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TRADITION, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Chenming Jiang, Hao Wang

Dharshini Mahesh Babu

Siti Balkish Roslan, Hidayati Ramli

Lin Peng, Xi Lin, Bing Hua Zhang

Yiran Wang

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Mark Gillem

Hesham Issa

Adnya Sarasmita

Feni Kurniati

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207 East 5th Avenue
Eugene, OR 97401

tel: 541 712 7832
e: coordinator@iaste.org; www.iaste.org



TRADITION, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

FROM HEARTH TO COURTYARD TO SALON: SPATIAL SUBSTITUTION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN EARLY MODERN SHANGHAI

Chenming Jiang, Hao Wang

FROM HEARTH TO COURTYARD TO SALON: SPATIAL SUBSTITUTION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN EARLY MODERN SHANGHAI



The courtyard (合院) in traditional Chinese architecture has long served not only as a spatial typology but as a profound cultural carrier of ethical order, family structure, and cosmological worldview. Functioning as both dwelling and moral diagram, it is a spatial condensation of what Yi-Fu Tuan terms “hearth” — a center of cultural identity and familial meaning. Yet in early modern Shanghai, under the dual pressures of high-density urbanization and the influx of Western architectural and domestic ideals, the courtyard vanished rapidly from the urban fabric.

This paper investigates the disappearance of the courtyard not merely as a morphological phenomenon, but as the dislocation of a meaning-bearing spatial system. Despite its physical extinction, the symbolic, functional, and affective needs it fulfilled did not dissolve. Instead, they persisted—albeit reconfigured—within the evolving spatial culture of Shanghai’s comprador class. The shift from courtyard to salon, from fire-centered domesticity to modern bourgeois hospitality, marks a process not of negation but spatial substitution. This study defines “cultural logic” as the ritual, gendered, and hierarchical codes embedded in domestic space, which persist even in hybridized architectural forms.

The central research question is: How was the replacement of the traditional courtyard spatial system enacted, and in what forms did its cultural logic persist or transform? Methodologically, this paper employs a typological and ethnographic reading of early modern residential forms in Shanghai, focusing on houses inhabited or commissioned by comprador elites such as Wu Tongwen (吴同文), Wu Peichu (吴培初), and other figures living in the French Concession and former International Settlement. Their villas, garden homes, and hybrid apartment-mansions embody a complex interplay between Euro-American spatial imports and latent Chinese domestic codes.

Drawing on Xing Ruan’s theory of the “house society” and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of “structure and substitution,” the study examines how traditional spatial ethics—ritual hierarchy, gendered privacy, collective memory—were transposed into imported or hybrid typologies. The veranda, salon, stair-hall, and ballroom emerged as alternative “centers” replacing the courtyard and the ancestral altar, while still anchoring domestic identity.

The preliminary argument, drawn from the transition traced in Confucius’ Courtyard, is that the spatial transformation from fire-centered to ceremony-centered domestic life—from 火塘 (huotang) to 厅堂 (tang) to 社交厅 (salon)—reflects not cultural rupture but adaptive continuity. The comprador house becomes a theater of negotiation between imported cosmopolitanism and embedded familial codes.

This research contributes to architectural anthropology by framing urban housing change not solely as technical adaptation, but as cultural translation. In doing so, it challenges a simplistic narrative of Westernization and instead posits a layered, dynamic continuity of meaning through spatial re-inscription.

1. INTRODUCTION

The courtyard house has long been recognized as the fundamental domestic typology in traditional Chinese architecture. More than a climatic or spatial device, the courtyard functioned as a social and symbolic center that organized kinship hierarchy, ritual practices, and everyday life. It structured the relationship among family members, mediated gendered space, and provided a setting for ancestral worship and social interaction. In

this sense, the courtyard house embodied a coherent domestic spatial system rather than a mere architectural form. It operated as a spatial framework through which social relations, ritual order, and cultural meanings were structured, in which meaning surpassed form as the primary organizing principle.¹

In early modern Shanghai, however, this system underwent a profound transformation. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, under the combined forces of colonial urban planning, increasing urban density, and the introduction of Western architectural models, the traditional courtyard house rapidly disappeared from the urban residential fabric, as Shanghai developed into a highly heterogeneous urban environment shaped by overlapping political, economic, and cultural systems.² It was replaced by new housing forms, including garden villas, apartment mansions, and hybrid residences, particularly among the emerging urban elite and comprador class in the International Settlement and the French Concession.

Existing scholarship has often interpreted this transformation as a process of Westernization, modernization, or stylistic change. Studies of Shanghai housing have focused on architectural form, urban morphology, or the importation of foreign building types. While these approaches have contributed to the understanding of Shanghai's built environment, they tend to overlook the transformation of domestic spatial structure and the persistence of cultural and social practices embedded in residential space.

This paper proposes a different interpretation. It argues that the disappearance of the courtyard house should not be understood simply as the loss of a building type, but as the transformation of a domestic spatial system. The social, symbolic, and ritual functions once organized around the courtyard did not vanish; rather, they were relocated into new interior spaces such as the hall, salon, veranda, and stair hall in early modern Shanghai residences. This process is conceptualized here as spatial substitution, in which the cultural logic of domestic life is preserved through the reconfiguration of spatial forms.

The theoretical framework of this study builds on the notion of the hearth as the symbolic center of domestic life, understood as the primary spatial focus from which dwelling is organized.³ Extending this framework, domestic and ritual life in traditional Chinese architecture was structured not around the hearth alone but through a courtyard–hall system, in which the courtyard and the main hall together formed the spatial and ceremonial core of the household.⁴ This historical shift—from hearth-centered to courtyard–hall-centered

¹ Xing Ruan, "The Meaning Surpasses the Form: Musings on Anthropology and Vernacular Architecture" (《意馀于形——人类学与民居杂谈》).

