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DIGITAL, VISUAL, AND IMMERSIVE TRANSLATIONS OF TRADITION

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DIGITAL, VISUAL, AND IMMERSIVE TRANSLATIONS OF TRADITION

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

VIRTUAL TRANSLATIONS: TRADITION, PERCEPTION, AND THE IMMERSED BODY

Tatjana Crossley

VIRTUAL TRANSLATIONS: TRADITION, PERCEPTION, AND THE IMMERSED BODY



This paper examines how immersive environments translate tradition. Building on research into architecture, culture, and the body, it argues that tradition is an ever-changing and evolving concept reshaped through virtual mediation and the relationship between bodies and space. VR and immersive media, defined broadly to understand the practice of architecture within this discourse, do not merely represent historical forms; they generate new traditions by reframing how bodies perceive, remember, and inhabit space. Focusing on spatial traditions across history, the paper explores how cultural narratives are embedded in architectural design. Drawing on case studies, it positions virtual architectural environments as sites where tradition is both archived and transformed through embodied experience.

1. INTRODUCTION: TRADITION IN TRANSLATION

Architectural tradition has typically been understood as a matter of continuity where the transmission of forms, typologies, material choices, construction methodologies, and symbolic languages permeates across generations and creates cultural identity. While this way of thinking about tradition is suitable in historical analysis and conversations around preservation, it does not account for the ways in which tradition adapts, migrates, and acquires new meanings as it crosses cultural boundaries, temporal distances, and representational media. It is the difference of seeing tradition as something static to understanding it as something that is ever evolving based on the technologies, stories, and cultural values upheld at a given moment in time.

Considering the translation of tradition opens up a more dynamic framing. Rather than architectural tradition being simply replicated from one generation to the next, this framing recognizes a transformation that tradition undergoes, shaped by new bodies, new contexts, new technologies, and new media – required as a condition of survival.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin¹ argues that translation produces a new language and a new body of meaning. It is not derivative but rather offers a way to examine what happens to architectural tradition when it is mediated through the representation of culture. Specifically, this paper will consider this through the lens of immersive and virtual environments.

Immersive environments, understood broadly, across the history of architecture and media, function as translational spaces in which architectural tradition shifts from material continuity toward perceptual and experiential continuity through the passing down of narrative. In *Virtual Reality: Architecture, Culture, and the Body*, the term virtual reality has been defined “as an experiential and spatial condition rather than simply a digital construct... [where] immersive environments function as extensions of the body and reflect a

collective identity.”² Within this definition, virtual reality is understood as part of a longer lineage of immersive architectural practices that have always mediated cultural narratives through perception and the body. This paper proposes that architectural immersion is one of the primary mechanisms through which tradition materializes, migrates, and changes.

The paper will establish a theoretical reframing of tradition as translation. It will position architecture as a historically immersive medium and provide a precise definition of the virtual beyond its digital associations. It will ground the analysis in embodied perception and cultural memory. The argument will be demonstrated using two main case studies: the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii and *MUDI Reality+*. Finally, the paper considers virtual environments as living archives with the critical questions this raises in order to draw conclusions about tradition as this embodied translation.

2. FROM INHERITANCE TO TRANSLATION: RETHINKING TRADITION

Conventional architectural discourse has framed tradition as an inheritance or a stable set of formal, material, or symbolic conventions passed down through time. This model has been productive for architectural history, to examine culture and typology, and for conservation, providing a language for identifying lineage, influence, and continuity. However, it privileges the object of transmission over the process of transmission and, in doing so, reduces tradition to static forms detached from lived experience through which they acquire meaning.

We can understand tradition as narrative, ritual, and cultural knowledge that, architecturally speaking, is activated through space. Traditions survive because they continue to be experienced, reinterpreted, and re-embodied by new subjects in new contexts. Each act of reception is also an act of transformation as new bodies introduce subjective readings that add to collective meaning.

While Walter Benjamin’s translation theory focuses primarily on language, his thinking can be applied to architectural tradition. The work lives on through its transformations. Rather than producing a replication, the translation produces an ‘echo of the original.’³ Benjamin further argues that translation is not about communicating meaning directly, but about revealing what he calls ‘pure language,’ something that no language achieves alone but toward which all languages collectively gesture. Therefore, translation is a temporary negotiation of cultural difference rather than its resolution. Similarly, Homi Bhabha’s account of cultural translation, in *The Location of Culture*,⁴ articulates that tradition operates in the hybrid space where cultures and meaning encounter one another to produce something neither fully continuous nor discontinuous from the past. Tradition is a construction that is performed in the present rather than being

simply inherited from the past. Where Benjamin argues that the task of the translator is to reveal the ‘pure language,’ Homi Bhabha insists that there is no pure original in the first place. Both come to the same conclusion, that the most honest translation reveals the tension that is produced between these inherited forms and contemporary needs. This framing resists treating tradition as exclusive to any single original culture and opens space to consider how traditions acquire meaning through repetition, evolving practice, cross-cultural encounter, and reinterpretation.

Architecture has always played a central role in this translational process. Built environments encode cultural narratives not only through their formal and material properties but also through the spatial sequences, atmospheres, and sensory engagements they produce. They structure embodied experience related to movement, dwelling, and memory. Architecture materializes cultural values, and tradition, in this sense, is sustained by the experiential activation afforded by these values. As buildings are repurposed and new meaning is imparted, these values evolve to form hybrid translations (Figure 1).

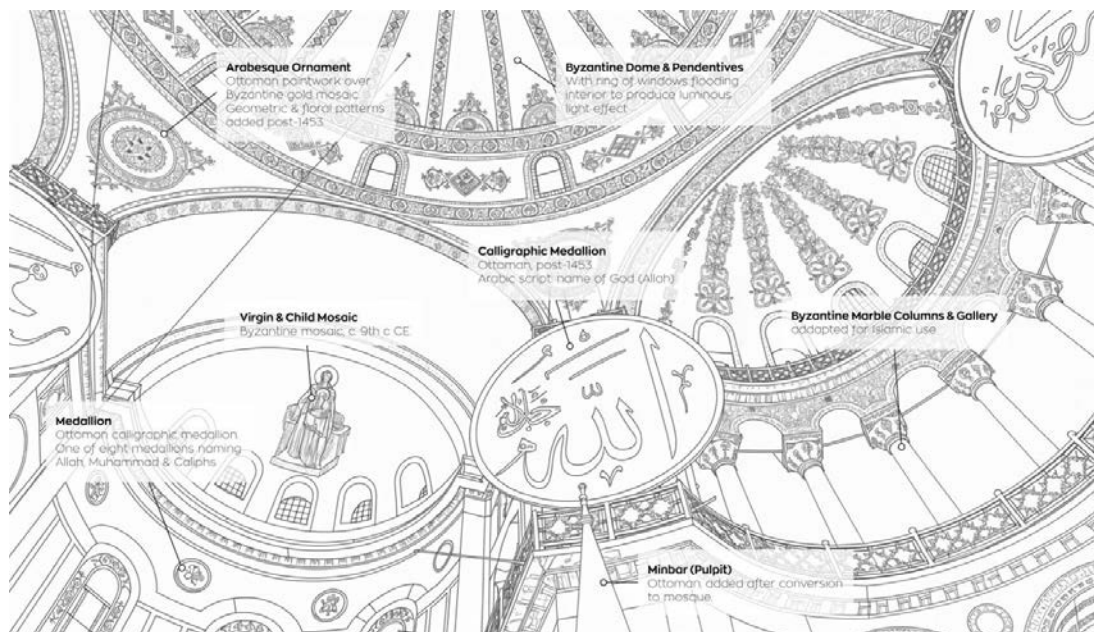


Figure 1: Hagia Sophia, layered histories, diagram. (Source: Illustration by Tatjana Crossley using xFigura).

This is a dynamic process of cultural meaning-making that opens the possibility of understanding immersive architectural environments, both historical and contemporary, as the primary sites at which this translation occurs. It is through immersion that the body is most fully drawn into the spatial logic of a cultural narrative, and it is through that immersion that tradition acquires new meaning for new subjects in new times.

3. ARCHITECTURE AS IMMERSIVE MEDIA

Architecture has always functioned as an immersive medium. Spatial enclosure, controlled lighting, material texture, olfactory and acoustic atmosphere, and choreographed movement have been used to produce environments that envelop their users, guide perception, and convey cultural meaning. These immersive qualities of architectural space are how it is able to behave like a communicative device or instrument.

Immersion deals with the alignment of spatial form with bodily perception. Because of this, the medium itself shapes and transforms human perception as much as what it is trying to convey.⁵ This is as true of examples like Ancient Roman fresco rooms or digital headsets. Immersive environments, using a variety of media, reframe reality, using spatial frameworks to influence what is experienced, how it is perceived, and how it is remembered. Architecture, when considered in this sense, is already a medium of virtual production as it materializes social and cultural frameworks, encoding collective narratives into the spatial conditions through which bodies move and orient themselves.

This understanding situates the history of architectural immersion within a broader media lineage. Oliver Grau's research catalogues virtual reality environments across history and demonstrates that this drive to surround ourselves in constructed spatial narratives is not new.⁶ The spatial sequencing of ancient fresco rooms, the atmospheric light of Byzantine vaults, the scale and optical effects of the Panorama Rotunda, and the sensory exploration of many contemporary immersive installations and architectures all use variations of the same underlying logic. They produce a deliberate organization of perception to create an experience that often extends beyond the physical boundaries of the space. Techniques such as perspectival illusion and manipulation, atmospheric effects, 360-degree imagery, and temporal sequencing all have architectural precedents in history. The panorama rotundas of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, described by Stephan Oettermann as a mass medium of nationalist imagery, used not only painted surfaces but faux terrain, cannons, and military bands. It was a full sensory apparatus in service of a particular spatial narrative.⁷ What has changed throughout history are the media and modalities of representation.

The work of Sarah Kenderdine⁸ offers a further lineage of immersive practice drawn from non-Western cultural traditions. Her project *PLACE-Hampi* (2006) treated the Hindu ritual landscape as a living cosmology rendered through rotating panoramic immersion, mimicking ethnographic participation rather than archeological observation. *300 Years of Hakka Kung Fu* (2016) used motion capture and immersive video to frame an embodied martial practice as more than just a sport, but as an archive of cultural memory. And *Traveling Kungkarangkalpa* (2017) positioned the dome as a cross-cultural bridge from temples, cathedrals, and mosques to the projections of cave painting, which Kenderdine and others⁹ identify as the first immersive experiences created by humans. These projects demonstrate that the impulse to immerse the body in cultural

narrative is a key feature of human spatial practice across traditions. Because of this, we can begin to unpack how architecture and this drive to immerse people in particular narratives are so crucial in this discussion of tradition and how immersive environments function as translational spaces for architectural tradition as forces that mediate culture through the body.

3.1. Defining the Virtual: Beyond the Digital

To position virtual and immersive environments as continuations of an architectural tradition of immersion, it is necessary to establish a definition of the virtual that moves beyond its common association with digital devices and simulation technology. The term ‘virtual reality,’ popularized in the 1980s by Jaron Lanier of VPL Research, has become widely identified with head-mounted displays, haptic interfaces, and digital rendering engines, but this obscures a broader spatial and experiential condition that the term describes.

This paper recognizes the virtual as an experiential and spatial condition rather than a hardware and software-driven device. A virtual environment reorganizes bodily perception, suspends ordinary spatial cues, and draws the body into a constructed narrative that extends beyond its immediate physical surroundings. In this sense, the virtual is not positioned in opposition to the real but instead is a mode of reality shaped through mediation and embodied engagement. As David Chalmers has argued, ‘virtual reality is genuine reality’¹⁰ since our perception of any environment is always already mediated by our sensory apparatus, our cultural conditioning, and our memory of prior spatial experience.

Gilles Deleuze’s distinction between the virtual and the actual provides an interesting and relevant theoretical anchor.¹¹ For Deleuze, the virtual is not the unreal but can be thought of as the not-yet-actualized. Using his description of the fold,¹² we can understand that virtual spaces are products of reality, formed by the interplay of internal and external forces, accumulating layers of meaning that are continuously reinterpreted as they are inhabited by new bodies in new contexts. Elizabeth Grosz, drawing on Deleuze, further frames virtuality as an ‘endless openness’¹³ that allows for the production of different forms of knowledge rather than simply a ‘re-production of a real.’¹⁴ ‘It is a mode of production’¹⁵ that reflects the contexts that have shaped it. Throughout architectural history, spaces have been designed to produce experiences that go beyond a simple physical dimension.

Frescoed garden rooms, panoramic paintings, theatrical stage sets, spiritual, religious, and contemplative spaces, as well as contemporary digital environments, all operate as virtual spaces that extend perception beyond the immediate physical constraints of the architecture or device to invite their users into constructed spatial narratives. The Villa Livia garden room at Primaporta (now housed in the National Roman Museum), which was a subterranean dining space painted with a panoramic garden in eternal spring, transported its

Ancient Roman occupants into an idealized landscape that never existed outside the painted surface. The significance of this panoramic space is that the images convey an image of Rome under Emperor Augustus as a well-tended garden, thriving under the care of the imperial family. The plants and birds represented signify peace, prosperity, and fertility. The space is about imposing an ideology.¹⁶ Similarly, the panorama rotundas of the late eighteenth century used the 360-degree battle scenes to promote national pride. These spatial illusions were so powerful that users described what was called panorama sickness, which we can equate to that sensation of nausea sometimes created with contemporary virtual reality technologies. Examples today, such as immersive digital environments like MUDI Reality+ and DMUConstellation, by ArchiTAG, extend this lineage into mixed and augmented reality with a focus on using the virtual to convey narratives for education.

The virtual is not limited to illusionistic modalities but can also be thought of as a function of architecture. Throughout architectural history, ideology, value, and social frameworks have been embedded in the design of space. They control how bodies move, suggest how bodies should interact, and impose these frameworks on their users. They direct the gaze, create moments of compression and release, and heighten values of sensory awareness in novel ways that are all integral to the experience of space and the way in which we can interpret this in relation to tradition. For example, Janet Abu-Lughod¹⁷ describes the conditions produced by the ‘traditional’ Islamic city – a term she acknowledges is problematic in this context.¹⁸ Because of the cultural proclivity towards privacy, streets divert in a way to break lines of sight.¹⁹ Because of Islamic law, windows on the exteriors of homes are smaller and must not be opposite a neighbor’s windows. These proclivities and laws have shaped spaces and created distinct architectures that follow these cultural traditions.

The immersive and the virtual function as a translational medium. It reframes tradition and culture. By altering scale, orientation, temporality, and sensorial emphasis, virtual environments translate cultural narratives into new experiential forms, allowing meanings to expand, shift, and hybridize across contexts. This property is intrinsic to representation and the immersive organization of space. Moving forward in this paper, it is important to recognize that the virtual encompasses architectural practice as a means for perpetuating culture. Architecture is a device and medium of representation for the virtual.

4. EMBODIMENT, PERCEPTION, AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Translation is tied to the experience of the body. To understand how architectural immersion translates tradition, it is necessary to understand how bodies sense, remember, and transform cultural meaning through spatial experience.

The concept of the body image, central to psychoanalytic and phenomenological work developed by Paul

Schilder,²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty,²¹ and Jacques Lacan,²² provides a framework to understand subjective experience. The body image is not static but a dynamic, continuously evolving map of the body's spatial position, sensory capacities, and relational orientation within its environment. It situates us within space, providing the coordinates through which controlled movement and spatial understanding are possible. The body image is layered, over time, as bodies encounter new experiences. It accumulates an archive of prior experience that can be remembered when dealing with new environments.

Immersion temporarily destabilizes the body image until it can understand the new spatial frameworks, drawing on the archive to integrate the new information. This cycle allows the immersive space to create moments of heightened perceptual awareness where the body can receive the meaning conveyed by the space.

For architecture, this has profound implications. It supports the idea that cultural memory is not only stored in texts and symbols, but also embedded in experiential patterns, in the spatial sequences, atmospheres, and sensory engagements that architecture produces and through which traditions have historically been passed down. When the body encounters an immersive environment organized around a particular cultural narrative, it is not passive. The body is actively constructing it through the sensorial engagement. Therefore, the tradition and the message are produced by the encounter between the body and the space.

The work of Merleau-Ponty, specifically his *Phenomenology of Perception*,²³ reinforces this understanding that perception is always embodied and shaped by this history of experience. We perceive through the sensory apparatus, from the body, and through movement and orientations that constitute lived spatial experience. Cultural conditioning, that is, the historically specific patterns and narrative associations inherited, shapes what and how we perceive. Perception is never culturally neutral. It is always historically situated, providing a particular lens through which to understand space.

When immersive environments translate cultural traditions, transposing new spatial, temporal, or sensory cues, the translation is more than representational. It becomes a part of the experience and the moment of spatial orientation, leaving a trace in the body's archive of experiential memory. Tradition, understood in this way, is a negotiated process between memory and perception, between the accumulated spatial experience of the past and the new immersive conditions of the present.

5. VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS AS TRANSLATIONAL SPACES

Virtual and immersive environments engage with both past and forward thinking. As spaces meant to encompass aspirational qualities or values, these environments often compress temporal layers, combining historical references with speculative futures. In doing so, they create conditions where tradition is constantly

and actively being re-imagined and re-authored. While they do preserve history and tradition, they also generate it.

This brings to the discussion the distinction between preservation and translation. Preservation seeks to maintain tradition intact, fixing it in a particular historical moment. Translation accepts that tradition will be transformed through transmission and new media of representation.²⁴ It is less concerned about whether things are precisely the same and more about whether the meaning remains alive and significant for new subjects. As technologies and cultural dispositions change, architecture and design evolve, and the immersion and virtual realities they perpetuate grapple with this condition. They introduce new spatial, temporal, and perceptual conditions that transform the traditions they engage in order to maintain the relevancy and meaningfulness of tradition.

This becomes even more significant when considered in relation to our global condition, where it is easier to travel and where ideas, information, and experience are more easily communicated and shared around the world. When considering digital technologies, this is further amplified. The movement of bodies and the desire to feel a part of something larger mean that tradition migrates and, through migration and encounters with new subjects, evolves. Traditions translated into virtual space are no longer anchored to a single location or historical moment. They circulate across cultural boundaries, encountered by bodies with radically different spatial 'archives,' different cultural expectations, and different histories of spatial experience. As Arjun Appadurai has argued in *Modernity at Large*,²⁵ the global flow of cultural forms produces new conditions of deterritorialization from which traditions can detach from their original spatial and cultural anchors and enter global networks of reinterpretation. They acquire new meanings outside of their original context.

Architecture provides a powerful site for this deterritorialization as ideas are either appropriated or co-opted. Throughout history, we can recognize the power of architecture to provide a physical construction of virtual frameworks. A Roman villa from Ancient Rome, a Chinese traditional courtyard space, or a vernacular dwelling are never encountered by a global audience in the same culturally situated way as their originally intended occupants. The archive of spatial experience that each body brings is different; the cultural narratives through which they interpret the spatial organization are different; the meanings they interpret in the experience are different. Rather than thinking of this as a problem that should be solved through a different or greater fidelity of representation, something arguably impossible, it is better to understand this as a condition of translation and how living tradition continues to maintain its relevancy.

Authenticity does not just reside in material continuity or representational methodology. It emerges through meaningful embodied engagement that allows rich narrative organizations to be communicated, and where immersion enables new bodies to inhabit and reinterpret the cultural logic of the tradition. Virtual space

becomes a site where cultural meanings are expanded, contested, and reconfigured across audiences, an active environment for the ongoing negotiation of cultural inheritance.

6. CASE STUDIES: TRANSLATIONAL IMMERSION

6.1. Case Study One – Historical: The Villa dei Misteri, Pompeii

The Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii,²⁶ dating from the first century BCE, provides an example of illusionistic architectural immersion in the Western tradition. It demonstrates an instructive instance of tradition operating through immersive translation.

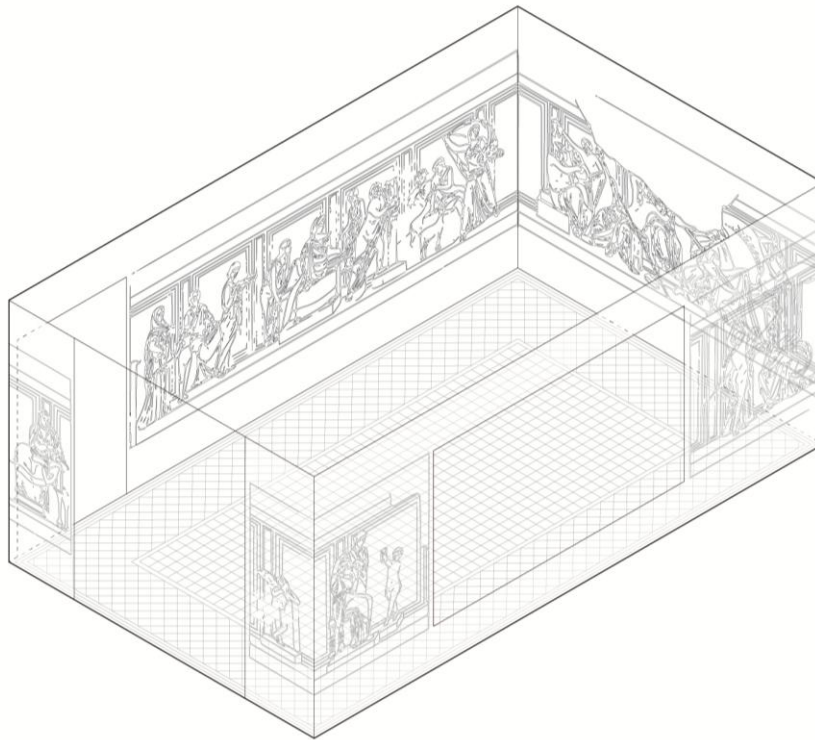


Figure 2: Villa dei Misteri, Great Frieze 360. (Source: Illustration by Tatjana Crossley).

