

Beyond the Surface: Neo-Vernacular Architecture in Sweden and Denmark's Contemporary Landscape

B. T. Eybye^{1,*}, M. Dabaieh²

¹ Aarhus School of Architecture, Aarhus, Denmark, bte@aarch.dk, ; ² Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden, marwa.dabaieh@mau.se, 

Topic: T4.1. Contemporary projects inspired by tradition

How to cite: Eybye, Birgitte T. & Dabaieh, Marwa (2025). Beyond the Surface: Neo-Vernacular Architecture in Sweden and Denmark's Contemporary Landscape. In C. Mileto, F. Vegas, A. Hueto-Escobar & S. Manzano-Fernández (Eds.) *Earthen and Vernacular Heritage: Conservation, Adaptive Reuse and Urban Regeneration*. September 10th – 12th, 2025, Valencia (Spain). edUPV. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HERITAGE2025.2025.19310>

Abstract

In Scandinavian architecture, the neo-vernacular movement has gained ground as a means of sustainable building design. Hence, the objective of this paper is to investigate Danish and Swedish neo-vernacular in order to examine whether these building approaches are mimicry or reflect genuine alignment with the core values of traditional vernacular. To achieve this, the paper presents a literature review on neo-vernacular architecture and a case study comprising a Danish and a Swedish neo-vernacular dwelling. Main findings include the Scandinavian neo-vernacular as a complex field that holds different approaches to building and overall, shows a significant trend to integrate traditional vernacular with modern design and sustainability principles.

Keywords: neo-vernacular architecture; contemporary vernacular; Scandinavian architecture; sustainability in architecture; cultural authenticity; Danish and Swedish architecture

1. Introduction

Within the last decades, many studies have shown that vernacular materials and techniques can contribute to sustainability in the built environment. Consequently, neo-vernacular architecture denotes a design approach that aims to reinterpret and adapt traditional building styles and techniques to contemporary needs and contexts (Vellinga, 2013).

In Scandinavia, the neo-vernacular movement has gained traction to preserve the region's rich vernacular heritage and promote sustainable design practices. The neo-vernacular approach thus comprises several Danish and Swedish building types from residential to institutional.

The Danish neo-vernacular includes both *folk* and *academic* examples. Many buildings in eco-villages (e.g. Dyssekilde, Andelssamfundet in Hjortshøj and Friland) are inspired by low-carbon building and vernacular architecture. Among the *academic* architecture, there are many renowned examples. For instance, The Modern Seaweed House by Vandkunsten Architects (2013) interprets the traditional Læsø vernacular buildings with seaweed roofing. Studielandsbyen (*Study Village*, 2017) is the development of a vernacular farm into student accommodation through the addition of new buildings designed by architects Lenschow and Pihlmann. House of Nature (2021) at Silkeborg Højskole by ReVærk Architects is built of wood and takes its inspirational sources in the historic post-and-plank-construction. At Fyn, VERNA

Architects have designed a common house (2023) in cooperation with the local community that focuses on reuse and flexible constructions.

Sweden has also embraced the neo-vernacular approach in which architects and designers explore ways to integrate traditional building techniques and aesthetics into contemporary projects. This often features elements such as pitched roofs, exposed timber framing, and the use of local, natural materials. Examples includes eco-villages such as Baskemölla Ekoby and Untersteshöjden. Among the *academic* examples is Library House (2022) designed by Fria Folket Architects to accommodate work spaces and a book collection. At Rörbäck Forest Retreat (2020), Gipp Architecture has added two new buildings to an old Halland Farm. The new buildings are definitely contemporary, though shape and materials resemble the old farm buildings. Villa Glasmästar (2023) designed by KFA Architects exemplifies sustainability with biogenic materials and avoidance of chemicals. Traditional red Falu paint on the exterior reflects a vernacular Swedish aesthetic.

2. Objective and methods

The neo-vernacular movement sparks discussions on the essence of such approaches and calls for critical exploration. Consequently, the objective of this paper is to examine the diverse interpretations of *neo-vernacular* in Scandinavian architecture and investigate the extent to which it reflects a genuine alignment with the environmental, cultural, and social imperatives associated with traditional design.