² Ma Xueqiang and Zhang Xiuli, *Social Life of Compradors in Modern Shanghai* (《出入于中西之间：近代上海买办社会生活》) (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2009).

³ Joseph Rykwert, "House and Home," *Social Research* 52, no. 1 (1985): 51–62. extendi

⁴ Xing Ruan, *Confucius' Courtyard: Architecture, Philosophy and the Chinese House* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

domestic space—provides a crucial background for understanding later transformations in early modern Shanghai.

Based on this framework, this paper examines how the domestic center was further transformed in the transition from courtyard houses to modern urban residences. Through case studies of houses associated with comprador elites such as Wu Tongwen and Wu Peichu, it analyzes how traditional spatial ethics, ritual hierarchy, and social relations were translated into new architectural forms.⁵ The emergence of interior reception spaces such as the salon and stair hall represents not a rupture but a continuation of domestic spatial logic in a different material and cultural context.

By interpreting the transformation of housing in early modern Shanghai as a process of spatial substitution and cultural translation, this study contributes to architectural history and architectural anthropology. It challenges a linear narrative of Westernization and instead proposes a more nuanced understanding of continuity, adaptation, and transformation in domestic space.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Hall System and Domestic Spatial Structure in Traditional China

The traditional Chinese courtyard house should not be understood merely as an architectural form or building type. Rather, it provides a structured framework for living, within which social relations, ritual practices, and everyday life are organized and given meaning. In this sense, architecture operates not as an object, but as a medium through which a particular way of life is articulated.

Central to this framework is the idea of a spatial center. Yi-Fu Tuan has described the hearth as the symbolic origin of the home—a focal point around which warmth, gathering, and shared experience take place. The hearth is not only a physical element but a center of meaning that anchors human existence within space.

In the context of Chinese architectural history, however, this center is not fixed. As Xing Ruan has argued, the domestic center underwent a fundamental transformation: from a hearth-centered dwelling to a courtyard–hall system structured around ritual and social order. Drawing on archaeological evidence from early settlements such as the Yangshao Banpo site, Ruan traces a shift from front-hall spaces organized around the hearth to later courtyard configurations in which the hearth disappeared and was replaced by a new spatial order centered on the courtyard and the main hall. In this transformation, fire as the core of

⁵ Ma Xueqiang and Zhang Xiuli, *Social Life of Compradors in Modern Shanghai* (《出入于中西之间：近代上海买办社会生活》) (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2009).

domestic life was gradually displaced by ancestral ritual, and the house became a setting for the enactment of social and ethical relations.

The courtyard and the hall together form what may be understood as a courtyard–hall system—not a formal typology, but a structured spatial configuration that embodies a particular way of life. The courtyard mediates between inside and outside, between family and society, while the hall serves as the locus of ritual, authority, and collective identity. It is within this system that domestic life is organized, not only in terms of use, but in terms of hierarchy, memory, and meaning.

This spatial organization can be further understood through the concept of the “house society” proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which the house functions as a social institution that maintains continuity across generations. In such a system, architecture does not simply contain social relations; it actively structures and reproduces them. The central hall, associated with ancestral tablets and ceremonial practice, anchors lineage continuity, while the surrounding spaces articulate degrees of privacy, gendered occupation, and social hierarchy.

From the perspective of domestic spatial structure, the courtyard–hall system also reflects a relational logic of movement and visibility. As Robin Evans has suggested, domestic space is defined not only by enclosure but by the relationships between spaces and the ways in which they regulate interaction. Similarly, Joseph Rykwert has emphasized that the house becomes a “home” through ritual, memory, and collective life. In the courtyard house, these dimensions converge in the courtyard–hall system, where space is inseparable from the practices and meanings it sustains.

The courtyard–hall system, therefore, represents a historical reconfiguration of the domestic center—from the hearth as a focus of survival and gathering to a spatial system structured around ritual, ancestry, and social order. It is this transformation that provides the conceptual foundation for understanding the later relocation of the domestic center in early modern Shanghai, where the physical courtyard disappears but its underlying spatial logic persists in new forms.

2.2. Colonial Shanghai and the Transformation of Urban Elite Housing

The transformation of domestic space in early modern Shanghai cannot be understood solely as an architectural shift; it must be situated within the broader socio-economic and cultural conditions of a rapidly changing urban environment. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Shanghai emerged as a treaty port shaped by colonial governance, global trade, and unprecedented urban expansion. Within the International Settlement and the French Concession, new urban forms, infrastructures, and lifestyles began to redefine the

conditions of everyday life.

One of the most significant consequences of this transformation was the emergence of a new social group commonly referred to as the comprador class, or more broadly, the urban elite. These individuals occupied an intermediate position between Chinese society and global capital, operating within both local cultural frameworks and transnational economic networks. Their domestic life was therefore shaped by a dual condition: the persistence of traditional familial structures and the adoption of new forms of social interaction associated with modern urban life.

This shift in social structure was accompanied by a transformation in residential architecture. The traditional courtyard house, with its inward-oriented spatial organization and clearly articulated courtyard–hall system, gradually gave way to new housing forms, including garden villas, hybrid mansions, and apartment-style residences. These new houses were often detached or semi-detached, equipped with modern infrastructure, and organized around interior circulation systems rather than open courtyards.

