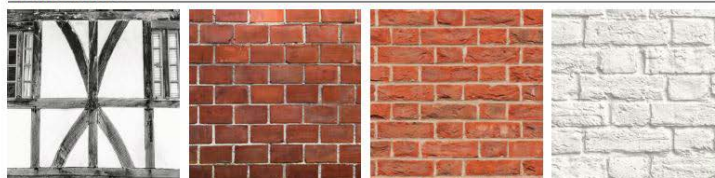


Source: former UDIP Student

- **Materials / detail palette** – A palette, created using small images or extracts from photographs, are arranged in a grid to show the most common materials, colours, features or details found within area.

TRADITIONAL MATERIALS PALETTE

Wall materials



Roof materials

