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TRANSLATING TRADITION THROUGH COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

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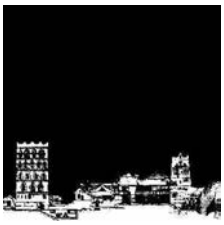

TRADITIONAL DWELLINGS AND SETTLEMENTS WORKING PAPER SERIES

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

THE TOURIST GAZE VS THE LOCAL GAZE: TRANSLATING A COLONIAL CORE INTO A POST-COLONIAL ASSET

Hidayati Ramli, Siti Balkish Roslan, Khoo Fong Yi

THE TOURIST GAZE VS THE LOCAL GAZE: TRANSLATING A COLONIAL CORE INTO A POST-COLONIAL ASSET

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This paper examines how Kuala Lumpur's Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area translates a colonial core into a post-colonial tourism asset through the River of Life project. Drawing on a visitor survey (n=155) and a focus group with tourist guides (KLTGA), it finds that while visitors express high aesthetic satisfaction, most lack historical awareness. Crucially, 84.5% accept colonial buildings as emblematic of Malaysian heritage, revealing post-colonial amnesia. The paper argues the project produces a gentrified memory that prioritizes spectacle over substance. It concludes by calling for future ethnographic research to better assess whether the project reflects genuine post-colonial reappropriation or enduring colonial validation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The opening lines of the eponymous track "The Tourist" by the band Radiohead—"Hey man, slow down, slow down / Idiot, slow down," offer a discerning cultural critique of contemporary travel. Reportedly inspired by the observation of tourists hastily navigating a foreign locale, lyricist Thom Yorke captures the essence of a phenomenon later theorized by John Urry. This reprimand to decelerate serves as a counterpoint to the tourist experience: the primacy of visual consumption. Tourism, in this view, facilitates the maximization of such consumption, transforming the physical environment into a form of cultural capital to be captured, collected, and committed to memory most often through the mediating lens of the photograph [1]. However, the contemporary landscape of tourism necessitates an extension of this analytical framework. The advent and ubiquity of social media introduce a new dimension to the consumption of place, one that can be elucidated through a Bourdieusian lens [2]. Within this digital sphere, the concept of digital capital emerges as an asset, distinct yet interrelated with other forms of capital. Its value is derived from its potential for convertibility, as it embodies and signals the level of recognition and social standing a person may command within online networks [3]. Consequently, the "tourist gaze" is no longer confined to the immediate, physical act of seeing. It is now dynamically expanded, projected through algorithmic curation and broadcast to a potentially global viewership, as the experience of travel becomes a form of content to be produced and circulated [4].

It is precisely at this intersection of the accelerated gaze [5, 6] and its digital production that the post-colonial city becomes a particularly potent site of analysis. Nowhere is this more evident than in the carefully curated spectacle of urban renewal, where history itself is repackaged for optimal touristic consumption [7, 8] in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a city whose built environment bears the layered inscriptions of colonial governance, post-independence nationalism, and contemporary global economic aspirations, offers an exemplary case.

Figure 1: River of Life daytime view, overlooking the Sultan Abdul Samad Building on its left and its night view on the right. (Source: Author).

Within its historic core, the Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area (DMHA), as shown in Figure 1, stands as the former administrative headquarters of British Malaya, a precinct where the colonial past is not merely preserved but actively reinterpreted and marketed for present-day purposes. The Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) precinct represents one of Malaysia's most significant heritage ensembles. Anchored by the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, a newly opened building after its conservation, which boasts a Moorish-Indo Saracenic structure built in 1897 as the secretariat for the British colonial administration [9]. The area also includes a cluster of buildings that served as the apparatus of colonial governance. These structures, situated around a vast open square and flanked by the Klang and Gombak rivers, a confluence and raison d'être for Kuala Lumpur's early township, formed the ceremonial and administrative nucleus of British power in Malaya. However, following independence in 1957, proclaimed at the very square that hosted colonial parades, the precinct acquired new layers of meaning. It has since symbolized the country's post-colonial sovereignty, demarcating the site for national celebration and as a repository of collective memory [10]. Yet this layering also produced complexity. The colonial architecture, once the embodiment of foreign domination, was gradually reappropriated as "heritage", a term that selectively emphasizes aesthetic and historical value [11] while often omitting the political and social disputes embedded within these structures.

The DMHA has undergone significant urban renewal under the broader framework of Kuala Lumpur's economic transformation agenda [12]. The River of Life (RoL) project, identified as a key Entry Point Project under the Economic Transformation Program [13], represents the most visible and theoretically revealing intervention within this precinct. By night, the colonial-era buildings are transformed. Advanced lighting and aesthetic enhancements bathe the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in a luminous glow, turning the former British Malaya Government Offices into a breathtaking night show. Meanwhile, the Klang and Gombak rivers, the historical confluence for Kuala Lumpur's founding, are rehabilitated and reframed as a waterfront promenade and repackaged as the river that founded life in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, visitors fill the newly

constructed walkways, smartphones in hand, capturing and instantly broadcasting the place via social media. Yet this spectacular translation of the built environment prompts a critical question. In the rush to create the perfect, social-media-worthy moment, to "capture" and perhaps "collect" this aestheticized version of the "past," what is being left behind? The conservation of the DMHA, particularly through urban renewal projects such as RoL development, acts as "translational mediators." It physically and semantically reshapes the site's relationship to its colonial past, translating a complex legacy of governance, resistance, and appropriation into a consumable "tradition" of historic beauty. This process, as this paper argues, prioritizes a universalized tourist gaze, potentially at the expense of a more nuanced local historical consciousness. The urban renewal of Kuala Lumpur's historic core is not neutral. It is a selective process that reshapes a complex colonial legacy into a consumable aesthetic for contemporary heritage tourism. It effectively translates a colonial core into a post-colonial asset that is visually spectacular but historically partial.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cities are not inactive backdrops to human activity but are complex accumulated texts as collective human stories within their landscape. Nora [14] argues that cities bear the inscriptions of successive generations, creating a dense fabric of overlapping and often contradictory meanings. Similarly, Malas [15] argues, the city resembles a multiplicity of overlapping texts in an on-going process of being written, re-rewritten, modified and erased, a process that inevitably shapes collective memories through the exhibition of museums, memorials, historical sites and public places. Heritage tourism, therefore, fundamentally involves the process of "translating tradition": representing the past to serve present-day economic, political, and social agendas [11], reframing conflicting narratives and flattening historical layered complexities in favor of a more marketable image [16]. This selective interpretation is especially acute in post-colonial contexts, where the built environment is a politicized landscape of contradictory meanings grounded in history, in which sites of memory tend to serve as repositories that collect and accentuate struggles [15]. Heritage conservation in this light is an intervention into this living text. It can either highlight narratives of colonial architectural grandeur, narratives of post-colonial nationalist triumph, or more dissonant narratives of resistance and appropriation. Kuala Lumpur's Dataran Merdeka, and its choices about which layers to foreground or illuminate, is a profound political act that shapes collective memories and urban identity. The River of Life project therefore, with its advanced lighting and aesthetic enhancements, is a material manifestation of what Huyssen [17] terms as "gentrification of memory." The urban project exemplifies a single, dominant, spectacular layer that actively obscures the layers beneath where the colonial core is rendered beautiful, spectacular, and photographable, but at the potential cost of its historical complexity. As Huyssen [17] argues, certain urban spaces undergo a process of selective aestheticization, where the past is not merely preserved or layered but

sanitized, cleaned of its dissonance, its discomfort, and its contradiction, to produce a memory that is consumable, safe, and commercially viable. Gentrified memory is memory that has been scrubbed clean, polished, and illuminated for public consumption, much as a gentrified neighborhood retains its historic facades while displacing the communities and practices that once animated them [18].

Meanwhile, the process of selective inscription and erasure is expressed through what John Urry terms the "tourist gaze." The tourist gaze actively transforms places, including layered, contested historical sites, into spectacles for tourist consumption [19]. Heritage tourism, operating through this gaze, demonstrates precisely how the past becomes commodified, themed and packaged as a "safe, visually pleasing, and commercially viable product" [19]. Observably, the colonial administrative buildings around the Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area, carefully restored and illuminated, become photogenic signifiers of "heritage" divorced from the labor, exploitation, and resistance that accompanied their construction. The tourist, armed with a camera, does not encounter a living contested history but a carefully curated spectacle. In this sense, the tourist gaze is the mechanism through which the city is finally, and most powerfully, simplified for consumption. However, Boeck [20] urges the decentering of these external gazes through reframing and refocusing narratives that embody memory over sight. In doing so, Boeck not only subverts the predator-prey dynamic that Haraway [21] identified as central to the colonial gaze – "to see and not be seen"- but also argues that the tourism lens must cease perpetuating such gazes. Instead, it must begin to decolonize itself by recentering the local gaze.

As De Certeau [22] suggests, local inhabitants do not simply consume space as a visual spectacle; they produce space through the "practice of everyday life": walking, dwelling, working, remembering, and returning. These "spatial stories" are lived, not framed. In other words, they are embodied [20], therefore not merely observed. The local gaze is thus a haptic, multi-sensory, and temporally deep mode of relating to place, one that cannot be reduced to the consumptive glance of the tourist, as local inhabitants have place attachment to these sites. Low and Altman [23] define place attachment as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral bonds that develop between people and their environments through lived experience curated over time through routines and accumulated memories. Place attachment involves three dimensions: (1) the person (who is attached), (2) the psychological process (affect, cognition, behavior), and (3) the place (the specific environmental features that hold meaning). The local gaze of Kuala Lumpur's inhabitants, consequently, is structured by generations of lived experience. They do not see a "heritage zone" like the field of Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) as a "tourist attraction" but instead as the place where locals break fast during Ramadan festivities, which has now become a yearly norm. Likewise, these sites are familiar street corners, the routes taken daily to work, the places to avoid traffic, or the heritage Jamek Mosque that is accentuated in the River of Life project, as the mosque where prayers have been offered for decades. These

meanings are largely inaccessible to the tourist gaze, which privileges the visual over the tactile and the memorial.

Why, then, one should query, do urban renewal and heritage conservation projects so often prioritize the tourist gaze over the local gaze? The reasoning lies partly in what Smith [24] terms the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). The AHD is the dominant, institutionalized way of understanding heritage that privileges expert knowledge and values, monumental architecture of 'old' and historic places, and national or universal significance over local, vernacular, intangible cultural meanings, and everyday attachments that places may have for communities [25]. Therefore, the AHD is powerfully at work in the conservation of colonial-era buildings such as those around the Dataran Merdeka Area. The Sultan Abdul Samad Building and other colonial buildings and structures are preserved and promoted as heritage because they signify a particular narrative: the transition from British colonial rule to Malayan (and later Malaysian) independence. This narrative is visually spectacular, photographically appealing, and easily packaged for tourist consumption. Yet it is also, as Tunbridge and Ashworth [26] would recognize, as dissonant heritage: a heritage that suppresses as much as it reveals. These buildings may be celebrated as a "Triumph of Reason" [27] that embeds the Eurocentric ideals of spatial order but it's a site of colonial rapture. The colonial architecture, therefore, that now serves as a backdrop for tourism was, for much of Kuala Lumpur's history, a symbol of British domination, segregation, and exploitation. Yet, the dominant heritage narrative actively suppresses certain local memories and stories, favoring "the materiality of heritage over the intangible cultural practices and meanings that people attach to places" [24].

Therefore, to converge between the tourist gaze and the local gaze, this research centers the intermediary position of the tourist guides. Unlike casual visitors, guides possess deep, repeated, and embodied knowledge of the heritage precinct. They are professionally trained to interpret and narrate heritage for consumption [28]. As co-creators of tourist experiences and brokers of cultural meaning, tour guides facilitate encounters between tourists and heritage sites, managing expectations, interpreting meanings, and shaping emotional and cognitive outcomes [29]. This brokerage function is particularly critical in post-colonial heritage contexts, where guides must navigate the tensions between colonial histories, nationalist narratives, and visitor expectations. Crucially, the guide's mediating gaze is structured by material and logistical constraints that are rarely discussed in literature, a gap this research highlights. The mediating gaze, therefore, is not a free-floating interpretive perspective but is infrastructurally conditioned and shaped by the very material conditions of the heritage site. Moreover, guides possess a form of situated local knowledge that differs from both tourist and resident perspectives [30]. They navigate the site daily, witness the friction between tourist expectations and infrastructural realities, and possess professional interpretive knowledge of the site's

histories. The guide's perspective thus offers a critical bridge between the spectacle of heritage tourism (the tourist gaze) and the lived, logistical, and sensory realities of heritage translation (the working local gaze).

The framework of "translation" is a productive metaphor for understanding heritage conservation in post-colonial contexts [31]. Translation is never neutral. It involves choices about what to carry across, what to leave behind, and what to transform in the process. Therefore, translation in colonial and post-colonial contexts is deeply implicated in power relations, as the act of translating colonial buildings into heritage assets for post-colonial tourism is not merely technical but political [32, 33].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Mixed-Methods Approach

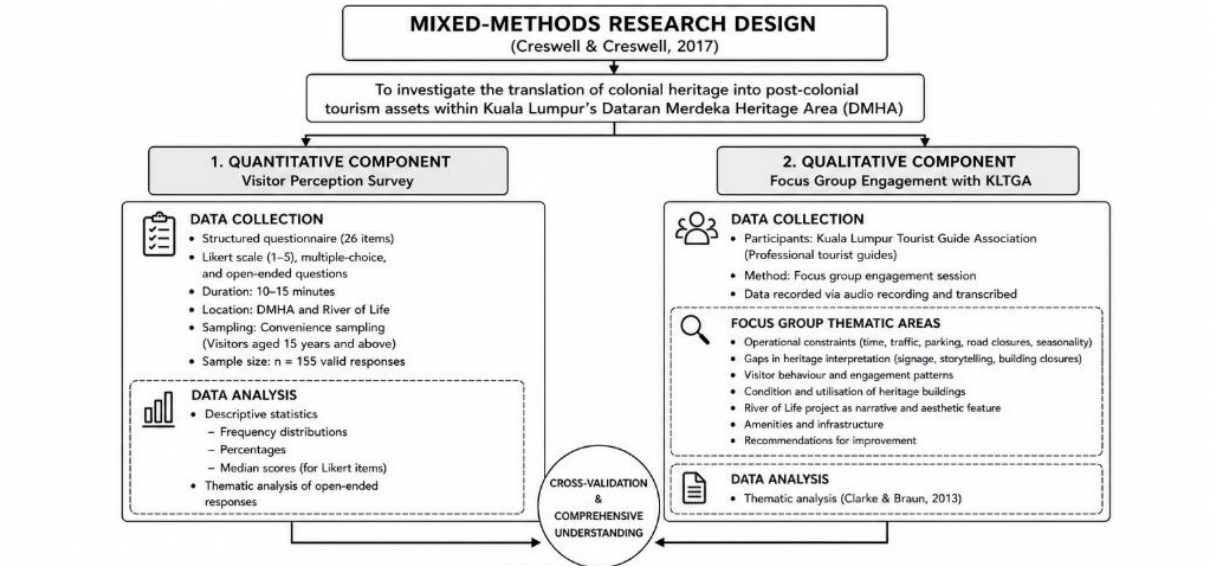

Figure 2: Research methodology. (Source: Author).

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach [34] to investigate the translation of colonial heritage into post-colonial tourism assets within Kuala Lumpur's Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area (DMHA). The research design integrates quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to capture both the breadth of visitor perceptions and the depth of professional insights from those who mediate heritage tourism on the ground. The study is structured around two interrelated components: (1) a visitor perception survey (quantitative), and (2) a focus group engagement session with the Kuala Lumpur Tourist Guide Association (KLTGA) (qualitative). This methodological configuration enables cross-validation of findings and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how the Dataran Merdeka precinct is being transformed, whose narratives

are being privileged or suppressed, and what structural constraints limit meaningful heritage translation. This study has stringently observed the ethical guidelines, adhering to anonymity and confidentiality.

3.2. Qualitative Visitor Perception Survey

To capture the operational and interpretive challenges faced by those who mediate heritage tourism on the ground, a focus group engagement session was conducted with the Kuala Lumpur Tourist Guide Association (KLTGA). Professional tourist guides were selected as key informants because they occupy a unique intermediary position within the heritage tourism encounter. As such, their insights provide a critical bridge between the tourist gaze [as theorised by 19] and the logistical, interpretive, and sensory realities of heritage consumption. The engagement session focused on the following thematic areas: operational constraints affecting tour delivery (time allocation, traffic congestion, bus parking regulations, road closures, and seasonal pressures); perceived gaps in heritage interpretation (absence of interpretive signage, limited historical storytelling, building closures); visitor behavior and engagement patterns; the condition and utilization of heritage buildings; the effectiveness of the River of Life project as a narrative and aesthetic feature; amenities and infrastructure; and recommendations for improvement. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis [35].

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The Tourist Gaze: Spectacle and Satisfaction

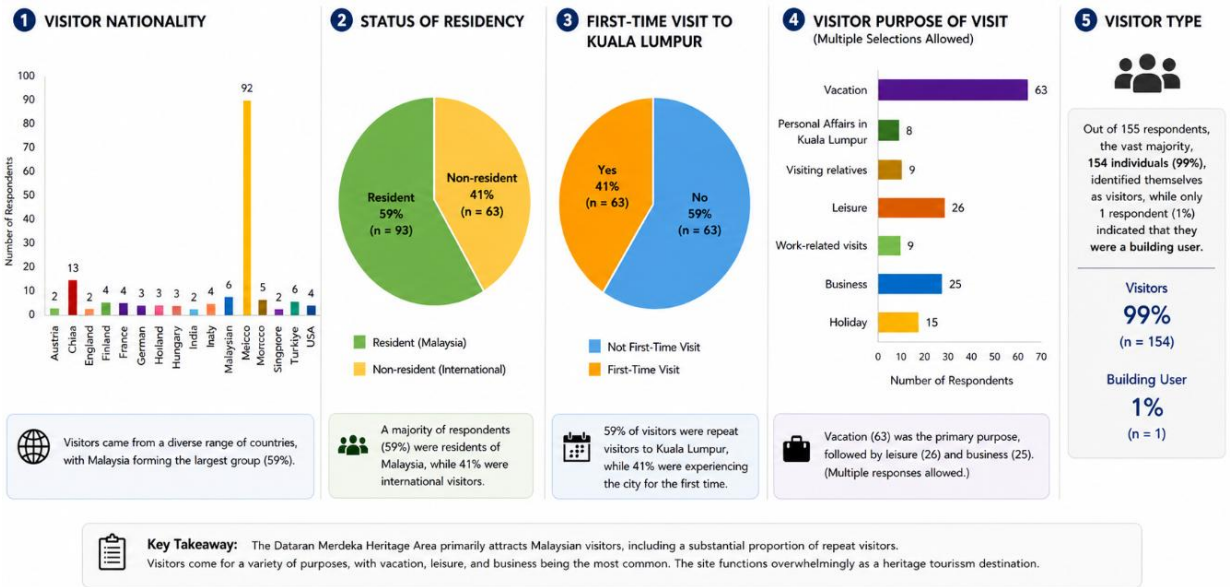

Figure 3: Visitor demographics and purpose of visit to the Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area (DMHA). (Source: Author).

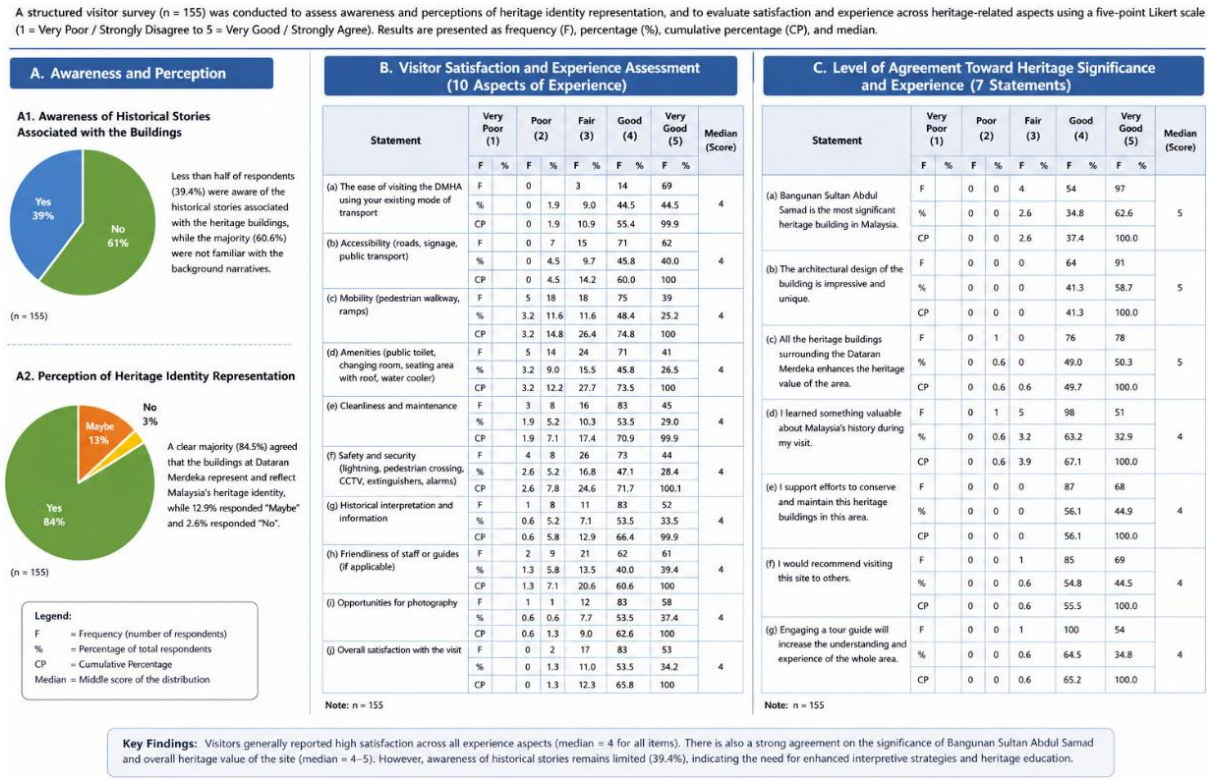

Figure 4: Visitor awareness, perception, and satisfaction towards Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area. (Source: Author).

The survey results shown in Section A2 Figure 4 above reveal a visitor population that is overwhelmingly satisfied with the aesthetic and experiential qualities of the Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area. A total of 84.7% of respondents rated their overall satisfaction as good or very good, and an exceptional 99.4% indicated they would recommend visiting the site to others. These figures suggest that, from the perspective of the tourist gaze, the "translation" of the colonial core into a consumable heritage asset has been highly successful. Meanwhile, the most frequently cited activity among visitors was taking photographs or videos, reported by 104 respondents (67.1%). This finding aligns directly with Urry's (1992) theorization of tourism as the maximization of visual consumption and extends it into the contemporary digital context. Visitors are not merely seeing the site; they are actively capturing and curating, and, as suggested by the integration of social media practices, disseminating its image. Therefore, the category of "Opportunities for photography" received the highest satisfaction rating of all aspects assessed, with 91% of respondents rating it good or very good (Section B(f) Figure 4).

However, beneath this surface of high satisfaction lies a significant gap in historical understanding. When asked whether they were aware of the historical stories associated with the heritage buildings, only 39.4% of respondents answered affirmatively. The majority (60.6%) were not familiar with the background narratives

of the sites they were photographing and enjoying. This disconnect between aesthetic appreciation and historical literacy is central to the paper's argument. It suggests that visitors are consuming a generalized, affective sense of "heritage," a consumable "tradition" without necessarily engaging in its specific, contested, or uncomfortable dimensions. Furthermore, the overly celebrated colonial core as a heritage asset becomes contradictory, as suggested by the high percentage of tourists' reflection of it as Malaysia's heritage identity without acknowledging its nuanced complexity.

4.2. The Mediating Gaze: Insights from the Kuala Lumpur Tourist Guide Association (KLTGA)

Where the survey captures the satisfied tourist gaze, the KLTGA engagement session reveals the structural and interpretive constraints that often limit the translation of heritage meaning on the ground. Tourist guides occupy a unique position between the tourist gaze and the site's layered histories. They are professionally obligated to interpret and disseminate history within the contextual local gaze, yet operationally constrained by infrastructure, scheduling, and policy. Their insights provide a critical counterpoint to the overwhelmingly positive survey data.