At first glance, these forms appear to follow Western domestic models. Features such as stair halls, corridors, verandas, and formal reception rooms suggest a direct importation of European spatial arrangements. However, such a reading risks oversimplifying the transformation as a process of stylistic imitation or Westernization. A closer examination reveals that these spaces were not merely adopted, but reinterpreted within the context of existing domestic practices and social structures.

The most notable transformation lies in the reconfiguration of the domestic center. In the traditional courtyard house, the courtyard–hall system structured both everyday life and ceremonial activities. In the new urban houses of Shanghai, however, the open courtyard was often absent, and the centrality of domestic life was relocated into interior spaces. The salon, the reception hall, and the stair hall emerged as new focal points, accommodating forms of social interaction that combined traditional familial rituals with modern practices of hospitality.

This shift reflects not only a change in architectural form, but also a transformation in the relationship between domestic space and society. Whereas the courtyard house emphasized inwardness, enclosure, and the regulation of family hierarchy, the modern urban residence increasingly accommodated outward-facing social activities, including entertaining guests, business interactions, and public display. The emergence of bourgeois hospitality as a central component of domestic life required new spatial configurations capable of mediating between private and public domains.

At the same time, the underlying social structure of the household did not disappear. Family hierarchy,

ancestral memory, and gendered spatial divisions continued to shape domestic life, albeit in reconfigured forms. The absence of the courtyard did not eliminate the need for spatial differentiation; rather, it necessitated new mechanisms for organizing movement, visibility, and social interaction within enclosed interior environments.

Therefore, the transformation of housing in early modern Shanghai should be understood not as a replacement of one architectural type by another, but as a reorganization of domestic spatial structure under new urban conditions. The courtyard–hall system did not simply vanish; its functions were redistributed across a set of interior spaces that together formed a new domestic system. It is this process of reconfiguration that sets the stage for the spatial substitutions analyzed in the following section.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a multi-layered methodological framework that combines typological analysis, archival research, and spatial reading to investigate the transformation of domestic space in early modern Shanghai. First, the study employs a typological approach to trace the historical evolution of domestic spatial organization, focusing on the transition from courtyard-based dwellings (合院) to hybrid villa forms. Rather than treating architectural types as fixed formal categories, this research follows Xing Ruan's understanding of dwelling as a spatial disposition that corresponds to specific social structures, in which the configuration of space reflects and reproduces familial and social relations. Within this framework, the courtyard is analyzed not only as a physical form but as a relational system structured around hierarchy, ritual, and kinship.

Second, the study is grounded in archival research, including historical maps, building records, property archives, and documented floor plans of representative residences in the former French Concession and International Settlement. These materials provide empirical evidence for reconstructing spatial layouts and understanding patterns of domestic use. Particular attention is given to residences associated with comprador elites, such as the Green House of Wu Tongwen and other garden villas, where hybrid spatial configurations can be clearly identified.

Third, the research adopts a spatial-analytical reading of plans and interiors, informed by the methodological lineage of Robin Evans and architectural anthropology. Through close examination of room sequences, circulation patterns, and spatial hierarchies, the study identifies how traditional elements—such as axial ordering, gendered separation, and ritual centers—are reconfigured within imported or hybrid typologies. In this sense, spatial analysis is not limited to geometric description but extends to the interpretation of embedded social relations.

In addition, the study incorporates an ethnographic sensibility, drawing on historical accounts, memoirs, and secondary literature to infer patterns of inhabitation, domestic rituals, and social practices. While direct fieldwork is limited due to the historical nature of the cases, this approach allows the reconstruction of lived experience and the cultural meanings attached to specific spaces.

Analytically, the research is guided by Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of "house society" and "structure as transformation," through which architectural change is understood not as rupture but as substitution within an underlying structural logic. Building on this, the paper introduces the concept of "spatial substitution" to describe how the functional and symbolic roles of the courtyard were transferred to new spatial elements—such as the salon, veranda, and stair-hall—within modern residential forms.

By integrating typological, archival, and spatial methods, this study constructs a cross-scalar analysis linking architectural form, social structure, and cultural meaning. This methodological framework enables the research to move beyond formal description and to interpret the transformation of domestic space in Shanghai as a process of cultural translation embedded in spatial reconfiguration.

4. SPATIAL SUBSTITUTION: FROM COURTYARD-HALL SYSTEM TO INTERIOR SOCIAL SPACE

4.1. Spatial Substitution as a General Mechanism

The transformation of domestic space in early modern Shanghai can be most clearly understood through the concept of spatial substitution. Rather than interpreting the disappearance of the courtyard–hall system as a rupture, this study argues that it should be understood as a process in which spatial functions, social meanings, and ritual practices were reorganized and relocated within new architectural forms. These spaces did not replicate the courtyard in form; rather, they inherited and transformed its role as the center of domestic life.

In traditional Chinese architecture, domestic life was structured through a courtyard–hall system in which spatial configuration was inseparable from social hierarchy and cultural meaning. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** A key aspect of this transformation lies in the relocation of the domestic center. In the traditional courtyard house, the courtyard and the main hall together constituted the spatial and ceremonial core of the household. In early modern Shanghai houses, however, this center was no longer expressed through an open courtyard. Instead, it emerged through a constellation of interior spaces, including the salon, reception hall, and stair hall, which collectively structured social interaction and domestic hierarchy.

The salon, in particular, became a primary site of social activity. As a space for receiving guests, conducting business, and performing hospitality, it assumed functions that were previously distributed across the courtyard and the hall. Unlike the inward-oriented courtyard, the salon was often positioned within an enclosed interior environment, yet it retained its role as a central gathering space. It mediated between the private domain of the family and the public world of social relations, thereby rearticulating the domestic center in a new spatial form.