Room 5 of the villa contains a continuous panoramic fresco sequence, the Great Frieze (Figure 2), depicting a ritual initiation into the cult of Dionysus. Scholars interpret this fresco as a preparation of a young initiate into the cult through marriage to the god. Bettina Bergmann's research²⁷ on Roman fresco rooms as memory theaters is directly applicable here: the images could be understood non-linearly, and the room provided a space for private cultural, political, and ritual discourse that extended the symbolic space of the villa into a virtual one. The fresco creates a spatial enclosure²⁸ where the physical space of the room and the painted

space of the ritual narrative become experientially continuous. As Nikolaus Dietrich has shown,²⁹ depth techniques in Roman wall painting, including atmospheric perspective, the raising of the painted figures above the floor line so that the base of the wall reads as a continuation of the actual floor, and moments where figures appear to press forward beyond the picture plane into the physical space of the room, reinforce this spatial continuity, drawing the initiate into the narrative.

It is believed that the actual cult initiation would not have occurred in this room, and instead Room 5 is seen as more of an instructional space. The space translates these Dionysian rites into an architectural experience that itself becomes a form of the ritual. The sequence of scenes that depict submission, disorientation, flagellation, and regeneration stage the process of initiation in this spatial way, so that the body moving through and orienting within the room understands the emotional and psychological arc of the ritual process. The cultural tradition of the Dionysian rites is translated from its ritual context, which was likely performed outside at night, into an architectural one, acquiring new spatial, narrative, and perceptual dimensions in the process. The frescos are a means to communicate information about the ritual to the initiates, and in this way pass down a cultural record.

This translation is not to be thought of as lesser than the original ritual but is a spatial form that carries the tradition, or at the very least, an understanding of it, forward. While the fresco takes on new meanings for us today, and the illusionistic representation it presents may be less convincing to contemporary viewers with different modalities of representation and immersion, they encode an experiential logic of space.³⁰ In this case, as the cult went underground and the practices did not continue through to the contemporary period, the fresco preserves a specific historical understanding of subjectivity and self-actualization in relation to the unique socio-political contexts of the time period.

6.2. Case Study Two – Contemporary: MUDI Reality+

*MUDI Reality+*³¹ (Figure 3) is a Mixed Reality project developed by ArchiTAG in collaboration with the Museo Diffuso of Castel San Pietro Romano and was inaugurated in April 2024. It offers a contemporary instance of the immersive translation of culture through architecture and design.

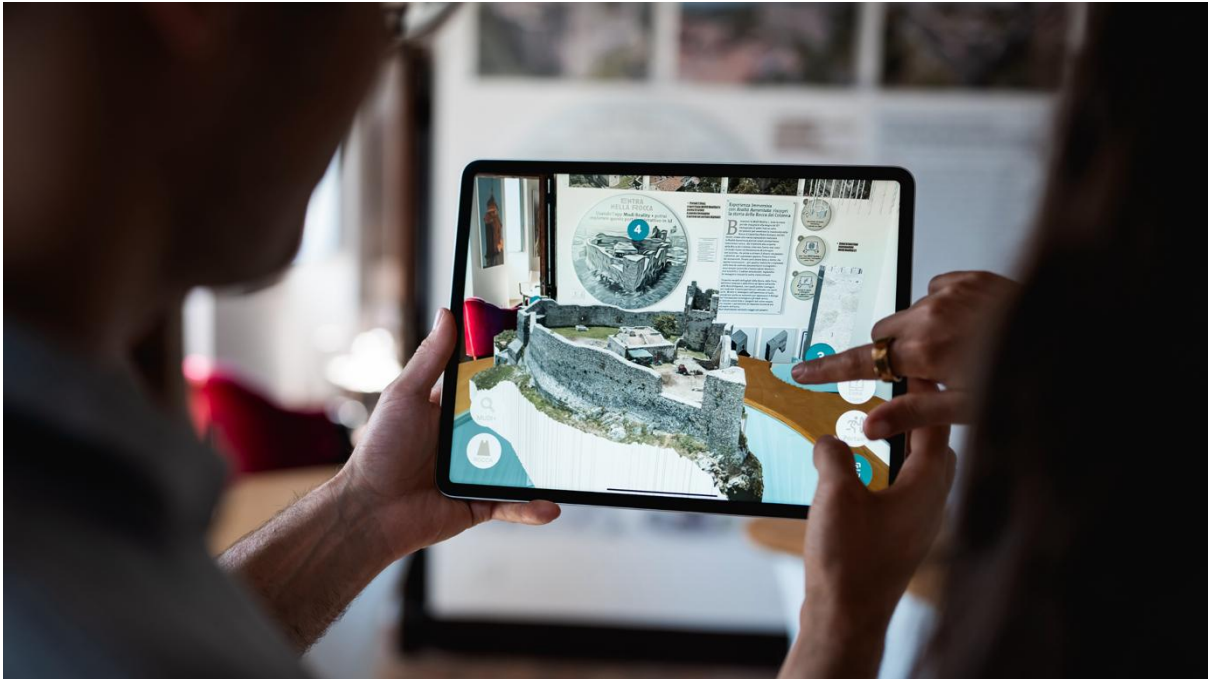


Figure 3: MUDI Reality + immersive app design. (Source: photo by ArchiTAG).

Castel San Pietro Romano is a medieval hilltop village in the Lazio region southeast of Rome. The main attraction to the village is the Rocca dei Colonna, a fort that survives in fragments. The fortified complex of the Rocca comprised a tower, drawbridge, polygonal walls, and an ogival gate, and has been damaged over centuries, making it not as fully legible as a spatial sequence to visitors encountering it today. The project responds to this condition of the ruin and works to reconstruct the Rocca in a way that translates it into an immersive, interactive augmented reality experience through which the original spatial and architectural logic of the complex can be understood.

The installation combines a physical interactive space that includes a digital portal, a 3D-printed table, a 3D-printed scale model of the fort (designed specifically with visually impaired visitors in mind), and a vinyl carpet with a mapping reinterpretation that spatially anchors the experience. This is coupled with an augmented reality application accessible through dedicated iPads at the museum. The digital reconstruction process was achieved through drone photography and processed using photogrammetry software into a detailed 3D mesh model of the Rocca as it exists today (Figure 4). This was then layered with historically reconstructed elements developed in close collaboration with archeologists and local historians, ensuring that the speculative massing models were grounded in verified historical evidence. The project attempts to spatially reconcile the accessible information and design modalities supported by new technology. Through the AR interface, visitors can switch between the Rocca's current ruined state and its digitally reconstructed

historical state, which superimposes the full spatial volume of the tower, the drawbridge, and the walls onto the physical remains that survive in situ. Visitors can rotate, zoom in, and resize individual elements that include the tower, the drawbridge, and the gate, to understand their role within the experience of the whole.

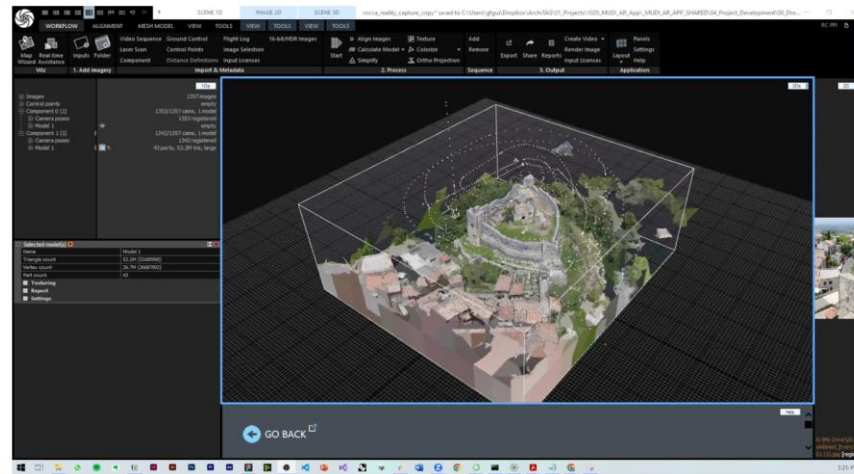


Figure 4: Reality Capture photogrammetry workflow. (Source: Screen-capture by ArchiTAG).

MUDI Reality+ does not attempt to restore the Rocca dei Colonna nor even to preserve a singular authoritative version of its history. Rather, it stages a series of encounters in which a spatial experience of the fort can be made available to contemporary visitors. It is not meant to replace the physical experience of the ruin but instead provides a new layer of understanding, a palimpsest in which past and present coexist and can be meaningfully interacted with. The project operates through what Baudrillard understood as simulation, but rather than treating this as a loss of meaning, it argues that responsible simulation, that is grounded in archeological evidence, preserves historic sites while producing new educational opportunities.

The visual appearance and the Rocca's spatial and cultural logic are reimagined to demonstrate the medieval fortified tradition of central Italy and the constructional and organizational decisions that shaped the Rocca, its village, and even the surrounding area. It is not about preserving the tradition but about creating a living representation for people to learn more about the site and its significance. In this way, it translates culture and presents it to new subjects.

Significantly, the project also makes visible the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of this process. It required the coordination of historians and archaeologists who provided the research and historical interpretation that validates the digital reconstruction. This sits alongside the design and technological development of the AR interface, the user experience, and the physical installation. The project to reinterpret the Rocca dei Colonna in this way is not the product of a single authorial vision but of a structured dialogue

between historical knowledge, archaeological evidence, and spatial design. As contemporary culture embraces new use cases for digital VR and AR experiences, this project offers a model for how architectural tradition might be translated responsibly, enabling interactive engagement rather than passive display.

Comparing *MUDI Reality+* with the Villa dei Misteri, though very different case studies, shows how technology, media, and design translate cultural tradition through the organization of spatial sequence, threshold, movement, and sensorial experience. Both demonstrate an encounter between a body and a culturally organized environment, and the most powerful component of these case studies is the alignment between spatial form and perception that allows tradition to be read and interpreted. Though the media are radically different, the logic is not so different. It is about imparting knowledge.

7. VIRTUAL ARCHIVES AND THE FUTURE OF TRADITION

As immersive environments increasingly function as vehicles of cultural knowledge, they invite comparison with another model of cultural memory: the archive. Conventional archives are organized around a logic of preservation as they store cultural artifacts in a stable, retrievable way. Virtual environments, as this paper has presented, operate with a different logic, one that is closer to what Jacques Derrida³² identifies as the essentially productive and unstable nature of archival practice.

For Derrida, the archive represents an active process of cultural power. Rather than thinking of it as neutrally storing information, it is selective and organizational, with the effect of mediating and shaping what can be remembered and how. History is constructed, and archives are part of this process. We can also understand virtual environments as sites of cultural translation, as archives in this sense, since they are also working in an active process of production that shapes which cultural narratives are given spatial form, which bodies are invited to participate, and which experiential logics are used to organize space.

Clemantine Deliss develops this critique further in *The Metabolic Museum*,³³ where she proposes that collections should be understood as dynamic sites of continuous reinterpretation, a metabolic model in which objects are constantly reread and recontextualized to produce new forms of knowledge. The museum becomes a laboratory rather than a repository. This metabolic model can also be applied to the logic of virtual environments: active, generative, and evolving. Aleida Assmann's work³⁴ on cultural memory as an active process reinforces this. Cultural memory persists through repeated acts of reinterpretation, through ritual, narrative, and spatial practices through which communities continuously re-engage with their inherited cultural meanings. The process of memory is not passive. As Michael Levin's concept of 'mnemonic improvisation' suggests – the idea that memories are constantly being rewritten – Michael Pollan connects

this to the continuous reconstruction of identity itself.³⁵ Human memory evolves as we construct who we are. Architecture and the virtual reality it provides is a powerful activating practice. It provides space in which tradition is inhabited, not just represented but experienced through sensorial and embodied encounters with cultural narratives.

Kate Crawford's work³⁶ on the politics of archiving is also relevant here. Crawford demonstrates that data and models are always embedded in infrastructures that reflect what has been documented, digitized, and validated within systems of cultural prominence and privileged history. The archive reveals relations of power, visibility, and exclusion.

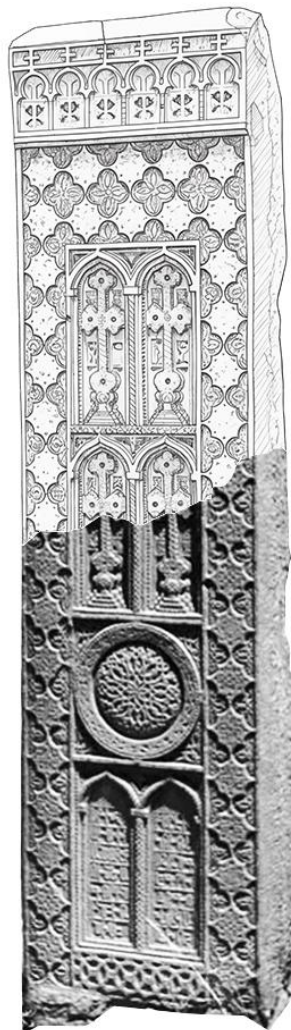


Figure 5: Fragmented Khachkar, an interpretation. (Source: Illustration by Tatjana Crossley and Polina Aleshkina using xFigura).

The Armenian Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale, curated by Marianna Karapetyan,³⁷ demonstrates the role of translation through new media and representation. It does not try to reconstruct endangered Armenian monuments but instead generates speculative fragments that are trained on three-dimensional scans of threatened heritage. They occupy the territory between inference and memorial. The deviations from historical fidelity, the misalignments and distortions that emerge from the process, show the limits of what new technologies can do when the original conditions have been erased by violence, time, or climate. The pavilion positions virtual media as a participant in mourning and ethical reflection, making visible the gap between the archive's knowledge and the monument's cultural weight (Figure 5).

This interpretation suggests significant potential and responsibility. The potential is for plural, evolving, non-hierarchical traditions where the design of space makes possible the engagement of multiple cultural communities with inherited traditions. It also opens doors to awareness and the sharing of meaning across cultures. And finally, through shared experience, it has the potential of producing hybrid meanings that no single tradition could have produced alone. This is arguably the most exciting possibility that can be associated with contemporary notions of hybrid identities.

Regarding responsibility, this concerns the politics of translation. Virtual 'archives,' like all archives, are not neutral. They reflect the choices of those who design them, the cultural frameworks through which those designers understand the traditions they are translating, and the bodies for whom they are organizing. They are inherently subjective and contain bias. For example, the panorama rotundas of the nineteenth century were used largely for propaganda. The imagery displayed nationalist narratives, rendered the enemy faceless, and expressed ideological intent. This is an age-old architectural question: who is space designed for and why? It is also an important question related to the kinds of spaces we replicate and reimagine both physically and digitally today. Contemporary virtual environments, which have a greater global reach, need to address the questions about which spatial traditions are represented and what cultural narratives are encoded in the architectural decisions that structure our experience of space.

8. CONCLUSION: TRADITION AS EMBODIED TRANSLATION

This paper argues that architectural tradition is not fixed but evolves and goes through a process of translation as new bodies reinterpret it and new modalities of representation communicate it. The immersion into architecture, across history, is a primary site at which this translation occurs. Virtual reality, understood as an experiential and spatial condition rather than a digital technology, provides a medium through which culture and tradition can be conveyed. The organization of perception and narrative produces meaning that is intrinsically tied to the body.

The Villa dei Misteri demonstrates that this is not a new phenomenon. We can understand the frescos as a means to preserve the initiation rites, but we can also understand how the frescos turned the rites into an architectural space that was experienced and shaped the subjectivity of its ancient Pompeian initiates. The rites in this representation become more than instructions and engage with illusion and the sensorial. Today, this logic is extended into cross-cultural and cross-temporal ways that subvert cultural boundaries and invite bodies whose experiential histories are very different from those initially designed for. These encounters create new readings of space that allow for inherited cultural meaning to evolve in relation to the subjects engaging with it.

While architecture provides shelter, it, more significantly, encodes culture, movement, economy, politics, and practices. Architecture makes tradition available in spatial and experiential terms. It makes tradition inhabitable. Spatial logics continue to organize embodied encounters, generation after generation, medium after medium, technology after technology.

Architecture and virtual reality are not passive. They are actively involved in the negotiation of cultural inheritance. The challenge for architectural practice, and for the critical discourse that supports it, is to engage this translational condition cognizant of the embodied logics through which tradition lives, and to the political dimensions of the choices that shape which tradition is passed down or not, for whom, and through what spatial means.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

CREATIVE TRANSLATION OF TRADITION: A TRANSMEDIA STUDY OF THE LAND TEMPLE IMAGERY IN *UPROAR IN HEAVEN*

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CREATIVE TRANSLATION OF TRADITION: A TRANSMEDIA STUDY OF THE LAND TEMPLE IMAGERY IN *UPROAR IN HEAVEN*



This study will trace the transmedia life history of the animated land temple imagery from Uproar in Heaven (1961). Beginning with the animators' artistic distillation of vernacular architectural features, the image circulates across multiple fields, including a 'reverse translation' back into a physical temple in Moganshan's Yucun Village.

The study will identify three interrelated theoretical contributions. First, the 'triple authentication' of form, affect, and authority ensures the imagery's recognizability, resonance, and legitimacy as it travels. Second, the imagery functions as cultural capital, recognized and converted by different actors across media, tourism, and design fields. Third, a 'topological structure' of tradition keeps core properties stable while surface manifestations are continuously reconfigured – generating not the loss of aura or the triumph of simulacra, but a form of 'dynamic authenticity' based on participation, negotiation, and creative translation.

Methodologically, the study adopts a process-tracing approach, combining visual analysis, netnography, on-site observation, and interviews. By following a single imagery through its transmedia journey, it will offer an empirical account of how tradition is translated in the network society – not as a fixed heritage to be preserved, but as a living resource to be creatively renewed.

1. INTRODUCTION: A BUILDING BORN FROM ANIMATION

In Yucun, a village nestled at the foot of Mogan Mountain in Zhejiang Province, a small temple stands as an unassuming yet intriguing architectural intervention (Figure 1). Completed in the early 2020s as part of a broader rural revitalization project, the Jianghuang Temple was intended to serve as a spiritual anchor for the community – a place for villagers to perform rituals, seek blessings, and gather for festivals.

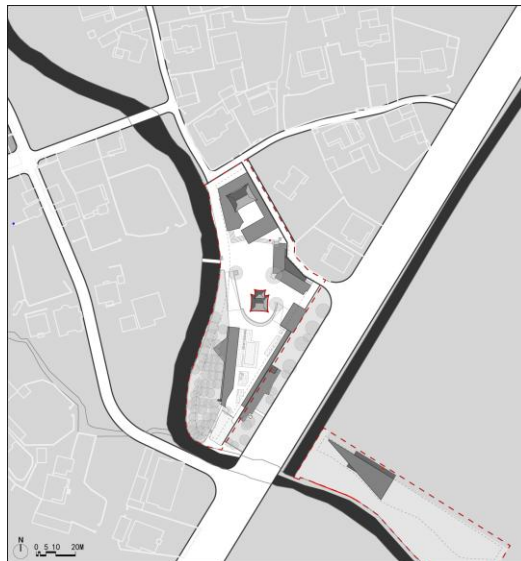


Figure 1: Site Plan of Jianghuang Temple Precinct, Yucun, with the Gate-Stage compound centered (Source: Image courtesy of Southeast University Design Institute, edited by the author).

Yet, what makes this building remarkable is not merely its function – one that integrates it closely with the community – but the visual reference from which its gate-stage compound was derived. Its bright vermilion walls, flame-shaped arched doorway flanked by round windows, and flaring hip-and-gable roof evoke a visual resonance (Figure 2): this is the temple into which the Monkey King transforms himself – the famous cartoon image from the classic 1961 animated film *Uproar in Heaven* (Da Nao Tiangong).



Figure 2: Front and rear elevations of Jianghuang Temple. (Source: See note 18).