The first part of the paper establishes the theoretical and analytical frame of the study. In doing so, it explores understandings of neo-vernacular architecture and looks into key elements of traditional Swedish and Danish vernacular through literature reviews, since this knowledge is crucial in the discussion on the possible alignment between traditional and neo-vernacular. The second part of the paper presents

a case study for the purpose of exploring neo-vernacular in the built environment. Findings of the case study and the analytical frame inform the discussion, followed by results and conclusion.

Applied methods comprise literature reviews and case study research. For temporal reasons, the literature reviews are not comprehensive. Concerning the exploration of neo-vernacular, the aim is to throw light on this ambiguous notion for which reason diversity among the sources is emphasized. Case study research is chosen, as this method is well-suited to produce in-depth information on a phenomenon (the essence of Scandinavian neo-vernacular) through the investigation of a small number of dense cases (neo-vernacular buildings). The selection strategy aims to maximize information from a few, dense cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). Lastly, the following criteria are reflected in the choice of the two selected cases: 1) Each case must be Scandinavian neo-vernacular, confer to the overall objective of the study, 2) each case must be unique to the other regarding its national context (Danish or Swedish), 3) Each case must be a single-family house for reasons of comparability. Single-family housing is well represented among neo-vernacular architecture, and it also holds extensive relevance in Scandinavian architecture, since these houses are among the most popular types of dwellings. Hence, the chosen cases are Hahn Lavsén's own house (Agger, Denmark) and Rundbalshuset (Kassjö, Umeå, Sweden).

Sources comprise of literature on vernacular and contemporary architecture, research methods and other relevant material. Concerning the case study, sources encompass interviews, right of access to documents, site visits, empirical studies, literature, drawings, photos and videos in order to get critical insights into the motivations and challenges of the design process. For reasons of temporality and extent, the study is delimited to Danish and Swedish neo-vernacular, though the authors acknowledge that such buildings are found all over Scandinavia.

3. Theoretical and analytical framework

3.1. Neo-vernacular

The term vernacular architecture is complex, comprising both historic, rural heritage and on-going building processes (Vellinga, 2013). (Maudlin, 2010) broadens the definition further as *the other* comprising everything but canonical architecture. This study concurs with the multifarious nature of vernacular architecture and applies Paul Oliver's predominant definition as a guideline. According to (Oliver, 2006), vernacular architecture is the common people's buildings. They are built by the owner (possibly together with the community) in accordance with traditional building practice. Hence, the building design is influenced by local conditions such as climate, landscape and materials as well as the buildings reflect the culture and economy of their residents.

Likewise, the notion of *neo-vernacular* (also new vernacular or contemporary vernacular) is intricate. (Zographaki, 1986) sees neo-vernacular as a deliberate reproduction of traditional buildings into contemporary forms. (Turkušić, 2011) develops on neo-vernacular from a heritage perspective and defines it as modern interpretations of vernacular architecture, meaning that it takes its inspirational sources in vernacular heritage and applies current technology and aesthetics. According to (Vellinga, 2013), neo-vernacular architecture refers to a contemporary movement that draws inspiration from traditional building and local materials while integrating modern technology, aesthetics and sustainable practices. It emerged as a response to the globalization and homogenization of architectural styles and is often seen as a counterpoint, emphasizing the importance of local identity, environmental responsiveness, and community engagement in the design process.

The neo-vernacular movement has gained significant attention in recent decades as a means of preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainable development. For instance, (Zhao & Greenop, 2019) introduce the concepts of *neo-vernacular* and *semi-vernacular* architecture as approaches to vernacular village conservation in China. It critiques the neo-vernacular style for prioritizing aesthetics over community needs and highlights the semi-vernacular method for its focus on social sustainability and community engagement. In his extensive literature review, (Pardo, 2023) examines current research trends and challenges in preserving vernacular architecture in the context of globalization. This study emphasizes the environmental benefits of traditional materials and the challenges posed by globalization, loss of craftsmanship, and changing societal needs.

The review also identified a number of papers in which the growing focus on sustainability is reflected. For instance, (Chahanjiri et al., 2014) highlight the connection between sustainability and vernacular architecture. Thus, their understanding of neo-vernacular comprises responsible use of resources, blending traditional and new construction and harmony with the context. (Tiwari & Vij, 2024) explore the integration of neo-vernacular elements in traditional Indian temples and how to balance tradition and innovation.