At the same time, elements of traditional domestic structure persisted within these new configurations. In certain cases, spaces analogous to the ancestral hall continued to exist within otherwise Westernized residences. These spaces, sometimes explicitly designated for ancestral tablets or ritual use, indicate that the symbolic core of the household was not eliminated but re-embedded within a different architectural framework. The coexistence of such spaces with modern reception rooms reveals a layered spatial logic in which traditional and modern functions overlap.

Circulation systems within these houses further demonstrate the transformation of domestic spatial order. In contrast to the sequential progression of spaces in the courtyard house—often articulated through gates, corridors, and courtyards—the modern residence relied on interior circulation, including staircases and corridors, to organize movement.⁶ These systems enabled new forms of spatial differentiation, particularly in the separation between family members and servants. Servant circulation, often concealed and spatially compressed, ensured the efficient operation of the household without disrupting the visible order of domestic life. This differentiation echoes, in a transformed manner, the hierarchical spatial divisions present in the traditional courtyard house.

The vertical organization of space also introduced a new dimension to domestic hierarchy. Whereas the courtyard house was primarily horizontal, structured through successive courtyards and axial progression, the modern urban residence often extended vertically across multiple floors. This verticality reconfigured the spatial distribution of family members, functions, and degrees of privacy. Upper floors could accommodate more private living spaces, while lower levels were reserved for reception and public interaction. In this sense, vertical movement replaced the axial depth of the courtyard as a means of organizing domestic space.

Through these transformations, the courtyard–hall system did not disappear but was translated into a new spatial language. Its functions—ritual centrality, social gathering, hierarchical ordering, and mediation between inside and outside—were redistributed across a network of interior spaces. These spaces, taken together, formed a new domestic system adapted to the conditions of early modern Shanghai.

⁶ Mark Jarzombek, “Corridor Spaces,” 2010.

Spatial substitution, therefore, should not be understood as a simple replacement of one form by another, but as a process in which the underlying cultural logic of domestic space is preserved through transformation and reconfiguration. The courtyard was no longer present as a physical element, but its role as the organizing center of domestic life persisted in a dispersed and reconfigured manner within the modern house.

4.2. The Green House: Dual Centers and Ritual Persistence

The Wu Tongwen residence, commonly known as the Green House, provides a particularly revealing example of how the courtyard–hall system was transformed rather than eliminated in early modern Shanghai. Designed in a modern architectural language and equipped with advanced technologies, the house nonetheless retained a clearly defined ritual core.⁷

On the ground floor, a space designated as an ancestral hall was preserved within the otherwise Westernized spatial configuration. Distinct in atmosphere and decoration from the surrounding interior, this space served as the locus of ancestral worship and ritual practice. Historical accounts describe the continued use of this space for seasonal ceremonies, during which family members gathered to perform rites in accordance with traditional customs (Figure 1). In this sense, the ancestral hall maintained the symbolic role of the central hall in the courtyard house, even though it was no longer embedded within an open courtyard system.



Figure 1: Interior view of the Green House (Wu Tongwen Residence), showing the preserved ceremonial space within a modern domestic setting. (Source: Green House (《绿房子》), Shanghai Urban Planning Administration Bureau).

⁷ Shanghai Urban Planning Administration Bureau, *Green House* (《绿房子》) (Shanghai: Shanghai Urban Planning Administration Bureau).

At the same time, the house incorporated new spaces for social interaction, including reception rooms and salons, which accommodated modern forms of hospitality and social life. These spaces did not replace the ancestral hall directly; rather, they coexisted with it, forming a dual-center structure of domestic centrality. On the one hand, the ancestral hall anchored lineage, memory, and ritual continuity; on the other hand, the salon and reception spaces mediated interactions with the outside world, including guests, business partners, and social networks.

This coexistence demonstrates that spatial substitution did not occur through simple replacement, but through layering and redistribution (Figure 4). The domestic center was no longer singular and spatially fixed, as in the courtyard–hall system, but became differentiated and distributed across multiple spaces within the house.