4.2.1. Time, traffic, and the accelerated tour

As shown in Section B, Figure 5, the most pressing constraint identified by KLTGA members is the severe limitation of time allocated to the Dataran Merdeka precinct within standard tour itineraries. Guides reported that guided tours within the DMHA are often extremely short, typically limited to 10–15 minutes, primarily due to traffic congestion and strict bus parking regulations. Tourist buses are only permitted to park briefly, forcing guides to conduct most storytelling inside the bus rather than on-site. At the DMHA, tourists often only manage to take photographs in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building around 10:00 a.m., when weather conditions are already hot, further limiting outdoor engagement as reflected in Section A, Images 1 and 2 of tourists' preferences to visit the site. This accelerated tour structure exemplifies Yorke's plea to "slow down." The tourist gaze, in this context, is not merely a matter of visual primacy but is actively enforced by logistical constraints. Guides become time-pressed narrators, unable to deliver the depth of interpretation they possess.

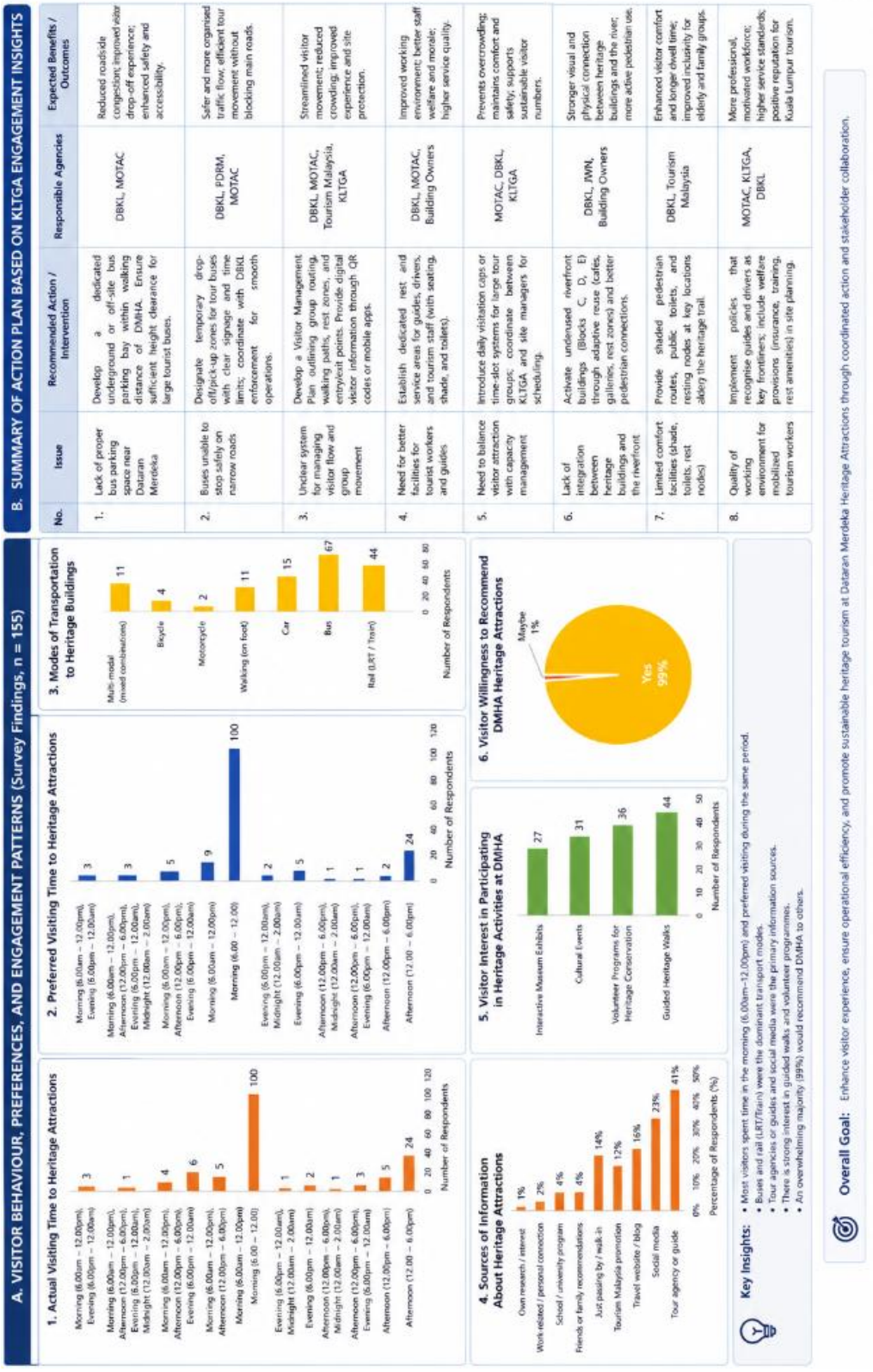

Figure 5: Visitor behavior, preferences, and engagement patterns & action plan for enhancing DMHA heritage tourism. (Source: Author).

4.2.2. Underutilized heritage

Guides noted that some heritage sites are frequently skipped during tours due to limited or absent interpretive information, buildings being abandoned or closed, and a lack of active attractions or amenities. As a result, tourists often pass through areas such as the River of Life corridor without meaningful engagement or understanding of the surrounding heritage assets. This finding suggests that the "translation" of the colonial core is uneven. While the Sultan Abdul Samad Building functions as a highly visible, photogenic representation, other historically significant structures remain uninterpreted and effectively invisible to the tourist gaze, much less informing the local people concerning its relevance to the urban history of the area.

4.2.3. The River of Life as a disconnected narrative

The River of Life (RoL) is a critical element in understanding Kuala Lumpur's origins and heritage. Tourist guides aim to tell the story of how Kuala Lumpur was named, tracing the historical confluence of the Sungai Gombak and Sungai Klang. However, several challenges impact the effectiveness of this narrative. While guides explain the significance of the rivers, tourists often cannot directly see the Klang River from certain bridges or stations, limiting the sensory connection and the full appreciation of the river's role in the city's history. Furthermore, many heritage buildings near the river currently lack an intimate relationship with the waterway, meaning that visitors miss out on the immersive experience of the river's sounds and its historical significance. The RoL project, despite its aesthetic enhancements, has not successfully integrated the river into the heritage narrative in a physically or sensorially coherent way.

4.3. Convergence and Divergence Between Visitor and Local Guide Perspectives

The survey and KLTGA data reveal both convergence and divergence. Visitors are highly satisfied with the visual and aesthetic dimensions of the site, rating photography opportunities and overall satisfaction very highly. However, guides reveal the structural constraints: limited time, poor infrastructure, underutilized buildings, disconnected river narrative (see Section B, Figure 5) that prevent deeper heritage translation from occurring. Crucially, the survey finds that only 39.4% of visitors are aware of historical stories (see Section A2, Figure 4), which aligns with guides' observations that interpretation is rushed, often delivered on buses rather than on-site, and that many heritage buildings remain uninterpreted or closed. The satisfied tourist gaze, in other words, may be satisfied precisely because they do not know what they are missing. The paper does not suggest that visitors are uninterested in history, indeed, 28.4% expressed interest in guided heritage walks (see Figure 4, Section A, 5). Rather, the structural conditions of the tour (time pressure, parking constraints, lack of amenities as summarized in Section B, Figure 4) actively work against the possibility of deeper engagement.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area (DMHA) as a Translation of Colonial Heritage

Conversely, visitors may leave the site with beautiful photographs and fond memories, but lacking a substantive understanding of the colonial histories, narratives of resistance, or layered meanings embedded in the built environment. As shown in Section A1 of Figure 3, despite this lack of historical awareness, 84.5% of respondents agreed that the buildings at Dataran Merdeka represent and reflect Malaysia's heritage identity (Section A2, Fig. 4). This conflation of the colonial core with Malaysian heritage identity is, however, deeply troubling. First, it centers colonial architecture as the primary signifier of national heritage, thereby marginalizing pre-colonial and indigenous architectural traditions. The Dataran Merdeka precinct, for all its historical significance as the site of independence, represents a built environment imposed by British colonial administration. Yet 84.5% of visitors surveyed accepted these structures as emblematic of Malaysian heritage—not British colonial heritage, but Malaysian. This is a remarkable act of post-colonial reappropriation, but also a concerning interpretation. By landmarking these buildings and repackaging heritage tourism without decolonial narration, the implicit message absorbed by tourists is that Malaysian heritage is colonial heritage. This tourist imagery might be understandable if the views were held primarily by foreign visitors, but most respondents, 59% (n=91), were local tourists. This indicates that Malaysian tourists too accept these buildings as representative of their national identity despite their "local" gaze and irrespective of the more nuanced local historical consciousness. The uncritical celebration of colonial architecture as national heritage for economic consumption thus becomes a form of post-colonial amnesia [36], where the very structures that enforced colonial domination are embraced as authentic expressions of Malaysianess.

Furthermore, it erases the contestations and violences of colonial occupation. By presenting the Sultan Abdul Samad Building as a neutral backdrop for heritage photography, the DMHA sedates its historical function as the headquarters of British colonial administration, the very apparatus that enforced land alienation, labor exploitation, and racialized governance. As Abd Muis, Bakar [37] argue, these colonial policies practiced by the colonial administration have had lasting impacts on the identity and socio-politics of everyday Malaysians, shaping land ownership patterns, ethnic relations, and economic structures that persist to the present day. To present this building as merely "heritage" is to sever it from these living legacies. Therefore, it risks perpetuating a post-colonial dependency on colonial validation. When a city's most recognizable heritage iconography is derived from its colonial past, it implicitly accepts the colonizer's aesthetic as the standard against which heritage is measured. The Indo-Saracenic style of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, a hybrid style invented by British architects drawing on Mughal and Islamic motifs [38], is not authentically "Malaysian" in any pre-colonial sense. It is, rather, a colonial translation of regional aesthetics for imperial

administrative purposes. For this to be consumed as the symbol of Malaysian heritage is to grant the colonial project a final, posthumous victory: the colonized nation now voluntarily presents its oppressor's architecture as its own authentic identity. The perpetuating urban texts for this area not only subscribe to the ongoing colonial celebration, but it overlaps the gentrification of collective memories, scrubbed clean of its discomfort and repackaged for safe, profitable aesthetic consumption as these buildings implicitly demarcate that meaningful heritage can only be realized through monumental architecture. By focusing conservation resources and tourism promotion on the colonial core, the DMHA sidelines vernacular, intangible, and pre-colonial heritage forms. The everyday living heritage that still operates in the shadow of these colonial facades is pushed to the margins of the heritage narrative, deemed insufficiently monumental, photographable, or profitable for the heritage tourism economy. The local gaze, structured by everyday attachment to these lived practices [23], is rendered obscured by the spectacular glare of the tourist gaze, even when it is domestic tourists themselves who are doing the looking.

5.2. The RoL Project as a Translation of Gentrified Memory

Likewise, the River of Life project has successfully achieved one dimension of translation: the aesthetic for touristic heritage consumption. The advanced lighting, cleaned riverfront, and visual coherence of the colonial core have created a spectacular, photogenic environment that visitors rate highly and eagerly disseminate through social media. In this sense, the project has translated the colonial core into a post-colonial asset for the domestic and global tourist market. The buildings are no longer symbols of British administrative power; they are backdrops for selfies, icons of a generic "heritage" identity, and nodes in a network of digital photographic circulation. Therefore, drawing on the gentrified memory [17], the paper argues that the RoL project produces a sanitized, aesthetically pleasing version of the past that prioritizes spectacle over substance. This results in a translational mediator of historical meaning that is selective at best.

The survey finds that 60.6% of visitors are unaware of the historical stories associated with the buildings and the heritage site, as illustrated in Figure 4, Section A2, which indicates that the visual translation has not been accompanied by a semantic or narrative translation. Visitors see beauty; they do not necessarily understand history. The KLTGA insights explain why: guides have 10–15 minutes, no place to park, no shaded rest areas, and buildings that are closed or abandoned, suggesting that the translation is structurally constrained. It begs the question of which narratives are suppressed by this prioritization of the tourist gaze and the production of gentrified memory, and who could recontextualize it for the visual consumers sans tourist guides? The narrative of resistance and appropriation, on how Malaysians negotiated, challenged, and eventually replaced colonial governance, is not visibly interpreted nor consumable when the site visit is rushed and climatically limited and structurally constrained for extensive leisure. The limitation in turn encourages accelerated

touristic photographic consumption. Meanwhile, the narrative of labor, the workers who built these structures, the servants who maintained them, the river as a site of industrial and trading activity, remains as layered history washed under modern redevelopment. Finally, the river's own history as a contested space of early settlement, flooding, and transformation is sensorially disconnected from the visitor experience without proper immersed historical retelling. The spectacular lighting, while beautiful, may actively obscure these histories by producing a smooth, consumable, conflict-free "tradition." Again, this paper does not argue for the removal of lighting or the cessation of aesthetic enhancement, much like it does not advocate for colonial building removal as historical artifacts. Rather, it argues that aesthetic translation should be accompanied by interpretive translation as a post-colonial asset. The two need not be in tension.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the translation of Kuala Lumpur's colonial core into a post-colonial tourism asset through the River of Life project. The findings reveal a critical tension: while visitors express high satisfaction with the aesthetic and photographic qualities of the Dataran Merdeka Heritage Area, the majority remain unaware of the historical narratives embedded within its colonial architecture. Most significantly, a large proportion of visitors, including local tourists, accept these former symbols of British administration as emblematic of Malaysian heritage identity, raising concerns about post-colonial amnesia and the uncritical internalization of colonial aesthetics as national heritage. It argues that the RoL project produces gentrified memory, prioritizing visual spectacle over substantive historical interpretation. The tourist gaze dominates, while the mediating gaze of professional guides reveals structural constraints: limited time, poor infrastructure, and disconnected narratives that actively prevent deeper heritage translation. The result is a sanitized, consumable past that suppresses dissonant histories of colonial exploitation, resistance, and labor.

However, this conclusion is limited by the study's methodological scope. The research captured visitor perceptions and local tourists guide insights but now suggests the involvement of critical stakeholder groups essential for a more robust conclusion: (1) heritage practitioners and conservation professionals, who make institutional decisions about what is preserved and interpreted; (2) urban planners and policymakers, whose decisions on infrastructure, parking, and tour logistics structurally shape heritage delivery; and (3) local residents, whose everyday place attachment and generational memories constitute the local gaze this paper, explores, theorizes and discusses but could not fully access. Therefore, it leaves future research to incorporate these perspectives through multi-stakeholder ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews with heritage practitioners, policy analysis of urban planning decisions, and participatory walking interviews with long-term residents for more robust reflection on genuine post-colonial reappropriation or an enduring

colonial validation. Only then can heritage studies move decisively beyond the tourist gaze toward a decolonized, locally grounded framework.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

REINVENTING "THE RESIDENCE": MEDIATING NOSTALGIA AND PLACE ATTACHMENT THROUGH CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN PUERTO RICO

Victor Manuel Serrano

REINVENTING "THE RESIDENCE": MEDIATING NOSTALGIA AND PLACE ATTACHMENT THROUGH CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN PUERTO RICO

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This paper examines cultural performance as a site where residence in Puerto Rico is re-authored, mediating nostalgia and place attachment amid material, legal, and institutional instability. Taking Bad Bunny's concert residency No Me Quiero Ir De Aquí as an analytic entry point, it analyzes how a domestic structure staged within a mass spectacle reorganizes dwelling as a shared, affective, and political practice. The paper situates this event within a genealogy of domestic repertoires shaped by colonial governance, modernization, migration, and neoliberal restructuring, showing how the performance renders fragments of residence collectively inhabited and negotiated.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE HOUSE AS A SET FOR THE RESIDENCY

> "Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of."
>
> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* [1]

For 31 summer nights in 2025, a small *casita*—a modest, familiar domestic structure—stood illuminated at the center of Puerto Rico's largest stadium. Surrounded by tens of thousands of spectators, broadcast across screens and circulated widely through media platforms, the house appeared at once intimate and monumental, ordinary and spectacular. This formed the spatial and affective anchor of Bad Bunny's concert residency *No Me Quiero Ir De Aquí* ("I Don't Want to Leave Here"), an event that transformed a ubiquitous Puerto Rican domestic space, recognizable across rural, urban, and diasporic contexts, into a shared point of collective orientation. The presence of the house raised a deceptively simple question: why did a figure of home resonate so powerfully in this setting, and why now?

This paper approaches the concert residency, or the residency, not as a cultural spectacle to be interpreted symbolically, but as an analytic event that condenses broader tensions surrounding housing, displacement, and belonging in contemporary Puerto Rico. The concert residency is introduced as an analytic lens, framing the staged house as a spatial device through which dwelling, landscape, and inhabitation are reorganized for collective recognition (Figure 1). The concert did not simply represent domestic life; it reorganized how dwelling could be seen, felt, and shared under ongoing conditions of instability. Through staging, performance, and collective recognition, the concert residency rendered fragments of domestic life—architectural forms, landscape, everyday practices, and generational relations—publicly legible without claiming resolution or permanence.

The affective force of this staging cannot be explained by aesthetics alone. The house emerged as meaningful because residence in Puerto Rico has become increasingly unstable. Since 2019, neoliberal policies such as Act 60 have incentivized outside investors to acquire residential properties and land—often in coastal and touristic areas—and convert them into short-term rentals and luxury developments. Rising land values, demographic shifts, and uneven recovery policies have intensified housing insecurity and displacement, transforming domestic space into a contested terrain of attachment, care, and loss. In this context, the house no longer functions primarily as a secure container of private life. Instead, it becomes a charged site where questions of who may remain, who must leave, and under what conditions dwelling is sustained, are actively negotiated.

Yet this instability does not emerge solely from recent market dynamics. As the residency makes perceptible, the fragility of residence resonates with longer histories in which dwelling has rarely been secured through permanence alone. Colonial governance, modernization projects, migration, and legal regimes of property and inheritance have repeatedly unsettled residential life in Puerto Rico, producing forms of inhabitation that are lived and maintained in practice but only partially recognized institutionally. The contemporary displacement crisis intensifies these conditions, making residence newly visible as an affective and political problem.

Against this backdrop, cultural performance emerges as a critical medium through which nostalgia and place attachment are mediated. Here, performance surpasses representation and metaphor, becoming a spatial practice that temporarily reorganizes how dwelling is inhabited and recognized across geographies and scales. By staging and inserting a domestic structure and a partial landscape into a stadium, and embedding them within practices of music, gathering, and intergenerational exchange, the residency staged a provisional, relational, and collectively accessible space—without promising stability or legal security. Nostalgia circulated not as a return to a secure past, but as a shared attentiveness to what dwelling has meant and continues to mean under conditions where material stability can no longer be assumed. In this sense, nostalgia operates not as heritage or restoration, but as an affective practice that intensifies attention to dwelling precisely when its material guarantees are eroding.

Drawing on an interpretive analysis of the concert's affective organization, alongside a genealogy of domestic forms and practices in Puerto Rico, this paper examines the role of performance in mediating nostalgia and sense of place attachment. It argues that the residency participates in a longer repertoire through which domestic space becomes publicly legible when residence is under pressure. By beginning with the concert as an analytic entry point and unfolding the historical, legal, and social conditions that give it force, the paper seeks to show how performance reorganizes residence as an affective and political practice—enabling dwelling to persist not as a guarantee, but as a shared condition continually negotiated in the present.

Figure 1: The stage as analytical device. Conceptual illustration re-assembling the stage elements, a domestic structure and landscape, into a legible field. These fragments are positioned as a spatial device through which dwelling becomes publicly perceptible. (Source: Illustration by the author.)

2. THE CONCERT RESIDENCY'S AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

To understand why the residency's staging of domestic space produces such intense affective resonance, it is necessary to examine how the performance organizes space, social relations, and modes of attention in the present. Rather than treating the concert as an expression of pre-existing meanings of home, this section analyzes the residency as an affective setting:[2] a spatial and temporal arrangement through which fragments of domestic life are staged, recognized, and collectively inhabited before their longer historical and structural conditions are traced.

Music in Puerto Rico has often operated less as commentary than as accompaniment—a shared form through which displacement, instability, and loss are endured collectively rather than explained or resolved.[3] In the residency *No Me Quiero Ir De Aquí,* this affective capacity is spatialized. The performance generates a setting in which domestic forms, everyday practices, and relational orientations become perceptible as conditions of dwelling. The residency thus functions as a spectacle through which inhabitation is briefly reorganized. Francisco Oller's painting (Figure 2) provides an illuminating picture that foregrounds a longer repertoire in which music, ritual, and domestic space operate as sites of collective inhabitation—a wake ceremony holding together grief, play, and social excess in a shared and sustained tension.

Figure 2: Domesticity as collective inhabitation. Francisco Oller y Cestero, El Velorio (The Wake), 1893. Oil on canvas. Painting depicting a vernacular wake ritual unfolding within and around domestic space, where music, grief, celebration, and social disorder coexist. (Source: Public domain.)

In this paper, residence is approached not as a stable condition secured through property, law, or architectural enclosure, but as a practiced and affective relation continually negotiated through social life. Performance, in turn, is understood as a spatial practice capable of reorganizing how such relations are made visible, shared, and inhabited—however provisionally. From this perspective, the concert residency does not symbolize home, nor does it resolve conditions of displacement. Rather, it creates a setting in which the fragility, porosity, and relational labor of dwelling can be collectively recognized in the present.

2.1. Staging Domesticity

One of the most spatially consequential elements of the performance was the *casita* [4] ("little house"): a modest domestic structure inserted into the monumental scale of the stadium. Architecturally, the staged house combined elements of the modern single-family dwelling, common across the Puerto Rican archipelago, with features associated with the *casita*—a vernacular form often linked to rural life, locality, and incremental building.[5] Organized around semi-public living spaces, this configuration evoked a mode of dwelling in which everyday life unfolds across thresholds rather than behind enclosed interiors.

The spatial emphasis of the structure lay in shared zones: an open living area, an adjacent carport, and a publicly visible balcony, all oriented outwards toward the audience. These elements are characteristic of domestic settings in both urban and rural Puerto Rican contexts, with the distinction that rural houses are more often situated within larger property lines. In all cases, such spatial arrangements encourage social life to

extend beyond the interior, allowing neighbors, guests, and passersby to inhabit the margins of the home. By foregrounding these zones—and their relation to the surrounding landscape—the *casita* made visible the everyday practices of gathering, listening, hosting, and lingering through which domestic life is socially produced.[6] Rather than presenting the house as a protected container, the structure staged domesticity as something already exposed, relational, and situational.

The inclusion of a partial landscape in the set design further shaped this relational logic. Suggestive of a countryside environment, the house appeared grounded without asserting territorial ownership. The surrounding elements functioned not primarily as scenic backdrop, but as spatial cues linking dwelling to land, horizon, and broader human–nature relations. In this arrangement, domestic life emerged from interiority to signal an embrace of communal and environmental entanglements.

Positioned within a stadium typically organized around distance, separation, and managed access, the *casita* disrupted established spatial hierarchies by scaling intimacy and familiarity up to the level of the collective (Figure 3). Through this spatial move, residence was staged as a shared experience—temporarily inhabitable and publicly visible—without claiming permanence or resolving the conditions that render dwelling insecure. The house thus functioned not as a model to be recovered, but as a spatial device that reorganized how domestic life could be encountered and reimagined.

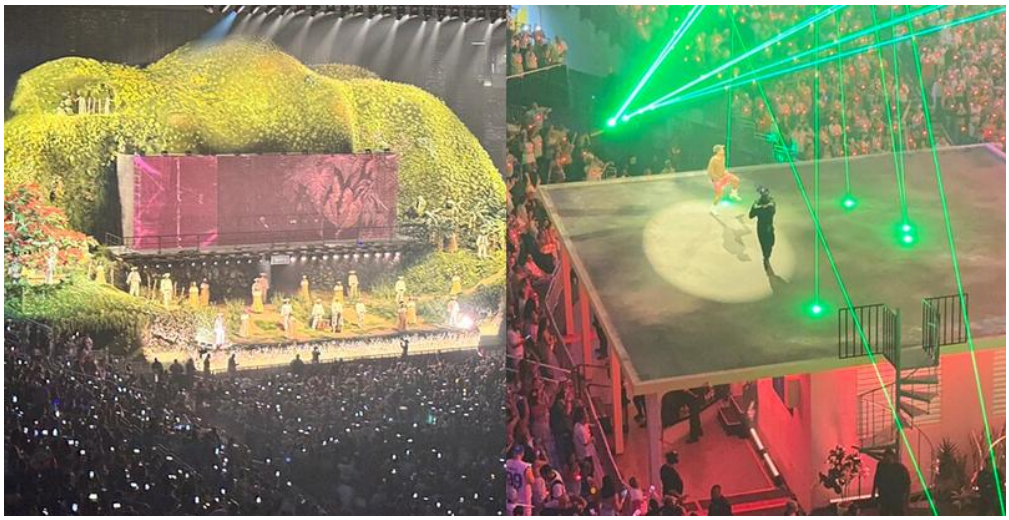

Figure 3: Staging domesticity within spectacle. *Casita* and mountain stages at *No Me Quiero Ir De Aquí* residency, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 5 September 2025. Shown together to foreground how domestic and landscape forms are reorganized within a mass performance setting. (Source: Photographs by Comecoquito. Wikimedia Commons (CC0 1.0, public domain dedication)).