3.2. Characteristics of Danish and Swedish vernacular architecture

Danish vernacular architecture is strongly connected to cultural and geographic conditions, particularly the temperate climate and the extensively cultivated landscape. The majority of the vernacular heritage is half-timbered, a building technique developed from the Middle Ages onwards. Regional differences such as available timber resources are reflected in the diverse types of load-bearing structures and timber joints. West Schleswig was influenced by Frisian culture, which is why brick-building

gained ground here in the early 18th century and then spread along the Danish West Coast. In Southern Jutland, a few post-and-plank-constructions are preserved. Distinctive features of Danish vernacular architecture are the rectangular layout called *længehuset* (prospectively the *longhouse*), steep roofs (pitched or half-hipped) and facades with a rhythmic design due to the half-timbering. Main materials are wood (timber, boards), earth (infills, adobes, bricks etcetera), thatch (reed, straw), mortar and stone, usually from the local area. Reuse of building materials and components were common in vernacular building practice and so was thrift (Stoklund, 1969; Eybye, 2024).

Swedish vernacular architecture is deeply influenced by the country's diverse climate, geography, and cultural heritage, spanning from the northern Sami regions to the southern earthen buildings. In the north, the traditional Sami dwellings called *goahhti* are constructed from timber and turf, designed to provide warmth and protection against the harsh Arctic climate. These structures reflect a close relationship with nature and materials sourced from the surrounding environment. Moving southwards, the architecture transitions to a mix of wooden cottages and farmhouses, notably *stugor* and *torp*, often built with timber from the vast forests. The southern regions, particularly in places like Skåne, showcase earthen constructions such as *skånelånga*, where thick clay walls provide insulation in contrast to the colder northern climate. Throughout the country, timber plays a significant role in vernacular architecture, with its use in everything from homes to barns, ensuring the structures are both functional and adapted to their environment (Bronner, 2004; Björck et al., 2021).

3.3. Summary

Though the literature review is not exhaustive, it indicates lack of theory on neo-vernacular. Focus on sustainability has increased in line with the general development, and contemporary is

crucial in neo-vernacular. Relatedly, current construction in Scandinavia is subject to strict legislation (energy consumption, daylight, spatial conditions and insulation to name a few) that inevitably adds modernity. Consequently, the analytical frame defines contemporary as 1) design, construction and technology, and 2) sustainability. Since this study explores whether Scandinavian neo-vernacular truly aligns with traditional vernacular, the analysis also includes 3) elements from traditional vernacular such as adaptation to site, design and materials.

4. Case studies

4.1. Hahn Lavsens house, Agger, Denmark

In 2018, architects Caroline Hahn and Ebbe Lavsens purchased an old *højremshus* (aisle-truss house) from 1827 in the village of Agger. Aisle-truss houses are the vernacular architecture of Northern Jutland, and the building design and choice of materials are closely connected to the scarce resources and harsh climate conditions by the West Coast. Next to the old house, Hahn and Lavsens have built a new, single-family house from 2019 to 2022 (Fig. 1). Preliminary to the construction process, the architects investigated the design principles of their old aisle-truss house as basis of the new house (Munk, 2023).

4.1.1. Design, construction and technology

The house is designed as two longhouses in a T-shape form with a pitched roof and it is 126 m². The scale is adapted to the old aisle-truss house and similarly, the fenestration resembles the old house with larger openings to the south and few, small openings to the north. Despite this, the house is clearly contemporary. Concerning materials, the walls are built of Ytong energy+ blocks, the roofing is made of tarred pinewood planks, the windows are of pinewood and produced in a local factory. Floor tiles are laid in sand for future disassembly and insulation materials are natural, comprising shells and wood fibre (Jensen, 2022).