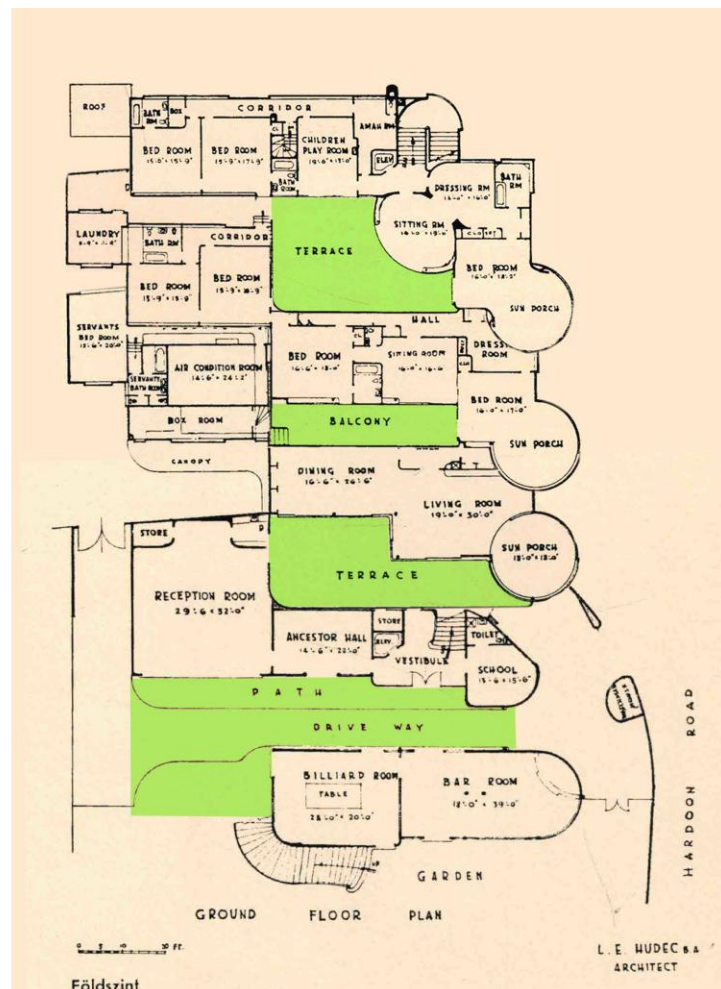


Figure 2: Analytical diagram of the ground floor plan of the Wu Tongwen Residence (Green House), highlighting the transformation of the courtyard–hall system into a network of interiorized spaces. The green areas indicate terraces, circulation zones, and intermediary spaces that reinterpret the spatial role of the traditional courtyard within a modern domestic configuration. (Source: Drawn by the author based on archival sources).

4.3. Xieqiao Lane Mansion: Spatial Hierarchy and the Graded Structure of Domestic Life

The residence of Wu Peichu at Xieqiao Lane presents a different yet complementary mode of spatial transformation, in which the logic of the courtyard–hall system was not expressed through dual centers, but through a graded spatial hierarchy (Figure 3). Documented in *The Builder* (1934), the house reveals a highly structured internal organization in which spatial differentiation corresponded closely to social hierarchy and patterns of domestic expenditure.⁸

In this case, the absence of an open courtyard is more pronounced, and the organization of domestic life relies almost entirely on interior spaces. Circulation is structured through corridors and staircases rather than through a sequence of courtyards and gates. The spatial hierarchy of the house is articulated through levels, room sizes, and degrees of accessibility, rather than through axial progression.

Reception spaces within the mansion play a central role in organizing domestic life. Large interior rooms function as sites of social gathering, hospitality, and negotiation, effectively assuming the role of the courtyard and the central hall. These spaces accommodate both family activities and external interactions, reflecting the increasing importance of bourgeois social life in the urban context.

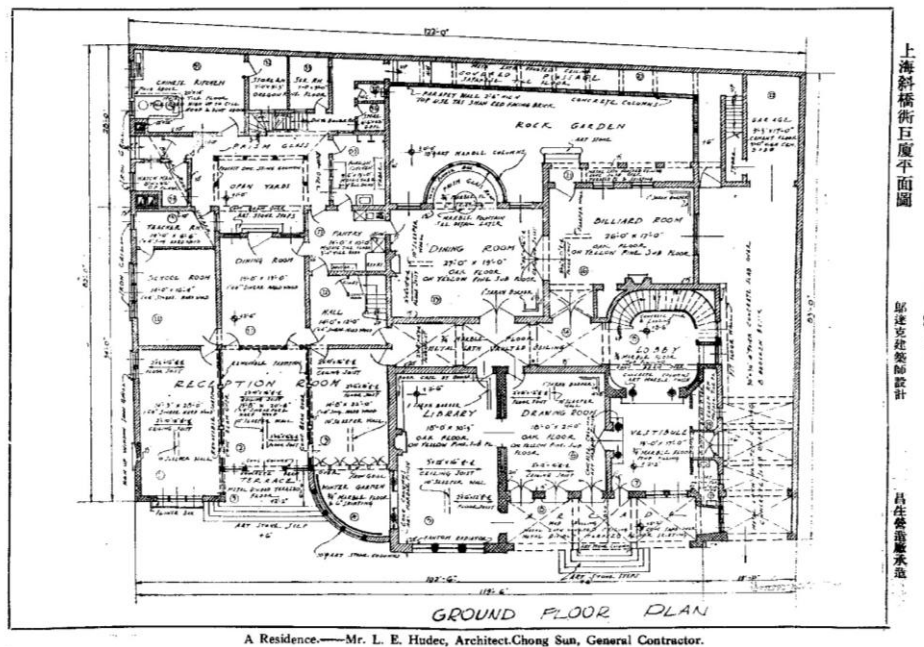


Figure 3. Ground floor plan of the Wu Peichu Residence (Xieqiao Lane), illustrating spatial hierarchy and differentiated circulation. Source: *The Builder*, February 1, 1934.

⁸ “The Residence of Wu Pei-chu, Shanghai,” *The Builder*, February 1, 1934.

At the same time, the internal organization of the house preserves distinctions between family members and servants. Service spaces and circulation routes are often compressed, concealed, and separated from the main areas of the house, ensuring that domestic labor supports but does not interfere with the visible order of social life. This separation echoes the hierarchical spatial logic of the traditional courtyard house, where different groups occupied distinct zones within the domestic environment.

4.3.1. Urban embedding: domestic architecture as the spatialization of financial structures

The residence of Wu Peichu in Xieqiao Lane (斜桥弄巨厦), designed in 1933, presents a critical case in understanding the transformation of domestic architecture in modern Shanghai. Unlike the suburban villas of foreign merchants, Wu's residence was embedded within a dense *lilong* fabric, surrounded by properties that he himself had developed through real estate investment. This spatial condition reflects not merely a constraint of urban density, but a deliberate positioning within a network of property ownership and financial circulation.

As studies of Shanghai's comprador system have shown, real estate functioned as a fundamental form of collateral within the credit economy. In this sense, Wu's residence should be understood not as an isolated domestic object, but as the spatial anchor of a larger financial structure. The villa's location within the lane network thus embodies what can be described as an "embedded domesticity", where residence, investment, and urban social relations are materially intertwined.