2.2. Social and Generational Links

This domestic setting was further activated through collaborations that bridged musical genres, generations, and spatial imaginaries. Throughout the residency, folk and traditional musicians, indie artists, and mainstream performers appeared together within the staged domestic environment rather than as isolated guests. Musical exchange was situated within a shared social space, emphasizing co-presence over individual display. Media accounts frequently highlighted how these encounters unfolded in and around the *casita*, portraying artists not as elevated figures set apart from the audience, but as participants in a recognizable scene of familiarity and mutual recognition.[7]

This staging echoed everyday practices in many Puerto Rican neighborhoods, where domestic space is structurally porous and routinely open to social circulation. Garages open to the street, balconies extend into public view, and shared ground blur distinctions between neighboring houses. These spatial conditions support practices such as *fiestas de marquesina* (house parties) and *parrandas* (visiting parties), itinerant musical visits that transform private homes into temporary communal stages. In such practices, the house operates less as a boundary than as a node of circulation, enabling music, food, kinship, and presence to move fluidly between interior and exterior space.

By staging the *casita* as a locus of performance, the residency translated these quotidian forms of domestic sociability into a large-scale setting. Importantly, this translation preserved the logic of porous domesticity rather than spectacularizing it. Children, adolescents, adults, and elders were implicitly folded into the same domestic frame, emphasizing intergenerational co-presence as a lived condition rather than generational succession as a symbolic narrative. The residency's intergenerational programming mattered as much as its spatial choreography. Older and younger musicians shared the same domestic frame, allowing cultural lineages to be encountered as continuities in practice rather than as museumized artifacts. What emerged was not a nostalgic recuperation of tradition, but an active negotiation in which cultural forms were adapted, contested, and renewed.

Framing the house as a relational structure rather than a static backdrop thus made cultural continuity legible. The *casita* did not simply symbolize home; it enacted the social practices through which home is produced and reproduced—gathering, listening, sharing space, and sustaining presence across difference. In doing so, the residency offered a model of re-authoring residence: assembling domestic fragments, enabling intergenerational transmission through co-presence, and staging everyday porosity as a public ethic of care and recognition.

2.3. Audience and Affect

The staging of domesticity did not operate solely at the level of visual form. Its effectiveness depended on the audience's affective recognition. The *casita* functioned as a shared reference point through which spectators could orient themselves in relation to dwelling, kinship, and everyday sociality. Participation emerged less through overt interaction than through co-presence and engagement—the sense of knowing how to be in relation to the space and to others it invoked.

This recognition was at once psychological, spatial and relational. Viewers did not need to see their own homes replicated in the *casita* to experience its affective force. Instead, the domestic form operated as an anchor, allowing diverse audiences—local and diasporic, young and old—to inhabit the same scene without requiring shared biography or identity. Affect circulated through orientation: the feeling of belonging to a recognizable mode of dwelling that could be shared across difference.

Crucially, this affective resonance was not harmonious. Comfort and familiarity coexisted with acute awareness of residential fragility. The house appeared simultaneously as a site of care and as a site of loss, displacement, or threatened continuity. Rather than resolving this tension, the performance held it in suspension. Nostalgia did not operate as a desire for return or restoration,[8] but as a shared mode of attention—an intensified awareness of what dwelling has meant and continues to mean precisely because permanence can no longer be assumed. In this context, nostalgia can be read less as sentiment than as an affective practice through which attachment is maintained in tension with uncertainty.

Through this affective condition, the residency reorganized how domestic life could be seen and felt at an intensified scale. It neither generalized residence into abstraction nor offered cathartic closure. Instead, it produced a provisional inhabitation of domestic space, making attachment perceptible while layering the conditions that continue to unsettle dwelling.

2.4. Media Circulation

Media circulation further extended this affective configuration. Circulated images and videos repeatedly foregrounded the *casita* as a site of gathering and familiarity.[9] The images and short videos, while removed from their original context, continuously reproduced domesticity. This repetition mattered: it reinforced the *casita's* role as a spatial reference through sustained re-encounter outside the concert's venue.

Through circulation, what traveled was not a detached symbol of home, but an affective structure—the sense of how domestic space could be collectively oriented and inhabited, even temporarily. Visibility did not displace inhabitation but amplified it, allowing domestic space to remain imaginable beyond the venue while

preserving its provisionality. The conditions rendering residence insecure were not alleviated through circulation; recognition and insecurity continued to coexist.

In this sense, media circulation functioned as an afterlife rather than as representation. It prolonged the residency's capacity to organize attention around domestic space while maintaining its unresolved status. The *casita* continued to appear not as a stable anchor or universal sign, but as a repeatedly re-encountered fragment—recognizable, resonant, and left open.

3. RE-ACTIVATING FRAGMENTS: A GENEALOGY OF DOMESTIC REPERTOIRES

The residency's affective force does not emerge in isolation. The domestic forms staged within the stadium resonate because they draw on longer histories through which residence in Puerto Rico has repeatedly been made, unmade, and reworked under conditions of instability. Having examined how the concert reorganizes dwelling in the present, this section traces the genealogy of the fragments it activates. Rather than offering a linear history of housing forms, the genealogy that follows traces moments in which domestic space re-entered public life as a site of collective negotiation.

Across these moments, what persists are not intact traditions or continuous models of dwelling, but fragments: partial architectures, spatial practices, social arrangements, and affective orientations that endure through repetition, modification, and re-use. These fragments do not survive because they resolve instability, but because they offer recognizable ways of inhabiting contradiction. They allow dwelling to persist as practice even when its legal, material, or institutional foundations become uncertain. The residency assembles such fragments not as illustrations of the past, but as a reorganization of what can be understood as a domestic repertoire[10]—a historically layered set of spatial and social practices through which belonging, care, and vulnerability are enacted through repetition over time.

In this sense, the performance functions as a mode of activation rather than representation. McFarlane reminds us that activating a fragment does not recover an original context or fix its meaning; rather, activation reconfigures elements so that their relational logic becomes perceptible.[11] By staging disparate domestic forms in co-presence, the residency intensifies their affective charge and renders their historical resonances legible in the present. A promotional poster (Figure 4) depicts an assemblage of domestic, architectural, and landscape fragments, foregrounding a visual logic of legibility and re-activation that anticipates the repertoire traced in the sections that follow.

Figure 4: Domestic repertoire and historical re-activation. Frank S. Nicholson, Discover Puerto Rico U.S.A.: Where the Americas Meet, ca. 1936–1940. Color silkscreen poster produced for the New York City Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration (WPA). U.S. federal government work. (Source: public domain.)

3.1. Communal Dwelling and Shared Space

Early Indigenous dwelling forms in Puerto Rico, such as the bohío and the caney, functioned as communal and ritual spaces embedded in collective social life rather than individualized regimes of property or enclosure.[12] Dwelling was organized around shared presence, circulation, and social interdependence, with architectural form inseparable from collective practices of living together. Although these structures were largely erased as material forms through colonization, their significance does not survive as a continuous tradition or architectural lineage. Instead, they persist as a relational logic that reappears intermittently as a fragment—a kind of imagined space where social cohesion is made possible. What returns in such moments is not the house itself, but an understanding of space as something collectively coordinated: temporarily assembled through proximity, rhythm, and co-presence.

In the residency, this logic is reactivated through embodied practices such as dance and rhythmic repetition, including bomba-informed movement and percussion.[13] These practices foreground circulation and collective alignment over privatized interiority. Movement, sound, and gesture organize spatial attention horizontally rather than hierarchically, producing a shared orientation that does not rely on fixed boundaries. Through performance, dwelling is momentarily reorganized as a condition of bodily coordination and mutual visibility. Importantly, this activation does not assert origin or continuity. It operates as a fragment within a broader domestic repertoire, resurfacing not as a recovered past but as a relational possibility that performance can momentarily reassemble in the present. Communal dwelling as a relational spatial logic—organized around shared ground and collective use—foreground forms of habitation that reappear as fragments within later domestic repertoires rather than as continuous architectural models (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Communal dwelling and shared space. Reconstruction of a Taíno village at Tibes Indigenous Ceremonial Center, Ponce, Puerto Rico. Photograph by Marine 69-71, 4 September 2005. The image illustrates dwelling organized through collective spatial relations rather than individualized enclosure. (Source: Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)).

3.2. Rural Vernaculars and the Casita

Rural domestic forms that emerged under plantation economies gave rise to vernacular structures later condensed in the figure of the *casita*.[14] Shaped by histories of labor displacement, rural poverty, and informal settlement, the *casita* functioned simultaneously as material shelter and as an affective marker of endurance. It offered a minimally secure form of dwelling in contexts where land tenure, infrastructure, and institutional support were uneven or absent. Over time, the *casita* exceeded its architectural specificity. As concrete housing and modernization schemes transformed vernacular building practices, *casitas* persisted not as stable forms but as fragments—reappearing in differentiated ways across public celebrations, artistic representations, and diasporic contexts.[15] These iterations did not reproduce a single house type. Rather, they

reworked domestic form in response to distinct spatial and social conditions, allowing the *casita* to endure as an affective reference.

This persistence should not be understood as cultural survival in a strong sense, nor as the continuity of a coherent vernacular tradition but instead, the *casita* operates as a remainder of uneven modernization. Its recurrence across sites and media testifies less to continuity than to the repeated emergence of precarity as a structuring condition of residence. In the concert, the *casita* reappears not as a nostalgic return to rural life, but as a spatial device that condenses these longer histories of displacement, improvisation, and care into a shared setting. Positioned within the stadium, it activates accumulated meanings without fixing them, allowing the fragment to function as a collective point of recognition. The *casita* (Figure 6) can be seen as part of everyday streetscapes, emphasizing vernacular dwelling as an incremental and socially embedded practice that sustains habitation through proximity and shared thresholds.

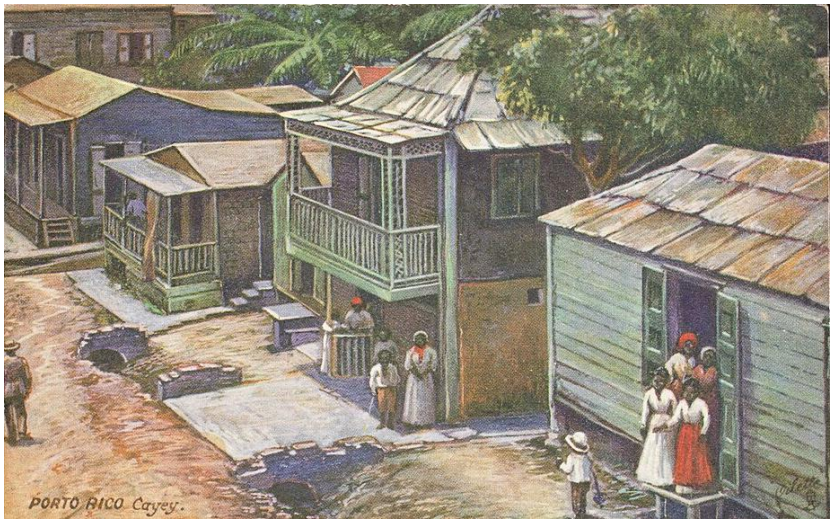

Figure 6. Vernacular dwelling and incremental inhabitation. Street scene, Cayey, Puerto Rico. Postcard published by Raphael Tuck & Sons, c. 1903. Newberry Library, Leonard A. Lauder Collection. The image depicts vernacular domestic forms embedded in everyday circulation, proximity, and shared thresholds. (Source: Wikimedia Commons).

3.3. Modernist Aspiration and Its Erosion

Mid-twentieth-century modernization projects in Puerto Rico recast domestic space as a site of progress, mobility, and development. Concrete housing and suburban expansion were promoted as markers of stability and social advancement, embedding the modern house within narratives of permanence and upward mobility.[16] These projects did not operate as uniform or uncontested impositions. Rather, modern domestic forms evolved alongside existing cultural imaginaries emphasizing continuity, lineage, and belonging,

producing hybrid aspirations that combined forward-looking ideals with selective returns to familiar symbolic orders.

For much of the population, these aspirations were never fully realized. While new housing forms transformed domestic landscapes, they did so unevenly, yet the influence of modernization did not vanish. Instead, it left a durable imprint on how residence came to be associated with futures of improvement—an association that persists even as the material foundations of dwelling have grown increasingly fragile. In the residency, these aspirations resurface as affective residues rather than reaffirmed promises. Concrete domestic features—flat roofs, outward-facing balconies, and modular forms long linked to modernization—are staged in relation to contemporary insecurity. The flat roof, in particular, came to encode a temporal logic of dwelling structured around anticipation: designed to allow future expansion to take shape through lived practice.

In this sense, modernist domesticity appears as a fragment whose promise continues to organize imaginaries even as its guarantees erode. It is held in tension as it becomes an audible and visible part of the repertoire through which residence has been imagined and repeatedly unsettled. Modernist aspirations are exemplified by lived and incremental conditions, in which constructions are extended and often emerge through self-building practices that register modernity as desire and process rather than as stabilized form (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Modernist aspiration and incremental urban dwelling. View of La Perla from Castillo de San Cristóbal, Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. Photograph by JohnnyGo, 27 December 2011. The image shows incremental self-built housing where modern materials and forms coexist with ongoing informality. (Source: Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).)

3.4. Neoliberal Precarity and the Reactivation of Residence

In the present, residence in Puerto Rico is increasingly shaped by financialization, displacement, and uneven access to tenure, repair, and permanence.[17] Housing circulates as an investment asset even as everyday dwelling remains exposed to administrative uncertainty, rising land values, and regulatory instability. Under these conditions, the house reappears as a charged fragment precisely because its material and legal foundations can no longer be taken for granted. Neoliberal precarity does not signal the disappearance of domestic meaning, but the context in which domestic space becomes newly performative.

Residence has long operated as both a material arrangement and a social project tied to land, autonomy, and care. Colonial land regimes fractured and constrained residential security, while successive modernization and development narratives promoted models of permanence that frequently collided with existing practices of dwelling. In recent decades, these tensions have been intensified by tourism-driven real-estate markets, fiscal restructuring, and policy regimes that prioritize the mobility of capital over residential continuity. Rather than securing housing as a stable condition, these processes have further transformed residence into a provisional state—maintained through everyday effort but exposed to displacement.

This instability is compounded by legal and institutional frameworks governing property and inheritance. For instance, under Puerto Rico's civil-law system, forced heirship (la legítima) often produces fragmented ownership across multiple heirs, resulting in homes that are continuously inhabited and cared for yet lack clear title. The resulting condition—lived and maintained in practice but structurally insecure—became especially visible after Hurricane María, when thousands of households were denied federal assistance due to the absence of formal documentation.[18] The disaster did not create residential fragility so much as render explicit how long dwelling had been sustained without institutional guarantees.

Contemporary recovery efforts have largely prioritized administrative operability, infrastructural functionality, and market circulation over long-term residential permanence.[19] Even during periods framed as economic recovery, housing stability frequently remains conditional, provisional, and revocable. Coastal zones such as La Parguera illustrate these dynamics with particular clarity, as conservation, tourism, and longstanding inhabitation coexist in unresolved tension.[20] Figure 8 (Figure 8) situates contemporary conflicts over coastal access and displacement within a longer visual economy of tourism, in which domestic and leisure landscapes were aestheticized as collective progress. Such conflicts are not solely about regulation or land use, but about how care, responsibility, and historical presence are recognized under conditions of displacement.

In this context, neoliberal precarity functions not as the endpoint of the domestic repertoire but as the condition under which domestic space is reactivated as an affective and political resource.[21] By assembling

communal logics, vernacular endurance, and modernist aspiration within a single performance, the residency renders these tensions collectively legible. Domestic fragments are not synthesized into coherence, but brought into co-presence so that contradiction can be inhabited.

Figure 8: Tourism, modernity, and coastal development. Dorado Beach Hotel, Dorado, Puerto Rico. Postcard from the Tichnor Bros. Collection, Library of Congress. The image presents a foundational site in Puerto Rico's tourism-driven development model, foregrounding coastal modernity as an aspirational landscape later subject to privatization and contestation. (Source: Public domain).

4. RE-AUTHORING RESIDENCE ACROSS SCALES

This paper does not argue that domestic space is inherently or continuously performative. Rather, it shows that it becomes performative under specific historical and political conditions. When permanence, ownership, and institutional recognition can no longer be assumed, domestic space is mobilized not simply as a symbol of home, but as an active site where affect, memory, and belonging are collectively rehearsed, contested, and reorganized. Under such conditions, the house re-enters public life as a medium through which dwelling can be temporarily re-oriented, even if it cannot be secured.

Performance, in this sense, is not a metaphor for representation but a mode of spatial practice that emerges from instability itself. It does not resolve displacement, repair legal precarity, or restore dwelling as a stable condition. Instead, performance enables domestic space to be inhabited differently: as a provisional, relational formation that can be recognized, shared, and negotiated across multiple scales. This distinction clarifies why domestic forms resurface so forcefully—not as timeless cultural symbols or nostalgic returns, but as fragments whose affective and political charge intensifies when stability erodes.

4.1. Re-Authoring as Reorganization

Re-authoring does not imply the invention of new meanings or the recovery of stable traditions. Instead, it names the reorganization of existing fragments once residence can no longer operate as it previously did. Under conditions of instability, dwelling is no longer secured primarily through permanence, legal title, or continuity; it must be continually composed through practices that enable recognition, attachment, and co-presence.

In the concert, domestic forms do not appear as pre-given symbols of identity or heritage. They emerge instead as materials actively rearranged through performance—fragments drawn from multiple historical registers and placed into new spatial and social relations. This rearrangement alters how residence is re-experienced as a temporal and relational practice assembled through proximity, repetition, and shared orientation.

Re-authoring, in this sense, is neither recuperative nor utopian. It does not restore domestic space to a prior condition, nor imagine an entirely new one. Rather, it works with what remains available under precarity: partial forms, accumulated affects, and inherited aspirations whose original guarantees have transformed. Through performance, these fragments are brought into co-presence, allowing dwelling to persist as something lived and recognized.

This logic of re-authoring is not limited to spectacular events. Community-based initiatives such as Casa Pueblo in the municipality of Adjuntas offer a grounded example of how domestic space can be reorganized as a site of collective care, pedagogy, and ecological inhabitation without relying on permanence or state recognition.[22] Originating in a family home and gradually re-functioned through shared practice, Casa Pueblo sustains residence through attachment, maintenance, and co-presence rather than legal security or ownership alone. Like the concert, it re-authors residence by working with domestic fragments—scale, familiarity, inherited forms of care—deploying them as public resources while remaining embedded in the conditions of structural precarity from which they emerge. Across these contexts, a form of collective authorship emerges where no single actor controls the meaning of residence, and no singular narrative is stabilized.

4.2. Affective Relationships and Contradictions

Within this process of re-authoring, as dwelling becomes unstable, attachment acquires urgency. Longing no longer orients itself toward the recovery of a secure past, but toward maintaining relationships in the absence of durable guarantees.

In this sense, nostalgia operates less as sentiment than as a mode of attention. It registers loss and erosion while sustaining attachment to ways of inhabiting space that are no longer institutionally protected. What is recalled is not a stable home, but the experience of dwelling as something once more reliable than it is now. Memory becomes politically charged not because it stabilizes identity or tradition, but because it articulates claims of belonging that cannot be fully expressed through policy or property regimes.

In the residency, moments of familiarity and comfort are inseparable from awareness of fragility, producing an affective register in which longing and precarity coexist. This coexistence is central to the performance's force because it enables dwelling to be felt as unfinished and vulnerable, yet still meaningful.

Anthropological accounts of ritual and festive life have long noted that performative intervals do not resolve social tensions, but allow them to be collectively inhabited.[23] Rather than reconciling opposing forces, such intervals suspend them, enabling contradiction to be lived. Domestic space becomes central precisely when contradictions surrounding residence intensify. These tensions are not external pressures, but internal contradictions embedded in the very idea of dwelling: prosperity alongside vulnerability, intimacy alongside exposure, continuity alongside mobility. When these expectations can no longer be stabilized materially, contradiction becomes the condition of dwelling itself.

In the residency, conflicting meanings of home are held together through shared presence, spatial proximity, and affective recognition. Prosperity and precarity coexist in the same domestic scene; intimacy unfolds in a public arena; attachment to place is articulated alongside awareness of displacement. By staging the house as both intimate and spectacular, familiar and contested, the residency collapses boundaries between private and public, homeland and diaspora, tradition and modernization. Domestic space circulates as a portable site of attachment—performed across dispersed publics while remaining grounded in shared forms of recognition. What travels is not a unified meaning of home, but the capacity to inhabit its contradictions together.

4.3. Scaling, Circulation, and Limits

The re-authoring of residence staged through the residency does not emerge ex nihilo. It resonates with longer-term practices through which dwelling in Puerto Rico has been sustained beyond formal ownership or permanence—through proximity, inheritance, caregiving, and shared occupation. The performance does not replace these everyday forms of inhabitation; it intensifies and renders them perceptible at a mass and mediatic scale.

Scaling, in this sense, does not imply abstraction. As domestic fragments circulate beyond the venue, they do not dissolve into generalized symbols of identity or culture. Instead, what circulates is a relational form,

recognizable because it echoes lived practices of inhabiting space together. Performance allows such practices to be momentarily amplified—made visible, audible, and shareable—without detaching them from the instability that produced them.

At the same time, the limits of this performative intensification must be acknowledged. Performance does not resolve displacement, secure tenure, or undo structural inequality. Visibility and recognition do not substitute for material security, and circulation can expose attachment even as it sustains it. The analytic value of the residency thus lies not in proposing solutions, but in illuminating how dwelling continues to acquire meaning.

5. CONCLUSION: REINVENTING THE RESIDENCE

This paper has argued that cultural performance can open a provisional space in which residence is re-authored under conditions of material, legal, and infrastructural instability. Rather than resolving housing precarity or offering programmatic political solutions, the residency examined here temporarily repositions dwelling as a shared and inhabitable condition, allowing contradictory experiences of attachment, insecurity, and belonging to be held together. Performance does not repair residence as a structure; it activates residence as a practice.

By situating the residency within a longer genealogy of fragmented domestic imaginaries in Puerto Rico, the analysis has shown how re-authoring operates not as restoration or transformation, but as the reorganization of existing fragments once permanence can no longer be assumed. Communal dwelling logics, vernacular endurance, and modernist aspiration reappear not as recoverable pasts or viable futures, but as affective resources that continue to organize expectations of dwelling even as their material guarantees erode. What persists is not continuity in form, but a repertoire of domestic practices through which residence remains imaginable, negotiable, and socially meaningful.

The paper has emphasized that performance matters here not because it represents home, but because it renders contradiction inhabitable. Within the residency, prosperity and precarity, intimacy and exposure, attachment and displacement coexist without being reconciled. The house appears simultaneously as aspiration and fragility, familiarity and uncertainty. Performance sustains this simultaneity by holding contradictory meanings in suspension, allowing dwelling to be lived and recognized collectively even as its structural supports remain unresolved.

Approached in this way, residence emerges as a living archive—not of fixed forms or stable identities, but of accumulated practices, affects, and claims that are activated when incremental pressures produce qualitative shifts in how dwelling is experienced and understood. Performance enables these layers to surface without

coherence or closure, extending domestic affect across scales while remaining grounded in specific histories of care, inheritance, and loss. Re-authoring thus names not the pursuit of unity or stability, but the ongoing practice of assembling domestic fragments within uneven conditions of power, risk, and attachment.