This was no accident. Lacking reliable historical records of the original temple, the design team adopted the animated imagery as the primary formal and cultural prototype for the image of its gate-stage entrance. This seemingly curious design choice could raise a troubling question for those concerned with how tradition is translated today: why would a twenty-first-century community building adopt a cartoon as its prototype? Is this not a betrayal of what ‘translation’ should be – not modern means expressing traditional content, but traditional means giving form to a virtual, media-born image?

And yet, this operational question – whether the design betrays or upholds a certain ‘norm’ of translation – risks overshadowing a more meaningful inquiry: what happens to tradition when it is no longer tied to the continuity of the physical building, but lives on through repeated translation across media, memory, and space? The Jianghuang Temple’s gate-stage compound suggests an answer. What appears at first glance as postmodern irony or theme-park replication might, on closer inspection, reveal itself as something more subtle. It is not a break from tradition, but a link in a longer chain of transmedia translation – a process in which a media image, itself already a creative translation of vernacular architecture, now returns to the physical world to sustain a living tradition by re-anchoring it in a place that serves the community today.

What we see in Yucun, I argue, illuminates an important dimension of how tradition is translated in the contemporary network society¹ – that is, a social order where information and media flows transcend geographic boundaries and reshape cultural translation. Traditional architectural forms and their cultural meanings are no longer confined to specific places, waiting to be ‘preserved’ or facing inevitable ‘decline.’ Instead, they are increasingly drawn into global flows of information and media, where they circulate as symbolic resources available for continuous reinterpretation, appropriation, and transmedia translation.

This paper traces the transmedia life history of the cultural imagery that gave the Jianghuang Temple’s gate-stage compound its appearance: the animated land temple from *Uproar in Heaven* – a creative distillation of vernacular architectural vocabulary rather than a faithful reproduction of any actual temple, a highly stylized ‘simulacrum’ that has, over decades of circulation, penetrated collective memory and begun to exert a reverse influence on the production of physical space. Tracing this imagery from its origins in vernacular architecture, through its stylized encoding in the 1961 animated film, its production and circulation across various social fields, to its eventual ‘reverse translation’ back into a physical temple in Mogan Mountain, this paper asks: How does a classic media image, already once translated from architecture to animation, undergo further translations by diverse actors – tourists, local governments, designers? What mechanisms enable it to maintain recognizability while acquiring new meanings across different contexts? And what does this process reveal about the translation of tradition in the digital age?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSLATION AS PROCESS – A POST-AUTHENTICITY PERSPECTIVE

2.1. From Authenticity to Translation: A Process-Oriented Turn

For much of the twentieth century, debates about cultural heritage were dominated by questions of authenticity. The *Venice Charter* and UNESCO’s World Heritage framework were built on the premise that tradition’s value resides in its fidelity to an original, historically verifiable state. This ‘authenticity’ paradigm has since been extensively critiqued: scholars have argued that authenticity is not an intrinsic property but a socially constructed value, negotiated through processes of selection, interpretation, and institutional recognition.² Tradition, in this view, is not a fixed inheritance but a ‘selective past’ continually reworked in the present – a process of translation.

This paper aligns itself with this ‘post-authenticity’ trajectory. However, rather than reiterating the critique, it seeks to ask: If authenticity is not given but made, how is it made? By what processes do cultural imageries gain legitimacy as carriers of tradition? How do they travel across different media and social contexts, and

what enables them to retain or transform their meanings along the way? These questions call for a shift from a static focus on what authenticity is to a dynamic focus on the processes through which tradition is translated, produced, and circulated.

2.2 Toward an Integrated Framework: Key Theoretical Resources

To answer these questions, this paper constructs an integrated theoretical framework drawing on multiple theoretical traditions.

The framework first draws on the perspective of transmedia storytelling and cultural translation. Following Henry Jenkins' work,³ translation is understood not as the passive transmission of fixed meanings but as creative deformation – a process in which cultural imageries are reshaped to fit the logic of different media (the visibility of animation, the experiential logic of tourism, the materiality of architecture) and different contexts of reception. Each adaptation reinterprets the imagery, producing new meanings rather than merely reproducing old ones.

Further, it aims to reveal the process through which spatial meaning is produced. In the network society's 'space of flows,' the consumption of imageries foregrounds the importance of 'representations of space.'⁴ The animated land temple imagery itself is a powerful representation of space – an imagined, conceived image (*le conçu*). This mediated representation actively travels across screens, guides public perception and practice, and participates in representational spaces (*le vécu*) – the lived, socially produced spaces where users interact with their environment. From there, it reaches the level of spatial practice (*le perçu*) – the external, material, perceptible physical environment – where it shapes the production of new physical spaces, thereby completing the dialectical circuit of spatial production.

The driving forces behind these processes of translation and spatial production can be illuminated through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and field.⁵ The canonical image from *Uproar in Heaven* – already accumulated with institutionally and historically certified cultural capital – is strategically recognized, appropriated, and 'converted' by different actors across different fields: tourists seeking authentic experience, local governments enhancing place branding, and designers pursuing creative breakthroughs. By tracing this cross-field circulation of capital, we can see how the imagery's meaning is continuously shaped by the interests of those who seek to appropriate it.

The study also engages critically with classic theories of cultural reproduction, further grounding its model in a broader theoretical conversation. The trajectory traced here – from vernacular architecture to animated copy to newly built physical structure – resonates with Walter Benjamin's concern about the decay of aura⁶

and Jean Baudrillard's account of the 'simulacrum'.⁷⁷ However, this paper offers a different reading. Drawing also on Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach⁸ – which treats culture not as a fixed code to be preserved but as a web of significance to be interpreted – this study argues that a canonical media image, grounded in collective memory and affective resonance, can generate what might be called an 'empathetic aura' – a form of aura that does not reside in the unique, authentic original but in the shared emotional attachment to a widely circulated image. Moreover, the entire process of transmedia translation reveals a mechanism of 'dynamic authenticity' – a mode of cultural legitimacy based on participation, negotiation, and continuous reinterpretation – that operates at the heart of contemporary identity construction.

Together, these theoretical resources are integrated to trace the transmedia life history of the land temple imagery and to identify the mechanisms that enable translation to occur. This framework does not treat tradition as a fixed object to be preserved or a lost original to be recovered. Instead, it offers a model for understanding tradition as a living, dynamic process of creative translation – one that is particularly visible and consequential in contemporary media-saturated societies.

2.3. Research Approach: Process-Tracing and Meaning-Making Analysis

To proceed from empirical description to theoretical abstraction, this study adopts a qualitative, case-study approach organized around two complementary dimensions: process-tracing and meaning-making analysis. It combines visual analysis, netnographic analysis of social media, on-site observation, and in-depth interviews.

The study first systematically traces the complete translation trajectory of the land temple imagery. Visual analysis of *Uproar in Heaven* examines the 'initial translation' from vernacular architecture to animation; netnographic analysis collects and examines public discourse on social media and travel platforms to track the imagery's circulation and reproduction; on-site observation and spatial documentation of the Jianghuang Temple's gate-stage compound in Yucun anchor the analysis at the critical moment of 'reverse translation' back into physical space.

On this basis, the study further interprets the underlying logic and power dynamics through triangulation across interviews, online discourse, spatial practice, and visual texts, identifying the interaction patterns among form, affect, and authority.

Following this approach, the analysis traces the transmedia life history of the land temple imagery and identifies the mechanisms that enable translation to occur. It reveals, as I will show, that each successful translation depends on what I call the 'triple authentication' of form, affect, and authority; that the imagery's circulation is simultaneously a movement of cultural capital across different fields, as different actors

recognize, appropriate, and convert its value for their own purposes; and that, despite profound transformations, there is a deep topological structure to tradition – a set of core attributes that remain stable even as its manifestations change dramatically across different media and contexts.

3. A TRANSMEDIA LIFE HISTORY

3.1. Initial Encoding: From Vernacular Architecture to Animated Meme

3.1.1. The Vernacular Land Temple: Architectural Vocabulary and Cultural Meaning

The land temple (*tudi miao*) is one of the most widely distributed building types of vernacular religious architecture in rural China. Dedicated to the Earth God (*tudi shen*), these small shrines were traditionally found at village entrances, at crossroads, beneath trees, or at the edges of fields (Figure 3). Their architectural forms varied regionally but typically shared several features: small scale, often a single bay; a pitched roof (gabled or hip-and-gable); a façade largely unadorned except for a central door or niche as the visual focus; and the red associated with auspiciousness in folk tradition. Local materials and building practices varied, yielding forms that ranged from simple stone shrines of four stacked slabs to brick-and-tile niche shrines, and finally to single-bay and even multi-bay temples large enough to enter. This trajectory traces an evolution from the vestiges of ‘spirit stone worship’ to a more codified spatial form.⁹



Figure 3: Land temples in rural Fujian, shown for illustrative purposes. (Source: Author).

Culturally, the land temple was more than a building in its material sense and was deeply embedded in the meaning networks of traditional Chinese society. It served multiple interconnected functions. As a site of popular belief, it was where villagers sought protection for their land and prayed for good harvests. As a symbol of the community, it marked the boundaries and center of the settlement, and its construction, upkeep, and ceremonies were collective endeavors that reinforced social ties and local identity. As a space where daily life intersected with ritual, it hosted not only everyday offerings but also periodic temple fairs and village operas, making it a vital node for social interaction, cultural performance, and public life. In a broader sense, the land temple functioned as a cultural landscape: a material condensation of human dependence on the land, reverence for natural forces, and the lived practices through which meaning was produced and sustained.

In sum, the traditional land temple was a small-scale building type deeply rooted in China's agrarian civilization, one that fused belief, social organization, and everyday construction practices. With its simple yet varied spatial forms, the land temple became a foundational motif in the vernacular landscape, carrying meanings of place identity, community cohesion, and cultural continuity. This accumulated body of meaning would later provide rich material for creative translation – most notably, its reimagining as an animated image in *Uproar in Heaven*.

3.1.2. Animated Translation: From Architecture to Cartoon Imagery

Uproar in Heaven, produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, is a landmark of Chinese animation. The film's aesthetic was shaped by a deliberate commitment to 'national style' – a fusion of traditional Chinese painting, opera, and folk art with the techniques of animation. The iconic scene of the Monkey King transforming himself into a land temple, which appears in the second part of the film completed in 1964, exemplifies this approach. Zhang Zhengyu, responsible for the visual design and atmosphere of the second part, drew heavily on Buddhist and Taoist architecture and murals, a practice that has been praised as 'refining and sublimating them to achieve a realm of sublime beauty'.¹⁰ This creative context – emphasizing refinement, transformation, and formal expressiveness – enabled a translation of the vernacular land temple that went beyond realistic representation.

This animated translation had a clear literary antecedent in Chapter Six of *Journey to the West*, where the Monkey King disguises himself as a land temple during a critical moment of battle. The land temple – the most ubiquitous and visually distilled form of religious architecture in rural China – was instantly recognizable, and that recognizability carried a folk meaning of local protection. To a fleeing Monkey King in need of concealment, it would have been the natural choice of disguise. Some scholars have further suggested a heaven-to-earth parallel between the Monkey King's title 'Great Sage Equal to Heaven' (Qi Tian Dasheng)

and the Earth God, arguing that his title and behavior are a literary elaboration of the Earth God tradition.¹¹ Thus, even before the animation, both the land temple and the Monkey King himself were already part of an earth-bound symbolic system, providing a semantic foundation for the visual translation that followed.

That translation worked on three levels. First, the animation deliberately set aside regional and material variations, focusing instead on a handful of highly recognizable visual cues: the silhouette of a tiled roof with upturned eaves, the openings, the vermilion walls, and the compact scale. These were abstracted into geometric forms – a trapezoidal roof with simple ridge ornaments, a rectangular wall mass, a flame-shaped doorway, two circular windows, and split-shaped bracket sets on both sides under the eaves. The result was a visual symbol stripped of local specificity but saturated with generic ‘temple-ness’ (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The image of the Land Temple that was transformed by Sun Wukong in *Uproar in Heaven*. (Source: Screenshot from the original animated film *Uproar in Heaven* [Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan, dirs., Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1961-1964]).

Second, the animation did not stop at a static rendering of the literary idea. It introduced a continuous, character-driven movement while playfully deforming the formal elements of the building. The roof was proportionally exaggerated; the eaves curved with a playful elasticity. The circular doorway became a mouth, the round windows eyes and the bracket sets ears – a literal anthropomorphism that gave the building a face.

The most memorable touch was the tail. The animators did not present the completed temple as a static disguise. Instead, they devoted several frames to a brief episode within the transformation: the tail first protrudes awkwardly from the back of the shrine, and the building’s ‘face’ registers a look of brief embarrassment; then, with a sudden snap, the tail becomes a flagpole, and the expression shifts to a sly, triumphant grin (Figure 5). Where the novel offers only a plot point narrated from Erlang’s perspective, the animation reframes it as a moment of psychological comedy centered on the Monkey King’s own experience. And beyond humor, the sequence achieved a conceptual translation of architectural elements into bodily features – a visual equivalence between building and body, realized within cartoon logic, that would later prove crucial when the image was ‘reverse translated’ back into physical architecture.



Figure 5: Facial expression comparison of Sun Wukong before and after placing his tail during transformation. (Source: Ibid.).

Finally, the image was crystallized through a distinctive visual style. The vermilion walls stood out against the green mountains, reinforcing the temple's role as a visual focal point; the outlines were fluid yet carried a rustic simplicity, echoing the aesthetics of folk art. This potent 'meme' – in the original, pre-internet sense of a culturally transmitted unit of meaning – is immediately recognizable, emotionally engaging, and stylistically coherent.

3.1.3. Narrative Function and Mnemonic Anchoring

Why has this scene, rather than any other, become such a durable cultural touchstone? The answer lies partly in its narrative function within the film and the psychological identification it generates.

The transformation occurs at the climax of the battle between the Monkey King and Erlang, a sequence of rapid shapeshifting in which the two opponents turn themselves into a succession of animals. During this high-speed chase, the transformation into a temple is a moment of sudden stillness, a shift from action to suspense, from chase to game of hide-and-seek. The Monkey King's choice of disguise is also a moment of revelation that externalizes his wit, humor, and quick thinking. It is a mischievous way of facing the crisis, one that perfectly fits his nature – a fusion of his monkey instinct, divine power, and human traits. Moreover, visual design drives the narrative: the tail that becomes a flagpole is both the flaw that gives away his disguise and a shared imagery that elicits a knowing smile from the audience, integrating visual wit with plot progression.

This narrative embedding, together with emotional resonance, has consolidated the scene as a cross-generational memory anchor. Over decades of circulation – through repeated television broadcasts, home video, and now streaming – it has become a shared reference point, functioning as a shorthand for the

Monkey King’s shape-shifting powers, for the aesthetic achievements of classic Chinese animation, and, crucially for this study, for the very idea of a ‘land temple’ itself. Beyond its original context, the image has been repeatedly quoted, parodied, and recreated across comics, advertisements, internet memes, tourism, and cultural product design – evolving into a cultural IP that provides emotional source and symbolic capital for the translations and meaning contests that would follow in the network society.

3.2 Mediated Circulation: Popular Identification and Institutional Appropriation

3.2.1 Popular Identification and Local Association

The highly stylized land temple image from *Uproar in Heaven* did not remain confined to screens. As a deeply ingrained piece of collective visual memory, it began to permeate how ordinary people perceive and interpret real-world landscapes, triggering what might be called a creative ‘second translation.’

In contemporary tourism and everyday observation, visitors and residents alike, drawing on the visual script provided by the animation, actively ‘recognize’ buildings that resemble the cartoon temple – whether in form, color, or scale – in a playful, often spontaneous act of identification. This process injects dynamic cultural narratives and personal emotions into otherwise static spaces.

This identification is driven primarily by formal similarities (Table 1). The animation’s distillation of the land temple to its most salient features – vermilion color, compact scale, anthropomorphic façade – creates a visual template that viewers carry with them. When they encounter a real building that shares these features, the template is activated, and the connection is made. For example, a visitor to Tongjun Mountain in Zhejiang, encountering a newly built gate structure with red walls and a compact form, commented on a social media platform: ‘It instantly made me think of the temple the Monkey King turned into’¹² (Figure 6). A small rural temple on the outskirts of Beijing prompted a similar association from a user who joked, ‘I wonder if Erlang is nearby’¹³ (Figure 7). These associations have little to do with historical accuracy; they are private ‘visual discovery games’ played based on a shared cultural code.

ANIMATED FEATURE	REAL-WORLD TRIGGER	EXPLANATION
Vermilion Color	Red temple walls or doors	Most immediate and universal visual cue
Compact Scale	Small, single-bay shrines or pavilions	Distinguishes from larger institutional architecture
Anthropomorphic Façade	Circular doorway, arched gate, round windows	Animation’s ‘mouth and eyes’ mapping makes viewers sensitive to building ‘faces’
Traditional Roof	Pitched tiled roof of any type	Provides the basic ‘temple’ gestalt

Table 1: Bases for public identification and their real-world triggers. (Source: Author).



Figure 6: A Dianping user comment: ‘I seem to have seen the Land Temple transformed by Sun Wukong.’ (Source: An Ya, see note 12).



Figure 7: A Baidu user’s social media post: ‘Transformed by Sun Wukong? Is Erlang Shen Yang Jian nearby too?’ (Source: Xingfu Shenghuo, see note 13).

Unlike the purely spontaneous examples above, identification can also originate from professional or disciplinary frameworks. The case of the Little Chapel at Nanjing University’s Gulou Campus is instructive. Designed in 1933 by Qi Zhaochang (1880-1956), a Chinese engineer educated in the United States, this single-story building combines Chinese and Western elements, featuring a hip-and-gable roof and gray brick walls. The east façade is strikingly simple, consisting only of an arched doorway and two round windows (Figure 8). In a post on the official WeChat public account of NJU’s architecture school, the author explicitly noted that the building’s appearance ‘closely resembles the little temple into which the Monkey King transformed to evade Erlang’s pursuit, except that it lacks a flagpole out back.’¹⁴ This analogy from within the architectural profession, disseminated through an institutional channel with thousands of views, shows that

the animated land temple's influence extends beyond folk amusement, gaining legitimacy through professional discourse and reaching a wider audience.



Figure 8: The Little Chapel at Nanjing University. (Source: Nanjing University Archives, see note 14).

The social and affective dimensions of this identification are amplified by social media. Individual intuitive associations, once shared online, easily trigger recognition and interaction from other users, transforming private observation into emotional resonance based on shared cultural memory. Consider the moment when a visitor, after privately noticing a building's resemblance to the animated temple, hears another tourist exclaim, 'It's the one the Monkey King turned into!' In that instant, what might have remained a private perception becomes a shared recognition – a small, spontaneous bond formed through a common cultural reference. The animated image here functions as a kind of social currency, enabling strangers to connect through a shared cultural reference and converting an ordinary place into a meaningful, affectively charged space.

This widespread, spontaneous practice of identification has, in some cases, created a unique socio-cultural context that can influence how material heritage is valued and preserved. The case of Shanghai's Victory Cinema is instructive. Built in 1929, the cinema was originally an Art Deco structure with a distinctive Chinese-style tower – a small, three-bay pavilion with upturned eaves – atop its western-style roof. The tower was demolished in the 1990s, leaving the building's 'complete historical image' as a matter of debate among preservation professionals (Figure 9). Yet in popular discourse, the tower had been affectionately nicknamed 'the tower temple that Monkey King turned into'¹⁵ – a reference that, while playful, attached a powerful emotional narrative to the structure (Figure 10). This popular identification, anchored by a classic animated image, injected a vivid, tangible, and emotionally resonant layer of civic interpretation into what might

otherwise have remained a dry historical debate. When the building was later restored, the professional team not only reconstructed the tower based on historical photographs but explicitly invoked the public identification in their interviews and promotional materials¹⁶ (Figures 10, 11). Here, public identification – a form of affective authentication – entered into the dialogue with professional and institutional practices of heritage conservation.



Figure 9: Comparison of the Victory Cinema tower before and after demolition. (Source: Shanghai Hongkou, "Shengli dianyingyuan bi 'ye' huigui, bainian jianzhu xiaomie 'shiwang huoji' | Genzhe biaoqingbao daka Hongkou ③" [Victory Cinema Returns with a 'V' Gesture, Century-old Building Eliminates 'Urgent Danger' | Check in at Hongkou with Emojis ③], January 31, 2025, accessed April 9, 2026 <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1822716830236670379&wfr=spider&for=pc>).



Figure 10 (right): A screenshot from an interview with the restoration team of Victory Cinema, mentioning 'the tower temple transformed by Sun Wukong' (Source: See note 15).

Figure 11 (left): Promotional image of Victory Cinema's post-restoration exterior, described as 'Wukong transformed into architecture' (Source: See note 16).

This widespread, spontaneous practice of identification not only adds a vibrant, unofficial narrative layer to specific places but also constitutes an active form of meaning-making in the network society. It demonstrates how ordinary people, as agents of cultural meaning, appropriate media imageries – a vernacular vocabulary of the space of flows – to make local associations. At the same time, this affective understanding, diffused through public space, becomes a ‘cultural context’ with which other social actors can interact and engage.