4.3.2. Dual spatial systems: the coexistence of Chinese and Western domestic orders

A defining characteristic of Wu Peichu's residence is the coexistence of Chinese and Western spatial systems within the same architectural framework. On the ground floor, the reception spaces exhibit a dual configuration: a Chinese-style hall organized by axial spatial logic and a Western-style sitting room articulated through volumetric and decorative expression. This duality was not unusual among Shanghai's urban elite, where domestic life and social representation operated through differentiated spatial codes.

In such houses, family members typically inhabited the Chinese-oriented spaces, while guests were received in Western-style rooms. This spatial division reflects not a simple hybridization, but a functional bifurcation of domestic space, corresponding to different social registers. The Chinese hall maintained continuity with lineage-based spatial order, while the Western reception room facilitated modern forms of social interaction and display.

4.3.3. Segregated circulation: spatializing hierarchy through movement and access

The separation of servant circulation from household circulation is a crucial spatial manifestation of social hierarchy. In Wu's residence, service routes—from garage unloading to storage and kitchen—were organized along peripheral corridors, often concealed between outer and inner walls. Similarly, servants accessed upper floors through narrow secondary staircases, entirely detached from the main circulation of the family.

This spatial arrangement resonates with the emergence of corridor-based planning in modern domestic architecture, which, as Mark Jarzombek argues, fundamentally reorganized the relationship between movement and social order. In this context, circulation is not merely functional, but disciplinary—structuring visibility, access, and hierarchy. Thus, the house becomes a microcosm of social stratification, where class relations are not only maintained but actively produced through spatial organization.

4.3.4. Family structure and spatial order: standardization and hierarchical centrality

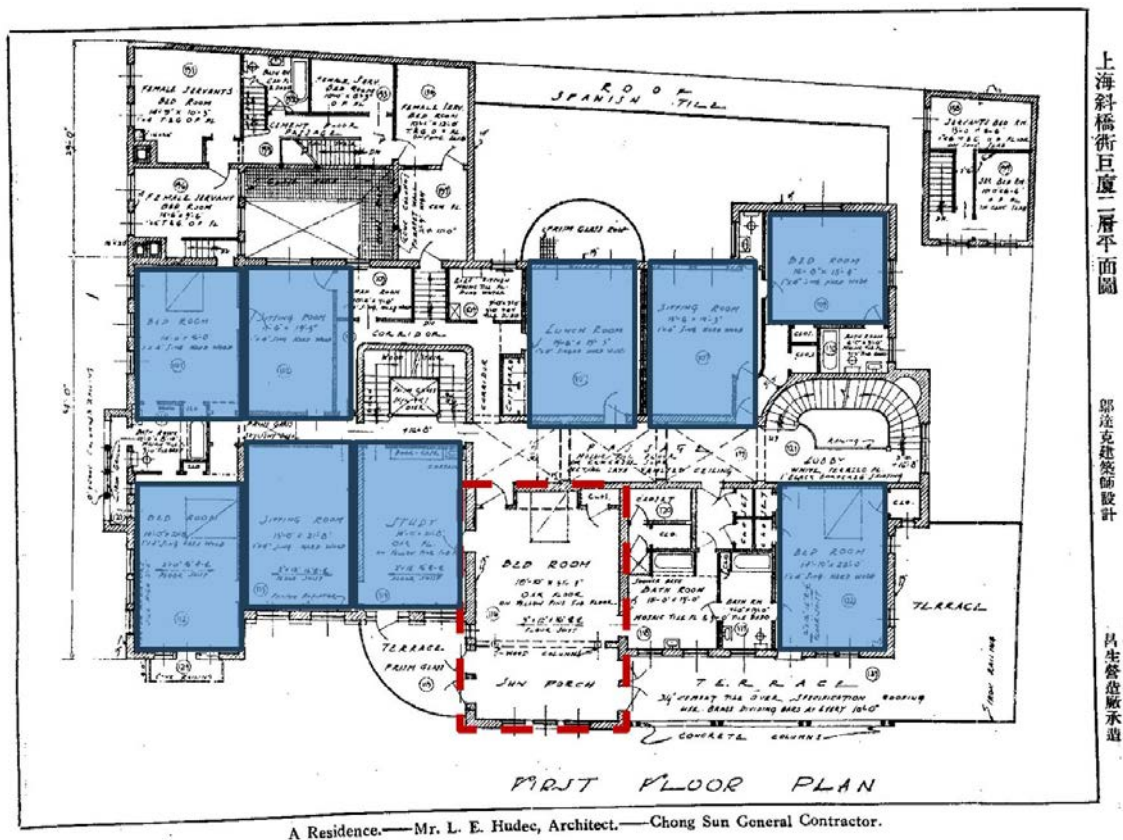


Figure 4: First-floor plan of the Wu Peichu Residence (Xieqiao Lane), demonstrating how domestic space operates as a materialization of social hierarchy. The privileged positioning and expansion of the owner's suite contrast with the standardized dimensions of other rooms, revealing a spatial encoding of differentiated economic and social status within the household. (Source: Drawing by the author, based on the original architectural plan published in *The Builder*, February 1, 1934).

The upper floors of the residence further reveal the internal organization of the family (Figure 4). While the bedrooms allocated to Wu's numerous children were largely equal in size and configuration, suggesting a degree of standardization, the master bedroom occupied a central and privileged position, directly connected to a large terrace. Adjacent to it was the wife's room, forming a spatial nucleus of authority.