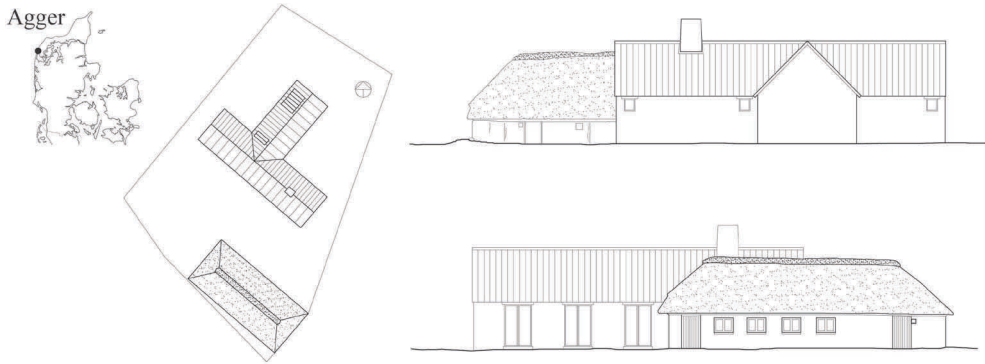


Fig. 1 – The Hahn Lavsén house. The houses are orientated according to the strong, prevalent wind from the north-west. North and south elevations. Scale and fenestration of the new house aligns with the old house. Drawings are based on (Thisted Kommune, 2025) (Eybye, 2025).

4.1.2. Sustainability

The house is energy labelled *A2015* (Thisted Kommune, 2025) and thus, is a Net Zero Energy Building (NZEB). The main energy source is district heating which is considered a relatively green energy source. The aim was to avoid concrete, and Hahn explains that they have chosen “few, honest materials with a long lifetime” (Jensen, 2022). For instance, the Ytong energy+ blocks were selected due to their cradle-to-cradle certification. Leftover wood from the construction has been used to build the front door and interior elements. The kitchen is built of reused oakwood. (Jensen, 2022; Munk, 2023).

4.1.3. Elements from traditional vernacular

The orientation, shape, design and fenestration of the house refers to traditional vernacular. Hahn relates that the components of the vernacular materials (i.e. wood, sand, lime and clay) also are the main components in their choice of materials. The architects wanted affinity between the two buildings in regard to materials and scale, just as the preconditions of Agger are the same as 200 years ago (Jensen, 2022). The house is owner-built to a large extent which was common in the traditional vernacular and highly unusual in present Danish construction.

Hence, building costs are relatively low. Lastly, Hahn and Lavsén state that the building process was about learning, not getting finished quickly (Jensen, 2022).

4.2. Rundbalshuset, Kassjö, Sweden

Rundbalshuset (The Round Bale House) is a single-family house (Fig. 2) located in Kassjö, northern Sweden and it is built from 2017 to 2021 by Laura and Erik Vidje. Their aim was to incorporate circular design principles in the building, reduce the environmental impact and to build in accordance with local climate. In this area, temperatures can range from -30°C in winter to over 30°C in summer (Elva Hållbara, 2025).

4.2.1. Design, construction and technology

The house has a distinctive, round shape, since this form is most efficient in regard to energy and materials. The primary materials are straw bales and clay, as the 70-centimeter-thick walls consist of wooden studs filled with tightly pressed straw bales, which are then plastered with clay. This combination provides excellent insulation. Other materials are laminated timber and bricks. Windows are large and along with the shape and detailing, the house is indisputably contemporary (Elva Hållbara, 2025).

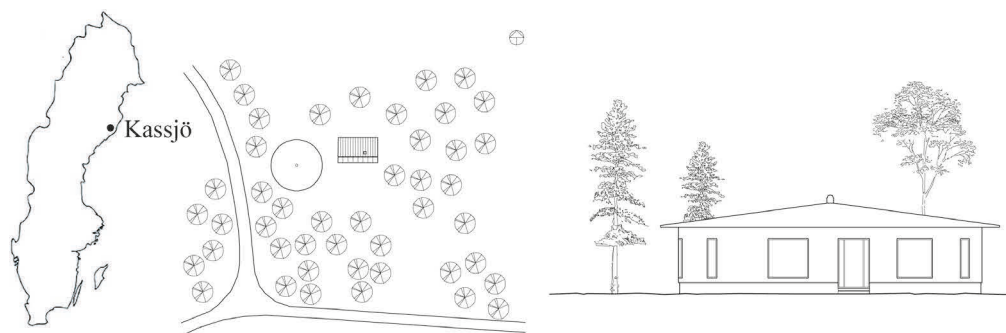


Fig. 2 – *The Rundbalshuset. Site plan with the dwelling and guest house. South elevation with main entrance. Drawings are based on (Elva Hållbara, 2025) (Eybye & Dabaieh, 2025).*