More broadly, by reading performance as a spatial and affective practice through which space is made provisionally inhabitable, this paper offers a way to examine how belonging continues to be mediated, sustained, and contested under conditions that demand the continual reinvention of residence.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, 2.
2. While the concert operates at a spectacular scale, this spectacularization should not be understood as a substitution of image for lived experience. Rather, it functions as a moment of intensified visibility through which an ordinarily fragmented and private condition—residence—enters a shared public register. In this sense, the spectacular does not negate the everyday, but amplifies it, making domestic precarity and attachment momentarily legible at a collective scale. This reading draws on affect theory that emphasizes circulation, public feeling, and the translation of lived attachment into collective recognition rather than representation alone. See Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson, eds., Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, Practices and Infrastructures (London: Routledge, 2016).
3. For music and activism see for example Teófilo Espada-Brignoni and F. Ruiz-Alfaro, "Culture, Subjectivity, and Music in Puerto Rico: Bomba, Plena, and the Ousting of a Governor," *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation* 10, no. 1 (2021): 3–12. For music and mourning practices see Archivo Medios Audiovisuales, UPR-RP, *Baquiné o el velorio de un niño negro (recreación) (1986)*, YouTube video, accessed April 20, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cal8v-T5Xlk. *The video recreates a baquiné ceremony, a vernacular wake ritual that Oller famously depicted in his painting El Velorio. See also Francisco Oller, El Velorio (The Wake), 1893, oil on canvas, 240 × 400 cm, Museum of Art, History, and Anthropology of the University of Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico.*
4. For a discussion of the relation between rural house typology and cultural practices see for example Luz M. Rodríguez López, "Casas Jíbaras: Anotaciones sobre Arquitectura y Tradición en Puerto Rico," *Polimorfo: Revista de ArqPoli*, no. 4 (2017): 12–29, Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12475/1805.
5. For discussion of the conceptual and cultural intentions behind the staging of the residency, including the use of domestic elements such as the casita, see Tess Garcia, "A Puerto Rican Design Team Literally Moved Mountains for Bad Bunny's Residency," *Architectural Digest*, September 19, 2025, https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/puerto-rican-design-team-bad-bunny-residency; and Leila Cobo, "Residente pregunta, Bad Bunny contesta: Una conversación sobre identidad puertorriqueña, actuación y un proyecto musical 'sorpresa'," Billboard en Español, October 1, 2025.
6. Colin McFarlane, *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), Introduction; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26–35; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110; Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005), 9–18.

7. Media coverage of Bad Bunny's Puerto Rico residency repeatedly emphasized the casita as a social setting rather than a static stage element, noting how guest artists and public figures appeared lounging, performing, and congregating within the domestic structure itself. See for example Coral Murphy Marcos, "Bad Bunny's Casita, a Summer Hub for Celebrities, Carries a Legacy," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/10/realestate/bad-bunny-puerto-rico-residency-casita.html.
8. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49.
9. Following the residency, short-form videos, photographs, and brief clips circulated widely across social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), frequently foregrounding the domestic staging of the performance. This paper treats these materials not as comprehensive documentation of audience response, but as part of the performance's afterlife, through which the spatial and affective logic of the residency—particularly the casita as a site of shared recognition—was reiterated and extended beyond the venue.
10. I use the term repertoire to mean an embodied system of knowledge—gestures, actions, and embodied practices transmitted through performance—which is the sense Taylor develops in the book. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
11. Colin McFarlane, *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), Introduction; "Fragmenting Cities," 40; "Without Closure," 94; "Assembling the exhibition" (Namuwongo), 165–68.
12. Early Taíno dwelling forms such as the bohío and caney are widely documented as communal and ceremonial spaces embedded in collective social life rather than individualized property regimes. See Ricardo E. Alegría, La cultura taína (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1954); Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico: A National History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).
13. Bomba is a participatory Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance practice organized through call-and-response, rhythmic improvisation, and embodied interaction between dancers, drummers, and chorus, producing collective spatial coordination rather than fixed choreography. See Víctor Colón-León, "Bomba: The Sound of Puerto Rico's African Heritage," General Music Today 34, no. 3 (2021); and Donald Thompson, Music in Puerto Rico: A Reader's Anthology (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 25.
14. The "casita" has been widely discussed in scholarship on Puerto Rican vernacular and informal architecture as a domestic form shaped by rural displacement, self-building, and incremental construction, particularly in the mid-twentieth century. Emerging from histories of agricultural labor, migration, and uneven modernization, the casita came to function not only as shelter but as a social and affective space through which endurance, attachment, and community life were sustained, even as concrete housing and development projects displaced its material presence. See Luz M. Rodríguez López, "Casas Jíbaras: Anotaciones sobre Arquitectura y Tradición en Puerto Rico," *Polimorfo: Revista de ArqPoli*, no. 4 (2017): 12–29, Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, ; Jorge Duany, "From the Bohio to the Caserio: Urban Housing Conditions in Puerto Rico," in *Self-Help Housing, the Poor, and the State in the Caribbean*, ed. Robert B. Potter and Dennis Conway (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press; Kingston: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1997), pp. 188-216.; and Luis Aponte-Parés, "What's Yellow and White and Has Land All Around It? Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios," Centro Journal 7, no. 1 (1995).

15. The appearance of "casitas" in diasporic contexts—most notably in New York City—illustrates how this domestic fragment persists through differentiation rather than formal continuity. Bronx casitas are self-built, incremental structures shaped by urban vacancy, community gardening, and collective use, and differ materially, spatially, and socially from both rural Puerto Rican houses and recognized architectural types. See Joseph Sciorra, "'I Feel Like I'm in My Country': Puerto Rican Casitas in New York City," The Drama Review 34, no. 4 (1990): 156–170.

16. For discussions of how modern domestic imaginaries in Puerto Rico linked architectural form, cultural continuity, and aspirations for progress—producing hybrid and contested visions of permanence that were unevenly realized in practice—see Carmelo Esterrich, "Concrete and Countryside: Articulations of the Urban and the Rural in 1950s Puerto Rican Cultural Production" (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); Andrés Pabón Charneco, "The Architecture of San Juan de Puerto Rico: Five Centuries of Urban and Architectural Experimentation" (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Malena Rodríguez Castro, "The Discreet Charms of Hispanophilia," in Hispanofilia: Arquitectura y vida en Puerto Rico, 1900–1950, ed. Enrique Vivoni-Farage and Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998), 296–315.

17. Act 60 (the Puerto Rico Incentives Code of 2019) consolidated earlier tax-incentive laws aimed at attracting external investment. While not designed as a housing policy, it has contributed to intensified real-estate speculation—particularly in coastal and touristic areas—thereby exacerbating displacement pressures. In this paper, Act 60 is treated as a structuring condition of residential instability rather than as an object of legal or fiscal analysis. See Natasha del Toro, "We Went to the Most Unequal Place in America," *More Perfect Union*, October 26, 2023; National Law Review, "Puerto Rico's Act 60: A Platform for Global Finance and Fintech," October 13, 2025.; and Naomi Klein, The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes On the Disaster Capitalists (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018).

18. Under Puerto Rico's civil-law system, inheritance regimes based on forced heirship (la legítima) frequently result in residential property being shared among multiple heirs, producing fragmented ownership and prolonged succession processes. As widely documented, many homes remain inhabited and maintained across generations without clear title, a condition that significantly constrained access to federal disaster assistance after Hurricane María. See Ivis García, "The Lack of Proof of Ownership in Puerto Rico Is Crippling Repairs in the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria," Human Rights Magazine, American Bar Association, May 21, 2021; and Federal Emergency Management Agency, After-Action Report: Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico (Washington, DC, 2018).

19. Analyses of post-crisis recovery in Puerto Rico have shown that large-scale federal and fiscal interventions often mitigate short-term economic contraction while leaving underlying structural vulnerabilities intact, particularly in housing and infrastructure. Recovery efforts have frequently prioritized administrative functionality and market circulation over long-term residential security. See Gabriel Guillama Capella, Federal Funds in Puerto Rico: The ARRA Experience and Lessons for Economic Recovery (San Juan: Centro para la Renovación Económica, Crecimiento y Excelencia, 2026); and Naomi Klein, The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes On the Disaster Capitalists (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018).

20. La Parguera, located in the municipality of Lajas, has been designated a natural reserve since 1979 and is subject to Commonwealth and federal environmental protections. Despite this status, private residential structures have existed for decades along the coast and within the maritime-terrestrial zone, often without clear authorization. Between 2023 and 2025, administrative and legislative measures seeking to regularize these structures through concessions and fees prompted legal challenges, environmental protest, and public debate over the privatization of public coastal lands. While this paper does not intervene in the

legal merits of these cases, the controversy provides critical context for understanding how environmental protection, heritage, and long-term inhabitation generate competing claims to place.

21. Scholarship on coastal heritage landscapes emphasizes that conflicts over land use and conservation are shaped not only by regulation or policy but by affective attachments such as care, loss, and indignation. As Susan P. Mains has shown, practices of documentation and representation translate lived attachment into collective political claims, making displacement a struggle over public legibility as much as over material tenure. See Susan P. Mains, "From Menie to Montego Bay: Documenting, Representing and Mobilising Emotion in Coastal Heritage Landscapes," in Heritage, Affect, and Emotion: Politics, Practices and Infrastructures, ed. Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson (London: Routledge, 2017), 83–100.
22. Casa Pueblo, founded in Adjuntas in the 1980s, emerged from a family house and gradually became a community-run space for cultural, environmental, and educational practice. Its trajectory illustrates how domestic space can be reorganized as a site of collective inhabitation and care without reliance on permanence, ownership, or state recognition. Here, Casa Pueblo is invoked not as a comparative case, but as an illustrative example of how re-authoring residence operates through sustained practice under conditions of institutional and ecological precarity. See Alexis Massol-González, Casa Pueblo: A Puerto Rican Model of Self-Governance (Amherst, MA: Lever Press, 2022).
23. See, for example, Victor Turner's discussions of ritual and social drama, as well as broader anthropological analyses of festive practices that frame performance as a temporary suspension of social contradiction rather than a mechanism of resolution.

Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

COUNTER-ARCHIVAL APPROACHES TO ABORIGINAL HOUSING HISTORIES AT ERAMBIE MISSION (1950 - PRESENT)

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COUNTER-ARCHIVAL APPROACHES TO ABORIGINAL HOUSING HISTORIES AT ERAMBIE MISSION (1950 - PRESENT)

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This paper examines the housing history of Erambie Mission, an Aboriginal settlement on Wiradjuri Country in Cowra, New South Wales, Australia from 1950 to the present. It draws on forensic architectural analysis of institutional archival records and community-based participatory research conducted across two site visits in 2025, from which it assembles a counter-archive comprising oral histories, community testimonies, personal photograph collections and community-held documentation, that directly contradicts the official record in many instances and expanding it in others. Institutional archives document Erambie as an administrative object, while the community account reveals the lived experience of housing under colonial administration and the deep significance of place and community that the official record could not see and was not designed to hold.

1. INTRODUCTION

The architectural histories of Aboriginal missions and reserves in New South Wales, Australia, remain largely undocumented, with records dispersed across institutional archives, often inaccessible to the communities they concern. Where documentation does exist, it reflects the priorities of the administering bodies, such as the Aborigines Protection Board (1883–1940) and later the Aborigines Welfare Board (1940-1969),[1] rather than the experiences and knowledge of community members. The result is an official record that is fragmentary and partial, and in many instances actively misleading about the built environments it purports to describe.

This paper examines the housing history of Erambie Mission, an Aboriginal settlement on Wiradjuri Country in Cowra, New South Wales, which was declared an Aboriginal reserve in 1891.[2] It argues that the community account of Erambie's housing history held in oral histories, personal photograph collections, and community-held documentation constitutes a counter-archive that reveals what institutional records fail to. What the community account reveals is the lived experience of housing under colonial administration, the initiative exercised by the Erambie community over their built environment across successive eras of government policy, and significantly, the importance of place and community to Erambie residents. This counter-archive supplements the official record and, in many instances, directly contradicts it.

The paper is situated within a broader research project on Aboriginal housing histories in New South Wales, Australia, and is in conversation with counter-archival and decolonial approaches to institutional records that seek to reposition communities as authoritative sources for their own histories. In this sense, the counter-archive is itself an act of translation, rendering community knowledge legible in institutional contexts from which it has been systematically excluded.[3] The Australian mission and reserve system is briefly

contextualized in the following section before the paper turns to the specific history of Erambie and the counter-archival account its community holds.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a two-phase methodology combining forensic architectural analysis of institutional archival records with community-based participatory research through which community members are repositioned as authoritative sources for their own histories. These two phases are complementary and interdependent as forensic architectural analysis identifies what the official records contain while community consultation addresses what it cannot provide.

Forensic architectural analysis, drawing on Eyal Weizman's framework for reading built environments as evidence, involves the systematic comparison of multiple source types, which encompass architectural drawings, settlement plans, administrative photographs, policy documents, and current site conditions, to identify discrepancies, contradictions, and absences in the official record. Weizman's framework treats the material traces of the built environment, including its construction, alteration, destruction, and current condition, as evidence that can be cross-examined against other sources to reveal what official accounts conceal or distort.[4] This approach is necessary because institutional archives reflect administrative priorities rather than community realities. Archival research was conducted across three institutional collections: the National Archives of Australia, the Museums of History New South Wales State Archives Collection, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Collections. Materials examined include architectural drawings and cottage design plans produced by Public Works NSW in the 1940s, settlement layout and infrastructure plans, administrative photographs of the mission taken in 1980, and policy documents relating to housing provision at Erambie. Analysis of these materials against one another and against current site conditions revealed significant discrepancies, revealing that houses prominently featured in 1940s and 1980 documentation no longer exist, with the number of dwellings at Erambie having reduced from over forty to twenty; the original church and preschool are severely vandalized, and community members in archival photographs are unnamed. These gaps and contradictions formed the basis for community consultation.

Community-based participatory research was conducted across two site visits to Erambie, in September and November 2025. The September visit involved a preliminary community consultation in which a curated selection of archival photographs held at the National Archives of Australia was printed and returned to community members. Community members were invited to identify people, places, and spatial context in the photographs, correcting and expanding the institutional metadata that had left people unnamed and context

undescribed. This consultation also revealed that community members hold extensive private documentation entirely absent from institutional archives, including personal photograph collections and material culture.

The November visit involved a community forum hosted at a local community building, Gumbuya, which was open to Erambie residents, at which archival materials were displayed and community members were invited to share their own stories and knowledge of housing history including photographs. From this forum, interviews were conducted with more than ten community members across individual and group settings. Interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed using Otter.ai. Interview transcripts were coded and sorted thematically using NVivo, following a thematic analysis approach. Two organizing themes guided the coding: insights into the architectural and social histories of Aboriginal housing, and housing design and construction. Within these themes, codes addressed housing conditions across historical and present periods, life under managers, resident information, and stories and memories. The testimonies included in this paper are shared with the knowledge and consent of those who gave them.

The research draws on primary sources: institutional archival records, community oral histories, and community-held documentation including personal photographs and document collections. Analysis reveals limits of the official record and the significance of the community account.

Secondary historical sources contextualize the archival and community materials. These sources are compared with institutional archives and interview material to identify where accounts converge or diverge. These secondary sources include:

- Jeremy Long's 1965 survey of institutional communities in Eastern Australia.[5]
- Heather Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972*.[6]
- Peter Read's oral history collection *Down There With Me on the Cowra Mission*.[7]
- Lawrence Bamblett's *Our Stories Are Our Survival*.[8]
- and the community publication *Our Stories Our Elders*, co-edited by Isabel Coe and Helene Hamilton.[9]

Ethical commitments guiding this research are grounded in Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and the Indigenous Archives Collective's Right of Reply framework, which asserts that Indigenous peoples have rights to challenge and respond to information held about them in institutional collections.[10] As a non-Indigenous researcher, the obligation of this project is to community knowledge rather than to institutional or disciplinary interpretation of it, and toward returning materials and findings to the community in accessible forms. This research was conducted with ethics approval from the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number ETH25-10998.

3. CONTEXT

Erambie Mission sits on Wiradjuri Country on the western bank of the Lachlan River, two kilometers from the center of Cowra, New South Wales. Missions and reserves were parcels of land set aside by colonial governments from the late nineteenth century, sites of enforced settlement, administered first under the Aborigines Protection Act 1909 and later the Aboriginal Welfare Act 1940, through which the state exercised extensive authority over the daily lives of Aboriginal people.[11]

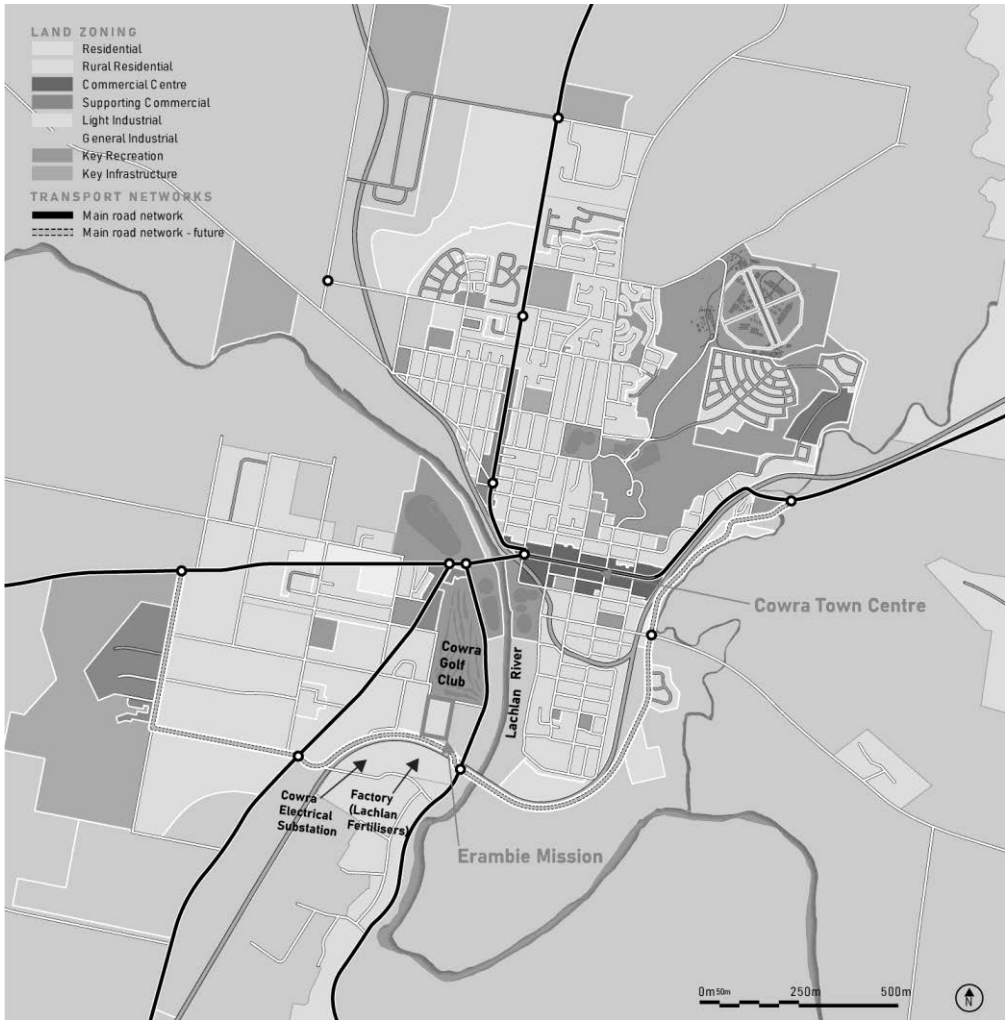


Figure 1: Location of Erambie Mission, Cowra, New South Wales, present day, showing separation from town center by the Lachlan River and surrounding land uses.

A thirty-two-acre parcel of land at Cowra was gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve in 1890, with a small group of Wiradjuri already camped on the western side of the river.[12] The reserve became known as Mulyan, and later Erambie. A resident teacher-manager and matron were appointed by the Aborigines Protection Board,

making it a formally managed station by 1927.[13] From the implementation of the 1909 Act to 1920, the population living on or near Erambie grew to more than 150 people, drawing complaints from white residents of Cowra and pressure to relocate the community.

> "When the townspeople were complaining that the mission was too close to town and wanted to move the mission, my grandfather said No. 'We're not going anywhere while our little school is here."
>
> Aunty June Murray[14]

The Protection Board, recognizing it could not endlessly destroy reserves and manage the displacement that followed, allowed Erambie to remain. By the 1930s the community had grown too large to dismantle.[15]

The managed station system gave the Board's appointed managers sweeping powers over residents. Under the regulations of the Protection Act, a manager could expel residents, withhold rations, deny entry to visitors, and charge people with an almost infinite range of offenses for failing to obey instructions.[16] In practice this meant intimate surveillance of domestic life. At Erambie, working men were required to seek the manager's permission before inviting friends to their homes, and restrictions were placed even on who could attend children's birthday parties. Lawrence Bamblett, a member of the Erambie community and research fellow at AIATSIS, whose book documents community histories from within, records that respected Erambie Elders considered such entry rules degrading, and that they believed they should be "above that sort of thing."[17]

The managers' authority extended into the home itself through twice-weekly inspections assessing whether houses were kept to the matron's standards. Aunty Esther Cutmore, a Wiradjuri Elder and lifelong Erambie resident, recalled the inspections in detail:

> "They used to come and check the homes, and you'd see the women up early in the morning with buckets and mops and scrubbing brushes and scrubbing their floors ... she was the manager's wife, the matron. And she checked our head for head lice. She put DDT in our head, which is a bad substance ... our scalps used to be red."
>
> Esther Cutmore, interview, 25 November 2025

The threat that accompanied these inspections was not merely administrative. As Cutmore made clear: "if they [the homes] weren't clean, that could be a reason your kids could be taken."[18] Housing inspection was thus directly tied to the removal of children, now formally recognized as part of the history of the Stolen Generations, the term used in Australia to describe the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families under state authority.

From the 1940s onward, under the Aboriginal Welfare Board's assimilation policy, the pressure on Aboriginal communities intensified. Where the earlier Protection Board had been prepared to leave economically independent Aboriginal people alone, the Welfare Board was determined to intervene in the lives of all Aboriginal people, wherever they lived. Its stated goal was to achieve what it called "successful assimilation" which in practice meant demanding that Aboriginal people abandon contact with family, community, language and country as conditions for basic rights and services.[19] To enforce this, the Board established a network of District Welfare Officers posted in towns to maintain "constant contact" with Aboriginal people living most independently of Board control. The explicit goal was a web of surveillance extending beyond the reserve boundary.[20]

Housing was central to this assimilation program as both incentive and instrument of control. An Exemption Certificate, which the Board offered as a reward to Aboriginal people who could demonstrate they had cut themselves off from culture and kin, unlocked the promise of a house in town.[21] Isabel Coe, an Erambie community member recalls what this meant in practice:

> "For Aboriginal people to be able to leave the reserves they had to apply for a Certificate of Exemption which most Aboriginal people refer to as 'dog tags'. To apply for a certificate, it meant Aboriginal people were seen as 'trustworthy' where they could walk down the streets as everyone else although some of the conditions to be approved meant things like giving up your culture, families and communities."
>
> Isabel Coe[22]

But even this promise was largely illusory. In Cowra in 1951, tradesmen engaged to build houses for Aboriginal families were intimidated by fellow townspeople until they withdrew their tenders.[23] As Goodall notes, "most of the fights were not over houses but over land, land of the smallest but perhaps the most significant size in Australia's colonized history, the house block."[24] June Murray, a Wiradjuri Elder and Erambie resident, put the spatial politics plainly: "White people didn't like too many blackfullas walking downtown – we were not allowed to be seen."[25]

For Erambie residents, the experience of housing during the managed station era was shaped by profound material inadequacy combined with the indignity of constant oversight. The early dwellings were the "red huts", two-room tin structures with no running water, dirt floors, and in summer, conditions Aunty June Murray described as "almost like ovens."[26] Families collected water from an outside tap, cooked over open fires, and heated water in coppers for bathing. Murray recalled:

> "My family lived in small tin huts that were in sections on Erambie. There were three sections with 20 huts on the mission and each section was fenced off with trees growing

> between each one, where we had to walk around the block to visit aunties or uncles. … Three children shared a bed, me, my sister, and my younger brother... We had thin mattresses with one grey government blanket each and for extra warmth Mum would throw clothes all over us at night ready for bed. I remember my younger brother would sleep in the middle of me and my sister and sometimes he would wet the bed, so then everyone would be cold and wet."
>
> Aunty June Murray[27]

In the 1950s the red huts were replaced by fibro (fibrous cement) cottages supplied by the Public Works Department. The documentary record of these cottages exemplifies the character of the official archive more broadly. Jeremy Long's 1965 survey of institutional communities in eastern Australia as the most systematic administrative account of Erambie during this period, recorded the cottages as connected to town water and electricity, with laundry-shower rooms and little overcrowding.[28] His account is precise about infrastructure and occupancy, but does not acknowledge inadequate conditions inside those houses or the community life sustained within and around them. The people who lived there are present only statistically. The 1980 administrative photographs held at the National Archives reproduce the same logic: they document housing stock, exteriors, streetscapes, building conditions, leaving the people who appear in them unnamed. These collections document Erambie as an administrative object, recording structures and not the people who lived in them. The counter-archive assembled through community consultation, presented in the Results section that follows, is the record of what the official archive could not hold.