This arrangement reflects a tension between modern rationalization and traditional hierarchy. On one hand, the uniformity of children's rooms indicates a shift toward standardized domestic planning; on the other hand, the spatial centrality of the master's suite preserves a hierarchical order reminiscent of earlier domestic systems.

4.3.5. Architecture of display: entrance hall and staircase as mechanisms of social credibility

The entrance hall and the main staircase constitute the most architecturally expressive elements of the house. Their generous scale and formal articulation signal wealth and status, but more importantly, they function as spaces of social visibility. Positioned at the threshold between exterior and interior, these spaces mediate between private life and public representation.

In this sense, they operate as what may be termed "credit-display spaces". Within a socio-economic system where trust was partially constructed through social interaction, the architectural staging of arrival—through grand halls and prominent staircases—played a performative role in establishing credibility.

4.3.6. Dispersed centrality: from courtyard as composite center to functional distribution

Unlike traditional courtyard houses, Wu Peichu's residence does not contain a central open-roof space that organizes domestic life. In the traditional courtyard system, the courtyard functioned not merely as a spatial void, but as a composite center, integrating environmental, social, ritual, and symbolic roles within a single architectural element.

In Wu's residence, this composite structure disappears. However, this does not imply that the courtyard is replaced by another spatial form such as a light well. The light well, where present, serves a strictly environmental function—ventilation and illumination—and does not carry the social or symbolic weight of the traditional courtyard.

Rather than a process of substitution, what occurs here is a disaggregation of centrality. The multiple roles once concentrated in the courtyard are redistributed across different parts of the house: social interaction shifts to reception rooms and salons; family hierarchy is expressed through the spatial organization of bedrooms; and technical devices such as light wells manage environmental regulation.

This transformation marks a shift from a ritual-centered spatial order to a functionally differentiated domestic system, in which meaning is no longer anchored in a single spatial core but dispersed across a network of specialized spaces.

4.4. From Centralized to Distributed Domestic Centers

Taken together, these cases reveal that the transformation of domestic space in early modern Shanghai cannot be reduced to a single model. Instead, spatial substitution operates through multiple strategies, ranging from the coexistence of traditional and modern centers, as seen in the Green House, to the full interiorization of domestic order, as exemplified by the Xieqiao Lane mansion.

What unites these different cases is the relocation and redistribution of the domestic center. In the courtyard house, the center was spatially concentrated in the courtyard–hall system. In modern urban residences, this center becomes dispersed across a network of interior spaces, including salons, reception rooms, stair halls, and circulation systems.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between space and social life. The domestic center is no longer defined by a single architectural element, but by a set of spatial relations that collectively organize ritual, hierarchy, and social interaction. Spatial substitution, therefore, should be understood as a process in which the underlying cultural logic of domestic space persists, even as its physical form is fundamentally transformed.

5. CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND CULTURAL TRANSLATION

The transformation of domestic space in early modern Shanghai has often been interpreted through the lens of Westernization, emphasizing the adoption of foreign architectural styles and spatial forms. However, the analysis presented in this paper suggests that such a linear narrative is insufficient to account for the complexity of domestic life and spatial organization during this period.

Rather than viewing the disappearance of the courtyard house as a rupture, this study has argued that it should be understood as a process of cultural continuity achieved through spatial substitution. The courtyard–hall system, as the traditional spatial framework of domestic life, did not simply vanish with the introduction of modern housing forms. Instead, its underlying cultural logic—ritual centrality, hierarchical organization, and the mediation between family and society—was rearticulated within new spatial configurations.

This process can be described as a form of cultural translation. The term “translation” here does not imply a direct correspondence between traditional and modern forms, but rather a transformation in which meanings are preserved through reinterpretation. The salon, the reception hall, and the stair hall in early modern Shanghai houses do not replicate the courtyard or the central hall in form, but they assume comparable roles in structuring social interaction, domestic hierarchy, and the relationship between private and public life.

At the same time, this translation is neither complete nor uniform. As suggested by the case studies discussed in this paper, different houses exhibit different strategies of spatial substitution. In some instances, elements of the traditional system are explicitly retained, while in others, they are fully absorbed into a new interior spatial order. These variations indicate that cultural continuity operates not through replication, but through adaptation and reconfiguration under specific social and urban conditions.

The concept of spatial substitution proposed in this paper offers a way to understand this process beyond the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. It shifts the focus from architectural form to domestic spatial structure, and from stylistic change to the transformation of social relations embedded in space. In doing so, it highlights the persistence of domestic cultural logic even in contexts of rapid urban and architectural change.

More broadly, this study contributes to architectural history and architectural anthropology by reframing the transformation of housing as a process of negotiation between different spatial systems and cultural orders. The case of early modern Shanghai demonstrates that modern domestic space is not simply the result of external influence, but the outcome of an ongoing process in which local cultural frameworks are reinterpreted and reconfigured within new spatial conditions.

Therefore, the disappearance of the courtyard house should not be understood as the end of a cultural system, but as the beginning of a new phase in which the domestic center is no longer concentrated in a single spatial form, but distributed across multiple spaces within the modern house. In this sense, what changed was not the existence of a domestic center, but the way in which it was spatially articulated.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