3.2.2. Institutional Appropriation: Branding and IP Strategies

Alongside the public’s spontaneous, playful acts of identification, a more systematic logic of cultural imagery appropriation also operates in the network society. The collective memory and affective investment attached to the animated land temple in *Uproar in Heaven* form a kind of latent cultural capital. But there is a structural divide between diffuse, spontaneous collective practice and systematic, institutionalized cultural production. The former is primarily about meaning-making that is driven by emotion and consumption; the latter is about organized, strategic culture appropriation and value capture. Bridging this divide often requires a decisive media event – a moment that concentrates public attention and makes dispersed cultural capital legible and actionable for institutional actors.

The global success of *Black Myth: Wukong* in 2024 was such a moment. It not only reignited interest in the *Journey to the West* Universe but also created potential for reactivating existing cultural memories tied to it. Local cultural authorities quickly seized the opportunity. In Shanghai, for instance, the story of Victory Cinema’s ‘Monkey King tower temple’ atop its roof was prominently revisited in official promotions, using the game’s momentum to reinforce the site’s appeal as a hybrid architectural curiosity and a destination for photo-taking and social sharing. This case shows that public identification and official branding can share the same symbolic resources and reinforce each other in the wake of a major media event.

At the same time, a more ambitious operation of symbolic ‘meaning bundling’ was taking shape around *Black Myth: Wukong*, revealing a different face of local cultural promotion strategy. If the Victory Cinema case represents the activation of existing cultural memory – using a new media event to reinforce an established narrative – then the wave of attention centered on Shanxi’s ancient architecture, directly catalyzed by the game, represents a more systematic construction of new value. Here, the strategy is to actively graft a powerful new IP narrative onto traditional heritage.

Shanxi became the epicenter of this new attention because *Black Myth: Wukong* drew its visual world from the ancient architecture of northern China, particularly this province, using high-precision digital technology to construct a mythical realm that was both richly textured and visually striking. Upon the game’s release, a wave of ‘cultural archaeology’ emerged among global player bases. Countless players and fans, acting as amateur

antiquarians of the digital age, took to the internet to compare game scenes with real-world heritage sites, tirelessly identifying the ‘real-world prototype’ behind every architectural detail.

This phenomenon did not emerge in a vacuum. According to an article republished by the Shanxi Provincial Bureau of Cultural Heritage, the Shanxi Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism had already collaborated with the game’s developer during the production phase, providing filming support and planning promotional campaigns – including the ‘Follow Wukong to Tour Shanxi’ route and heritage check-in events – well before the game’s release.¹⁷

At the macro level, provincial agencies acted as web traffic directors, officially authenticating and binding the game’s virtual scenes to the province’s key architectural heritage sites, thereby channeling global curiosity into regional tourism. At the micro level, individual sites pursued a more refined strategy of deep engagement with the IP. The case of Jinci Temple is particularly revealing.

As a masterpiece of Song dynasty wooden architecture, Jinci holds a distinguished place in the architectural history of northern China. It first benefited as a highly recognizable component of the broader Shanxi ancient architecture pool, sharing in the primary cultural capital generated by the game. This wave of attention, it should be noted, was initially focused on the correspondence between the game’s virtual environments and physical architecture, not on any direct connection to *Uproar in Heaven*. But the management of Jinci saw an opportunity. They seized a critical ‘translation moment,’ creatively linking the public’s anthropomorphic reading of Shuijingtai’s façade – particularly its eyeglass-like round windows – to the animated film’s logic of translating the Monkey King’s facial features into architectural elements.

To solidify this claimed connection, official discourse deliberately layered multiple forms of ‘evidence.’ Not only did it directly refer to the Shuijingtai – first built in the Ming dynasty – as the ‘prototype’ for the animated land temple in official promotions, but it also invoked the established fact that the building had served as a filming location for the 1986 television adaptation of *Journey to the West*. By bundling the existing cultural capital of the ‘classic TV series filming location’ with the newly constructed narrative of animation inspiration, the management of Jinci aimed to establish a coherent and authoritative cultural genealogy of the *Journey to the West* universe, one that spanned live-action and animation, physical architecture and virtual image – and, by implication, hinted at an even deeper link to the original novel itself.

The management of Jinci further reinforced this association through a series of systematic on-the-ground initiatives: themed check-in activities, co-branded cultural products that blended animated elements with architectural motifs, and social media campaigns. These initiatives were designed to guide the public through a shift in cognitive focus and a process of narrative co-construction – to redirect the diffuse public interest in

Black Myth: Wukong and Shanxi's ancient architecture toward a specific, collective recognition of the claimed 'inspiration' linking Jinci's Shuijingtai to the animated land temple in *Uproar in Heaven* (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Tourists online sharing photos of themselves checking in at Shuijingtai of Jinci Temple with Wukong-themed merchandise (Source: Sohu Video. "Wangyou lai dao Taiyuan Jinci, mai dao 86 ban Xiyouji Wukong bian shen xiao miao tongkuan wenchuang" [Netizen came to Jinci in Taiyuan and bought cultural products of the same design as the small temple transformed by Wukong in the 1986 TV version of *Journey to the West*]. Sohu, December 29, 2024. Accessed April 9, 2026. https://news.sohu.com/a/842986760_100114195).

This sequence of strategic operations, carried out through successive levels of local actors, reveals the typical path of cultural capital circulation in the network society. It shows that the contemporary value and 'authenticity' of a traditional cultural imagery are not fixed but are continuously negotiated, constructed, and validated through the ongoing interplay of media spectacle, participatory public practice, and layered official narratives – via active, multi-stage translation and the stitching together of meaning.

Thus, in the transmedia translation of the animated land temple as a cultural imagery, the strategic appropriation by local cultural authorities has functioned as an active hub of meaning production. By absorbing the emotional energy of public identification and leveraging the attention resources of new media events, they have successfully anchored this fluid imagery as a cultural asset with local belonging and social consensus.

This dilemma is not unique to this project. Throughout China, the rapid pace of rural transformation has led to countless instances where traditional building types must be reinvented for new contexts, often without clear historical guidance. The conventional approaches – archaeological reconstruction based on scant evidence, generic ‘traditional-style’ architecture that lacks specificity, or modernist designs that make no reference to the past – each have their limitations. The Jianghuang Temple project represents an alternative approach: the deliberate appropriation of a widely recognized media image as a legitimate source of architectural form and meaning.

Hu Shi articulated the logic behind this choice in terms of a shift from historical authenticity to what might be called affective authenticity. Since the historical form of the original temple was irrecoverable, any attempt at literal reconstruction would be speculative at best, inauthentic at worst. Instead, the design should aim for something different: an entrance building that could be immediately recognized by the community as a land temple – one that could evoke the appropriate emotional and cultural associations, and function effectively as a spiritual landmark and a social anchor for the village. To achieve this, Hu Shi and his team sought to draw on a strong imagery of ‘land temple’ already available in the collective imagination – sufficiently vivid and widely shared to serve as a cognitive and emotional anchor for a new building.

The animated land temple imagery from *Uproar in Heaven* met this requirement. It was itself an artist’s distillation and exaggeration of vernacular land temple architecture, elevated into a nationally recognizable visual symbol that transcended regional particularities. Decades of circulation had embedded this image in the collective memory of multiple generations. Choosing this animated image was not about replicating a cartoon temple but about appropriating a meme already sedimented in collective memory as the ‘seed’ for design translation. What the network society’s space of flows makes possible – its accessibility and use effects – allowed the design to bypass the dead end of historical verification and connect directly with public emotion and cognition. The core task thus was to translate this abstract media imagery, through situated construction knowledge and spatial design, into a tangible place that embodies local spirit.

3.3.2. Professional Translation: From Two-Dimensional Image to Three-Dimensional Place

Based on this clear design intent, the creative process unfolded as a deliberate act of ‘reverse translation’ (Figure 14), which required a series of deliberate design decisions to turn a two-dimensional animated image into a three-dimensional building.

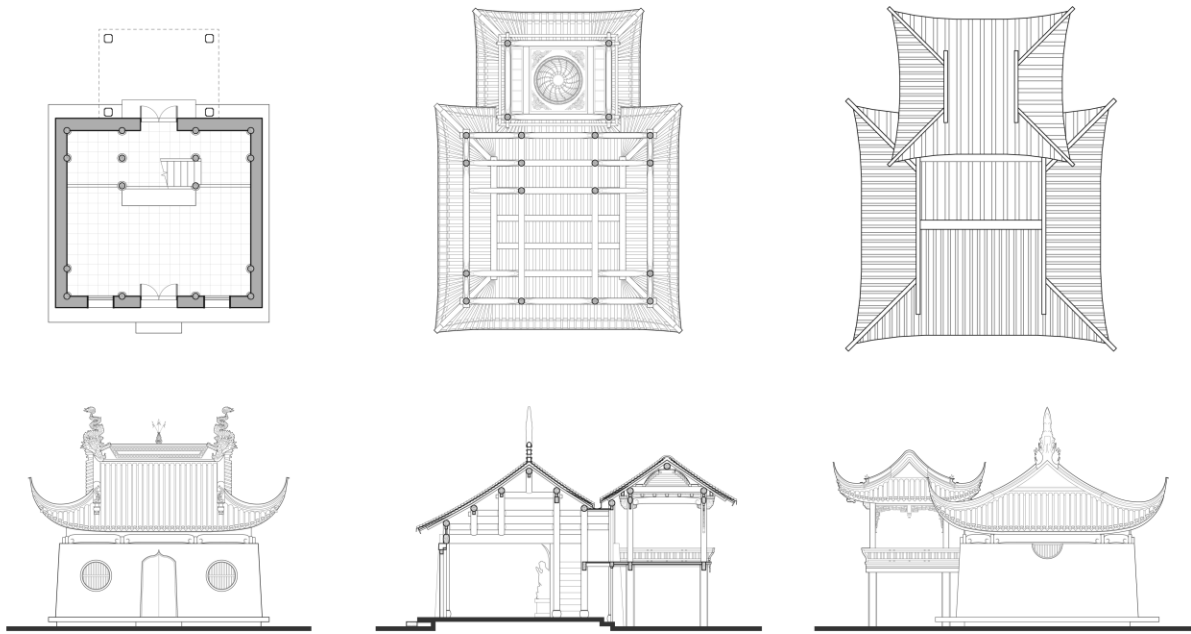


Figure 14: Plans, Elevations & Section – Gate-Stage compound, Jianghuang Temple (Source: Image courtesy of Southeast University Design Institute, edited by the author).

In practice, the design team consciously drew on the animated image for the building's most salient features: the vermilion color, the compact scale, the anthropomorphic arrangement of the flame-shaped doorway flanked by two round windows, and the presence of a flagpole. These elements function as visual triggers, intended to evoke shared cultural memory at first glance. The anthropomorphic logic of the animation subtly influenced the proportions and rhythm of the façade openings, giving it a gestural quality that distinguishes it from more conventional temple architecture.

Yet the design also departed from the animated image in significant ways, driven by the exigencies of real-world construction and the specific cultural context of Mogan Mountain. In the animation, the land temple is depicted with a hip roof, a form associated with the highest rank, such as imperial architecture in traditional Chinese practice. This choice was likely motivated by visual clarity and dramatic effect – the hip roof reads more clearly in silhouette than the simpler gabled or hip-and-gable roofs typical of vernacular land temples. For the actual building, however, the design team opted for a hip-and-gable roof with dramatically upturned eaves. This decision was informed by several considerations: the hip-and-gable roof is more typical of vernacular temples in the Yangtze River Delta region, it is technically more straightforward to construct at the required scale, and its flaring eaves achieve a visual dynamism that echoes the playful energy of the animated original without copying it directly.

The flagpole – a key element in the animated scene – was also transformed. Rather than placing it directly behind the temple building, as in the animation, the design team reimagined the flagpole as part of the site's narrative, relocating it to the opposite end of the plaza. This adjustment transformed the flagpole from a literal quotation into an organizing element of the broader site, creating a visual axis that linked the temple to the village square. Moreover, a small stage was added behind the temple, further connecting the building to the plaza and creating a venue for performances and community gatherings.

These design decisions reflect a sophisticated understanding of the animated prototype's strengths and limitations. The goal was not to create a literal replica of a cartoon, which would risk appearing as a theme park attraction, but to translate the affective essence of the animated image – its playfulness, its recognizability, its emotional resonance – into a building that could function seriously as a place of ritual and community life. The result is a structure that evokes the animated temple without being bound by it, that is both a recognizable 'Monkey King temple' and a fully realized piece of contemporary architecture.

3.3.3. The Production of Place: Capital, Space, and Social Practice

The building has, since its completion, become a site of active place-making. Through its flexible axial organization, open plaza, and multiple points of access, it accommodates villagers' rituals and prayers alongside tourists' leisurely visits and the community's public celebrations. This demonstrates how cultural capital accumulated through transmedia circulation can be 'fixed' in physical space and activated through social practice.

The wit and theatricality of the transformation scene in *Uproar in Heaven* are here translated into a spatial experience that is lively and open to multiple interpretations. This spatial quality was quickly recognized and activated by local cultural tourism operators. After completion, the gate-stage compound – instantly nicknamed the 'Monkey King Temple' (Wukong Miao) for its unmistakable likeness – became the focal point of the precinct's public promotion. Leveraging its open and playful character, local authorities organized events such as the 'Journey to the Stream – Wonder Temple Wandering Fair' (Xiyou Ji – Qimiao Youyuan Hui), bringing *Journey to the West*-themed check-ins, creative markets, and performances into the temple plaza.¹⁸ In this way, a building born from a media image evolved into a public site where traditional ritual meets contemporary life – a stage for collective festivity, blending traditional temple culture with media references and tourist participation.

In summary, the Jianghuang Temple design demonstrates how a media imagery carrying collective memory can function as a cultural meme, moving from screen to reality and reshaping material space. The success of this 'reverse translation' lies not in replicating the animated scene but in translating its shared recognition and

emotional resonance into an open, usable place spirit through the craft of construction. It reveals that when faced with a tradition that has lost its material anchor, design can creatively appropriate classic media images that have received widespread affective authentication, using them as meaning hubs to bridge historical perception and contemporary needs. This redefines ‘authenticity’ – not as a static truth buried in the past, but as the question of whether a deeply resonant story can be given material habitation in the present.

4. MECHANISMS AND MODELS: THE CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF TRANSMEDIA TRANSLATION

4.1. The Triple Authentication Mechanism

In the transmedia circulation of the animated land temple as a cultural imagery, the effectiveness and legitimacy of translation do not arise naturally but depend on a dynamic and mutually reinforcing ‘triple authentication’ of form, affect, and authority. Working together, these three ensure that the imagery maintains its core recognizability while continuously gaining new meanings and social consensus as it travels across different media, fields, and practices of diverse actors.

Formal authentication provides the visual foundation for translation. It refers to the retention or reconstruction of key formal features that trigger public recognition. In the land temple case, whether it is the animation’s distillation of the vermilion color, the anthropomorphic openings, and the pitched roof silhouette; the tourist’s sensitivity to similar colors and scale; or the design’s appropriation of symbolic elements in the Jianghuang Temple project, all rely on this simplified, commensurable visual grammar. Formal authentication prevents the imagery from losing itself in circulation, serving as a clear ‘cognitive thread’ that connects screen, landscape, and built environment.

Affective authentication refers to the imagery’s capacity to engage collective memory and emotional experience, providing the psychological and social foundation for lasting vitality. The transformation scene in *Uproar in Heaven*, with its narrative charm and humor, has crystallized into a cross-generational ‘memory package.’ This affective charge is reactivated in each new context: in the tourist’s delighted ‘identification,’ in the shared resonance of social media posts, or in the joy evoked by participating in a temple fair in Yucun. Affective authentication turns otherwise unfamiliar architectural vocabulary into a shared cultural reference and a form of social currency. It shifts translation from passive reception to active participation, and from the transmission of meaning to the co-construction of emotion.

Authoritative authentication provides institutional and professional endorsement, bringing the imagery from spontaneous popular practice into shared public discourse and professional production. This kind of

authoritative endorsement can come from several levels. At the professional level, for instance, it resides in *Uproar in Heaven* itself as a canonical work of Chinese art, as well as in the design team whose technical skill ‘reverse-translated’ the animated image into a credible physical space. The authority from the institutional level is seen when local cultural and tourism agencies promote the ‘Monkey King Temple’ narrative in official campaigns, or when heritage authorities restore the Victory Cinema tower based on historical research, thereby granting it institutional recognition. Meanwhile, the authority from the media level is well exemplified by the wave of archaeological enthusiasm sparked by *Black Myth: Wukong*, which brought new cultural attention and interpretive frameworks to the heritage sites it touched.

In practice, the three authentications do not operate in sequence but interweave and reinforce one another. Formal authentication provides a concrete vehicle for affective resonance; the accumulation of affective resonance, in turn, creates social demand and cultural capital for authoritative institutions to appropriate and endorse. Once authoritative authentication intervenes, it often further strengthens the public recognizability of formal features and grants broader legitimacy to affective practices. The Jinci case illustrates this interplay: through authoritative narratives (official promotion, the established fact of the TV series filming location), the management consolidated the public’s anthropomorphic reading of the façade (affective authentication) while reinforcing the visual features (formal authentication) in public perception. The Jianghuang Temple’s gate-stage compound, for its part, built on formal authentication (appropriating the animated visual elements) and affective authentication (evoking collective memory), and then relied on the professional authority of the design team – grounded in their expertise in architectural design and traditional architecture knowledge – to complete the legitimate transformation from image to place.

The success of the land temple imagery’s translation lies precisely in its authentication on all three fronts across its transmedia journey. Translations that attend to only one dimension – merely copying the form without engaging the affections or claiming authority without formal recognizability – are unlikely to gain such cultural traction.

4.2. Cultural Capital across Fields: Circulation and Conversion

The Bourdieusian framework of cultural capital and field offers a complementary lens. The animated land temple imagery functions as a form of cultural capital that, originally embedded in *Uproar in Heaven*, has since traveled across mass media, tourism, architecture and design – being translated, circulated, and converted into new forms of symbolic power and practical effects along the way.

In the field of mass media, the capital’s value lies in its capacity as a highly recognizable visual meme. The animated land temple itself represents accumulated cultural capital, and the success of *Black Myth: Wukong*

converted the cultural capital of the land temple imagery into a new form of knowledge-based capital, gaining fresh interpretive dimensions within the content ecology of the media field.

In the field of tourism, capital conversion operates through localized identification. The public's act of identifying real-world buildings that resemble the animated land temple converts internalized cultural capital into immediate experiential rewards and social resonance – i.e., social and symbolic capital. Local cultural authorities, in turn, strategically appropriate this widely recognized visual symbol, anchoring it to local heritage sites and transforming the fluid emotional attention attached to the animated image into tangible tourist attractions and economic revenue. Such popular identification, in some cases, has generated cultural capital strong enough to influence professional fields, incorporating public emotional recognition into decisions about heritage restoration.

In the field of architecture and design, capital undergoes a different form of conversion. The design team recognized the cultural capital accumulated by the animated imagery and sought to convert it from a symbolic resource into an innovative spatial strategy. It generated a form of built environment capital that is at once material (the building itself), symbolic (its cultural associations), and social (its role in enabling community practices). The resulting space not only provided a material anchor for local spirit but also gained unique place appeal and communicative value by embodying this classic narrative. This, in turn, allowed the space to be re-appropriated by local cultural authorities as a vibrant node for events – completing another loop of capital circulation.

Various actors – tourists, cultural officials, architects – recognize, appropriate, and creatively operate on the same imagery according to their own logics. This ongoing circulation of capital around a core imagery injects enduring momentum that cuts across media and time. It also vividly illustrates the survival logic of traditional culture in the network age: its vitality depends not on being preserved as a fixed heritage, but on becoming an active form of capital that can be recognized, appropriated, translated, and embedded into contemporary practice networks.

4.3. Topological Structure: Stability and Flexibility in Tradition

Faced with classic concerns about the fate of culture in the age of technical reproduction, the transmedia circulation of the land temple imagery offers a different path. This paper proposes a 'topological structure of tradition' model to explain why this process has not led to the disappearance of authenticity or the substitution of reality by 'simulacra,' but has instead generated a form of 'dynamic authenticity.'

Applying the topological concept of homeomorphism¹⁹ – invariance under continuous deformation – to cultural tradition, we can distinguish between its invariant deep structure and its surface manifestations, which change across time and context. In the land temple case, the deep structure includes the building's function as a spiritual anchor, its role in marking community identity, its status as a site of ritual and social gathering, and its basic formal grammar of small scale, pitched roof, and central opening. These core properties are homeomorphic: their internal relations and essential attributes are preserved across different contexts and manifestations over history.