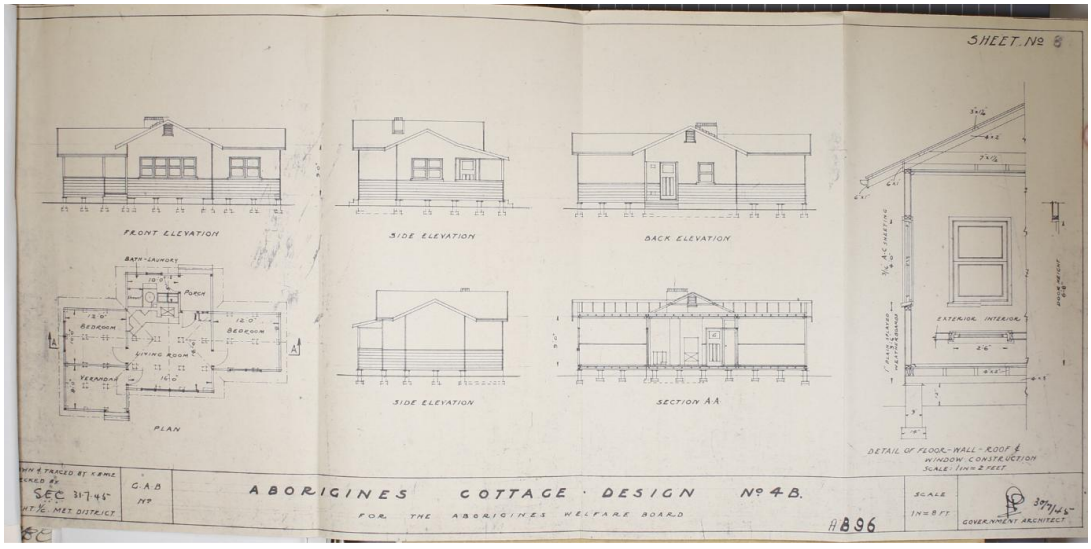


Figure 2: Cottage Design 4B, drawings by Public Works NSW, 1945. (Source: Museums of History NSW State Archives Collection).[29]

Figure 3: Housing at Erambie, Cottage Design 4B in foreground, 1980. (Source: National Archives of Australia).[30]

The Welfare Board, confronted by white towns' refusal to permit Aboriginal residential settlement, shifted strategy by 1960. Rather than acknowledging white intransigence, it began to blame Aboriginal people for the discrimination they faced, citing their "habit of clinging together in artificial groups" and willingness to live in "substandard dwellings" as the cause of rural hostility.[31] The solution it proposed was relocation to Sydney. From 1962 the Board stated that those for whom it had no legal responsibility would be forced off reserves unless they agreed to leave for the cities, and Housing Commission houses in Sydney were acquired as leverage. Choices made under these conditions to stay or to leave cannot be called voluntary.[32]

The removal of the full-time station manager in 1965 marked a significant shift, initiating a period of relative autonomy that gathered momentum through the 1970s with the broader Aboriginal rights movement. The 1967 federal referendum amended the Constitution to allow the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal people and include them in the national census, and the Protection Act was repealed in 1968. Community initiatives in housing during this period are examined in the Results section that follows.

4. RESULTS

During a preliminary community consultation at Erambie in September 2025, a curated selection of photographs held at the National Archives of Australia was printed and brought back to the community. The photographs, taken in 1980, have been held institutionally for over four decades with incomplete metadata and no identification of the people pictured. When presented with these photographs, community members were able to identify individuals, places, and spatial context that the institutional record had not captured. In

one instance, a community member identified his mother in a photograph that had remained unnamed in the National Archives since 1980. This moment is illustrative of the gap this research set out to examine.

Figure 4. (Left) Olive Williams identified in archival photograph through community consultation. (Source: National Archives of Australia).[33]
Figure 5: (Right) Community members identifying people in archival photographs at community consultation, Erambie, New South Wales, 2025.

The oral histories collected by Peter Read in 1979, the testimonies published in Lawrence Bamblett's Our Stories Are Our Survival and in Our Stories Our Elders, and the interviews conducted for this research in November 2025 collectively constitute the counter-archive examined in this section, as a community-held account of the built environment of Erambie that the official record cannot provide. The most significant discrepancy between the official record and the community account concerns the fibro cottages of the 1950s and 1960s. Josie Ingram, speaking to historian Peter Read in 1979, described the houses as they were when first occupied:

> "When they built these houses here back in the 1950s, they never had no lights, people had to use candles... They didn't even have a sink. There was no sink in them houses, and they wouldn't have one now only a doctor from down town come up here and went right through these houses."
>
> Josie Ingram, in Read, 1984 [34]

Aunty Esther Cutmore, interviewed at Erambie in November 2025, confirmed this account of the fibro house her family occupied: no electricity, kerosene for light, a wood stove, an open fireplace, no sink, water heated in a copper in the laundry for bathing. Aunty Helen Murray, writing in *Our Stories Our Elders*, described the same conditions in the 1960s and the resourcefulness they demanded:

> "During the 1960s on Erambie we had fibro homes. In our home there was no sink, no window screens, they had cemented tubs and taps in the laundry, there were no beds and we had an old stove in the kitchen area... As a teenager I spent a lot of time helping our Elders collect wood and coal. Sometimes we would walk down to the back of the mission carrying our shovels picking up the coal to make fire that was left from the shunter train that passed the mission once a week on a Sunday. We would use our shovels to collect coal, carrying it back home the best way we could, with all the cousins and friends. If we had no coal and wood there was no heat, fire or a way of cooking our meals."
>
> Aunty Helen Murray[35]

May Collett, also speaking to Read, named the burden that inadequate infrastructure placed specifically on women: "Them houses are hard to keep clean, fibro houses, especially if you've got a lot of little kids."[36] These accounts together describe a material reality of absent amenity, heavy domestic labor, and improvements that came not through Board initiative but through community advocacy and outside pressure, including a doctor's inspection and residents' organized demands.

The housing inspections conducted under the manager system are similarly absent from the official record, yet they shaped the experience of domestic life directly. The published account Aunty Esther Cutmore gave in *Our Stories Our Elders* extends beyond her interview testimony to include a detail the official record structurally could not hold:

> "Twice a week the manager would come to our home to see if it was clean. They simply knocked on the door and you had to let them in, there was never any notice of them coming and most times I would see my parents cleaning early hours in the mornings for when they would arrive. To clean the floorboards my parents would boil the copper because that was one thing they always checked if it was clean. There were times the manager's wife would walk in carrying a ruler and pen, checking our hair for any head lice from my siblings and me. Once they finished checking the house they would write a letter to the welfare, although I never knew what was written in those letters."
>
> Aunty Esther Cutmore[37]

The reach of the manager's authority into domestic life extended beyond inspection into the extraction of labor. Caroline Bamblett records that her mother, at the age of twelve, worked for the mission manager:

> "At the age of twelve my mother worked for the mission manager at their house, scrubbing floors on her knees and hands with a scrubbing brush, in exchange for rations like potatoes, rice, flour and sometimes milk. These were the days when there was no electricity or hot water, instead they had to boil water using the outside woodfire for hot showers or baths. Even the toilet was outside where a garbage truck used to collect all the sewage waste during the week."
>
> Aunty Caroline Bamblett[38]

None of this appears in the official record. The improvements that eventually came to housing at Erambie are recorded in community accounts as the result of organised community effort. Aunty Michelle Simpson names the Elders responsible directly:

> "There were Elders like my Mum, Aunty Aggie and Josie Ingram who done a lot of hard work for this community. Their hard work set up the Aboriginal Land Council, Preschool, Community Development and Employment Program (CDEP), Yalbillinga, upgrades to the Mission and houses."
>
> Aunty Michelle Simpson[39]

The official archive records what was built, while the community account records the advocacy and organizing through which it was achieved.

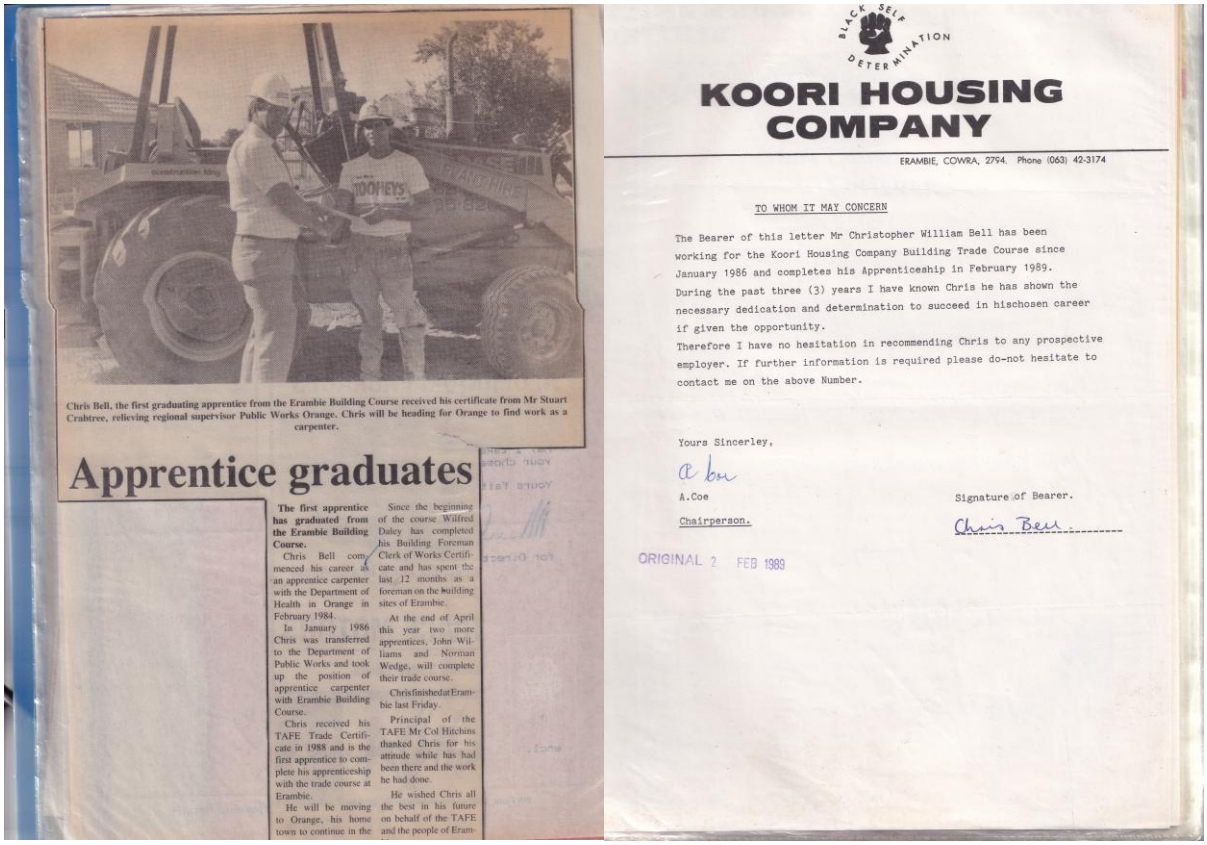
The removal of the full-time manager in 1965 and the repeal of the Protection Act in 1968 initiated a period of community initiative over housing that institutional archives document only partially. The formation of the Koori Housing Company in 1974–75 is the clearest expression of this. Through the Company, Erambie residents organized to survey community needs, engaging architects to design culturally appropriate housing arranged around a courtyard, which was housing conceived from within the community's own understanding of how it wanted to live. When the incoming federal government rejected the design as too expensive, Gordon Simpson, the Company's coordinator, recorded the community's response plainly: "We wanted total control and they said we could not have it."[40]

The Koori Housing Company was one of several community-run organizations that emerged during this period. Caroline Bamblett records their scope and their subsequent loss:

> "During the 80s on Erambie there was many Aboriginal organisations like the CDEP (Community Development and Employment Program), Koori Housing, Aboriginal Home Care, Aboriginal Legal Service, and market garden that were all thriving Aboriginal run businesses, that the community took ownership for, working towards self-determination. Unfortunately, these businesses are now shutdown in Cowra, where these services are now located in larger towns."
>
> Aunty Caroline Bamblett[41]

The Erambie Building Trade Course of the 1980s is a further expression of this period toward self-determination, and one documented almost entirely in community-held records rather than institutional ones. An Erambie resident spoke in an interview about what it meant to build those houses, cutting frames by hand, working the roof, doing the joinery. He recalled around thirty-five participants moving through the program over four years. He continues to work as a trainer and mentor in the construction industry.

The self-determination era is documented not in institutional archives but in the personal collections of community members. An Erambie resident has kept a careful record of his participation in the Building Trade Course: apprenticeship record slips showing his training in carpentry and joinery, award certificates from the Department of Technical and Further Education NSW presented at Cowra TAFE, a Koorie Housing Encouragement Award, an ANPWS scheme publication showing photographs of construction work at Erambie, and newspaper clippings recording the program's outcomes. One clipping shows a member of parliament handing over the keys to the second house built by Erambie apprentices, a group of young men standing in front of the completed building. Another records fourteen young Indigenous men receiving certificates for completing the Job Ready Course.



Chris Bell, the first graduating apprentice from the Erambie Building Course received his certificate from Mr Stuart Crabtree, relieving regional supervisor Public Works Orange. Chris will be heading for Orange to find work as a carpenter.

Apprentice graduates

The first apprentice has graduated from the Erambie Building Course.

Chris Bell commenced his career as an apprentice carpenter with the Department of Health in Orange in February 1984.

In January 1986 Chris was transferred to the Department of Public Works and took up the position of apprentice carpenter with Erambie Building Course.

Chris received his TAFE Trade Certificate in 1988 and is the first apprentice to complete his apprenticeship with the trade course at Erambie.

He will be moving to Orange, his home town to continue in the

Since the beginning of the course Wilfred Daley has completed his Building Foreman Clerk of Works Certificate and has spent the last 12 months as a foreman on the building sites of Erambie.

At the end of April this year two more apprentices, John Williams and Norman Wedge, will complete their trade course.

Chris finished at Erambie last Friday.

Principal of the TAFE Mr Col Hitchins thanked Chris for his attitude while has had been there and the work he had done.

He wished Chris all the best in his future on behalf of the TAFE and the people of Eram-

BLACK SELF DETERMINATION

KOORI HOUSING COMPANY

ERAMBIE, COWRA, 2794. Phone (063) 42-3174

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

The Bearer of this letter Mr Christopher William Bell has been working for the Koori Housing Company Building Trade Course since January 1986 and completes his Apprenticeship in February 1989. During the past three (3) years I have known Chris he has shown the necessary dedication and determination to succeed in hischosen career if given the opportunity.
Therefore I have no hesitation in recommending Chris to any prospective employer. If further information is required please do-not hesitate to contact me on the above Number.

Yours Sincerley,

A.Coe

Chairperson.

Signature of Bearer.

Chris Bell.

ORIGINAL 2 FEB 1989

Figure 6: Newspaper clipping: 'Chris Bell, the first graduating apprentice of the Erambie Building Trade Course, received his certificate from Stuart Crabtree, relieving Regional Supervisor, Public Works NSW', and Koori Housing Company referral letter. (Source: Personal collection of Erambie community member, 2025).

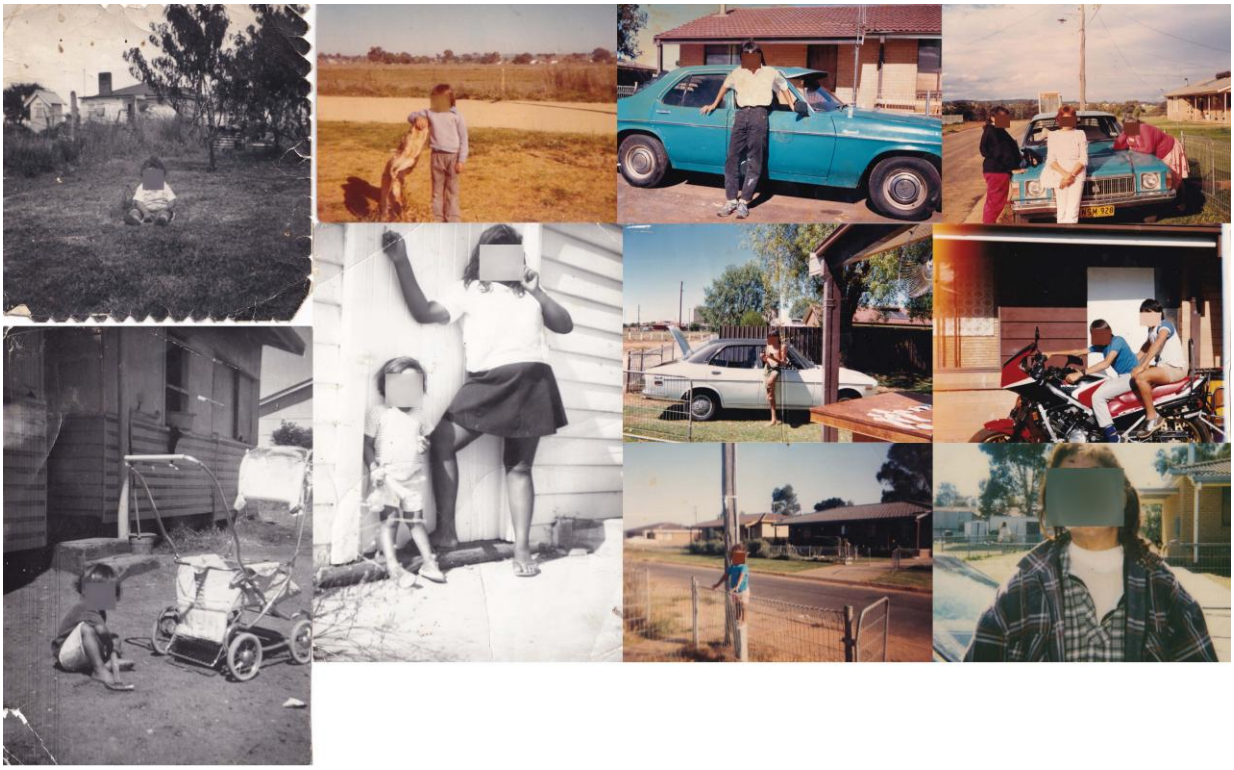


Figure 7: Family photographs documenting everyday life at Erambie, including children in gardens and relatives gathered outside homes. (Source: Generously shared by an Erambie community member, 2025. Faces obscured.)

An Erambie resident's personal photograph collection documents the life made in those houses: family images of babies in gardens, children in front yards, relatives gathered outside homes. The ordinary texture of belonging that no official archive thought to record.

Aunty Helen Murray responded to the gaps in the official record in a different way. Over two years, working in her spare time at TAFE, she built a miniature physical replica of Erambie across three historical stages: the red tin huts of the 1930s–1940s, the fibro houses of the 1960s–1970s, and the more recent housing. She worked from memory, using toothpicks and tweezers to make doors and windows, guided in part by a photograph of her own mother standing in front of the tin huts:

> "It was a project I started from memory going back to all the families that I remember on the mission. Each home was constructed during the different generations using objects from the reject shop, like using toothpicks and tweezers to make doors or windows. I saw a picture of my own Mum standing in front of the tin huts in her generation, which inspired me to create a project that was significant to me and I'm very proud of my work."
>
> Aunty Helen Murray[42]

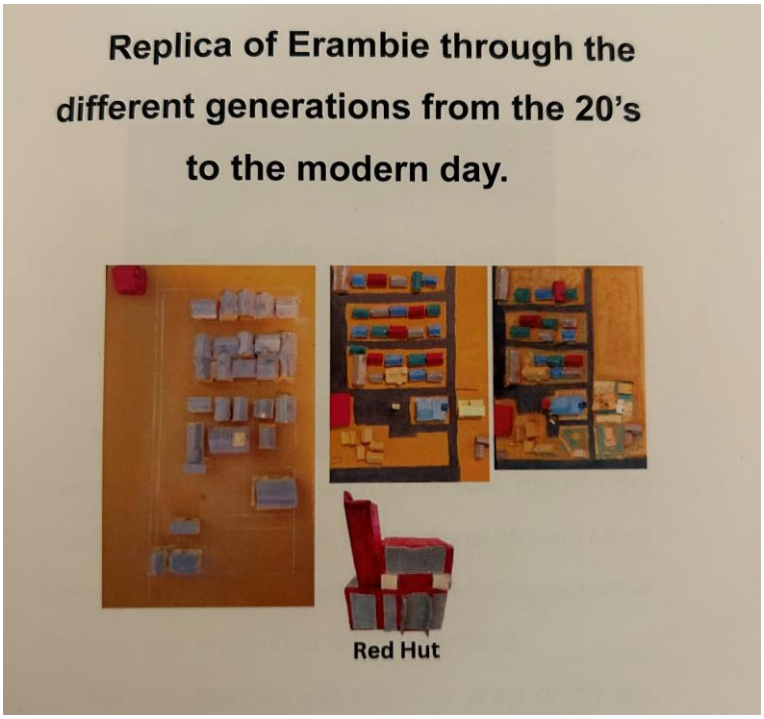


Figure 8: Helen Murray's models of Erambie, from Our Stories Our Elders.

The model documents spatial knowledge that is absent from the institutional archives including the layout of sections, the progression of housing types across generations, the physical form of a community across time. It is an architectural record made by a community member from memory for community significance, and as such it stands as one of the most complete accounts of Erambie's built environment encountered in this research.

5. DISCUSSION

Lawrence Bamblett writes that the dominant discourse within the Erambie community "was not about deficit. It was focused on the advantages of being part of the Erambie community."[43] This is the starting point for understanding what the counter-archive reveals. The official archive, by contrast, is not concerned with what the community experienced within those houses and the community account holds what the official record cannot.

What the official record could not hold operated at two scales simultaneously: the town and the mission. At the town scale, Goodall's analysis of the Board's failure to house Aboriginal people in Cowra and across rural New South Wales reveals that "most of the fights were not over houses but over land, land of the smallest but perhaps the most significant size in Australia's colonised history, the house block."[44] The Board offered

housing as a reward for assimilation while white towns withheld the land on which houses could be built. Where the Board did succeed in placing Aboriginal families in town, its "pepperpotting" policy ensured those houses were surrounded on all sides by white neighbors, guaranteeing there would be no Aboriginal residents adjacent, employing housing as an instrument of dispersal and surveillance rather than provision.[45]

At the mission scale, the same logic of spatial control was encoded in the built environment itself. Isabel Coe, reflecting on her childhood at Erambie, describes becoming aware of this only in retrospect:

> "Growing up as a kid, I never questioned why there was a church in the middle of the mission, why there was only one way in and one way out, or why my aunties and uncles all lived next door to one another. There were no shops and even to this day, there are no postal boxes for any mail to be delivered on to the mission. As a young child I never questioned my surroundings as they were a part of my upbringing, and it seemed that my surroundings were normal but unfortunately, as you start getting older you become more curious about things, asking questions becoming aware of the history of Aboriginal people and realising why missions and reserves were established and why they were set up."
>
> Isabel Coe[46]

These are architectural facts that Coe names from lived experience and that no official plan records as instruments of control. However, this spatial knowledge is held in the counter-archive.