4.2.2. Sustainability

The house comprises a number of sustainable features. The primary materials are chosen for their low environmental footprint and local availability. Likewise, more materials are reused such as the kitchen cabinets and furniture. The house is labelled *Energy Class A* and it has its own solar cells and solar collectors to produce renewable energy and thus, minimize reliance on the electricity grid. Moreover, an innovative shower system recirculates hot water, requiring only five litres per use. Greywater is treated on-site through infiltration, and composting toilets manage waste sustainably. Lastly, Laura and Erik Vidje promote sustainable building through workshops (Elva Hållbara, 2025).

4.2.3. Elements from traditional vernacular

Following vernacular construction principles, the house is built from a limited number of local materials. These are also found among the traditional vernacular buildings. The low roof pitch and wide eave are characteristic of local vernacular architecture, and the latter protects both earthen and wooden buildings. The house is built by the owners to a large extent and on a modest budget. Self-building is a principal feature in vernacular architecture and uncommon in the current Swedish construction sector. Finally, the plot is laid out to vegetable garden with a view to produce as much of their own food as possible (Elva Hållbara, 2025).

5. Discussion

The objective of this study is to examine the diverse interpretations of *neo-vernacular* in Scandinavian architecture and investigate the extent to which it reflects a genuine alignment with the environmental, cultural, and social imperatives associated with traditional design. Therefore, the paper presented a literature review and a case study. Though not exhaustive, the review highlighted the lack of deep theory on neo-vernacular architecture. It is likely that more literature sources had supported this finding. The case studies comprised a Danish and a Swedish single-family house. Clearly, more cases had most likely added to the findings, yet this was not possible for reasons of time and extent. Hence, it can be argued that limited knowledge on this complex matter can be deduced from two cases. However, according to (Flyvbjerg, 2006), generalisation is often possible from a single case and moreover, case studies are highly useful to scientific development, for instance through their thick descriptions. In this paper, the case studies produced crucial data.

The two cases were examined in regard to the developed, analytical frame. First subject concerned design, construction and technology. Both houses have an indisputably contemporary design (e.g. shape and fenestration) and they apply modern technology in regard to energy.

The design of the Hahn Lavsén house is closely affiliated with the vernacular aisle-truss house, whereas Rundbalshuset has a strong emphasis on passive systems and renewable energy sources.

Regarding sustainability, both houses comprises more aspects of sustainability. These include energy and choice of materials issued from vernacular architecture (biogenic, natural, reused or locally sourced). The climate by the West Coast is harsh for which reason the materials of the Hahn Lavsén house also are chosen with an emphasis on durability. The Rundbalshuset has a low carbon footprint, as it is mainly built of locally sourced straw and clay and furthermore, it is self-sufficient in terms of energy production.

Vernacular elements can be seen in both houses. This includes a small palette of (local) materials, self-building on a modest budget and the construction process emphasizing learning and hands-on experience. The Hahn Lavsén house is developed from the vernacular aisle-truss house and thus, it inserts itself in the tradition of the neo-vernacular as a preservation approach. The Rundbalshuset applies vernacular methods as well as eco-building (straw bale houses).

Initially, the Hahn Lavsén house appeared as a beautiful house that possibly was vernacular mimicry. Scrutiny shows, however, that the building aligns with vernacular principles and is neo-vernacular. Similarly, the Rundbalshuset aligns with vernacular principles and is neo-vernacular. With the strong intentions of renewable energy and low-carbon materials, this house arguably represents another branch within neo-vernacular that affiliates with eco-building.