Yet the surface manifestations of this core structure are not rigid, especially in the media-converged network society. It is situated within an open network of meaning, where its specific forms, interpretive contexts, and affective associations are continuously extended and reconfigured. The animated translation performed a dramatic 'sketch' of the vernacular land temple. Public identification 'pasted' the stylized imagery onto different real-world landscapes, adding playful narratives. Institutional appropriation 'bundled' it with new media events such as *Black Myth: Wukong*, expanding its interpretive frameworks. Design practice 'folded' it from a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional place, integrating contemporary functions. Each translation is a continuous deformation of the tradition's core structure. Its surface appearances – medium, narrative, material form – may vary greatly, but its core topological property remains throughout.

This model explains how 'dynamic authenticity' is generated. Authenticity does not reside in 'restoration' of an irretrievable historical original. Rather, it manifests in each translation as a creative resonance with the tradition's core topological structure, a genuine engagement with collective emotional memory, and an adaptive fulfillment of its cultural function in new contexts. The animated land temple is 'authentic' because it distilled and reconstructed the core visual grammar of the vernacular land temple while injecting the anthropomorphic vitality and playful narrative of the Monkey King's transformation. The Jianghuang Temple in Yucun is 'authentic' because, through its situated construction, it tangibly embodies the genius loci of the land temple as a village's spiritual center, while evoking public emotional identification rooted in animated memory.

Thus, the translation of traditional culture in the network society is essentially a topological process of constructing a network of meanings. The core structure of tradition acts as stable nodes within this network, while the endless chain of media translations, public practices, and creative productions serves as dynamic links that continuously extend and weave the network. Together, they form a cognitive system that is both resilient and dynamic. Tradition, in this system, is not a resource to be consumed but a 'meaning generator' that can be continuously activated, engaged with, and creatively reimagined. This is the power of active connectivity on the cultural dimension: through media networks, traditional culture becomes tightly linked to

contemporary emotions, memories, and practices, constantly generating new spatial meanings and innovative atmospheres along the way.

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A CONNECTIVE APPROACH TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study has traced the transmedia life history of the animated land temple imagery from *Uproar in Heaven*. Methodologically, it adopts a process-tracing approach that follows a single imagery through its transmedia life history, allowing for close attention to design decisions, social media posts, and institutional strategies.

It finds that the traditional culture embodied in this imagery has not been ossified or erased by technological reproduction and media change. Rather, through continuous creative translation across animation, tourism, local governance, and architectural design, it has gained dynamic continuity and value accretion.

The translation process follows a clear trajectory: from distillation of the vernacular source (stylized encoding of vernacular architecture, see 3.1), to circulation across media and fields (public identification and institutional branding, see 3.2), then to creative feedback ('reverse translation' into physical space, see 3.3). At the heart of this process is the 'triple authentication' mechanism which ensures the imagery's recognizability, resonance, and legitimacy as it travels.

Throughout this process, the animated imagery functions as a form of 'cultural capital,' recognized, appropriated, and converted by actors across different fields to serve their respective interests. Ultimately, the case reveals a 'topological structure' in the perception of traditional culture within the network society: the core genes of tradition remain stable, while their specific forms, meanings, and emotional associations are continuously extended and reconfigured. This generates a form of 'dynamic authenticity' based on participation, negotiation, and creative translation.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how traditional culture, in the network society, actively engages with contemporary emotions, social interactions, and spatial practices through cross-media connective networks. This process does not weaken tradition but binds classic symbols with new media events, local contexts, and public life, generating new spatial meanings and cultural innovation. Translating tradition, therefore, hinges on building and sustaining such boundary-crossing networks of meaning.

The study also deepens understanding of cultural heritage in the digital age by engaging critically with classical theories. Benjamin's concern about the 'decay of aura' and Baudrillard's warning about 'simulacra' are approached differently here. As a reproduced imagery, the 'aura' of the animated land temple does not derive from an inaccessible original but from empathic resonance as a carrier of collective memory – a radiance conferred by widespread emotional identification and repeated interpretation. Nor does its 'reverse translation' into physical space constitute a closed circuit of simulacra. Rather, it reveals a mechanism for the reproduction of 'the real': when media imagery has been internalized as social consensus, its material translation can generate a new spatial reality authenticated by both emotion and function. The study therefore argues for a shift in focus from an essentialist notion of authenticity to its dynamic generation and practical construction in the age of participatory culture.

Finally, the transmedia translation mechanism revealed in this case resonates with broader efforts to sustain cultural identity through heritage in contemporary China. As noted in President Xi's 2026 New Year address, phenomena such as the rising popularity of museums and intangible cultural heritage, the global appeal of classic characters like Wukong and Nezha, and the growing embrace of traditional aesthetics among young people all point to the same conclusion: cultural imagery deeply embedded in collective memory, when creatively translated and widely connected across media, can transform 'heritage' into 'resource' and 'history' into 'trend.' By tracing the micro-life history of the animated land temple, this study provides a concrete theoretical footnote to this broader wave of cultural innovation and dissemination.

5.3. Implications and Future Directions

This study offers practical implications for heritage conservation, place branding, and design innovation. In heritage conservation, practitioners should recognize the translational potential of classic media imagery as a carrier of 'cultural genes,' connecting public emotion and collective memory to put 'dynamic authenticity' into practice. Local tourism developers can leverage widely recognized imagery, engage with media events, and implement on-the-ground initiatives to turn fluid attention into sustainable local identity and experience. Architectural designers can adopt 'reverse translation' to turn classic imagery into material places that support contemporary life, bridging historical perception and functional needs.

Given the single-case nature of this study, further testing is needed. Future research could apply the framework to other classic imagery in the Yangtze River Delta or beyond – such as Leifeng Pagoda or garden imagery – for comparative studies. It could also examine how digital technologies (AR, VR, the metaverse) are reshaping transmedia translation and explore the 'shadow side' of translation – meaning distortion, commercial exploitation, or community contestation – for a more dialectical understanding of cultural translation.

In sum, by tracing the transmedia journey of a classic animated architectural imagery, this study argues for a connective model of cultural translation in the network society. The model encourages multi-actor participation, cross-media collaboration, and the co-production of meanings. Through continuous translation and dialogue, tradition is no longer a burden in need of rescue but a vibrant, future-oriented resource for creative renewal.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

EXHIBITION NARRATIVES IN CHINA'S INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE MUSEUMS (IHMs): EMERGING CHALLENGES AND OPTIMIZED STRATEGIES

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EXHIBITION NARRATIVES IN CHINA'S INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE MUSEUMS (IHMs): EMERGING CHALLENGES AND OPTIMIZED STRATEGIES



Industrial heritage, as a material carrier of industrial civilization, not only chronicles the trajectory of technological evolution but also shapes urban spatial structures, social relations, and collective memory. Within this field, Industrial Heritage Museums (IHMs) have evolved from technical display rooms into public cultural institutions that interpret industrial history, labor experience, and social values. Internationally, under the influence of new museology and heritage studies, exhibition narratives have shifted from simply showcasing machinery and production processes toward contextualized, story-driven and participatory formats, while digital media such as immersive projections and virtual reality have further expanded narrative possibilities.

In China, the rise of IHMs is closely tied to rapid urbanization and industrial restructuring, and is characterized by a late start, fast pace and large scale. Yet, behind the impressive spatial regeneration, IHMs face a series of structural narrative dilemmas: the separation of objects from their original contexts weakens interpretive power; a persistent bias toward technology-centered narratives marginalizes workers' lived experiences; consumerist logics turn industrial heritage into "check-in" scenery; and the widespread adoption of digital media has, in many cases, resulted in spectacular visual effects but hollowed-out historical meaning.

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the reconstruction of exhibition narratives in Chinese IHMs under digitalization and foregrounds two core questions: in the practice of digital immersive storytelling, what are the concrete manifestations of technological overuse, spatial fragmentation and the erosion of authenticity; and how can digital media be re-positioned from a tool of sensory stimulation to a narrative language that enables deep engagement? Drawing on narratology, museology and embodied cognition, and based on field investigations of cases such as the Shougang Park·RE Rui International Memory Hall, the China (Shenyang) Industrial Museum, the Chongqing Industrial Museum and the Kailuan National Mine Park, the paper analyses both the limits and potentials of current narrative practices.

The paper argues that optimizing digital narratives in IHMs is not a mere technical upgrade but a reinterpretation and reconstruction of industrial cultural values. It proposes a three-fold path of "narrative-driven" transformation: repairing the relationship between objects and sites through situational and embodied narrative design, re-centering workers and ordinary people as narrative subjects, and resisting consumerist flattening by turning visitors from heritage "consumers" into co-constructors of meaning. In doing so, the study suggests that only when digital media are embedded in a contextualized, value-oriented narrative framework can Chinese IHMs truly activate the cultural potential of industrial heritage and sustain industrial spirit in the midst of urban transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

As material testimonies of industrial civilization, industrial heritage sites not only bear historical information regarding technological systems, modes of production and industrial organization, but are also deeply intertwined with the formation of urban spatial structures, social networks and collective memory. Since the latter half of the 20th century, alongside the advancement of deindustrialization, industrial heritage has gradually transformed from derelict facilities into significant cultural resources, and its conservation and adaptive reuse have become key issues in global heritage practice and urban regeneration. Against this backdrop, IHMs (Industrial Heritage Museums, hereinafter referred to as IHMs), as a vital medium linking the conservation of industrial heritage with public display and social education, have evolved from merely

preserving and exhibiting technology and artifacts to comprehensively interpreting industrial history, labor experiences and social values, thereby becoming one of the core forms of revitalizing industrial heritage.

At the international level, the development of IHMs is closely linked to the emergence and evolution of new museology, heritage studies and public history.¹ Relevant research emphasizes that the public is increasingly resistant to the one-way dissemination of knowledge by authoritative bodies; public cultural spaces that construct meaning through narrative and allow for the participation of diverse stakeholders may well be what the public truly desires.² Exhibition narratives have gradually shifted from merely ‘displaying machinery and production processes’ to focusing on the complex relationships between people and technology, production and society, and industry and daily life. Through contextualization, storytelling and participatory approaches, they enhance public understanding and emotional resonance. Practice demonstrates that exhibitions with clear narrative logic and value orientation not only help expand the interpretative dimensions of industrial heritage but also effectively enhance public engagement and a sense of identification, particularly among younger audiences. Of particular note is how the integration of digital technology is profoundly reshaping the possibilities of exhibition narrative—media tools such as immersive projections, virtual reality and interactive installations have revitalized the vast spaces characteristic of industrial heritage, offering visitors a shift in experience from being ‘an outsider’ to becoming ‘part of the story’.

In contrast, the rise of IHMs in China is deeply embedded within the historical process of rapid urbanization and industrial restructuring. Since the reform and opening-up, and particularly since the turn of the 21st century, the implementation of industrial policies such as ‘retreating from secondary industries to advance tertiary industries’ and ‘emptying the cage to welcome new birds’ has led to a large number of traditional industrial enterprises ceasing production, relocating or transforming, resulting in a concentrated emergence of industrial heritage within a short period. Driven jointly by local governments, market capital and cultural policies, IHMs have been widely incorporated into the frameworks of urban regeneration and cultural tourism development, becoming key instruments for shaping the urban image and revitalizing existing spaces. Compared to the more gradual process of industrial heritage conservation in Western countries, the development of IHMs in China is characterized by a late start, rapid progress and large scale, and has achieved significant results in spatial transformation, architectural reuse and facility upgrades. Cultural landmarks such as the Shougang Park and the Power Station of Art (PSA) in Shanghai, both converted from industrial heritage sites, are prime examples of this process.

However, in contrast to the rapid spatial regeneration, the development of exhibition narratives has lagged behind. Whilst some IHMs have achieved great success in architectural form and landscape design, their exhibition narratives tend to be homogenized and remain at a superficial level, failing to effectively translate

into a system of meaning that the public can understand and relate to. In recent years, the widespread application of digital technology has given rise to a new dilemma: digital immersive exhibitions, such as light and sound shows, which some museums have invested heavily in, are becoming mere visual spectacles for social media check-ins; whilst industrial culture and the industrial spirit themselves are being sidelined and diluted; dazzling digital screens obscure the original texture of industrial buildings, creating a narrative disconnect between virtual imagery and physical space; whilst pursuing visual spectacle, digital ‘translation’ is also eroding the historical texture of industrial heritage; the accumulation of technology and the hollowing out of content constitute ‘emerging challenges’ unique to the digitalization process of China’s IHMs—these are not the ‘old problems’ of insufficient funding and talent shortages in the traditional sense, but rather a new tension between technological empowerment and narrative authenticity.

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the reconstruction of exhibition narratives in IHMs within a digital context, raising two interrelated core questions: First, what core dilemmas do Chinese IHMs face in the practice of digital immersive storytelling? What are the specific manifestations of technological overuse, spatial fragmentation and the erosion of authenticity? Second, how can we transcend the superficial logic of ‘technological overlay’ to achieve a deep integration and symbiosis between digital media and industrial heritage narratives? Centering on these questions, this paper draws upon relevant theories from narratology and museology, combined with research and comparative analysis of typical case studies such as the Shougang Park·RE Rui International Creative Memory Hall and the China (Shenyang) Industrial Museum, to examine the practical logic and limitations of industrial heritage exhibition narratives under the intervention of digital media.

The central argument of this paper is that the optimization of digital narratives in IHMs is not merely a simple upgrade of display technology, but a process of reinterpretation and reconstruction of meaning centered on industrial cultural values. Only by shifting from ‘technology-enabled’ to ‘narrative symbiosis’—respecting the historical context of industrial heritage, using digital media as an extension rather than an overlay of the narrative, and through spatial narrative reconstruction, multi-sensory interactive design, and the digital translation of historical memory—can the cultural potential of industrial heritage be truly activated.

2. THE EVOLUTION AND CURRENT STATE OF EXHIBITION NARRATIVES IN CHINA’S IHMS

The exhibition narratives of China’s IHMs are not static; rather, they have undergone a gradual transformation from ‘object display’ to ‘meaning production’ in tandem with the deepening recognition of the value of industrial heritage, the evolution of museum philosophy, and shifts in socio-cultural demands.³

Understanding this trajectory helps to grasp the historical roots of current narrative challenges and explains why digital immersive narratives are now viewed with such high expectations.

2.1. From ‘Production Logic’ to ‘Exhibition Logic’: The Historical Evolution of Narrative Agents

The exhibition practices of early Chinese IHMs often originated from corporate history museums or industry exhibition halls, and their narrative logic bore the deep imprint of a ‘production logic’. This ‘production logic’ refers to exhibitions that follow the thread of industrial production processes, with machinery and equipment at their core, presenting industrial history as a ‘history of technological evolution’ or a ‘history of product iteration’. Within this narrative framework, the purpose of the exhibition was to document industry achievements and pass on technical expertise, with the implicit narrative subjects being the ‘producers’—engineers, technical experts, and corporate managers. Visitors were assumed to be passive recipients of industrial knowledge; their experience was akin to surveying a production workshop through a pane of glass. Industrial history was consistently viewed as the story of ‘others’, making it difficult to transform into a meaningful narrative that felt personally relevant. This narrative model was typical of early displays and the exhibitions in some industrial museums. However, as industrial heritage has transformed from production sites into public cultural spaces, its social role has undergone a fundamental shift—museums are no longer merely display rooms showcasing industry’s technology and achievements, but rather ‘cultural interpreters’ for the public. This implies that the narrative logic must swiftly shift from a ‘production logic’ to an ‘exhibition logic’; that is, the purpose of an exhibition no longer remains merely at the level of recreating production processes, but rather, through selection, organization and interpretation, transforms industrial history into a cultural narrative that the public can understand and engage with: selecting industrial artefacts from the vast array of industrial remains that bear symbolic significance, emotional traces or social memory; organizing the meaningful connections between objects and people, and between the past and the present, within a narrative web woven from artefacts, documents, oral histories and spaces, which possesses both emotional tension and cognitive logic; and interpreting the invisible production processes, social relationships and emotional memories behind the artefacts through means such as scene reconstruction, media intervention and the framing of questions.⁴ Consequently, the narrative agents are expanding from a singular ‘producer’ to a diverse array of actors—including museum curators, heritage researchers, former workers, local residents and even the audience themselves. Practitioners are experimenting with various methods to engage an ever-wider range of groups in the construction of meaning. This shift constitutes the underlying driving force behind the evolution of exhibition narratives in China’s IHMs.

2.2. Limitations of Current Mainstream Narrative Models: A Bias Towards the History of Technology, Institutional Absence, and a Disconnect in the Interpretive Community

Although the transformation of narrative logic has gained widespread recognition at the theoretical level, the exhibition narratives of China's IHMs still face limitations in practice.

2.2.1. The separation of objects from their context undermines the effectiveness of exhibition narratives

The establishment of an industrial museum often entails removing industrial equipment from its original production site and relocating it to exhibition halls for centralized preservation and display, thereby creating a 'separation of object and context'—that is, a separation of industrial artifacts from their original environment, whilst this conservation practice is undoubtedly necessary, it severs the fundamental connection between the artifacts and their original spatial context. Machines are transformed from 'an integral part of the production site' into 'isolated objects in an exhibition hall', and the narrative effectiveness of these artifacts is naturally diminished in the process of this separation of object and context.⁵ More importantly, the industrial buildings themselves—the workshops and factory halls that bear the memory of production—are often transformed into 'containers for exhibits' during the process of museumification: elements such as their spatial rhythm and production environment, which could otherwise serve as narrative resources, are consequently obscured or dissolved. This fundamental dilemma constitutes the foundational predicament underlying all narrative limitations of IHMs. How artifacts, detached from their original context, can be recontextualized to reconnect with production settings, labor processes, and human agency is a core question that urgently requires an answer in exhibition narrative practice.

2.2.2. At the level of narrative discourse, there remains a bias towards the history of technology

The exhibition narratives of Chinese IHMs are still undergoing in-depth exploration and have yet to break free from the established paradigms of Western industrial museums. This paradigm is deeply rooted in the unique historical experience of Western industrialization—the Industrial Revolution brought the power of science and technology into the public eye; Europe, having pioneered the Industrial Revolution, emerged triumphant in the tide of globalization, thereby fostering a conviction in and reverence for science and technology, which in turn gave rise to an industrial narrative model centered on technological evolution and the invention of machinery.⁶ This narrative tends to portray industrialization as a history of technological advancement driven by 'technological breakthroughs', with scientists and other elites as the protagonists, whilst the protagonists responsible for putting technology into practice—those laborers who toiled alongside machinery and worked day and night in workshops—are pushed to the margins of the narrative, becoming a vague collective silhouette. China's industrial museum sector began somewhat later, and discussions and

research on exhibition narratives in such museums have drawn upon foreign experience, with existing Western narrative paradigms naturally being introduced and referenced. However, China's path to industrialization was not a simple replication of the Western model, but rather a systematic response and innovation actively undertaken in the face of external pressures, grounded in indigenous social systems and cultural traditions. Consequently, whilst Chinese industrial museums' adoption of a logical narrative centered on technological advancement can indeed establish an exhibition framework that appears 'flawless' in the short term, in the long run it fails to fill the void of meaning created by the separation of objects from their context. Nor does this narrative capture the unique aspects of China's industrialization—namely, how China managed to achieve industrialization in such a short time and lead a population of 1.4 billion to enjoy the modern lifestyle brought about by this industrialization. In this historical process, how is the historical status of workers, as the driving force of industrialization, situated? Re-examining the limitations of the technology-centric narrative will help us reclaim the ability to tell China's story and reshape the value foundations of Chinese industrial culture.

2.2.3. The erosion of IHMs' exhibition narratives by the logic of consumerism

The separation of objects from their context has rendered artifacts largely 'silent evidence', with the construction of their meaning heavily reliant on exhibition narratives. Yet today, consumerism is gradually eroding the cultural significance that exhibition narratives strive to construct, by transforming the value forms of industrial elements and reshaping the public's visiting behavior and modes of cognition.⁷

Firstly, industrial elements serving as historical witnesses have been alienated: within IHMs, elements with the greatest critical potential—such as the status of workers as historical agents and the collective memory of the industrialization process—could have served as narrative resources for reflecting on modernity and questioning institutional values, yet they have been commodified by consumerism: slogans and images symbolizing 'red' and 'revolution' are turned into fridge magnets and mobile phone cases; Che Guevara is reduced to a symbol printed on canvas bags and T-shirts; motifs such as the hammer and sickle and the red star have become common elements of trendy brands; and the former sites of working-class struggle have been converted into cafés and 'Instagram-worthy' restaurants. It is entirely reasonable for museums to showcase industrial elements through various forms of expression, and there is nothing wrong with consumers paying for them out of a simple emotional attachment to the memory of industrial history. The crux of the matter lies not in the act of consumption itself, but in how the logic of capital strips historical narratives of their capacity for dialogue with the present, causing them to lose their critical potential to engage with reality.