The Board's misreading of what Erambie meant to its residents was not incidental but systematic. By 1960 the Welfare Board had begun to characterize residents' attachment to the mission as a failure of ambition, blaming their "habit of clinging together in artificial groups" for the rural hostility that white towns had themselves generated. The 1967 NSW Joint Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Aborigines Welfare extended this logic, finding reserve residents "apparently quite content to remain as they are" and reading that contentment as a problem to be solved:

> "These people live in a community of their own where all are on the same standard of living, where few have any great ambition to get on in the world, where worldly goods are shared and, most important of all, where the stresses of modern living are not experienced... They are apparently quite content to remain as they are. Because there are no higher levels to which they might aspire, the lowest level becomes the norm."
>
> 1967 NSW Joint Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Aborigines Welfare[47]

The committee's phrase "worldly goods are shared" describes, without recognizing, the Wiradjuri values of reciprocity and collective care that community members name directly as the source of Erambie's significance. Aunty June Murray's account of the same years requires no elaboration:

> "When I lived on the mission everyone helped each other which is why I call them the best years of my life."
>
> Aunty June Murray[48]

Agnes Coe, an Erambie community member, observed that "most of the people who have moved off spend more time on the mission than they do in the houses they rent."[49] This observation quietly dismantles the logic of the Board's relocation program. The houses in town, the Housing Commission dwellings offered as reward for assimilation, could not compete with what Erambie meant to its residents. Neville Williams, speaking to Peter Read in 1979, was direct about what that was: "People always come back here... I wouldn't live in town, I'd rather live in an old shack here somewhere. I just feel I was brought up on the place."[50] For Aunty Michelle Simpson, the attachment was inseparable from the river and from Country: "I got a strong connection to the river which is a part of my identity and gives me a sense of belonging. It's knowing that when I'm on country, I'm home."[51] Bamblett captures the broader orientation in an image that carries the weight of Wiradjuri connection to Country: "Once you drink from the Lachlan River, where the snakes grow bigger, you always come back to the Lachlan River."[52]

What the Board read as passive acceptance of inadequate conditions was in community terms, an active and sustained commitment to place and community across generations.

Aunty Helen Murray's miniature model of Erambie, built from memory over two years at TAFE, documenting the mission across three generations of housing, is one expression of this. An Erambie resident recognizing his mother in a forty-five-year-old National Archives photograph, and another Erambie resident keeping his apprenticeship slips, award certificates and newspaper clippings in a personal collection that traces the community building program of the 1980s and 1990s, are others. These are not supplements to the archive, but rather they are the record of a history the archive was not designed to hold.

An Erambie resident also spoke in an interview about working in the construction industry in Sydney in the 1990s as a member of the CFMEU alongside his brother, and noticing almost no other Aboriginal workers on building sites. A conversation on site with another Aboriginal worker they encountered led the resident, his brother, and others to found the Job Ready Training Program, which continues today through TAFE.[53] The program is one expression of a pattern visible throughout the Erambie community's housing history: knowledge and agency extending outward, from the mission to the industry, from one generation to the next.

ATSI News

Off to a great start: new TAFE course

Fourteen young Indigenous men received certificates for their successful completion of the Job-Ready Course in construction at Lidcombe College of TAFE during NAIDOC week in July.

The six-week course is the first of its kind specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the NSW construction industry.

The course was developed thanks to the initiative of CFMEU Aboriginal Liaison Organiser, Les Tobler, along with Indigenous construction company, Gunai Constructions.

They found strong support for the idea at Lidcombe College of TAFE and a partnership between the CFMEU and Lidcombe College was quickly formed. Head Teacher of Construction, Colin Warn enthusiastically took on the program and played a key role, along with Les, and Gunai Constructions Murray Free and Chris Bell, in making it all happen.

Making it happen

"My main function," says Les "is to try to break the barriers down for our young people, to give them access to the industry and an opportunity to get the skills that other people obtain; to enable them to be their own self and start to do things for themselves in their own community."

That meant doing the hard yards, to raise money for the course and generate the community and industry support that would make it work.

But Tobler and his mates pulled it off. The Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE Aboriginal Unit provided funding for most of the course. Besides the CFMEU and Labor Council, the list of supporting organisations included major and medium-sized construction companies; Comet and Metro Skills Training, ATSIC, Naamoro Employee Services, Western Sydney Aboriginal Corporation and the Eora Centre.

"I'm proud to stand here today and see all those nephews of mine with all those smiling faces," Les

cials at the Lidcombe College ceremony.

The students were equally enthusiastic. They said they'd learnt a lot and would only have liked a bit more time for all the components covered.

Even those, like Tommy Stewart, who'd previously worked at a variety of different jobs, was glad to hear about the course through the local CDP. He's now starting an apprenticeship as a bricklayer. Mark Smith heads to Jacksons' Landing. Dave Whitton has an apprenticeship with Bovis Lend Lease.

Andrew Pye — the 'quiet achiever' who took out the Award for Excellence – has a job with De-Martin Gasparini.

All 14 students are ready to work in the construction industry or to go on to complete apprenticeships. The course has allowed them to obtain their Green Card induction into OHS standards and to gain basic skills in plan reading, carpentry, concreting and scaffolding, with tickets for hoist and forklift handling and driving and explosive tools operation.

ence and included site visits to the Grocon St Margaret Hospital job in Bourke Street and Multiplex's new Police Headquaters in Parramatta.

All of the 14 student have now found jobs or apprenticeships and are well on the way to a career in the building industry.

For more information on further courses contact Les Tobler at the CFMEU Sydney office: 02. 9285 5222.

Pictured from left: CFMEU Aboriginal Liaison Organiser Les Tobler with students Mark Smith, Dave Whitton, Indigenous TAFE teacher Graham Johnson, Peter Lett, Ronald Totten, Rheanon Bergan, Shane Lock, Michael Stacey, Raymond Adams, Brant Corderoy, Tommy Stewart, Casey Tomkins, Andrew Pye, and Construction head teacher Colin Warn at the presentation ceremony.

HARD HAT 2003 SEPT.

Making it happen: Chris Bell, Colin Warn, Les Tobler, Graham Johnson, Ron Griffin and Murray Free.

Figure 9: 'Off to a great start,' newspaper clipping reporting on the establishment of a new TAFE construction training program founded by Chris Bell, Colin Warn, Les Tobler, Graham Johnson, Ron Griffin and Murray Free (pictured). (Source: Personal collection of an Erambie community member, 2025).

The approach taken in this research which brings these community accounts into direct dialogue with institutional records is in conversation with a broader movement to assert the authority of communities to speak their own histories and to correct records made about them without their participation.[54] In the Australian context this work carries particular significance within current truth-telling and reconciliation initiatives. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap, signed in 2020 between Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, commits to structural change in the way governments work with First Nations communities, including shared access to data and information that reflects community realities rather than administrative priorities.[55] Research that recovers community accounts of housing history that names the unnamed, returns the archived photograph, and centres the community's own understanding of what their homes and their place meant contributes to this project of making the historical record more honest and accountable to the people it concerns.

6. CONCLUSION

The counter-archive assembled through this research reveals a history of Erambie Mission that the official record, which document Erambie as an administrative object, does not contain and in many instances directly contradicts. Comprised of oral histories, community testimonies, personal photograph collections, and community-held documentation, the community account documents Erambie as a place of significance and as a community defined by the attachments and knowledge sustained within and against those conditions across generations, rather than being defined by the conditions imposed upon it. Archival material held across the National Archives of Australia and the Museums of History New South Wales State Archives Collection were produced by administering bodies for administrative purposes and as such reflect the priorities and perspectives of those institutions, not the communities they governed. The counter-archive which expands and contradicts the institutional record, reveals that what was documented as adequate was experienced as deficient, and that what was read as passivity or contentment was in fact a deep and active commitment to place and community.

The act of bringing these accounts into dialogue including returning unnamed photographs to community and gathering oral histories and community-held documents, is a contribution to the broader project of truth-telling that has increasing urgency in the Australian context. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises that better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities depend on records and decisions that reflect community realities rather than administrative priorities.[56] The housing history of Erambie is one such reality, documented here through community knowledge rather than administrative, institutional record, and is more accurate for that recentring.

The architectural documentation of Erambie's built environment is ongoing work that will extend and deepen the findings presented here through tracing the spatial evolution of the mission across its housing eras through drawing and visual analysis.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

RECONSTRUCTING TRADITION: A STRATEGY FOR POST-GENOCIDE GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE

Dena Assaf

RECONSTRUCTING TRADITION:
A STRATEGY FOR POST-GENOCIDE GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE

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This paper will examine the impact of the genocide in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, on the built environment and the implications for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip for an estimated two million internally displaced Palestinians who have lost their homes and livelihoods. The paper will argue that the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip is not merely a reconstruction exercise to re-house the internally displaced population but requires careful consideration and measured actions through a holistic human-centric community-led approach to ensure the history, tradition, identity, and culture of place is not lost forever.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rebuilding of the Gaza Strip has had varied levels of attention in the media and various proposals have been shared in the public domain.[1] None of the proposals shared thus far demonstrate a humanistic approach towards the Palestinian population and the history of the Gaza Strip. The population of the Gaza Strip has undergone a tumultuous and harrowing experience over the last several years, and they deserve a solution for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip that honors them, their families, and communities. For a longer-term peace and security of the Gaza Strip, the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip must provide a durable and sustainable solution taking into account The Hope Paradigm (described in this paper) to allow for a respectful way forward.

The value of history, tradition, culture, and identity cannot be underestimated. As a corollary; the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE) was established in 1988 and has had the ability to maintain a continued annual engagement of international scholars thereby demonstrating that there is worldwide recognition in the value of our traditions, culture and heritage exemplified through our built environments. I therefore argue that the overall destruction of the Gaza Strip through the ongoing genocide, to the point where the majority of the built environment must be reconstructed, emphasizes the importance of supporting an approach that honors Palestinian identity and history.

> "The protection of cultural heritage is essential to preserving the identity, history, and resilience of communities affected by conflict. In Gaza, where the current conflict, widely concluded as genocide has placed the Gaza Strip's invaluable cultural heritage under danger and threat, the need for coordinated, innovative, and courageous efforts has never been greater. Each site, monument, and piece of history lost represents a fragment of collective memory erased, impacting the cultural landscape not only of Gaza but of humanity as a whole."
>
> Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation[2]

2. OVERVIEW AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1. History and Description of the Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip, Palestine, is a small area of 365 sq.km. with a length of 41 km (roughly the length of a marathon) and approximating 6 km at its narrowest part near Gaza City and 12 km at its widest in the south near Rafah City, and is circumscribed by the Mediterranean Sea, Egypt, and Israel. The Gaza Strip is geographically disconnected from the West Bank which together constitute the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and which are also referred to as the Holy Land. The estimated population of the Gaza Strip in 2022 was 2.38 million Palestinians and with its small area is considered one of the most densely populated territories in the world at 6507 persons/sq.km which is 15 times the density of New York City.[3] Since October 2023, the population of the Gaza Strip has decreased due to deaths from the genocide and the area where Palestinians are allowed to reside has been decreased by the Israeli government by over 50% thereby further exacerbating the ongoing humanitarian crisis.[4]

The inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are under occupation by Israel since 1948 and are confined within the borders set by the Israeli government. Historically, the Gaza Strip has been continuously inhabited for over 5300 years as per archeological findings of urban settlements from the 34th and 33rd centuries BCE. Archeological explorations were continuing before October 2023 and the richness of its history is exemplified in the architectural treasures and historical sites throughout the Gaza Strip.

2.2. Current Context and Impact of the Genocide on the Gaza Strip

The focus of this paper is on the current context of the Gaza Strip, and implications of reconstruction on its future. After 7 October 2023, a genocide of the Gaza Strip ensued.[5] The Israeli government conducted an assault on the Gaza Strip which is still ongoing, and the genocidal approach of the Israeli government included the erasure of entire neighborhoods and institutions across the Gaza Strip, in addition to the death of entire family lines. The death toll of Palestinians continues to grow and is a moving target with many missing persons as well, and until the offensive completely ends and a full accounting of deaths can be verified the actual death toll as well as number of injured including amputees will not be known.

The genocide includes the destruction of the built environment from human settlements to historical sites and continues to date, thus the final level of destruction and extent of what has been potentially lost is still to be determined. As of early 2026, estimates from UNOSAT (the United Nations Satellite Center) are that the level of destruction of the built environment is over 80% across the Gaza Strip (Figure 1), and in the northern governorates over 90%.[6] Specific to cultural heritage, "UNESCO has verified damage to 164 sites

since 7 October 2023 – 14 religious sites, 128 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 3 depositories of movable cultural property, 9 monuments, 2 museums and 8 archeological sites."[7] A comprehensive analysis of the destruction will need to be conducted once access to the Gaza Strip is made accessible to professionals and it is safe to conduct field visits.

The genocide upon the Palestinian people and their presence through their built environment, historical sites, educational and health institutions, and cultural heritage has been documented by many organizations and researchers.[8]

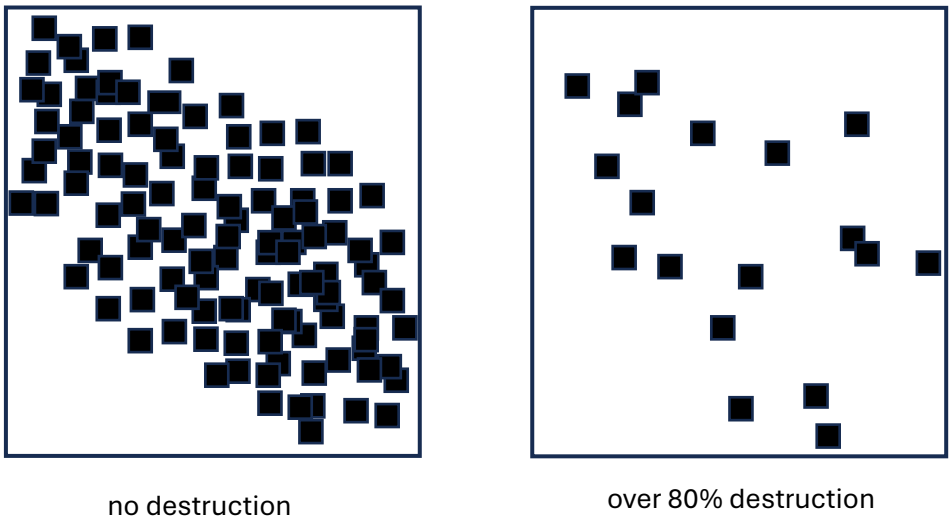

Figure 1: Conceptual graphic representation of built environment in the Gaza Strip and level of destruction post October 2023.

2. CONSTRUCTION PLANS FOR THE GAZA STRIP

2.1. International Perspective

Given the level of destruction across the Gaza Strip, there have been various proposals presented through the media by international actors. These proposals tend to favor an approach that erases completely the landscape as if nothing ever existed there before and propose a redesign of the Gaza Strip with no consideration of its history, tradition, culture, and identity. Additionally, architectural renderings shared demonstrate a total disregard of the historical context of the Gaza Strip or its vernacular architecture and culture. As the Gaza Strip lies along the Mediterranean Sea, international entities see a real estate opportunity with total disregard of the local population, their needs, or future aspirations.

Various discussions have centered on the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip as if it were a blank slate, and have also indicated the opportunities for wider streets, a grid infrastructure, and high-rise buildings and skyscrapers to replace the sometimes ad hoc nature of a built environment that had been developed over time. What is also stark in these discussions is the complete disregard of the local population and the trauma they have endured through this genocide.

The complexities of residential and land ownership are not addressed, nor how to compensate these internally displaced persons who have lost all their possessions, assets, and livelihood, on top of the human losses they have all suffered. The information available about intentions from international actors at the time of the writing of this paper has not shown any respect to the Palestinian people and their future in the Gaza Strip.

2.3. Local Perspective

The level of internal displacement in the Gaza Strip has created a dire humanitarian situation with total recovery and reconstruction needs estimated at US$71.4 billion, with physical damages alone reaching US$35.2 billion.[9] Internally displaced persons are living in makeshift tent encampments, or in school structures or any place where some semblance of shelter can be found. The displaced residents have a yearning to return to their homes, even if it is currently a demolished site. As an example, this was demonstrated in the last two years when ceasefires were in place, and internally displaced persons were allowed to return to Northern Gaza, and they did so in the thousands with no place to reside upon their arrival.[10]

Many news articles have documented the sentiments of internally displaced residents about returning to their destroyed homes. As stated by one internally displaced person living in a makeshift tent, "Of course there are no homes – they've been destroyed – but we are happy just to return to where our homes were, even over the rubble" and another stated, "By God, when they opened the road, I was so happy to go back."[11]

The Palestinian population is very well educated. There were 12 universities in the Gaza Strip (as well as other higher education institutions) before they were all destroyed during the ongoing genocide. Literacy rates are at 98% in the Gaza Strip, as well as in the West Bank.[12] The Palestinian diaspora is also very educated. The Palestinians have the capacity and know-how to undertake the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip in a manner that honors their history, tradition, culture, and identity while also addressing humanitarian needs.

The approximately 2 million internally displaced persons within the Gaza Strip (about 90% of the population)[13] have had to be very creative and innovative in their attempts to survive the genocide, to find and create shelter, address basic needs, and stay connected to the outside world through online

communications. This steadfastness and resilience of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip can be easily translated into action if given the opportunity to engage in the rebuilding of their own communities.

There is a desire of the local population to engage in the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip and to be an active participant in their future.

3. PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GAZA STRIP

In this section, I will outline a strategy for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip which provides agency to the Palestinians in their future, and will also result in a rebuilding of the Gaza Strip that honors Palestinian history, tradition, culture, and identity, as well as works to restore as much as possible of what was destroyed in the genocide. I foresee a future for the Gaza Strip that capitalizes on the strengths and resilience of Palestinians and creates an engaged community with hope for a better future.

Moreover, the paper will also emphasize that the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip must take a holistic human-centric approach respecting the Palestinian population and the suffering they have endured through this live-streamed genocide.

3.1. The Hope Paradigm for the Dignified Rebuilding of the Gaza Strip

I have elaborated on the importance of a holistic human-centric approach towards the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. Figure 2 illustrates the components that I believe must be included in this holistic approach. I have named this The Hope Paradigm for a Dignified Rebuilding of the Gaza Strip (The Hope Paradigm). The Hope Paradigm includes elements that could be overlooked in a solely pragmatic approach which only focuses on the physical and humanitarian needs of the displaced population of the Gaza Strip. The main components of The Hope Paradigm include beneficiaries, attributes, and context.

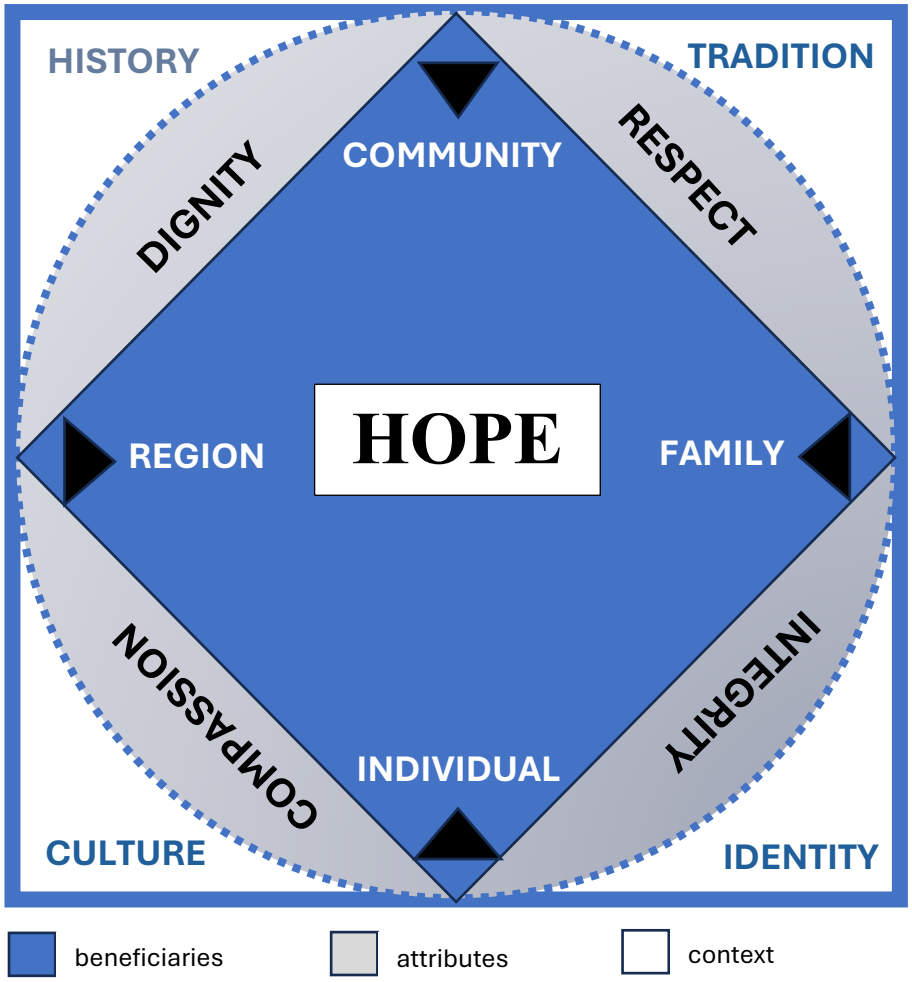

Figure 2: The Hope Paradigm for a Dignified Rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.

The beneficiaries of this paradigm are at the levels of the Individual, Family, Community, and Region. It is important to recognize the different levels of beneficiaries and their specific perspectives and needs. By considering the different levels of beneficiaries within the strategy for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip, there will be greater ownership and success in the implementation of the different phases of development. The genocide has not only obliterated the built environment but also impacted family structures and individual agency. There is significant trauma from an extended genocide of several years, and how to heal individuals, families, and communities will require understanding and compassion for what they have gone through. Providing different segments of society, the ability to be engaged and empowered in their future will be an important aspect of healing this trauma. A successful rebuilding of the built environment also requires the rebuilding of society first and foremost.

The attributes to be considered are Dignity, Respect, Compassion, and Integrity. These attributes provide a lens through which to examine the appropriateness of any solution or approach to be taken. I emphasize these attributes as important to any decision-making process in the Gaza Strip because the genocide has been on a people and their struggles for survival and has not been merely physical in nature and thus we must recognize the trauma perpetrated upon a genocided population. I find missing in the various analyses and assessments a recognition of the human element and thus my call for a holistic human-centric approach.

And the context recognizes the uniqueness of the Gaza Strip and the various aspects we should consider when designing a solution for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. The context components include History, Tradition, Culture, and Identity. Each of these context components has multiple aspects that can be examined and each recognizes that the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip should be uniquely Palestinian and cannot be a cookie-cutter solution done in isolation from the Palestinian reality, history, and identity.

3.2. Preparatory Analysis and Pre-Rebuilding Actions

It needs to be recognized that the level of destruction in the Gaza Strip has created a catastrophe for all involved, and the complexity of issues that need to be addressed prior to any reconstruction effort is numerous. Before any reconstruction process, a respectful approach to the demolished sites is required.

Given the level of destruction across the Gaza Strip, and ongoing assault, steps still need to be taken to extract human remains in a dignified manner. In addition, efforts should be made to provide the inhabitants of homes demolished with the ability to retrieve their belongings as much as possible. This is a form of respect for the affected population and shows compassion for their plight. And this also applies to historical and cultural sites where any pieces of the demolished buildings or their contents should be preserved. Cataloging what is found is important to the preservation of these historical sites.

Additional elements that need to be addressed prior to reconstruction efforts include an inventory and documentation of all historical and cultural sites across the Gaza Strip, and their level of destruction. This work has been started by various organizations including UNESCO, but finalization of such analyses requires verification on site which cannot be conducted at this time due to ongoing conflict and lack of access. Additional elements to be addressed include land and home ownership rights, as well as registry of deaths and related inheritance issues.

As this paper focuses on the traditional environment and what we can still save and restore, I believe there are additional measures to be taken to determine the elements of the traditional environment and sense of place that should have all attempts made to restore or preserve. Professionals and institutions may have

documentation useful to such an analysis which should be done neighborhood by neighborhood, however the general population will be a critical resource for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip. A rapid assessment can be conducted once it is safe to do so, where the internally displaced can be surveyed for initial inputs on what their views are on the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip, what their aspirations are, what they consider of significant value that may have been destroyed during the genocide, and what they would prioritize for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip in their respective neighborhoods, etc. Technology and online tools can be utilized to help in gathering such data.

More extensive surveys can be conducted in each neighborhood to be rebuilt through local committees made up of the residents of each neighborhood. These more extensive surveys through community engagement can inquire about the tangible traditional environment, but also identify other aspects less tangible that created the character and sense of place of each neighborhood. It is vital that the memories of the residents of the Gaza Strip be captured as much as possible so as to preserve as much as we can of what has been destroyed or lost. If what has been destroyed cannot be restored, then it can be captured in other ways to be determined. The goal is to honor Palestinian history and heritage, and recognize the value of what has been destroyed through a genocide.

3.3. Community Empowerment and Engagement Strategy

I believe that the best approach to address the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip is a community led participatory approach. It has already been demonstrated through the various ceasefires in the Gaza Strip that the displaced Palestinian population seeks to return to their neighborhoods and homes even if fully destroyed. This personal interest to return to one's home is inherent in the Palestinian culture.