5.1. Results

The study of neo-vernacular architecture in Scandinavia reveals a significant trend towards integrating traditional building practices with modern design and sustainability. Through the review and the case studies, it is evident that neo-vernacular architecture in Denmark and Sweden

is characterized by a deliberate emphasis on local materials and construction techniques, which blend harmoniously with modern technology and aesthetics. The two cases are thus exemplars of this architectural movement. The Hahn Lavsén house commits to neo-vernacular principles through its design and construction methods, while the Rundbalshuset shows innovative eco-building techniques. Both structures underscore the importance of durability and sustainability, reflecting a broader trend towards environmentally conscious design in response to stricter building regulations and climate change imperatives. The findings suggest that while contemporary designs incorporate modern elements, they maintain a strong connection to traditional vernacular architecture, thereby raising pertinent questions about authenticity and the essence of neo-vernacular approaches.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of neo-vernacular architecture in Scandinavia underscores its potential as a viable paradigm for sustainable and culturally resonant building practices. By integrating traditional architectural values with modern technological advancements, neo-vernacular architecture offers a compelling framework for addressing contemporary challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity. The case studies of the Hahn Lavsén house and the Rundbalshuset illustrate the movement's capacity to prioritize local adaptation, architectural quality, and sustainability. These examples highlight the complexity and potential of neo-vernacular architecture to redefine single-family housing in Scandinavia.

As the movement continues to evolve, it will be crucial to further investigate the balance between authenticity and innovation, ensuring that neo-vernacular architecture remains a dynamic and relevant approach in the architectural landscape.

References

- Björck, M. et al. (2021). Härdar och husgrunder: – arkeologi i det samiska kulturlandskapet i Syd- och Mellansverige. *META Historiskarkeologisk Tidskrift*, 85–108. <https://doi.org/10.59008/meta.vi.10747>
- Bronner, S. J. (2004). Dwellings: The Vernacular House Worldwide. *Western Folklore*, 63(4), 349–351.
- Chahanjiri, J. G. et al. (2014). Developing neo-vernacular building technologies to integrate natural and built environments: A model tourist village in Qeshm Island. *Research Journal of Recent Sciences*, 3(12), 78–86.
- Elva Hållbara. (2025). *Rundbalshuset*. Retrieved February 18, 2025, from <https://rundbalshuset.se/huset/?v=efad7abb323e>
- Eybye, B. T. (2024). Exploring twentieth century Danish vernacular architecture. In J. Cirklová (Ed.). *AMPS PROCEEDINGS SERIES 35.3: Prague – Heritages, Past and Present - Built and Social* (pp. 493–504). AMPS.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
- Jensen, B. L. (2022). *START portræt: Hahn Lavsén*. Retrived February 10, 2025, from <https://dreyersfond.dk/okay-portfolio/start-portraet-hahn-lavsén/>
- Maudlin, D. (2010). Crossing Boundaries: Revisiting the Thresholds of Vernacular Architecture. *Vernacular Architecture*, 41(2010), 10–14.
- Munk, H. (2023, September 25). *Boligreportage: De byggede bæredygtigt hus med mange benspænd*. Retrived February 10, 2025, from <https://www.bolius.dk/de-byggede-baeredygtigt-hus-med-mange-benspaend-99073>
- Oliver, P. (2006). *Built to meet needs: Cultural issues in vernacular architecture*. Architectural Press.
- Pardo, J. M. F. (2023). Challenges and current research rends for vernacular architecture in a global world: A literature review. *Buildings*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings13010162>
- Stoklund, B. (1969). *Bondegård og byggeskik før 1850*. Dansk Historisk Fællesforenings Håndbøger.
- Thisted Kommune. (2025). *Bilagsliste og akter*. [Right of access to documents].
- Tiwari, S., & Vij, M. (2024). Adaption of neo-vernacular architecture in contemporary temples in India: Insights from selected case studies. *International Society for the Study of Vernacular Settlements*, 11(8), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej-2024-11-08-01>
- Turkušić, E. (2011). Neo-vernacular architecture: contribution to the research on revival of vernacular heritage thorough moden architectural design. In *Importance of Place: 4th International Conference on Hazards and Modern Heritage*. Sarajevo.
- Vellinga, M. (2013). The noble vernacular. *The Journal of Architecture*, 18(4), 570–590. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2013.819813>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research*. SAGE.
- Zhao, X., & Greenop, K. (2019). From ‘neo-vernacular’ to ‘semi-vernacular’: a case study of vernacular architecture representation and adaptation in rural Chinese village revitalization. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25(11), 1128–1147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1570544>
- Zographaki, S. G. (1986). *Neo-vernacular: Trends towards the recent past in Greece*. [Master thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. Dspace@MIT. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/78950>