Secondly, the act of visiting in pursuit of meaning has been alienated: under the combined influence of social media and marketing discourse, museums are being redefined as a ‘new venue for consumption’—social platforms have amplified the social value of ‘check-ins’, and some visitors enter museums with the expectation of taking and sharing photos, or purchasing trendy cultural and creative products to gain social capital, thereby completing one ‘tasteful act of consumption’ after another.⁸ Having observed this trend, museums—in an effort to expand their influence and attract visitors—have begun, whether intentionally or not, to incorporate marketing features such as “best photo spots” into their exhibition design; these carefully designed check-in points further reinforce visitors’ expectations, turning the act of taking photos, checking in, and sharing on social media into a standardized visiting procedure; and a new wave of social media dissemination then propagates this experiential model to a wider audience of potential visitors. Under this model, industrial history is treated as the story of ‘the Other’, skimmed over rapidly, making it difficult to spark a sense of personal connection or relevance in the minds of visitors.⁹

Consumerism does not directly participate in the suppression or erasure of such critical content; rather, it strips it of its political connotations and returns it to the public in the guise of ‘nostalgic aesthetics’. The working class is reduced from ‘creators of history’ to ‘scenery to be viewed’, whilst labor is simplified from a social relationship worthy of scrutiny into a retro style available for consumption. In this process, the public’s emotional attachment to industrial memory is channeled into purchasing behavior, whilst the critical core quietly dissipates amidst the carnival of consumerism.

It must be made clear that the erosion of museum exhibition narratives by consumerism is neither unique to IHMs nor confined to China; rather, it is a universal global challenge. In the capitalist world, consumerism is embedded within its institutional logic, and the commercialization of museums rarely gives rise to tensions at the institutional level; in China, however, the introduction of this logic—lacking a corresponding institutional context—is more likely to conflict with the foundational values of industrial heritage, becoming a ‘force of alienation’ that must be treated with caution.

2.2.4. Visual spectacles and narrative hollowing-out in the digital age

The introduction of digital technology primarily responds to two practical needs: industrial artifacts are often too large or difficult to acquire, making it challenging to display them in their entirety; digital media is therefore introduced as an alternative presentation solution. Furthermore, public demand for experiential engagement is growing daily, and immersive experiences are viewed with high expectations compared to conventional display methods. However, digital practices have also given rise to the problem of narrative hollowing in exhibitions.

Digital technology has been alienated from a tool for narrating history into a device for enhancing visual sensations; this alienation is characterized by the accumulation of technology, and its root lies in the confusion between ‘experience’ and ‘understanding’ within curatorial philosophy. The digital practices of many museums today implicitly follow this logic: if the audience has a good experience and is immersed, they will naturally resonate with the exhibition, and the display will have achieved its purpose. While this logic is not inherently flawed, the complex layering of technical forms does not necessarily enhance the public’s sense of immersion; rather, it may divert their attention from understanding history towards experiencing spectacle. Do installations such as light and sound shows and circular theatres truly strengthen the connection with industrial heritage? After engaging with interactive installations, does the public retain a deep understanding of industrial culture? These questions point precisely to the underlying dilemma of digitalization. Technology should, in principle, lend greater power to exhibition narratives; yet the indiscriminate piling up of technical elements not only reduces industrial heritage to a backdrop for showcasing digital media, but also the public’s sense of immersion to mere sensory stimulation, thereby replacing historical understanding with fleeting experiences. Whilst audiences derive pleasure from dazzling visual spectacles, they lose the opportunity for a profound dialogue with history.¹⁰

On a deeper level, this practice of over-reliance on digital media essentially underestimates the public’s cognitive abilities. It presupposes that the public can only enter a state of immersion if drawn in by dazzling lights and stimulating interactive installations; the public is never regarded as equal participants in the construction of meaning, but rather as passive recipients who need to be ‘coaxed’ into absorbing knowledge. When curatorial logic revolves around ‘how to engage the audience more deeply’ rather than ‘how to make the narrative more compelling’, technology is transformed from a tool for telling history into a device that replaces the telling of history itself. The consequence is that museum professionals find satisfaction in feedback about a ‘good experience’, whilst unwittingly obscuring their fundamental mission as public cultural institutions.

In summary, the predicament of exhibition narratives in China’s IHMs stems from the structural tension between the fundamental characteristics of industrial heritage and the practice of museification. The distinctiveness of industrial heritage lies in the fact that its value is always embedded within specific relations of production and spatial practices—objects are the material crystallization of relations of production, whilst sites are the spatial unfolding of the labor process. The two are inherently inseparable within the context of production. Yet the process of museification removes artifacts from their original context, severing the physical connection between object and setting, thereby reducing artifacts from material crystallizations of production relations to silent evidence requiring reinterpretation, whilst original spaces such as factory buildings are reduced to mere backdrops. This further erodes the foundational value of industrial narratives—

the public is confronted merely with dehistoricized industrial aesthetics, rather than the social relations that underpin the labor process. This structural dilemma forms the common premise for a series of secondary issues, including biases in the narrative of the history of technology, the erosion of consumerism, and the accumulation of digital content. How to re-establish meaningful connections at the point of disconnection between objects and their settings is the core proposition that IHMs' exhibition narratives must address.

3. A WAY OUT: THE DEEP INTEGRATION OF CONTEXTUALISED NARRATIVE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

To break the current deadlock, we must transcend the 'technology-driven' mindset and shift towards a 'narrative-driven' logic. This requires a practice of critical re-contextualization to correct the misconception that digital technology serves merely as a device for sensory stimulation or a tool for landscape reproduction, and to rebuild the meaningful connections between objects and their surroundings. The key to achieving this shift lies in reconstructing the application logic of digital technology through contextualized narrative. Contextualized narrative posits that the generation of meaning depends on specific physical environments, social interactions and bodily practices; it opposes treating exhibits as isolated artifacts, and instead strives to construct a field of meaning-making that activates the public's senses and emotions. In the field of industrial heritage, the 'scene' of industrial heritage is not merely a spatial container or backdrop, but a practical site that genuinely embodies the politics of labor and the exercise of power; interrogating the historical logic of production relations and achieving the contemporary activation of historical relationships have become imperatives that contextualized narrative must confront.

Consequently, the deep integration of contextualized narratives and digital technology becomes the key to breaking the deadlock. This integration does not repeat the mistakes revealed in Chapter Two, but rather takes embodied cognition as its theoretical foundation, positioning the audience's bodily practices as the core medium of exhibition narratives. It shifts digital technology from creating 'scenes' to creating 'environments', and transforms exhibitions from being 'viewed' to being 'experienced'.

3.1. Restoring the Object-Scene Connection: From 'Object-Scene Separation' to 'Embodied Immersion'

The fundamental dilemma of IHMs lies in the fact that only a small number of artifacts are preserved, becoming isolated specimens, whilst the environments upon which they originally relied to generate meaning remain severed from them. The prevailing technical approach in current digital solutions involves overlaying digital imagery onto physical artifacts and using virtual reality to recreate vanished production scenes.

However, such mechanical recreations often reduce workers' labor practices to a rigid, stereotypical form, whilst the immersive experiences they create remain confined to the visual realm. Consequently, digital technology not only fails to bridge the physical spatial disconnect between objects and their contexts, but may even undermine the very foundations of the exhibition's narrative. Therefore, the first misconception we must overcome is that digitization is not about creating more realistic 'scenes' for public viewing, but rather about crafting tangible 'environments' that invite public participation. As Hume observed, 'the source of all knowledge lies in the sensations of the human body regarding the objective external world.'¹¹ The direct interaction between the body's senses and the objective world is the starting point for humanity's progression from sensory to rational understanding. This implies that to comprehend the relationship between an industrial artifact and its environment, the public must physically enter that environment and use bodily movement, manipulation and perception to re-establish the connection between the object and its setting. This process of immersion is the key to digital technology's intervention in exhibition narratives and the resolution of the problem of the separation between object and setting.

The 'Mine Tunnel Adventure' interactive exhibition at the Chongqing Industrial Museum provides a case study worthy of analysis. Departing from the traditional, one-dimensional and decontextualized display format—where mineral specimens are placed in display cases accompanied by explanatory labels—this project has transformed the foundation pit of the original factory building into a simulated mine tunnel. Centered on the narrative theme of 'discovering and identifying minerals', it creates an exploratory environment in which visitors take on the role of 'prospectors', independently searching for and scanning minerals such as magnetite and hematite within the relatively dimly lit tunnels, using animations provided by detection devices to learn about the characteristics of different minerals. This design replaces the passive visual reception of traditional exhibitions with the active physical act of 'searching'. Every physical action taken by the public—bending down, moving forward, searching, scanning, identifying and comparing—constitutes a spontaneous exploration. Their attention is naturally focused on the task at hand, making it easy for them to unconsciously accumulate sensory knowledge. When a visitor scans a piece of magnetite, the animation displayed by the detector not only identifies its name but also illustrates its connection to industrial processes. The ore is no longer merely an isolated piece of industrial evidence to be viewed, but becomes an integral part of mining practice. From the perspective of narrative effectiveness, this design successfully transforms 'declarative knowledge' (i.e. the classification of ores) into 'procedural narrative' (i.e. how ores are discovered), enabling visitors to internalize the connection between objects and their context through the sensory experience of completing a task. Of course, when considering the integrity of contextualized narrative, there remains room for discussion regarding the narrative depth of 'Mine Tunnel Exploration'. The current exhibition narrative focuses on the relatively narrow aspect of 'identifying ore' and has not yet formed an organic connection with the broader narrative of Chongqing's industrial development, let alone that of

China's industrialization as a whole. After completing the exploration, the public's intuitive understanding of labor scenarios—such as the working and living conditions of miners—remains limited. Interaction relies primarily on visual animations and the vibrational feedback of detection devices, whilst important sensory dimensions of the industrial environment, such as auditory and thermal sensations, have not yet been fully incorporated.

The digital transformation of the No. 3 Blast Furnace at the Shougang Park offers an alternative narrative approach. The narrative core of this project is 'How Steel Is Made', a classic theme that runs through the industrialization process. Unlike traditional exhibitions that rely on flowcharts, models or video presentations, the No. 3 Blast Furnace anchors its narrative directly within the furnace itself: visitors step into the actual space between the furnace core, the furnace walls and the charging cone, where, enveloped by immersive projection and surround sound, they witness first-hand the smelting of iron ore within the blast furnace. The narrative strength of this design lies in the intensity of its spatial storytelling—the narrative does not unfold on display panels or screens, but within the physical space occupied by the visitor. When the surround sound system simulates the roar of surging molten iron and projections on the blast furnace walls depict the searing scenes of smelting, the steel framework of the blast furnace and the digital imagery of its production process achieve a preliminary unity at the level of the visitor's physical perception. Visitors no longer learn the working principles of the blast furnace through flowcharts, but by standing inside it and experiencing the grandeur of its space and the precision of its structure on a human scale, thereby gaining a sensory understanding that transcends text and imagery. However, when examined from the perspective of the interactivity of 'scenographic narrative', this model still faces a tension between narrative depth and audience engagement. The current core experience is primarily wrapped in audiovisual elements, with the audience's role resembling that of an 'immersed observer' rather than an 'actor within the narrative'. In other words, the narrative progression is pre-scripted and linear; the audience cannot influence the direction of the narrative or access differentiated information through their own active physical actions (such as operating a simulation console).

We cite these examples not to deny their innovative nature or their positive role in exploring exhibition narratives for IHMs, but rather because we harbor higher expectations regarding their narrative potential. A comparison of the two cases reveals that the deep integration of digital technology and contextualized narrative requires striking an appropriate balance between 'narrative content' and 'physical participation'. The 'Mine Tunnel Adventure' at the Chongqing Industrial Museum employs an exploratory, task-driven narrative, where visitors' physical actions directly propel the narrative forward; however, its narrative content remains relatively limited in scope. In contrast, the No. 3 Blast Furnace at the Shougang Park uses spatial immersion to envelop the narrative, offering a high density of information and strong emotional impact, yet visitors'

physical engagement is limited. The ideal form of integration may lie in using ‘task-driven’ elements to stimulate visitors’ physical engagement, whilst employing ‘spatial immersion’ to enrich the narrative’s informational layers; only when these two approaches complement one another can the epistemological goal of ‘accumulating sufficient sensory material to achieve a leap forward’ be realized.

3.2. Reshaping the Narrative Subject: A Shift from a Technology-Centric Narrative Back to the Human

Redefining the narrative subject essentially addresses the question of ‘who is speaking’. In Chapter Two, we analyzed how many current industrial heritage exhibitions exhibit a pronounced bias towards a history of technology narrative: The narrative focus tends to be on the elite class—scientists, engineers and the like—while the content centers on machine inventions, technological innovations and production figures. This approach obscures human labor behind the success of objects and replaces warm, lived practice with cold data. Ultimately, this results in the workers—who spent their days and nights alongside the machines, imbuing industry with warmth and soul through their labor—being relegated to the margins of the narrative, reduced to mere backdrops or symbolic ‘crowd scenes’. Although many museums have recognized this issue and attempted to highlight workers in their exhibitions, if such ‘highlighting’ remains limited to a single line of text on a display panel, an old photograph, or a short audio-visual clip of oral history, the public will still be unable to truly comprehend the nature of workers’ labor. For the public to understand labor, their bodies must enter the context of labor itself; it is through embodied participation that they can intuitively grasp ‘how labor becomes the essential power of humanity.’

The China (Shenyang) Industrial Museum’s launch of the country’s first “Digital and Intelligent Worker Lei Feng” multimodal immersive AI+ special exhibition “Hello, Worker Lei Feng” provides a case study worthy of in-depth analysis regarding the digital empowerment of workers’ narratives. Centered on the narrative of ‘Worker Lei Feng’, the exhibition uses the interaction between the ‘Digital and Intelligent Worker Lei Feng’ and a staged drama to vividly portray Lei Feng’s labor practices during his time at Anshan Iron and Steel: his relentless dedication to his work and his constant reflection and learning through his diaries. These actions were, in essence, a concrete manifestation of the agency of workers at that time. When we study the spirit of Lei Feng, we should not merely learn from his selflessness and willingness to help others; rather, we should understand the weight and power of labor itself—not that one first becomes a perfect hero and then engages in labor, but that through day-in, day-out labor, a person gradually becomes that ‘self’ who is responsible, accountable, and strives for excellence. Traditional exhibitions often ‘elevate Lei Feng to a pedestal’, abstracting him into a ‘role model’ through the lens of moral edification, thereby obscuring the simple logic of how he, as an ordinary worker, shaped himself through labor. This shift in perspective moves the narrative

focus from moral judgments about ‘what kind of person Lei Feng was’ to a presentation of the process of ‘how Lei Feng became such a person through labor’; labor is no longer a backdrop, but becomes the core force that shapes the individual. In addition to centering the narrative on ‘Leifeng the worker’, the exhibition also seeks to create an immersive labor setting through staged scenarios. It selects 21 representative scenes from Leifeng’s time at Anshan Iron and Steel, using these staged scenarios as the core medium. By combining AI-generated historical scenes, documentary footage and real-time dialogue with the ‘Digital Leifeng’ avatar, it creates an immersive space that ‘bends time and space’. The establishment of this ‘dialogical’ nature is key to the transformation of workers from narrative objects to narrative subjects: in traditional exhibitions, workers are the subjects of discourse, whereas digital empowerment enables them to respond to the public gaze using the first-person pronoun ‘I’. When the digital avatar declares, “I am Worker Lei Feng”, it is not merely introducing itself, but proclaiming a shift in narrative power—the worker’s experience is no longer relayed by the museum, but is directly “spoken” by the worker’s own digital avatar.

It must be acknowledged that the current challenge remains how to present the narrative core of how ordinary workers achieve self-formation through their daily labor practices. Whilst the formal innovation of ‘Dialogue with Lei Feng’ is undoubtedly valuable, if the overall content remains confined to the moral confessions and inspirational aphorisms found in *Lei Feng’s Diary*, the public will be relegated to the role of bystanders ‘listening to the role model tell stories’, unable to truly assume the role of practitioners ‘working like the role model’. In other words, digital technology should serve the embodied presentation of the labor process, rather than the digital indoctrination of moral conclusions, for the tendency towards moral symbolization is, in essence, no different from the tendency in the history of technology to obscure labor itself. A genuine workers’ narrative does not involve ‘elevating’ Lei Feng or the working class to the status of deities, but rather keeping them ‘in the workshop’, allowing audiences to operate bulldozers with their own hands within virtual labor scenarios, to feel the rigors of technical mastery, and to experience the sense of fulfillment that comes from completing production tasks. Only in this way can digital technology truly fulfill its promise of ‘moving workers from the margins to the center’, transforming moral education from a process of ‘being told’ into one of ‘self-generation through labor’.

3.3. Resisting the Deconstruction of Consumerism: From Symbolic Consumption to Co-creation of Meaning

The core mechanism of consumerism’s erosion lies in transforming irreplaceable historical experiences into mass-produced symbolic commodities. When history can be photographed, purchased and taken away, its critical essence is quietly drained away through the act of consumption. It should be noted that resisting the erosion of consumerism does not simply mean boycotting all cultural and creative products or all gaming and

entertainment activities. Whether the combination of digitalization and contextualized storytelling helps to resist or exacerbates the erosion of consumerism depends on whether the narrative's internal logic propels history towards 'consumable symbols' or 'participatory meaning-making'.

Take, for example, the immersive educational program "The Kailuan Code" at the Kailuan National Mining Park. This project combines the escape room format with the educational function of a museum; the public must use clues gathered during their visit to complete tasks, thereby making the museum and the exhibits themselves integral components of the contextualized narrative. The narrative centers on the struggle history of the Kailuan coal miners, who were renowned for their 'exceptional fighting spirit'. Throughout the puzzle-solving process, visitors not only learn about coal mining techniques but, as the plot unfolds, gradually come to appreciate the combative nature and spiritual strength of the working class, gaining a deeper understanding of the fundamental proposition that 'labor creates value.'

The reason why excellent contextualized narratives are able to resist consumerism lies not in the sophistication of their technical methods, but in their reverence for the solemnity of history and their profound recognition of the value of labor. Enabling the public to step into the shoes of ordinary workers from history during the puzzle-solving process—to confront dilemmas of choice and experience the labor processes of the past—requires a significant investment of cognitive resources, emotion, and even physical effort. Such an experience effectively helps the public form a 'muscle memory' of the history of workers' struggles, which is precisely the prerequisite for the construction of meaning. This teaches us that the integration of digital technology and immersive storytelling must be underpinned by a 'foundational code'—all IHMs' cultural and creative products should carry the memory of labor rather than strip it of its essence, with the core aim being to help the public recognize the value of labor rather than merely seeking entertainment-driven thrills. When audiences feel the weight of history rather than the lightness of entertainment through their participation, they transform from 'consumers' of industrial heritage into 'co-creators' of historical memory.

4. CONCLUSION

China's IHMs are currently undergoing a critical period of transformation. On the one hand, rapid urban regeneration and the integration of culture and tourism present unprecedented development opportunities; on the other, multiple challenges—including the disconnection between objects and their contexts, a bias towards the history of technology, the erosion of cultural heritage by consumerism, and the excessive accumulation of digital elements—have plunged their exhibition narratives into a profound crisis of meaning. Taking 'exhibition narrative' as its central thread, this paper reveals the structural roots of the current

narrative dilemma: the value of industrial heritage is always embedded within specific relations of production and spatial practices, whilst the physical separation of ‘objects’ and ‘scenery’ during the museumification process is precisely the starting point of the rupture in the system of meaning. Building on this, the paper proposes the ‘deep integration of contextualized narrative and digital technology’ as a way out of this impasse. It explores possible pathways for digital technology to return from being a ‘sensory stimulation device’ to a ‘narrative language’ across three dimensions: restoring the connection between objects and their context, reshaping the narrative subject, and resisting the deconstruction of consumerism.

The research reveals that digital technology does not inherently possess the capacity to resolve or exacerbate the current predicament; its impact depends on the narrative logic guiding its application. When technology serves the narrative objective of ‘embodied cognition’—guiding audiences to enter labor contexts through bodily practices and to construct meaning through active exploration—digitalization can be transformed from a force of alienation into a medium for meaning-making. The core insight of this finding lies in the realization that the essence of IHMs’ digital transformation is not a technological race, but rather a revolution in narrative concepts. Only by shifting from a ‘technology-driven’ to a ‘narrative-driven’ approach can digital media truly become a bridge connecting the past with the present, artifacts with the public, and labor with value.

Looking ahead, as new technologies such as artificial intelligence and mixed reality continue to evolve, the narrative forms of IHMs will open up even greater possibilities. Yet the more rapid the pace of technological iteration, the more crucial it becomes to anchor our narrative concepts firmly. Only by maintaining, amidst technological change, a profound respect for the materiality of industrial heritage, the solemnity of labor’s value, and the public’s agency in constructing meaning, can digitalization truly become the enduring driving force for IHMs to ‘tell the story of China’s industrialization well’.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

TRANSLATING TRADITIONS: PHOTOGRAPHIC CONNECTION THROUGH VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Larissa Ribeiro Cunha

TRANSLATING TRADITIONS: PHOTOGRAPHIC CONNECTION THROUGH VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE



This investigation aims to approach photographic language as an instrument of cultural translation in the field of vernacular architecture, taking as a case study the photographic collection of the Portuguese architect-photographer António Sérgio Maciel Menéres. The work proposes to understand how photographic practice can transcend its documentary function to become an active means of rewriting and adapting architectural tradition in different contexts.