The creation of local committees would allow the residents of different neighborhoods to have agency over their future and be integral to the decision making related to the rebuilding of their neighborhoods. Their participation in the rebuilding of their respective neighborhoods will also provide income generation to the displaced population who have also lost their livelihoods. Youth engagement will be integral to the approach, which will provide them with hope for rebuilding their future.

Figure 3: Formation of Local Committees to mobilize community engagement and leadership

Figure 3 is a conceptual representation of the types of local committees that could be formed in each neighborhood. This will allow for community engagement and empowerment in the rebuilding process in the Gaza Strip, as well as addressing intersecting needs. These local committees could be incorporated into a governance structure which can then engage and report to regional committees to allow for coordination and support across neighborhoods. Given the extent of reconstruction that will be required and the rehousing of almost the entirety of the Gaza Strip population, a localized decentralized approach is needed to share the responsibility across the Gaza Strip. The alternative approach being suggested by external international actors would not be a realistic alternative as it would require a centralized approach which would not include the local population in the design of the rebuilding process and decision making for their future. Additionally, a localized decentralized approach would allow for local know-how and skills in construction to be utilized, whereas the centralized approach including emulating skyscraper cities would also require external know-how and technologies not available in the Gaza Strip thus slowing down implementation while also eliminating the inclusion of Palestinian history, tradition, culture, and identity.

3.3.1. The Great Omari Mosque, Gaza City

As demonstrated by the projects managed by various organizations such as the Center for Architectural Conservation (Riwaq) and the Gaza City Municipality, there are ongoing efforts to preserve or restore historical sites as they become damaged by the ongoing Israeli offensive. An example is the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City which is the oldest mosque in the Gaza Strip (over 1390 years old), and it occupies a site that has been repurposed for worship for over 3000 years (Figures 4 and 6). The Great Omari Mosque was bombed and practically destroyed in December 2023 (Figures 5 and 7). The work on the restoration of this mosque demonstrates the capacity of the community to undertake reconstruction projects even under dire circumstances. In this example, the community mobilized to support this project worked to collect parts of the building from the area after the bombings so that the restoration could utilize as many parts of the original structure as possible. Figure 8 shows the efforts of the community to organize the stones they found to allow for reconstruction and restoration of the mosque.

The community was also asked if they wanted to improve on the design of the historical site, by for example increasing the size of the inner courtyard utilized for prayers. The community communicated that they wanted the mosque to be restored to exactly as it was before with no alterations. Consequently, the decision of the community was respected, and the ongoing reconstruction is doing its best to honor the community's choice of restoring The Great Omari Mosque to its previous glory.

As part of The Hope Paradigm (Figure 2), I stressed the importance of decision making in the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip utilizing attributes of dignity, respect, compassion, and integrity. This example exemplifies how these attributes were factored into the reconstruction of the mosque by providing dignity to the community by respecting the community's design decisions, showing compassion for their feelings about the historical site and its value to their community, and demonstrating integrity by asking the community's input in the first place, and then honoring the agreement made on how to move forward.

Figure 4: Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City before its destruction. (Source: Riwaq Photo Archive, 2021).

Figure 5: Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City after its destruction. (Source: Riwaq Photo Archive, December 2023).

Figure 6: Interior Courtyard of the Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City before its destruction. (Source: Riwaq Photo Archive, 2021)

I also want to take the opportunity to highlight from these Figures the unique architectural features of the Great Omari Mosque. Throughout the Gaza Strip in the many historical sites and century old residential buildings were valuable cultural and architectural heritage that have been either damaged or destroyed by Israel's genocidal campaign against the Palestinians. It is our duty, such as demonstrated in the Great Omari Mosque example, to do our best to salvage any parts of these buildings, monuments, and sites. As part of the preparatory process before any reconstruction there would be the need to identify sites to be recovered, and document what remains. And like done for the Great Omari Mosque a scavenger hunt would need to be conducted with the cataloging of pieces found to allow for either full or partial restoration of the sites damaged or destroyed, or if that is not possible at all then the remnants found can be given a respectful home to display parts of what once was.

Figure 7: Interior Courtyard of Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City after its destruction. (Source: Riwaq Photo Archive, December 2023).

Figure 8: Beginning of restoration work of Great Omari Mosque in Gaza City including collection and sorting of its stones. (Source: Riwaq Photo Archive, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

The overall situation existing in the Gaza Strip today has created a climate of chaos, destruction, and displacement. The magnitude of issues that need to be addressed to resettle and address the humanitarian needs of the population is enormous and growing daily. This paper focused on the massive extent of destruction of the built environment in the Gaza Strip due to the genocide, and emphasized that the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip is not merely an exercise in pragmatic construction and allocating the required funding. Any rebuilding of the Gaza Strip will need to address the history, tradition, culture, and identity of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, and work to restore the unique sense of place throughout the Gaza Strip.

In the paper, I proposed that a holistic human-centric approach through a community empowerment and engagement strategy would provide a strategic approach to the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip ensuring the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip rebuild their neighborhoods in a manner that satisfies their needs while also honoring their history, tradition, culture, and identity. The formation of local committees at the neighborhood level could form the basis for a decentralized approach to the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.

The paper also emphasized that to bring hope back into the community, the proposed community empowerment and engagement strategy should utilize attributes of respect, dignity, compassion, and integrity throughout the decision-making process while also focusing on different levels of beneficiaries from the individual, to the family, to the community, and then the region. A holistic human-centric approach will not only rebuild the Gaza Strip but also help to restore the traditional elements of the built environment that could otherwise be lost forever and create an environment of safety and ownership by the community.

There is hope for the future of the Gaza Strip if the process of reconstruction is respectful to what was there before and the Palestinians who live there.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

DWELLING SCIENCE AND THE VERNACULAR: ALEXANDER KLEIN'S *SIEDLUNGEN* ACROSS GERMANY AND MANDATORY PALESTINE

Ekaterina Prozorova, Alona Nitzan-Shiftan

DWELLING SCIENCE AND THE VERNACULAR: ALEXANDER KLEIN'S *SIEDLUNGEN* ACROSS GERMANY AND MANDATORY PALESTINE

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This article relocates the vernacular within interwar modernism through Alexander Klein's dwelling science – a planning rationality that distilled domestic routines into modern dwelling types. Following Klein from Weimar Germany to Mandatory Palestine across three scales – the single-family house, the Siedlung estate, and the semi-urban settlement – we show how inherited spatial intelligence became the operative material of modern planning, recoded as a portable grammar of dwelling. Klein's moderate modernism joined calculation to cultural stabilization. Habitability became a political instrument within the mode of coloniality, binding population to claimed land across modern settlement.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates *dwelling science* – the systematic effort to render life processes, privacy, and psychological comfort architecturally legible – and its constitutive entanglement with the vernacular. The encounter between these two seemingly opposed registers, the procedural and the inherited, is examined through the work of Alexander Klein, an architect associated with one of the most calculation-driven strands of interwar modernism. Best known for his diagrammatic housing studies in Weimar Germany, Klein developed a method that translated practically and historically deposited spatial intelligence into typological and measurable form. His work is the instrument of this inquiry: a case study in which dwelling science did not suppress vernacular knowledge but recoded and organized it.

Despite the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern often advanced by advocates of the modern movement, recent scholarship has shown that the vernacular was never excluded by modern architecture as its suppressed "other." The vernacular occupied an active, if contested, place within interwar architectural culture as inherited dwelling knowledge that modern projects drew on and redirected toward new technical and territorial ends.[1] More than a residual category of tradition, it became one of the media through which modernism negotiated the relationship between social life and architectural form, between renewal and habit, and between claims to universality and historically situated relations of power.[2] The question is therefore not only how modernism represented the vernacular, but how inherited forms of dwelling knowledge were operationalized and made productive within modern planning itself – and at what political cost.

"Vernacular" is used in this article in two related registers. Ontologically, it names *habitat*: the accumulated, pre-reflexive spatial intelligence embedded in routines of everyday dwelling – produced not by discipline but by cultural habit and social practice. Operatively, it names a *procedure*: the extraction of transferable spatial relations from that habitat – privacy gradients, movement sequences, threshold hierarchies – and their

redeployment as typological instruments. Klein never used the term vernacular, but his method embodied these two related registers. Anthony Vidler's account of the "third typology" clarifies this relation retrospectively. In Vidler's formulation, inherited urban fabric carries "layers of accrued implication deposited by time and human experience" that cannot be discarded but can be redirected, providing "a key to newly invested meanings."[3] Vidler's framework belongs to the 1970s rationalist debate, but it names a structural possibility already present in Klein's practice two generations earlier. The vernacular enters Klein's work as an operative resource – the practical and cultural deposit to be mined, recoded, and redirected.

This operative logic becomes especially sharp in the case of settlement, which denotes the technological production of housing, infrastructure, and landscape into a single instrument of demographic and spatial order. Settlement translated the relation between built form and everyday life into a territorial and administrative scale. That operationalization belongs to the logic of coloniality – an intrinsic mode of modern thought and action. This mode was constitutive of modernity itself, active wherever settlement claimed land and made it habitable. Klein's dwelling science operated within this logic – extracting from inherited practice, recoding as transferable spatial relations, and deploying the vernacular as a portable grammar to create continuous patterns of dwelling.

To make this argument, the article examines the relation between two modern settlements and their social and political context. The first is in Weimar Germany, where inner colonization linked land recultivation to the scientization of the social, making settlement a key instrument of territorial organization and welfare reform. The second is in Mandatory Palestine, where that same modern logic operated in the context of Zionist colonization. The Zionist movement pursued settlement not by means of sovereign power, but under the mediation of British colonial rule – a practice we term *coloniality under colonialism*. The article follows Klein across both geographies during processes of ordering the environment and the population, turning the attachment to land into a pertinent question. It examines how Klein's dwelling science was not merely transferred from Germany to Mandatory Palestine but transformed in due course by the new territorial, demographic, and cultural data he encountered.

We argue that Klein's oeuvre across geographies is best understood through the concept of *moderate modernism*. The term refers to an intermediate register in which architecture recollected its traditional tools – composition, type, spatial hierarchy – while placing them within new demands for calculation, normalization, and social relevance. In Weimar Germany, it oriented settlement toward neighborhood value and cultural legibility. In Mandatory Palestine, it became a mnemonic device through which privacy and habitability could be reestablished for émigré settlers in an unfamiliar landscape.

The article's theoretical positioning draws on Stanford Anderson's distinction between social and disciplinary memory that helps explain how Klein's dwelling science extracted from vernacular practice the spatial relations that could be rendered comparable, typified, and reproduced.[4] Kenny Cupers situates Klein's work within the broader ideological horizon of modern settlement, showing how earth-boundedness became a shared project across progressives and reactionaries.[5] Ann Laura Stoler's insistence that colonial governance worked not through technical rationality alone but through affective registers that made new spatial orders feel inhabitable explains why habitability became a political instrument within settlement.[6] Ginger Nolan clarifies how embodied habits became operative material within modern planning, showing how Klein could transform vernacular knowledge into architectural method without reducing it to folk citation.[7]

How did this mode of coloniality via vernacular knowledge prepare the tools for settler-colonialism? Given Klein's eventual marginalization, another open question is how his method is located in this project. Such inquiries remain open, though this article provides a sharpened conceptual ground for that work. What can be stated from the outset is that the operationalization of the vernacular was never politically neutral; it joined technical rationality to cultural stabilization, activating habitability as a modern territorial form. The sections that follow move from the ideological horizon of modern settlement to Klein's projects at the scales of a house, a neighborhood, and semi-urbanity, tracing how dwelling science turned inherited relations to place into operative form.

2. VERNACULAR, EARTH-BOUNDEDNESS, AND THE COLONIAL FACET OF MODERNISM

The colonial facet of modernism entered architectural discourse through a territorial understanding of life. Friedrich Ratzel's nineteenth-century concept of *Lebensraum* linked physical space to the size and "mode of existence" of a population. In the early twentieth century, Leberecht Migge translated the territorial logic into a settlement program. Inward colonization (*Binnenkolonisation*) focused on food production, allotment gardening, and the intensified cultivation of domestic land, which appeared in Migge's work as techniques for extending productive life across territories.[8] Gardening colonies – encompassing both "grassroots" working-class allotments on urban wasteland and the social improvements pursued by bourgeois reformers – extended this agenda across the social spectrum. In Weimar Germany, the garden-city agenda and the wider project of life reforms (*Lebensreform)* charged the territorial program with distinct biopolitics – modernist settlement promised health, productivity, and social stability by reorganizing land together with the lives attached to it. Within this horizon, the concept of land-boundedness *(Bodenständigkeit*) did not indicate territorial expansion as such but rather designated the ideal of rootedness through which settlement could be represented as locally grounded and continuous with the regional landscape of the "homeland" (*Heimat)*. Cast as an intrinsic quality

of the rural vernacular, land-boundedness made settlement appear organic, continuous, and native to the land it reordered. Cupers has shown that settler-colonial consciousness made earth-boundedness a shared project across progressives and reactionaries.

By the interwar decades, colonization, cultivation, and modernization had become co-constitutive dimensions of a unified settlement rationality, each legitimizing and requiring the others. Designing for local and regional contexts was not a reaction against rationalist modernization but one of the conditions that produced it, contributing to the standardization, typification, and normalization that defined architectural modernism.[9] The vernacular served as a medium through which political claims over territory and population could acquire architectural legitimacy. Transposed to the Weimar context as a conceptual lens, Stoler's framework illuminates the dimension of *Bodenständigkeit* that purely technical concepts of housing reform missed. In her article "Affective States," Stoler argues that colonial governance was never secured by rationality alone. The very operations of public reason depended on a "visceral register" of sentiments, attachments, and intimate habits through which imperial arrangements acquired the texture of norm and durability.[10] Settlement, read through this lens, could not rely only on modern instruments of planning; it had to produce familiarity – the feeling that a new spatial order was inhabitable. Ginger Nolan clarifies how this conversion occurred within modern thought more broadly. For Nolan, the category of "savage thought" was not a pre-modern residue but a construction of modern rationality itself – a means of capturing embodied habits and converting them into architectural structures.[11]

Klein's early work in Germany demonstrates precisely how this conversion operated. His designs show how vernacular legibility could enter modern architecture without reduction to folk citation or nostalgic image. What came to the fore instead were relations between house and open space, privacy and exposure, interior sequence and movement – instruments for ordering life processes through architectural form. Klein's Villa Schulz in Berlin-Dahlem (1927) shows how these claims converge at the scale of the single-family house, establishing the typological model he would carry forward into his neighborhood and settlement work.

The Berlin housing debates of the 1920s clarify the issues at stake. In 1924, Berlin's chief architect, Martin Wagner, proposed to decentralize metropolitan order by organizing suburban settlement around an expanded transport network. Five years later, the mayor of Berlin, Gustav Böß, declared low-rise construction – above all, the single-family house – the desired objective of a healthy population policy.[12] Such statements locate housing type directly contingent on the management of territory and population, stabilizing the settled forms of life.

Klein entered this field as an émigré architect from the former Russian Empire who recalibrated his neo-classical training to the economic and social pressures of Weimar housing culture. Distant from the avant-

garde's manifestos, he pursued an architecture in which axiality, proportion, and compositional hierarchy could be reworked to accommodate economic demands and modern domestic use. His earliest publications examined German housing policy and sought to develop types of modern dwelling that accord with the disciplinary integrity of architecture.[13] Werner Hegemann, the editor of the journal *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, who provided Klein with a platform to publish his vision, exacted this position. Klein's ordering of interior and exterior space, Hegemann wrote, was a logic legible in "both the Palladian villa and the farmhouse."[14]

Villa Schulz in Berlin-Dahlem does not break with but rather draws on disciplinary architectural knowledge. The project occupies a pivotal place in Klein's development because it binds the ordering of the house to the organization of the plot as an integrated living terrain. The wooded site, the preservation of mature trees, the solar orientation, and the requirement of a continuous residential garden are absorbed into the generative logic of the plan. The project's intelligence lies in the way it loosens strict axiality without abandoning order. Where a full axial development cannot be sustained, Klein converts it into partial axes, controlled visual continuities, and a calibrated relation between interior rooms and exterior ground (Figures 1, 2). The house-and-garden type thus becomes a device for making land and dwelling mutually intelligible (Figure 3).

The project's typological significance extends beyond this single commission. Its later reappearance in *Das Einfamilienhaus. Südtyp* (1934) confirms that Klein treated this type as a portable model for a wider planning problem, asking how to produce a settled living environment under modern conditions of standardization and spatial reform.[15]

Klein remained distant from the explicitly political uses of *Lebensraum.* His planning language was anchored instead in spaciousness, visual integrity, psychological comfort, and the fit between human behavior and physical space. Yet that distance should not obscure the broader horizon in which his work operated. Trained within a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century engineering ethos, he understood the expansion and refinement of living territory as a positive task. In that respect, his work remained congruent with the modern equation, as Cupers argues, of colonization with cultivation.[16] The significance of Villa Schulz lies precisely in this claim. At the scale of the house, the villa makes visible a planning approach in which vernacular legibility, environmental adjustment, and modern rationality were cohered into a single architectural procedure. The next section describes this procedure as Klein's portable architectural grammar from the plot into the *Siedlung* estate.

Figure 1: Villa Schulz, Berlin-Dahlem, 1927. The entrance pathway. (Source: photo by the author, 2026).

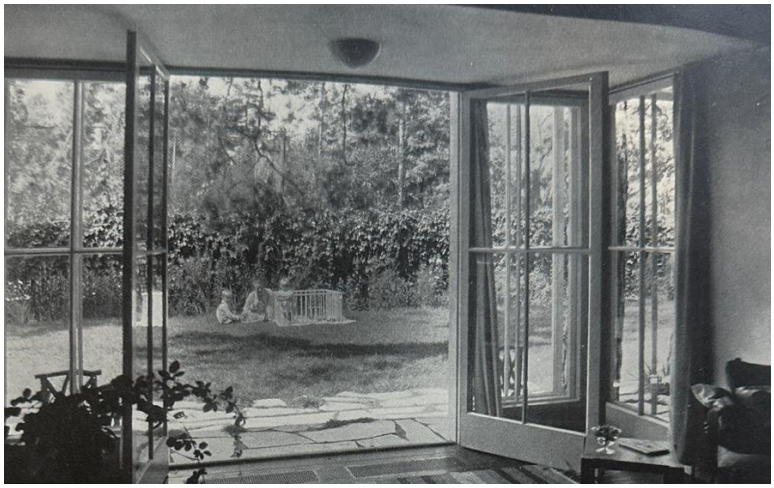

Figure 2: Villa Schulz. Glass doors from the living room to the garden. (Source: Alexander Klein's archive KL1-5, BHRC,[17] Technion).

Figure 3: Villa Schulz. Garden facade. (Source: Alexander Klein's archive KL1-5, BHRC, Technion).

3. FROM EXHIBITION ESTATE TO SOCIAL UNIT: AM FISCHTALGRÜND AND BAD DÜRRENBERG

The architectural culture of the German *Siedlung* movement during the Weimar years included diverse commitments to technology, social reform, and settlement form spanning over a wide political spectrum. The Weissenhof estate of 1927 crystallized the opposition between the radical pole of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) and a more moderate architectural modernism, sharpening the desire for another model of housing culture. Heinrich Tessenow curated in 1928 the *Am Fischtalgrund* exhibition in Berlin-Zehlendorf as a counter-model housing estate. The three houses of Klein in the exhibition strengthen the agenda that middle-class housing reform could be modern while respecting vernacular values.

The institutional setting of *Am Fischtalgrund* makes that negotiation especially clear. Although the development company GAGFAH (Non-Profit Joint-Stock Company for Employees' Housing) was often cast as "reactionary,"[18] its actual practice was far less dogmatic. The company engaged technologically ambitious builders, collaborated with architects across the professional spectrum, and treated the exhibition as a testing ground for typologies that could fit mass production.[19] The estate addressed a timely problem – how to standardize without generalizing, how to grant typological order a socially persuasive form. Located on a narrow ridge in Zehlendorf, adjacent to the radically modern *Waldsiedlung "Onkel Tom's Hütte,"* entangled the settlement in the much-cited Zehlendorf roof-war (*Zehlendorfer Dächerkrieg*), [20] where pitched and flat roofs became simplified markers of wider conflicts over architectural modernity (Figure 4). Yet Tessenow himself did not reduce the project to roof form;[21] he sought instead how to negotiate between inherited practice and modern building. Seeking typology in affordable dwelling was a touchstone through which he could relate historical, political, and architectural considerations.[22]

By the time Klein entered the project, he was preoccupied with developing diagrammatic method of evaluating dwelling plans. In 1927 and 1928 he published a sequence of texts on small-apartment planning and on the graphical evaluation of dwelling plans, moving steadily toward a method that joined typological analysis to concrete conditions of everyday life.[23] His position among moderate modernists was equally legible. Like Tessenow's "new simplicity" and Schmitthenner's "New Tradition,"[24] Klein's work treated cultural intelligibility as a condition of architectural authority. What separated him was the route: where they grounded intelligibility in inherited form, Klein sought it through typological discipline and the rationalized minimum plan.[25] That ambition came into sharper focus in Klein's contribution to the edited volume *Probleme des Bauens* (1928), where his stepwise description of graphic plan evaluation was accompanied by drawings from Tessenow's *Hausbau und dergleichen* – projects in which classical order and vernacular reference were already put in productive tension.[26] Klein endorsed Tessenow's attempt to orient the "housing culture"

toward "true simplicity and noble harmony."[27] and his vision of architecture as "intrinsically linked to its rationalization as following the clearest, simplest, and most logical solutions."[28]

Klein deliberately separated plan evaluation from construction technology. His types followed social assumptions and daily life rather than building techniques. The diagrams situated each plan within a socio-spatial milieu – household composition, income level, climate – and turned qualities ordinarily left to the architect's subjective appraisal, such as spatial sequence and overall impression, into graphic and calculable criteria. Thus, Klein's objective method "robbed the architect of his genius."[29] It demystified "creation" and deprived the author of his subjective vision, reconstructing instead a logic characteristic of vernacular architecture, in which built form emerged through accumulated living experience and practical rationality rather than the whims of the architect.

Am Fischtalgrund offered an early test of this method on the scale of a housing estate. Klein's contribution formed a distinct group of three housing types at the entrance to the exhibition: an apartment building along *Spandauer Straße* and, on the curving *Am Fischtal*, two smaller blocks combining apartment and two-family terraced housing (Figure 5). Their rear façades opened onto a shared lawn that extended toward the *Fischtal* park. The layouts were calculated for households of different sizes while adhering to common principles of efficient room arrangement. On the exterior, the pitched roofs satisfied the estate's formal rules, yet the façades were composed in a restrained geometry of broad planar surfaces, window openings governed by lighting needs and by interior organization rather than by picturesque display.[30] Contemporary commentators responded positively to Klein's ensemble. Hans Joseph Zechlin, the editor at *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst,* praised Klein's "deliberately functional houses," highlighting the floor plans and meticulous calculation of living space as among the most valuable results of the exhibition.[31] The architectural critic Adolf Behne, though unpersuaded by the GAGFAH estate as a whole, insisted that the houses by Tessenow, Poelzig, Mebes, and Klein could not be dismissed as ordinary suburban construction.[32] Klein demonstrated that typological rigor, domestic differentiation, and architectural integrity could excel in the context of architectural vocabulary that was often considered merely conservative.

Bad Dürrenberg Siedlung, planned in 1929 near Merseburg, let Klein extend his logic from an exhibition block to a full workers' estate, drawing him directly into the *Existenzminimum* debate over spatial standards for the modern population.[33] More importantly, the commission clarified what separated his planning principles from the dogmatic tendencies of radical settlement design. Walter Gropius had been initially invited to design the settlement and proposed a scheme following the strict row-estate logic of his *Karlsruhe-Dammerstock*. Resistance surfaced from all directions – from the district administration, from the *Leunawerk*e as employer and financer of the settlers, and from the city architect Friedrich Zollinger. Gropius refused to revise his

design and withdrew.[34] At stake was not modernization itself but the form it should take when applied to a particular population and territory. Adolf Behne captured this in his critique of *Dammerstock's* "dictatorial method": row construction, he argued, "should serve urban design rather than replace it."[35]

Klein submitted a counterproposal that redefined the object of rationalization. His planning began with the household and moved from demographic and economic data toward architectural form. Klein distributed different sizes of dwelling according to household composition – from two-person to five-person families – calibrating rent to the income levels of *Leunawerke*'s middle-ranking employees (Figure 6). Typology was thereby an instrument for matching the structure, affordability, and spatial organization of the household. This premise governed both the interiors and the entire layout of the settlement. Bedrooms received morning light; living rooms and balconies took midday and afternoon sun. Central heating and a shared mechanized laundry removed heavier domestic tasks from the dwelling units, concentrating service infrastructure at the hinge between the settlement and the railway station where everyday movement converged. The result was an integrated standard of performance in which room adjacency, solar orientation, technical equipment, and the economy of time operated together.

The same user-centered rationalism organized movement and open space on the scale of the estate. Vehicular traffic did not cross the residential zone, entrances faced pedestrian walks, playgrounds were placed between housing rows visible from the dwellings, and construction constraints were absorbed productively by converting assembly spaces into interior green courts (Figure 7). The settlement could thus be imagined simultaneously, in Catherine Bauer's famous formulation, as an "integral unit for planning", an "economical unit for construction and administration", and a "social unit for living."[36] This is the point at which Klein's dwelling science reached its distinguished settlement form: standardization disciplined by composition and the qualitative parameters of daily life.

Bad Dürrenberg, no less than *Am Fischtalgrund*, belongs to our exploration of the architectural middle ground. The affinity with Tessenow's notion of the *Kleinstadt* (small town) and his concept of *Mitte* (Middle) is historically suggestive, even if the documentary record of direct translation remains uneven.[37] Tessenow's own vision of a "third way" avoiding both "extreme forms of non-middle-class society" – capitalism and communism, *sachlich* and "proletarian" ways of building – pointed toward the same architectural territory.[38] Yet the routes to that territory differed fundamentally. Tessenow's middle ground was rooted in a vision of German culture and national belonging. Klein's arrived from the opposite direction. As a post-revolutionary émigré from the Russian Empire, formed neither by German nationalist sentiment nor by socialist conviction, he reached a structurally similar position through the logic of dwelling science itself – through typological discipline and the qualitative parameters of daily life rather than through any politics of place or

origin. *Fischtalgrund* staged that method within the public arena of the exhibition estate. *Bad Dürrenberg* turned it into a full planning procedure, departing from scientific research of habitat and avoiding radical dogmatic form. Together they show how Klein translated dwelling science from the scale of evaluating a residential plan into the organization of a neighborhood. The next section follows the transformation of Klein's work in a different territorial and political landscape.

Figure 4: *Am Fischtal Siedlung*. Rear façade of Klein's two-family terraced house. View through residential street to the neighboring *Waldsiedling (Onkel Tom Hutte*). (Source: photo by the author, 2026).

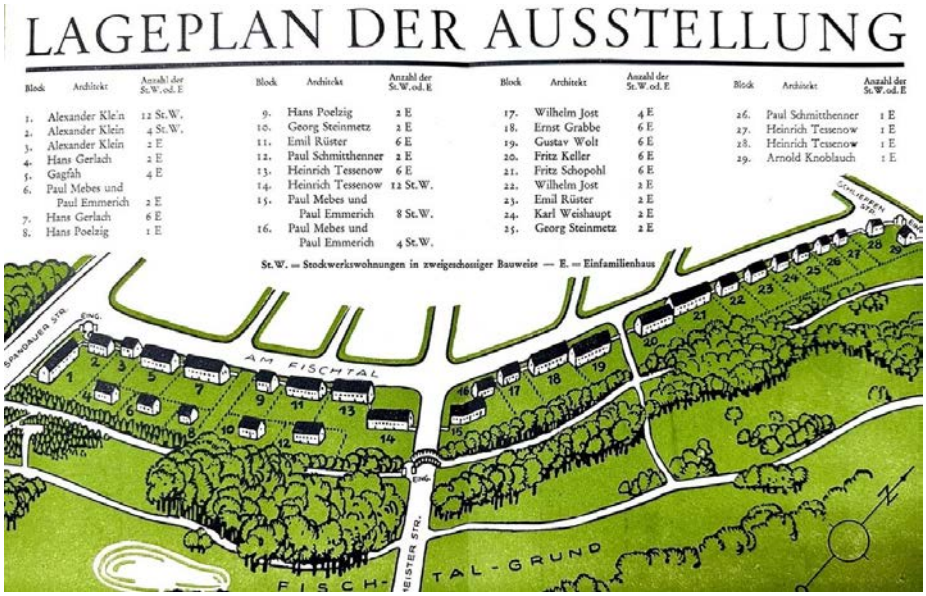

Figure 5: *Am Fischtal Siedlung* layout in the "*Bauen und Wohnen*" exhibition leaflet. Klein's houses no. 1 – 3: twelve-apartment house along *Spandauer Strasse* (1); four-apartment house and two-family terraced house along *Am Fischtal* (2,3). (Source: Alexander Klein's archive KL1-7-1, BHRC, Technion).

Figure 6: *Siedlung Bad Dürrenberg*, four-apartment houses, adjacent to the green space intended for sports grounds. (Source: photo by the author, 2026).

Figure 7: *Siedlung Bad Dürrenberg*, central green area. Front page of the advertising brochure. (Source: Alexander Klein's archive KL1-7-8, BHRC, Technion).

4. A NEIGHBORHOOD FOR GERMAN IMMIGRANTS NEAR HAIFA

Klein's arrival in Mandatory Palestine in 1935 set his method against a problem Weimar had not posed: how to settle, at territorial scale, an immigrant population whose diverse vernaculars belonged to landscapes left behind. Read in retrospect, a memorandum he addressed two years later to Chaim Weizmann, World Zionist Organization leader, reveals this larger framework as the coordinated planning of land and human resources, grounded in the economic fragility of the Zionist enterprise.[39] The procedure Klein proposed – *kulturelle Landesbesiedlung* (cultural settling of the country) – was not contingent on the idea of a national state. It relied instead on expertise of landholding institutions, implementing a scientific planning agenda – soil surveys, infrastructural technologies and legislation – for effective use of resources. Accordingly, land appeared in his proposal as limited, measurable, and demanding planned allocation. Klein cautioned against the waste of resources by inappropriate choice of cultivation or urban layout. Each settlement point would acquire a character matched to its economic function and to the population it received. Non-agricultural settlers would continue the vocations they had practiced before emigration, organized in local enterprises whose products would carry the recognition of regional origin.

His statement was based on his first commission in Palestine – the plan for the Haifa Bay Area and the detailed plan of German immigrants' neighborhood, – later 'Kiryath Bialik B'. There, his aim was to create an environment that would be familiar to German-Jewish émigrés, whom he considered intellectually developed and strongly individualistic. Although not German by origin, the Odessa born architect spent considerable time in Germany to learn the culture. The open question is whether the method he used could accommodate the larger social and ethnic diversity of Jewish émigrés. At this point, we examine this first plan that formed a jumping board to his later emphasis on housing on an urban and national scale.

The neighborhood was a part of Klein's broader planning for residential suburb in the Haifa Bay area. In the 1920s and 1930s, the British developed Haifa as a strategic maritime gateway and an imperial infrastructural node. The city's new harbor, the Palestine Railways network, and an oil refinery concession on the shore turned the bay area into a critical hinge of colonial infrastructure.[40] Alongside British development, Zionist institutions sought to acquire the bay lands – mostly dunes and marshland – for semi-urban Jewish settlement tied to Haifa's economic opportunities. This land was not suitable for agriculture and therefore was not inhabited by fellahin. Yet it is unclear if and how many Bedouins' families were displaced during these developments.

In response to the growing pressure of British oil interests near the coast, Zionist organizations invited British town planner Patrick Abercrombie to prepare a regional scheme capable of accommodating the conflicting demands of imperial infrastructure and residential development. Abercrombie, together with

Clifford Holliday, submitted the Haifa Bay Scheme in 1934. The plan preserved the value of the coastal residential zone, but the location of the industrial zone cut it off from Haifa's urban body. Klein's architectural consultancy to the Jewish National Fund (JNF) – his design for a semi-urban settlement on the land that the JNF purchased, followed the guidelines of the Abercrombie scheme. The earlier Zionist visions of the 1920s spoke in terms of "Greater Haifa,"[41] but Klein's 1935 housing concept was already committed to decentralization and a settlement autonomous of Haifa. The *Plan of Emek Zevulun (Haifa Bay) for Jewish National Fund (JNF) & Palestinian Economic Corporation (PEC)* that he developed between 1935 and 1939 comprised five symmetrically arranged seaside neighborhoods and an eastern residential zone. The German immigrants' neighborhood formed one part of this zone and was developed by RASSCO for middle-class settlers.[42]

The Bay project was meant to accommodate the different social and vocational status of the prospective inhabitants, yet all parts were inspired by the common horizon of land-boundedness. Most poignantly, this idea similarly underlay the progressive camp that would rally the socialist vision of the labor movement that struggled for a state, a modernism that differed from Klein's moderate version. Martin Hershenson has shown that in the 1940 exhibition *Twenty Years of Building.* The Workers Federation framed *Sachlich* architecture through a rhetoric of progress together with environmental rootedness, or *Bodenständigkeit.*[43] Yael Allweil's account of "the individual rooted in the homeland" also clarifies the modern political – not "aboriginal" – character of that figure.[44] Kenny Cupers[45] and Detlef Mertins[46] explain how such rootedness could be congruent with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* through the biological-functional concept of Hannes Meyer, which his disciple, Arieh Sharon, brought to Palestine. The advocates of this vision considered Klein's moderate modernism irrelevant to their ambitions.

The *Gartenstadt* German immigrants' neighborhood was Klein's first realized project in Mandatory Palestine. The social program of this residential community was detached from the collectivist premises of socialist labor settlement. Klein organized the middle-class housing according to criteria such as privacy, individuality, and the cultivated relation between house and garden. His insistence that settlement should "reflect the cultural standard of a society"[47] precisely reveals this position. Against the flat-roof vocabulary of radical Zionist modernism, the gabled roof skyline articulated a different view – one in which cultural familiarity was to anchor settlers in place (Figure 8). The project addressed German-Jewish émigrés who had arrived under conditions of persecution and displacement; for this constituency, the domestic environment had to provide more than shelter – the value of the neighborhood had to cohere cultural legibility and a sense of continuity.

The RASSCO advertising brochure introduced Klein as a "reputable authority" known above all for his typological studies of apartment and settlement layouts. As the brochure explicitly stated, RASSCO did not

deliver an isolated house in an unprepared area but a complete settlement with planted streets, sidewalks, and green areas "formed in the manner of the most attractive suburban residential settlements in Europe."[48] Striving for the mimetic connection with familiar semi-urban landscapes, Klein's design sustained a strict program of environmental control. To secure the desired "living culture", hedge fences were to grow along private plots and residential streets, and landscape architects were to prepare models for either aesthetic or produce garden for the residents to choose. Such measures organized the settlement as a comprehensively designed residential community in which individual property on public land was integrated into the image of the neighborhood. The neighborhood's suburban character was therefore produced through regulation as much as through form.

Klein developed the neighborhood layout along a slightly curved axis running from north to south as the continuation of an existing street. In his August 1937 article in *Habinyan* (The Building) journal, Klein set out the architectural intentions behind this garden-city model. He aimed to remove the familiar defects of urban life – noise, dust, and the domination of speed traffic – from the residential environment.[49] To do so, he replaced the usual road system running directly along the plots with a differentiated network of residential cul-de-sacs that continued as footpaths along the green strip of the Fuara irrigation channel. For Klein, the modern street could not be reduced to vehicular movement; it had to recover its architectural and cultural role within the neighborhood. Klein's staggered layout of the houses – his "double development" – secured privacy and an uninterrupted view of the garden, protected from potentially disturbing neighboring plot. Drawing on the scheme he published in *Das Einfamilienhaus. Südtyp* (1934), Klein compressed the two-story archetype into a one-story volume, conceiving the house as an expandable type with a solid ceiling, so that an additional story could later be added. He preserved the logic of axial design and movement pattern in the two building types, which shared the same basic plan, where all the living areas – the living room, bedroom, and children's room – faced the Western Garden (Figures 9, 10). The level of furnishing and appliances was exceptionally high for the conditions in Palestine at the time.

The memorandum to Weizmann gestures beyond those conditions. Whether the procedure could meet an extension is what the bay project leaves open. Klein's later planning of new towns on coast and hilly landscapes shows how habitability and residential values are compatible with the environmental specificity of a territory and how the dwelling science can be further instrumental for a city scale.

Figure 8: House Type 2 in German immigrants' neighborhood in Haifa Bay, 1936. (Source: Hadas family private archive).

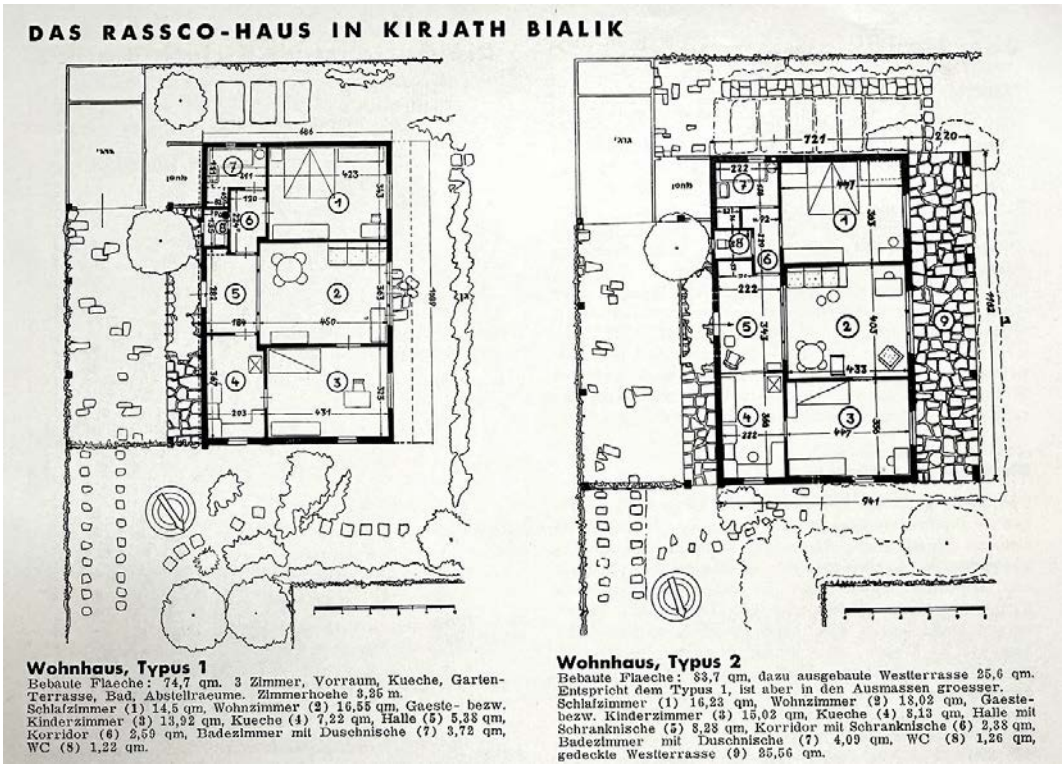

Fig. 9. Layouts for Houses "Type 1" and "Type 2". RASSCO advertising brochure. (Source: Alexander Klein's archive KL1-6-2, BHRC, Technion).

Figure 10: The front page of RASSCO advertising brochure. Models. (Source: Alexander Klein's archive KL1-6-2, BHRC, Technion).

5. CONCLUSION

Dwelling science, this article has argued, emerged through procedural reworking of the vernacular – an encounter whose political stakes this study has traced across two modern settlement contexts. Klein conceived of the house, the *Siedlung* estate, and the semi-urban settlement as connected scales of inhabitation that sustained a single operative logic. The vernacular entered this sequence as a portable grammar carrying recognizable relations between dwelling and communal life. In this process, the architecture studies spatial intelligence and recodes it into the design criteria. The result is a dwelling science that links measurable parameters to qualitative experience. Klein emerges as a key figure of moderate modernism that mediates between calculated typological control and inherited dwelling knowledge. Neither an avant-garde nor conservative, Klein's distinct architectural strategy reworked modernism from within. His modernism was contingent on the vernacular as the operative material from which architectural knowledge, both "high" and "everyday", could be drawn and recoded. Klein's work makes visible a field that architectural history often split – functional calculation and social engineering on one side, vernacular continuity and ordinary practices of dwelling on the other. His projects show the compatibility between these modes.

By comparing the German and Palestinian case studies, the article examines how Klein did not only transfer his dwelling science but reconfigured its premises. In Weimar Germany, inner colonization tied land recultivation to welfare reform. Klein's method operated there at the scales of the house and the estate, drawing on both high architecture – axiality, proportion, compositional hierarchy – and everyday vernacular intelligence such as privacy gradients and the relation between interior spaces and the outdoors. *Villa Schulz* demonstrated this at the scale of the plot, *Am Fischtalgrund* showed typological discipline and domestic differentiation, and *Bad Dürrenberg* brought that logic to the scale of the estate as a coordinated organism of household structure, services, and open space.

In Mandatory Palestine, settlement served the production of territorial attachment for a new population on a recently purchased land. Klein's larger Haifa Bay plan and his "cultural settlement" proposal to Weizmann indicate ambition to plan on an urban-territorial scale – to distribute different settlement types across the entire region. The Haifa Bay commission, a testing ground for this ambition, required an operation on a larger scale, devising housing schemes according to demographic composition, economic geography, and topography. The German immigrants' neighborhood demonstrates one segment of this expansion. Designing for German-Jewish émigrés, Klein faced the problem of making a foreign landscape habitable within the rapid production of an ordered settlement environment. The project unravels a different set of priorities and formal articulation than the hallmark housing of the socialist movement and therefore raises questions about diverse modes of coloniality and their meanings.

Klein's coloniality under British colonialism was part of a dispersed field of modernist projects and institutions without sovereignty. This logic of territorial attachment is the one we term coloniality under colonialism. Klein's shows how habitability acquired political efficacy, while the vernacular, deployed as a portable grammar of domestic continuity, became the architectural instrument through which settlers were bound to territory. In what way this strategy prepared the tools that settler-colonial settlement would require exceeds this article's scope, though its findings sharpen the terms in which that question can be posed. Klein's oeuvre clarifies a wider contradiction that lies at the heart of twentieth-century modernism. In his work, the humane promise of dwelling took the mode of coloniality, such that habitability itself became a material form of modern territorial action.

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10. Stoler, 7.
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12. Celina Kress, "Zwischen Bauhaus und Bürgerhaus – Die Projekte des Berliner Bauunternehmers Adolf Sommerfeld zur Kontinuität suburbaner Stadtproduktion und rationellen Bauens in Deutschland 1910–1970" (PhD diss., Technische Universität Berlin, 2008), 107.
13. See for example: Alexander Klein, "Tagesfragen der Berliner Wohnungswirtschaft," *Städtebau*, no. 6 (1926): 90 – 104; Alexander Klein, "Bemerkungen zum russischen Klassizismus von 1910–1915," *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* 8 (1926): 324–328; Alexander Klein, "Drei Bebauungsmöglichkeiten eines Grundstückes in Berlin-Wilmersdorf," *Bauwelt* 5 (1927): 104–106.
14. Werner Hegemann, "Sklaven eines falsch verstandenen Klassizismus? Grundriss-Analysen im Geiste Alexander Kleins" *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, 8 (1928): 345–348.
15. Alexander Klein, *Das Einfamilienhaus: Südtyp. Studien und Entwürfe mit grundsätzlichen Betrachtungen*, Wohnbau und Städtebau, Bd. 1 (Stuttgart: Hoffmann, 1934). See also: Alexander Klein, "Symmetrie und Axialität beim Einfamilienhaus. Betrachtungen zu einem Hause des Verfassers aus dem Jahre 1927," *Moderne Bauformen* 2 (1934): 65–84.
16. Cupers, 216.
17. Building Heritage Research Center at the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, Technion.

18. The term "reactionary modernism" was coined by Jeffrey Herf in his work "*Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich"* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
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26. For example, *Gutsherrnhaus. Gartenseite* (Manor house, garden view) and *Hellerau* school. Fig. 136-138 and 198. See: Alexander Klein, "Beiträge zur Wohnfrage," in *Probleme des Bauens* (Muller und Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1928), 116-143.
27. Klein, 117.
28. Porotto, 44. See also: Heinrich Tessenow. *Hausbau und dergleichen. Mit 107 Zeichnungen und Photographien eigener Arbeiten von Heinrich Tessenow.* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916).
29. Angelika Hinterbrandner, "Alexander Klein: Neuer Standard im Wohnungsbau" (master's thesis, Technische Universität Graz, 2023). See also: Christoph Lueder, "Evaluator, Choreographer, Ideologue, Catalyst: The Disparate Reception Histories of Alexander Klein's Graphical Method," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 1 (2017): 82–106, at 89.
30. The plans and façade drawings were published in "Ausstellung Bauen und Wohnen: GAGFAH-Siedlung Fischtalgrund in Berlin-Zehlendorf," *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, no. 5 (1928): 211–242. See also maquette on page 242.
31. Hans Joseph Zechlin, "Fünfzehn Architekten und der unbekannte Bürger: Zur Gagfah-Siedlung im Fischtalgrund," *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, no. 12 (1928): 550.
32. Mengin, 34.
33. Victor Bourgeois, *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum: Auf Grund der Ergebnisse des II. Internationalen Kongresses für Neues Bauen sowie der vom städtischen Hochbauamt in Frankfurt am Main veranstalteten Wanderausstellung; einhundert Grundrisse mit erklärenden Referaten*, L'habitation minimum (Frankfurt am Main: Englert & Schlosser, 1930).

34. Kress, 418.
35. Carsten Krohn, "Dammerstock Housing Development," in *Walter Gropius* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019). See also: Adolf Behne, "Dammerstock," *Die Form* 6 (1930): 165.
36. Catherine Bauer Wurster, *Modern Housing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 163.
37. A credible, if sparsely documented, point of contact between Klein and Tessenow is their possible institutional convergence at the *Technische Hochschule* Berlin-Charlottenburg around 1929–1930, where, as Corinna Isabel Bauer's research suggests, Klein taught as a guest lecturer. At least two of Tessenow's students moved between his class and Klein's Berlin office: Iwanka Waltschanova, previously at Adolf Sommerfeld Bau AG, joined Klein after graduating in 1929 and worked on the detailed planning of *Bad Dürrenberg*; Ludmila Herzenstein, also from the Sommerfeld office, worked with Klein on standardized housing while continuing in Tessenow's class. See: Corinna Isabel Bauer, "Bauhaus- und Tessenow-Schülerinnen: Genderaspekte im Spannungsverhältnis von Tradition und Moderne" (PhD diss., Universität Kassel, 2003), 112; supported by Klein's biographical note in the Haifa Technion catalogue, 1938 (BHRC, Technion, Haifa, KL1-2-5).
38. Hays, 114.
39. Alexander Klein, *Gedanken zu einer volkswirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Landesbesiedlung*, accompanied by a Russian-language letter clarifying the goal as *Landesplanung*, document no. 9-2029-A, December 22, 1937, Yad Chaim Weizmann, Weizmann Archive, Rehovot, Israel.
40. Daphna Half and Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, "Back to the Sea: Clifford Holliday and the Building of the Government Estate and Kingsway Boulevard in British Mandatory Haifa," *Journal of Urban History* 51, no. 5 (September 2025): 1149–1173.
41. See, for example, Richard Kaufmann proposal of 1920s in Gilbert Herbert and Silvina Sosnovsky, *Bauhaus on the Carmel and the Crossroads of Empire: Architecture and Planning in Haifa during the British Mandate* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1993).
42. For the history of the development, see: Ines Sonder and Joachim Trezib, *Mit RASSCO siedeln: Transferwege der deutschen Alija nach Palästina-Erez Israel (1933–1948)* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2023).
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44. Yael Allweil, "Building a Home-Land: Zionism as a Regime of Housing, 1860–2005" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), xxxii.
45. Kenny Cupers, "Bodenständigkeit: The Environmental Epistemology of Modernism," *Journal of Architecture* 21, no. 8 (2016): 1226–1252.
46. Detlef Mertins, "Bioconstructivisms," in *Modernity Unbound* (London: AA Publications, 2011), 159 –178
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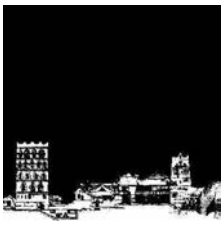
48. "Gartenstadt in der Haifa Bay RASSCO," booklet, Alexander Klein Archive, KL1-6-2, BHRC, Technion, Haifa.
49. Alexander Klein, "A New Haifa Bay Settlement," *Habinyan* (August 1937): 25–28. (In Hebrew).



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TRANSLATING TRADITION THROUGH COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

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