At a time when contemporary debates on heritage, authenticity and visual culture are becoming increasingly relevant — especially in light of the challenges posed by globalization, touristification and new preservation policies — Menéres' visual legacy offers significant contributions. His work provides a critical repertoire for rethinking how the vernacular is represented, appropriated and reconfigured in current discourses on architectural identity and collective memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Images happen between us, who look at them, and their media, through which they respond to our gaze. They rely on two symbolic acts that involve our living body: the act of fabrication and the act of perception, the latter being the purpose of the former.”

(Hans Belting, 2005, p. 69)¹

Recent studies on the relationship between architecture, image, and memory have made it possible to broaden the understanding of photography as a locus of thought and imagination, particularly with regard to the dynamics of heritage and visual culture in contemporaneity - namely archives/collections as objects of interpretation. On the other hand, the way in which tradition is constructed, mediated, and transmitted through the image remains an open field, especially in the context of vernacular architecture. This occurs in the face of the progressive rarefaction of the objects once photographed, in contrast to the persistence of the image, a living link between past and present. This investigation is situated within the contemporary debate on ‘*translating traditions*’, by considering the photographic image as an active medium of mediation, claiming for the image its own agency that transcends the mere illustration of the past.

Far from constituting a fixed or static entity, tradition manifests itself as a dynamic process, continuously reinterpreted through different media, practices, and cultural contexts, where there is a deliberate process of selection. The theorist Raymond Williams (1979), within the field of culture, reflects that:

“From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or

excluded. Yet within a given hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is presented and usually passed off as ‘*the tradition*’, ‘*the significant past*’.”

(Williams, 1979, p. 119)²

It is understandable that the very notion of culture is traversed by processes of transmission and transformation over time, which continually enables its reconfiguration in the present. Williams (1979) further emphasizes the relationship between tradition, ideology, and culture: it is “an aspect of contemporary social and cultural organization, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class. It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers, in practice, is a *sense of predisposed continuity*” (Williams, 1979, p.119).³

Within this framework, photography assumes a determining role. More than an instrument of recording, the photographic image can be understood as a mediating device that actively participates in the construction of narratives about the past and in its reconfiguration in the present. Sontag (2012) states that “Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph. In one version of its usefulness, the camera’s record incriminates”(Sontag, 2012, p. 14).⁴

By selecting, framing, and organizing the *chosen subject* - the so-called first reality - photography not only documents, but also interprets, translates, and reinscribes cultural realities, contributing to their circulation, permanence, and conceptual unfolding of the represented subject - *the second reality* - by opening space for different modes of reading, action, and interpretation (Kossoy, 2016).⁵

The Portuguese context of the 1950s and 1960s offers a particularly fertile field for this reflection. During this period, marked by the Estado Novo dictatorship - Salazarism (1933-1974)-the Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture (*Inquérito à Arquitetura Regional Portuguesa*) - IARP (1955-1961), constituted a fundamental moment in the rediscovery and valorization of popular architecture, considered “still today the most complete photographic survey of Portuguese popular architecture” (Leal & Prista, 2021, p. 258).⁶ Furthermore, it is “an irreplaceable source of examples of traditional Portuguese architecture, reflecting the characterization and the ‘state’ of architecture in a very specific period” (Nunes & Menéres, 2021).⁷ This survey, developed by a generation of young architects, sought to identify and document vernacular forms and ways of building and inhabiting, at a moment when the discipline was seeking to redefine its relationship with emerging architectural modernity.

It is within this context that the figure of the architect-photographer António Sérgio Maciel Menéres is situated, whose photographic practice emerges as an integral part of his participation in the Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture. Trained in the so-called ‘Porto School’,⁸ Menéres developed an attentive

gaze towards vernacular architecture, producing a vast corpus of images that, over time, surpassed its initial documentary function to assert itself as an autonomous field of visual investigation, evidenced in his various photographic exhibitions over the years, in his teaching career, and in his everyday life. His work allows photography to be understood not only as a record, but as an active means of constructing meaning, capable of translating values, practices, and ways of life into visual language, imbued with affectivity and belonging (Cunha & Urbano, 2025).⁹

Based on this premise, the present article proposes to analyze photography as an instrument of cultural translation in the field of vernacular architecture, taking as a case study the photographic collection of António Menéres. The analysis articulates a visual reading of images, an approach to the archive as a device for the production of knowledge, and a theoretical framework within the field of visual culture and cultural translation. This path will be further developed through the analysis of a set of images documenting the encounter between Menéres and the Brazilian architect Lucio Costa (1902-1998), allowing the observation of the translation of tradition in a transatlantic context.

It is argued that photographic practice can be understood as a process of translation, in which tradition is reinterpreted, reorganized, made intelligible, and unarchived for different audiences and contexts. In doing so, photography contributes not only to the preservation of heritage, but also to its continuous reinvention, particularly when articulated and connected to different contexts and geographies.

2. TRANSLATING TRADITION – IMAGE, VISUAL CULTURE AND METHOD

Understanding tradition as a dynamic process implies recognizing that its transmission does not occur through simple continuity, but through successive operations of translation. Thus, when analyzing an image, it becomes evident that, within its own static characteristic, it is also dialectical, enabling a succession of translations at each moment/time/context. Walter Benjamin (2006) explains:

“The historical index of images says, therefore, not only that they belong to a particular time, but above all that they only become legible in a particular time [their present]. (...) every now is *the* now of a particular *recognizability*. In it, truth is charged with time to the point of exploding. (this explosion, and nothing else, is the death of *intentio*, which coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth). It is not that the past casts its light on the present or that the present casts its light on the past; rather, the image is that wherein what has been comes together with the now in a flash, forming a constellation [idea]. In other words: *the image is dialectics at a standstill* [*Stillstand*]. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, that of what has been to the now is dialectical – not of a temporal nature, but imaged. Only dialectical images [*dialektische Bilder*] are authentically historical, that is, non-archaic images. The image that is read, that is, the image in the now of its *recognisability* [*Jetzt der*

Erkennbarkeit], carries to the highest degree the mark of the critical, dangerous moment underlying every reading.”

(Benjamin, 2006, p. 505)¹⁰

In this sense, translating does not correspond to faithfully reproducing an original content, but to transforming it, reinscribing it within new cultural, temporal, and discursive contexts, based on the assumption that - within this dialectical *modus operandi* - an archived image is in a constant process of rediscovery, reinterpretation, and repositioning in the present time. Tradition, as it does not present itself as a stable legacy, reveals itself as a field in continuous reconfiguration, mediated by practices, languages, and devices that actively participate in the production of meaning. The reading of images is reinscribed within this constant practice of producing new understandings.

For Homi K. Bhabha (1998), translation occurs in an in-between space, where meanings are negotiated and reformulated, giving rise to new forms of cultural understanding. “It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experiences of [nationness], community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha, 1998, p. 20).¹¹ It is within this framework that the concept of cultural translation becomes central, insofar as this intermediate space enables the production of new meanings and forms of representation.

Complementarily, Walter Benjamin (1987) proposes understanding translation not as a simple transfer of meaning, but as a process that expresses the intimate relationship between different languages. As the author states, “the task of the translator consists [...] in expressing the most intimate relationship among languages,” not being able to fully reveal this relationship, but to present it “in germ or intensively” (Benjamin, 1987, p. 106).¹² In this sense, translation does not operate through direct equivalence, but through approximation, displacement, and reconfiguration, establishing connections that are realized in an allusive and potential manner. Both perspectives allow tradition to be understood not as something fixed, but as a field of displacement, where each translation implies an active reinterpretation.

In this context, photography emerges as one of the privileged languages of this mediation: the photographic image participates in the construction of narratives about the world, operating simultaneously as document and interpretation. As Susan Sontag (2012) argues, to photograph implies a form of appropriation of reality, establishing a relationship of knowledge and power over what is represented.¹³ Similarly, Roland Barthes (1984) distinguishes two concepts regarding the duality that guides the interest in the image: *studium* (objective), associated with the field of cultural context and shared reading, guided by consciousness; and *punctum* (subjective, personal, untransferable), understood as the element that escapes this codification and affects the observer in a singular way, as an imposed interest upon the viewer, which may provoke.¹⁴ Boris

Kossoy (2016), in turn, emphasizes that photography, as representation, constitutes a second reality that, although fixed as a record, remains open to multiple interpretations, configuring itself as a continuous process of constructing realities, both at the moment of its production and in its reception.¹⁵

The consolidation of these understandings is part of a broader movement of revaluation of the image in contemporary thought, associated with the so-called *pictorial turn* (Mitchell, 1994) and *iconic turn* (Boehm, 1994),¹⁶ which shift the image from a merely illustrative position to the center of processes of meaning production.

As W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) observes:

“Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation [...] it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.”

(Mitchell, 1994, p. 16)¹⁷

This ‘pictorial turn’ characterizes the image as an interweaving of complex factors, such as *visuality* (what is seen, as a social and historical construction); *apparatus* (technical means: technology or support); *institutions* (museums, media, power structures that validate, preserve and circulate the image); *discourse* (languages, theories and systems of knowledge/interpretation); *bodies* (who sees and who is seen); and *figurality* (the very form, composition, and style of the image). Thus, from the perspective of the ‘*pictorial turn*’, contemporary culture - mediated by images - must not frame them merely as “representations”, but as *forces* that construct reality (What Do Pictures Want?, 2015),¹⁸ deserving the same analytical rigor traditionally applied to text.

This transition from ‘meaning’ to ‘force’ culminates in the maturation of Mitchell’s thesis in his later work, *What Do Pictures Want?* (2015). In it, the author moves from analyzing what images mean to investigating what they ‘want’, attributing to them a form of agency or vitality. When understood as ‘living beings’, images cease to be inert records of the past and become living archives in a constant process of unarchiving. Translating tradition, from this perspective, is not merely interpreting a static visual legacy, but engaging in dialogue with images that exert power over the present, demanding new ways of seeing and producing knowledge that recognize their autonomy and their capacity to reconfigure cultural reality. As Mitchell (2015) himself summarizes:

“Pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They don’t want to be equated with ‘a history of images’ or elevated to ‘a history of art’, but to be considered as complex individualities occupying subject positions and multiple identities.”

(Mitchell, 2015, p. 186)

Although Mitchell provides the basis for the agency of the image, it is in the *iconic turn* of Gottfried Boehm (1994) that one finds the methodological support for its formal autonomy. For Boehm, the image should not be read as a text, but understood through its '*iconic difference*' (*ikonische Differenz*). This means that meaning is not something imposed *upon* the image, but something that emerges from the tension between contrast, light, and form. Boehm argues that the image possesses its own logic that precedes verbal language, operating a synthesis that the gaze apprehends immediately.

Thus, the method of '*translating tradition*' requires the recognition that the image possesses a sovereignty that challenges our need for explanation. As Mitchell (2015) provocatively concludes:

“What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their viewers, or to enchant them. [...] What pictures want, ultimately, is simply to be asked what they want, bearing in mind that the answer may well be ‘nothing’.”

(Mitchell, 2015, p. 187)

Within this framework, the re-evaluation of authors such as Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky allows for an expanded understanding of images as cultural constructions and not merely formal objects. Warburg, in conceiving the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, proposed a reading of images based on relationships, survivals, and temporal displacements, organizing them into visual constellations capable of revealing cultural continuities and transformations (Warburg, 2010).¹⁹ Panofsky, in turn, systematized an iconological approach that enables the interpretation of images beyond their formal level, identifying underlying symbolic, historical, and cultural structures (Panofsky, 2004).²⁰

In the contemporary field, these reflections are revisited by authors such as Hans Belting, who proposes understanding the image not as an isolated object, but as the result of a relationship between body, medium, and culture. Within this framework, the image ceases to be understood as a mere object of analysis and becomes a relational process, embedded in specific historical and cultural contexts, and an active means of producing knowledge (Belting, 2011).²¹

It is from this articulation between cultural translation and visual culture that it becomes possible to understand photography as a method of translation. By selecting, framing, and organizing the visible, the photographic image operates as an intermediary language which, through its dissemination, is capable of making intelligible practices, forms, and knowledge that would otherwise remain confined to their context of origin. In this process, photography not only represents tradition, but participates in its transformation, reconfiguring it and making it accessible to new audiences and territories.

Therefore, photography can be understood as an epistemological device operating at the intersection between document and interpretation, between memory and construction. By translating vernacular architecture into visual language, it not only preserves a set of forms and practices, but contributes to their continuous reinvention, inscribing tradition within a dynamic field of circulation, reading, and reinterpretation.

This understanding becomes particularly relevant in the context of the present study, as it guides the reading of António Menéres' photographic archive as a field of visual translation, in which vernacular architecture is continuously reinterpreted through the image, across different times and geographies.

3. THE SURVEY AS AN ACT OF VISUAL TRANSLATION

“Mobilizing some of the most prominent Portuguese architects of the time, the survey, beyond its impact on the Portuguese architectural scene of the 1960s, was also - alongside the research of Leite de Vasconcelos, Orlando Ribeiro, the group of Jorge Dias, and Michel Giacometti - one of the most important investigations into the universe of Portuguese popular culture of rural origin carried out in the Portuguese twentieth century.”

(Leal & Prista, 2021, p. 258)²²

The Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture – IARP (1955–1961), constitutes one of the most significant moments in the construction of a critical awareness of vernacular architecture in Portugal. Developed within a context marked by the tension between tradition and modernity, this survey did not limit itself to documenting existing building forms, but sought to reinterpret them in light of a new architectural sensibility. Beyond an inventory, the Survey was configured as a device of mediation, through which popular architecture was observed, selected, and translated into disciplinary language.

“An initiative launched by the National Union of Architects of Portugal in 1955, the Survey delimited a group of architects whose mission would be to map the Portuguese territory and its marks over time, along the different regions that make up mainland Portugal. Also, to document the intrinsic relationship of architecture, with the landscape and the local population: the genuine roots of Portuguese architecture.”

(Cunha & Urbano, 2025, p. 55)²³

By mobilizing teams of young architects who traveled across Portuguese territory, the Survey established a method based on direct observation, systematic recording, and the production of images, which would later give rise to new debates, perspectives, testimonies, archives, exhibitions, publications, and an extensive historical visual legacy of Portuguese popular architecture that continues to generate broader discussions on modernity and tradition.

In this process, photography played a central role, not only as a tool of documentation, but as a means of constructing a gaze upon the vernacular. Through the camera, architects not only recorded buildings, but framed spatial, material, and social relationships, producing a visual narrative of ways of dwelling. “[...] the experience of photography applied to the continuous contact with the metamorphosis of the reality of human dwelling allows comparisons to be made and data to be obtained on the variety and evolution (or in some cases involution) of that metamorphosis” (Nunes & Menéres, 2021, p. 273).²⁴

It is within this context that the participation of António Sérgio Maciel Menéres is situated, whose experience in the Survey was decisive for the formation of his photographic gaze.

“António Menéres, together with his master Fernando Távora (1923-2005) and colleague Rui Pimentel (1924-2005), dedicated themselves to Zone 1 - of Minho, the Douro Litoral and Beira Litoral. This report - written, and figured with drawings, maps and photographs - together with other colleagues from the other 5 established zones, culminated in the publication of the book 'Arquitectura Popular em Portugal' (1961). Currently, the architect is one of the few living witnesses of the epic Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture.”

(Cunha & Urbano, 2025, p. 55)²⁵

Field practice, combined with the need to select and interpret what should be recorded, contributed to the development of a particular sensibility towards popular architecture. By capturing images, Menéres constructed visual readings in which framing, composition, and the relationship between elements assume a structuring role, a dimension that has been recognized as central to the photographic practice of the Survey, understood as an active process of interpreting the territory. It should also be noted that his experience in exploring Zone 1 (Minho, Douro Litoral, and part of the Beira Litoral) consolidated in Menéres a repertoire of forms and technical-constructive knowledge (materiality expressed in stone, wood, spatial typologies, etc.), which, at a later moment, he would “recognize” and “translate” when photographing Brazil and/or when engaging with Brazilian architects, such as Lucio Costa.

In this sense, the photography produced within the scope of the Survey can be understood as a process of translation. By converting constructive practices and ways of life into images, the photographic device transforms the vernacular into an object of knowledge, making it accessible to other contexts—academic, professional, and cultural. This operation necessarily implies a selection and reorganization of reality, in which certain elements are highlighted while others remain invisible (Williams, 1979), revealing that the Survey itself was the first movement of *unarchiving* popular culture into the center of scholarly debate.

The transition from the built object to the photographic image thus corresponds to a displacement of meaning. Architecture, originally embedded in a specific context of use and experience, is reconfigured as

representation, acquiring new meanings as it circulates across different media and discourses. “Thus, through the composition of image-text, *a content transferred from context is obtained*: a new document is created from the original, aiming to generate a different understanding of the facts, which then come to have a new plot, a new reality, *another truth*. Yet another *documentary fiction*” (Kossoy, 2016, pp. 52-53).

From this perspective, the IARP did not act solely as a record of physical preservation - since many of the documented architectural objects would eventually succumb to time or transformation - but operated in preserving their *dialectical potential*. Through this ‘documentary fiction’, Menéres’ photographic image emancipates itself from the original building to constitute itself as a living archive; a translated memory that, rather than crystallizing the past, keeps open the capacity to question the present and to ground new productions of knowledge.

In this way, photography documents tradition while also contributing to its reformulation, inserting it into a broader field of interpretation and debate, at a moment in which:

“Increasingly, attempts have been made, with greater responsibility, to intervene in architectural heritage in a way that causes the least impact on its contribution to the characterization of ways of living and modes of territorial appropriation. The temporal distance from these ways of life and, in some cases, the evident disappearance of these testimonies results in increased difficulty of intervention and safeguarding, especially because in most architectural interventions one observes the failure of a sense of scale, of the architectural character of a region or place, and of the use of spaces.

(Nunes & Menéres, 2021, p. 273)

From this logic, the Survey can be understood as a foundational moment in the visual translation of vernacular architecture in Portugal. By articulating observation, recording, and interpretation, this project not only preserved a set of practices and constructive forms, but also produced a language through which tradition came to be thought, communicated, and transformed. It is within this field that Menéres’ work is also inscribed—whose photographic practice extends and reconfigures this initial impulse—by opening paths for new ways of reading and circulating the vernacular, allowing researchers, through his archive, to contribute to its transmission and safeguarding as a dynamic field of knowledge.

4. THE ARCHIVE AS A DEVICE FOR THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

If, within the scope of the Survey, photography asserts itself as an instrument of translation of vernacular architecture, it is in the archive that this operation is prolonged and complexified. As it does not constitute a simple repository of images, the photographic archive can be understood as an active device for the

production of knowledge, in which the organization, selection, and circulation of images participate in the construction of narratives about architecture and territory.

Traditionally, architectural archives have been approached as documentary collections intended for the preservation of information concerning a set of works conceived and/or built by their authors, as well as repositories of information for future interventions and the safeguarding of built heritage. However, contemporary approaches in the fields of visual culture and archival studies have problematized this view, proposing a reading of the archive as a dynamic structure, capable of producing meanings and establishing relationships, while also allowing the human dimension of architectural practice to be understood.

As Nunes & Menéres (2021) rightly argue, it becomes indispensable that studies and records of architects' personal collections and estates be uncovered, studied, and documented, insofar as this provides the opportunity to establish relationships between architects of different generations, since working with a "living" archive becomes an important source of recognition and information, both in the academic and scientific fields. Therefore, the archive ceases to be conceived as a passive accumulation and asserts itself as a field of operations, where images and documents are constantly reconfigured, since "living" archives return to us this predisposition and continuity in reinterpreting the past, thus corroborating Williams' (1979) thought.

The photographic archive of António Sérgio Maciel Menéres fully fits within this perspective: it should not be understood as a static repository of negatives, but as a *relational system in motion*. Composed of thousands of images, as well as associated documents - such as travel records, books, publications, and working materials - this collection does not merely document vernacular architecture. It also reflects an intellectual and sensitive trajectory, shaped by field experiences, pedagogical practices, travels, and diverse cultural contexts, which allows the architect-photographer to be framed as a cosmopolitan figure, as an agent in the construction and circulation of identities and memories (Cunha & Urbano, 2025). The organization of this corpus reveals its own logic, in which images establish relationships among themselves, constructing a network of meanings that exceeds the individual record of each photograph. If the IARP was the moment of formation, the subsequent organization of his personal archive constitutes the moment of its *theoretical autonomy*.

"It should also be mentioned that, following his participation in the Minho team, António Menéres developed a sustained interest in the theme of popular architecture, expressed in one of the most important collections of photographs on the subject existing in Portugal" (Leal & Prista, 2021, p. 258).

In this way, the archive can be understood as a space of translation. By bringing together images produced in different geographical and temporal contexts, Menéres' collection establishes connections between territories, constructive practices, and ways of dwelling, allowing the emergence of comparative and transversal readings.

Through processes such as selection, framing, and the repetition of motifs, the archive organizes a visual narrative that translates vernacular architecture into an intelligible language for different audiences and generations. For instance, across the different territories of Portugal and Brazil. In this sense, the transition towards the transatlantic dimension in Menéres' archive does not occur through rupture, but through *recognition*.

This relational dimension brings the archive closer to the logic of a visual atlas, an idea originally developed by Aby Warburg (1866–1929), in which images are not presented in a linear manner, but organized in constellations that reveal continuities, displacements, and transformations. It is a form of imagetic understanding, by organizing and representing continuities, displacements, and transformations. It is a form of imagetic understanding based on the observation of the relationships between images and their inscription within different historical and sociocultural contexts (Maciel, 2018).²⁶

As suggested by approaches that conceive the image as an expanded field of knowledge, the archive becomes a space of montage, where the juxtaposition of elements allows relationships to be revealed that are not immediately visible in the isolated plane of each photograph or document, insofar as its global understanding is tied to the coexistence and convergence of what is seen and what is verbalized (Mitchell, 1994).

“Strictly speaking, Mitchell argues that the image is a field of conflagration of social tensions, producing new tensions through its evident alterity in relation to language, from which it can never free itself - and vice versa. The understanding of the image is only possible ‘in the consciousness of the irreducible coexistence and convergence of the visual and the verbal in both communicative and semiotic systems’, in the confrontation between visual and textual differences, which are always differences of a social nature.”

(Santiago Júnior, 2019, p. 17)²⁷

Operating within this logic, Menéres' archive preserves a set of images and constructs a specific form of knowledge about architecture, by traversing different spaces, places, geographies, and contexts, as well as by being translated by different interlocutors. Through its organization and circulation, the photographs cease to be merely documents and begin to act as instruments of interpretation, capable of revealing cultural structures, historical processes, and territorial dynamics, in a true coexistential photographic weave.

In this way, the archive assumes a fundamental role in the translation of tradition, as well as a device for *the production of transatlantic knowledge*. If photography, as an isolated image, already implies an operation of mediation, the archive intensifies this process by articulating multiple images and documents within a system that enables new readings and interpretations. Photography ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a method of comparison and dialogue between territories that, although distant, share a common vernacular

cultural matrix. It is within this network of relationships that Menéres' collection asserts itself as a fertile field for the *unarchiving* of new narratives on modern and popular architecture, serving as a bridge between memory documented in Portugal and its reinvention in Brazil.

From this perspective, Menéres' practice proves particularly relevant in demonstrating how the construction of a photographic archive can expand the historiography of architecture (Cunha & Urbano, 2025). More than a passive record, the archive acts as an active production of knowledge, transforming the visual interpretation of architecture and territories into a dynamic field of cultural translation.

5. DOCUMENTING THE TRANSLATION BETWEEN TERRITORIES — THE CASE OF LUCIO COSTA (1961)

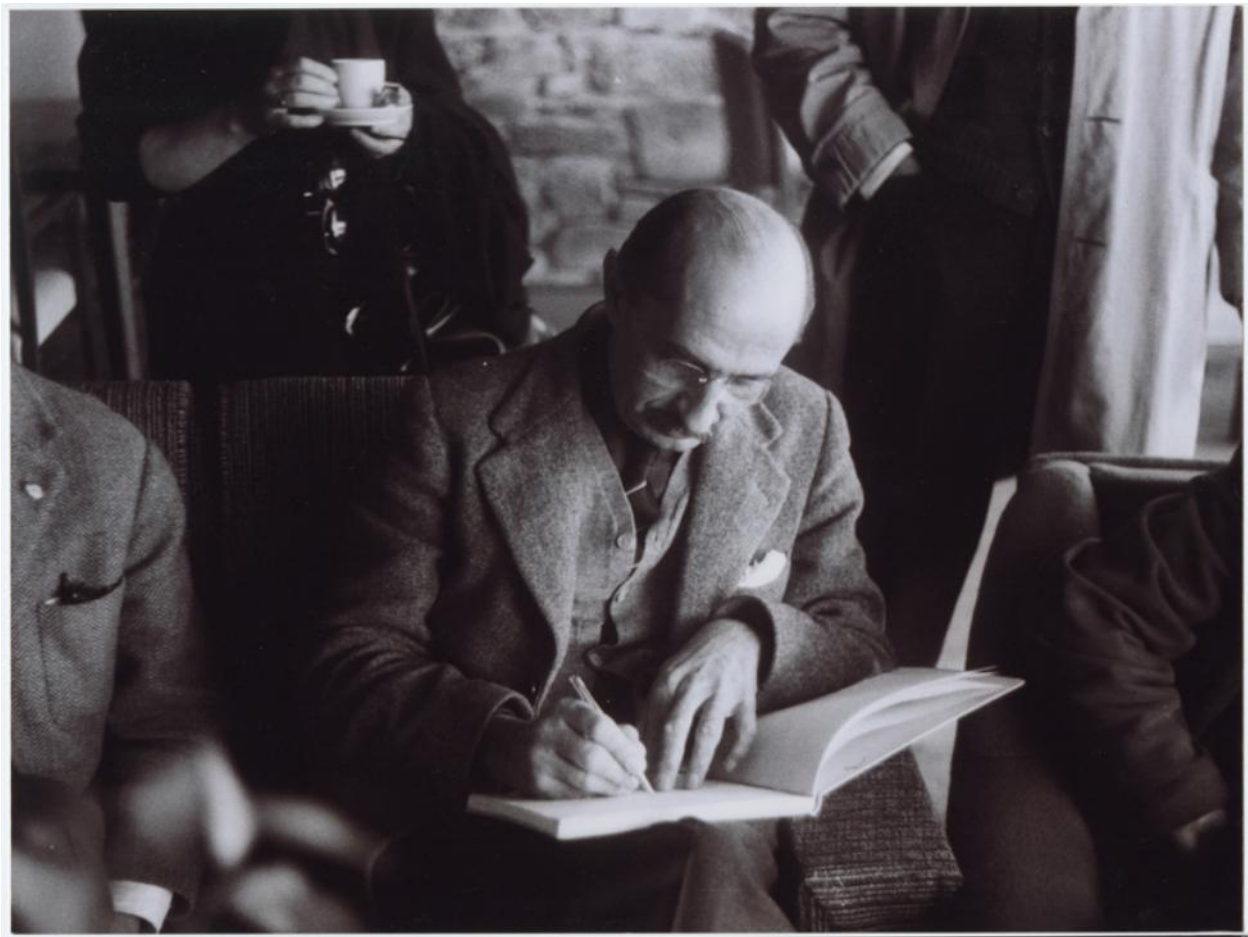


Figure 1: Lucio Costa reading at the Pousada de São Bartolomeu, Bragança, Portugal, photograph. (Source: Photograph © António Menéres, 1961, negative V/61, analog archive).

The transatlantic dimension of the translation of tradition becomes particularly evident when observed through the encounter between different agents and cultural contexts. In the case of the archive of António Sérgio Maciel Menéres, this condition is exemplified in the series of images documenting the visit of the Brazilian architect Lucio Costa to the region of Bragança in March 1961 (Cunha, 2026).²⁸

This photographic set constitutes a singular moment of mediation between different geographies and architectural traditions. The presence of Lucio Costa in Portuguese territory, in the context of the then recent publication of the book derived from the Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture - *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal* (1961) - as well as, in the previous year, the inauguration of Brazil's capital on April 21, 1960 - Brasília-DF - is inscribed within a broader field of cultural exchanges, in which vernacular architecture is observed, interpreted, and compared from different frameworks. It also coincides with a particularly fertile moment marked by discourses on heritage, legacy, modernity, and colonial architecture (Cunha, 2026).



Figure 2: Lucio Costa and his daughter Helena Costa at the Pousada de São Bartolomeu, with colleagues (from left to right): Jorge Pais da Silva, followed by Augusto Amaral, Lúcio Costa himself, his daughter, and José Carlos Loureiro, Bragança, Portugal. (Source: Photograph © António Menéres, 1961, negative V/61, analog archive).

Within this framework, Lucio Costa's gaze proves particularly significant. As a central figure in the construction of Brazilian modernism, the architect approaches Portuguese vernacular architecture not as a neutral observer, but as someone who recognizes, in that territory, traces of a cultural matrix that crossed the Atlantic and was reconfigured within the Brazilian context. The reading of the vernacular thus becomes an exercise in recognition and translation, in which forms, materials, and constructive solutions are reinterpreted in light of an architectural experience situated in another geography.



Figure 3: View of the Keep Tower of Bragança Castle with Helena Costa and Augusto Amaral. (Source: Photograph © António Menéres, 1961, negative V/61, analog archive).

In this context, as proposed by Bhabha and reinterpreted here, the aim is not to establish or verify fixed identities here or there, but to “transform the conditions of enunciation at the level of the sign”- redefined by their historical and cultural conditions - and to understand the past as something continuously reinscribed in the present. “The possibility of initiating cultural translations across minority discourses arises due to the disjunctive present of modernity” - in a process in which “the ‘lessons of the past’ [are reinscribed] within the

very textuality of the present,” that is, the repetition of reading within lived contexts is never the same (Bhabha, 1998, p. 341).²⁹

The photographs produced by Menéres during this visit do not merely document the presence of Lucio Costa and/or architectural photography, but construct a visual narrative that evidences this process of translation, also revealing a particularly affective and sentimental dimension of the photographic gaze developed by the architect-photographer. Rather than privileging exclusively architectural objects, the images capture gestures, paths, and moments of observation, revealing the processual and human dimension of the gaze. The architect is frequently represented in movement - walking, reading, conversing - inserted within the space he observes, suggesting an active and continuous relationship with the territory.



Figure 4: Route with architects, Lúcio Costa and his daughter through Vimioso, a Portuguese border town located in the sub-region of Terras de Trás-os-Montes, Portugal. (Source: Photograph © António Menéres, 1961, negative V/61, analog archive).

This set of images allows photography to be understood as a device of mediation between different layers of experience. On the one hand, it records the materiality of vernacular architecture; on the other, it reveals how this architecture is perceived, interpreted, and appropriated by an external observer. The image thus becomes a space of intersection between the local and the foreign, between recognition and rediscovery, between continuity and transformation, especially considering that this was not Lucio Costa's first visit to Portugal.³⁰

Thus, the city and the territory emerge as a true visual atlas, composed of fragments that, when articulated, reveal broader relationships between constructive practices, cultural contexts, and historical processes that operate between Brazil and Portugal. The photographs do not function in isolation, but collectively, enabling the construction of a reading that unfolds through pauses and continuities.



Figure 5: Lucio Costa and the group of architects at Solar de Mateus, Vila Real, Portugal. (Source: Photograph © António Menéres, 1961, negative V/61, analog archive).

One possible reading of this set suggests that these images may be understood as a “fragmented atlas of references, in which the Brazilian architect immediately identifies a common denominator: a colonial Brazilian architectural vocabulary developed in relation to historical Portuguese architecture,” where the city of Bragança functioned as an open-air laboratory, revealing an architectural continuity already familiar to Lúcio Costa, in which different cultural and territorial layers are articulated (Cunha, 2026, p. 315).³¹

The presence of other participants - such as Lucio Costa's daughter and the accompanying architects - reinforces the relational dimension of this process. Cultural translation does not occur in an abstract manner, but through shared experiences, collective paths, and interactions that contribute to the construction of a common understanding. The observed space thus becomes a field of negotiation of meanings, in which different gazes intersect and influence one another.



Figure 6: Group of architects during the visit: on the left, Carlos Carvalho Dias, followed by the wife of architect Octávio Filgueiras, then Arnaldo Araújo, Lúcio Costa, José Carlos Loureiro, and behind, Luís Pádua Ramos, Bragança, Portugal. (Source: Photograph © António Menéres, 1961, negative V/61, analog archive).

Through the analysis of this photographic set, it becomes evident that the translation of tradition is not limited to the transfer of architectural forms or models, but involves the construction of a field of relationships that traverse territories, cultures, and temporalities. Photography, here, documents this process and actively participates in its construction by selecting, framing, and organizing the conditions through which this translation becomes visible.

Thus, the encounter between Menéres and Lúcio Costa may be understood as a privileged moment for observing cultural translation in action. Through the mediation of the image, Portuguese vernacular architecture is reinterpreted within a transatlantic context, revealing the complexity of the processes through which tradition is continuously reconfigured.

On the other hand, another contemporary experience of the translation of tradition - through this same set of photographs - is its exhibition in the show *Lúcio Costa: Arquivo*, curated by the Portuguese architect Ana Vaz Milheiro at the institution Casa da Arquitectura, Matosinhos, Portugal. This exhibition was developed from the architect's personal archive, deposited at the institution in 2021.

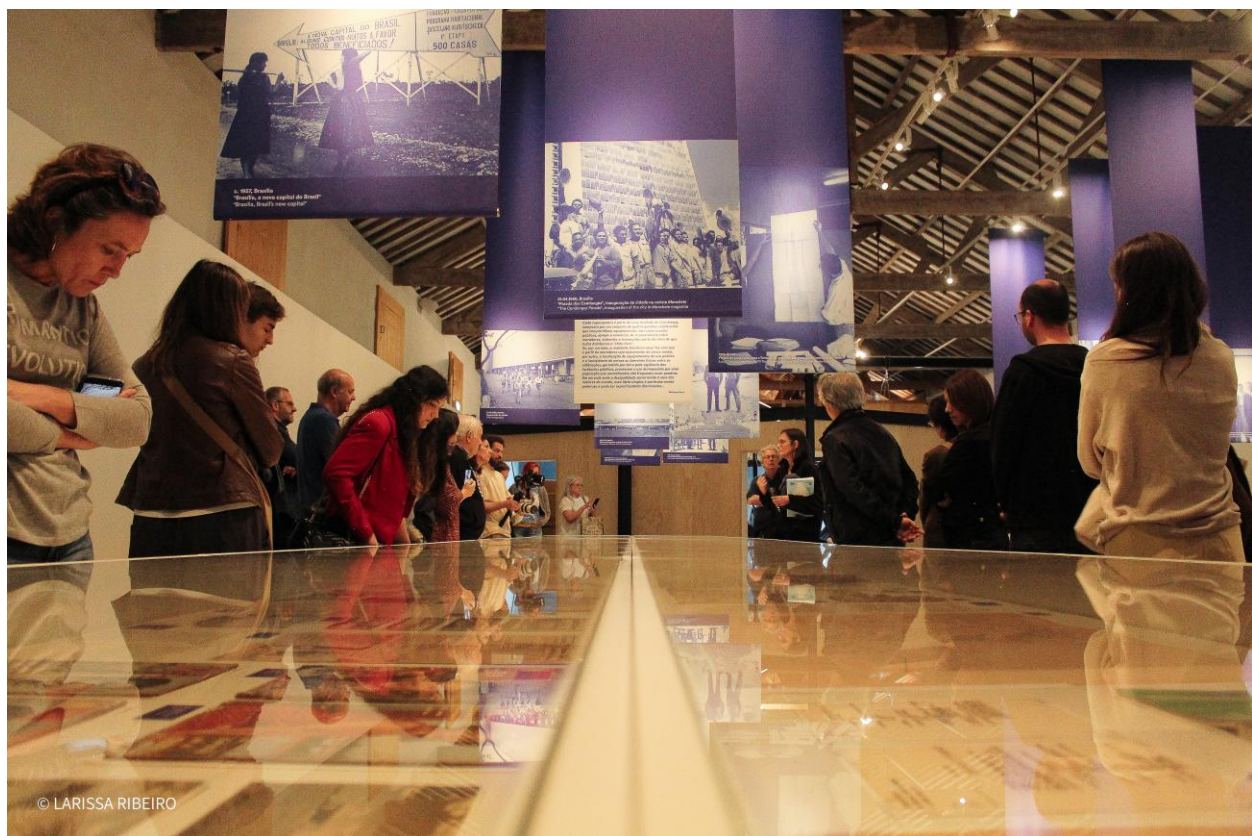


Figure 7: Visitors engaging with the exhibition *Lúcio Costa: Arquivo*, Casa da Arquitectura, Matosinhos, Portugal. (Source: Photograph © Larissa Ribeiro, 2026).

Opened to the public on April 18, 2026, and running until September 13, 2026, the exhibition sought to explore the intimate and human dimension of Lúcio Costa, rather than focusing exclusively on his architectural projects. By privileging the use of elements from the archive, many of them previously unseen, the curatorial approach proposes “a ‘confrontation with contemporaneity’, inviting a reassessment of the architect’s legacy in light of current questions regarding his motivations, influences, and the transformative impulse that marked the creation of Brazil’s new capital and modern architecture” (Casa da Arquitetura, 2026).³²

The exhibition is structured around six main modules, namely: Family, Writings, Portugal, Pilot Plan, Brasília, and Drawing. The set of photographs by António Menéres forms part of the ‘Portugal’ module, reaffirming, once again, the dialectical character of the image in its immobility (Benjamin, 2006).

The exhibition of this set constitutes a new critical moment of unarchiving: as these images move from Menéres’ private analog archive into the public sphere, they cease to be latent records and become active agents. This gesture of *unveiling* is not merely retrospective, but a renewed translation that restores the ‘agency’ of the image (Mitchell, 2015), removing it from the silence of the negative and reaffirming it as a living archive. In this process, tradition is continuously reinvented through the gaze that returns it to the flow of the present, generating new translations both in the transatlantic context and within the contemporary exhibition setting. It also provides undeniable proof of Lúcio Costa’s presence in northern Portugal in 1961, since “when the event is over, the photograph will still exist, conferring upon the event a kind of immortality (and importance) that it would never otherwise have had” (Sontag, 2012, p. 20).³³

6. ARCHIVES, TRANSLATION, TRADITION—CONCLUSIVE NOTES

The reading of photography as an instrument of cultural translation, as demonstrated throughout this study, allows for the establishment of a direct dialogue with contemporary debates in the field of heritage and visual culture. In a context marked by the intensification of globalization processes, the growing touristification of territories, and the progressive loss or disappearance of the vernacular, it becomes essential to question how tradition can today be represented, disseminated, and safeguarded.

Within this scenario, vernacular architecture is frequently framed as an object of visual consumption, reduced to stereotyped images that privilege a fixed and decontextualized notion of authenticity, often nostalgic and devoid of use. Such a process contributes to the construction of simplified narratives, in which the historical, cultural, and social complexity of constructive practices is frequently diluted. Photography, therefore, may

operate both as an instrument for the reproduction of such images and as a critical medium capable of revealing and challenging these representations.

The understanding of the work of António Sérgio Maciel Menéres points precisely to this second possibility. By evidencing photography as an active process of mediation and interpretation, this study highlights the potential of the image as a critical tool in the construction of knowledge about architecture and territories, as well as in its capacity for continuous translation. Rather than fixing tradition, photography may contribute to its reconfiguration, opening space for more complex readings, sensitive to the transformations and continuities that characterize the vernacular.

The approach proposed here engages with the need to rethink the instruments of analysis and representation in the field of architecture. The incorporation of photography as a method - rather than merely as illustration - makes it possible to expand forms of reading the territory, introducing dimensions that escape exclusively technical or formal analysis. By articulating the visible and the interpreted, the image becomes a privileged means of understanding tradition as a dialectical translation, always situated in the present.

By articulating contributions from the theory of cultural translation and visual culture with the reading of the Survey of Portuguese Regional Architecture, the photographic archive of António Sérgio Maciel Menéres, and the case study of Lúcio Costa's visit to Bragança (1961), it was possible to demonstrate that tradition is not transmitted linearly, but through processes of displacement, interpretation, and reinscription, operating through the dialectics of image reading. Within this trajectory, photography assumes a central role, functioning as an intermediary language between the local and the global, between the past and the present.

The consideration of the archive as a device for the production of knowledge further expands the understanding of photography beyond the isolated image, highlighting its potential as a relational system. When confronted across different periods and contexts -such as in the recent transition from private negative to public exhibition - the archive reveals itself not only as a static repository, but also as a *living archive*. This ongoing process of *unarchiving* ensures that the image does not merely document the past, but maintains its *agency* in the present, continuously renegotiating the meanings of tradition and architectural identity.

Finally, this study points to the need to integrate photography more consistently into research processes in architecture, not only as illustrative support, but as a critical method. By assuming the image as a field of thought, it becomes possible to develop approaches that are more sensitive to the complexity of cultural and territorial phenomena, contributing to a more dynamic and plural understanding of architectural tradition.

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8. The so-called ‘Porto School’ refers to a generation of architects who shaped Portuguese architectural thought in the 20th century by seeking a synthesis between an internationally oriented modernity and an architecture deeply rooted in local culture. It was precisely within this pursuit of identifying a Portuguese vernacular architecture that Menéres’ gaze was consolidated, operating between scholarly technique and a sensitivity to the territory.
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DIGITAL, VISUAL, AND IMMERSIVE TRANSLATIONS OF TRADITION

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