NEGOTIATING TRADITION AND MIGRATION: GENDERED DOMESTIC PRACTICES IN THE SOUTH INDIAN DIASPORA

Dharshini Mahesh Babu

NEGOTIATING TRADITION AND MIGRATION: GENDERED DOMESTIC PRACTICES IN THE SOUTH INDIAN DIASPORA



This paper examines how South Indian Agrabaram housing encoded caste hierarchy and gender division through spatial arrangements, particularly the enclosed, purity-governed kitchen. Drawing on three family homes (one in Tamil Nadu and two in the Greater Toronto Area), alongside oral histories and photographic documentation, it traces how South Indian diaspora women reinterpret the domestic food axis in Canada. Garages, basements, and dining rooms are repurposed into cooking and ritual spaces, challenging Western open-kitchen ideals while sustaining commensality and cultural identity. Through a feminist lens, the paper reveals how gendered foodwork labor, historically a site of subordination, is rearticulated in transnational contexts as both burden and empowerment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India, deeply rooted in Hinduism, has existed for over 3,000 years, establishing a rigid, hierarchical system, which remains the country's most archaic form of social stratification.¹ This system influences various social and economic outcomes, including residential patterns, education, employment opportunities, social networks, and marriage prospects.² Gender inequality is also deeply intertwined with these dynamics, as illustrated in *The Laws of Manu*, written approximately two thousand years ago by Brahmin lawgivers:

“In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence.”³



Figure 1: The Nadutheru (middle street) of Konnerirajapuram village, near Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, South India, showing agraharam housing on both sides directed toward the temple. (Source: Singal, Manan, “Interiority of Agraharam: Traditional Houses in Temple Towns of India”).

Although this text serves as a normative prescription, the subordination of women has long been a defining feature of hierarchical society and culture among Hindus. Gender inequality has been particularly pronounced among high caste individuals, where the conduct of women in the household is constrained by practices of purity, seclusion, and control of female sexuality, especially within Brahmin communities.⁴ In South India, these social hierarchies have also historically been reflected in spatial layouts, notably in the Agraharam housing model. Derived from the Sanskrit word meaning “the foremost row,” Agraharams (Figure 1) symbolized a prestigious residential arrangement, traditionally occupied by Brahmins, the highest caste in the hierarchy.⁵ These separatist practices were significantly reinforced during colonial rule, as the British consolidation of the caste system in the early 20th century, amplified the secular power of Brahmins across the country.⁶ Until the 1950s, strict social codes prohibited non-Brahmins from entering Agraharam streets, buildings, or temples, while Brahmins also avoided non-Brahmin spaces to maintain their perceived purity.⁷ Over time, these restrictions softened, allowing non-Brahmins gradual access to Agraharam spaces, initially as servants, companions, or classmates of Brahmin children.⁸ By the 1980s, as Brahmins migrated to urban

centers and relinquished their exclusive claims on Agraharam properties, non-Brahmins were able to rent or purchase these once-restricted spaces.⁹



Figure 2: Aerial map of Galivar Kandigai, with the star marking the village temple and the house marking Amma's home. (Source: Screenshot from Google Maps. Accessed November 23, 2024.)

This paper examines how the spatial ideologies embedded in an Agraharam-style family home in Galivar Kandigai (see Figure 2) — my maternal village in Tamil Nadu, India — have translated across time and migratory contexts into the suburban homes of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The house in Galivar Kandigai, referred to as “*Amma’s* home” hereinafter, was occupied by my mother during her adolescence; today, Amma has immigrated to Canada, settling first in Mississauga, Ontario and later in Hamilton, as part of a broader South Indian diaspora navigating the GTA’s suburban landscape. Through an exploration of oral history narrated by my family, spatial analysis of interior and exterior spaces, and religious beliefs across both contexts, the paper argues that caste ideologies are spatially embedded in the domestic sphere and the broader community, and that they travel. Through the lens of the food axis, what architectural historian Elizabeth Cromley defines as the spatial continuum of storage, preparation, cooking, service, and consumption,¹⁰ this

paper traces how, in Amma's home in Galivar Kandigai and in the GTA homes of the family that grew out of it, the same tensions between purity and pollution, visibility and concealment, female labor and female authority are encoded across both contexts, though the forms through which these tensions are expressed could not look more different.

2. THE PUBLIC REALM

2.1. Temple, Street, and Home: The Axis of Community

The relationship between the temple, the street, and the home has never been incidental in South Indian spatial culture. Where a temple sits, who lives closest to it, and whose procession has the right to pass before which door are not merely religious questions but spatial ones, encoding community membership, caste hierarchy, and the boundaries of belonging into the built environment. As anthropologist Mattison Mines has shown, the negotiation of public space in South Indian communities is inseparable from the assertion of social identity: the street is not neutral civic infrastructure but a medium through which caste position is performed, contested, and reproduced.¹¹ In the Agraharam, this spatial ideology is expressed through the alignment of street, procession, and temple into a single axis of community life. In the GTA, the same ideology arrives to find a suburban landscape organized around entirely different principles, one in which the street is designed for traffic rather than procession, and the temple has been displaced to the industrial margins of the city. What changes across migration is not the need for this spatial ideology but the forms available to express it, and the losses that accumulate when those forms are unavailable.



Figure 3: 1. Main Shrine, 2. Tank, 3. Temple Complex, 4. Gopuram. Map of Madurai. Aerial map of Galivar Kandigai, with the star marking the village temple and the house marking Ma's home. (Source: Screenshot from Google Maps. Accessed November 23, 2024.)

Agraharam houses typically lined the main street leading to the village temple, where Brahmins served as priests.¹² In South Indian temple towns, streets were organized in concentric or gridiron patterns around the temple, reflecting a hierarchy in which proximity to the temple signified greater societal importance.¹³ This spatial arrangement is visually prominent in larger temple towns, such as the *Meenakshi Amman Temple* in Madurai, Tamil Nadu (see Figure 3), where residential settlements are geometrically arranged around the temple. A similar pattern is evident in the village of Galivar Kandigai, where the nadutheru (main street) is centred around a single temple (see again Figure 2), dedicated to *Lord Muneeswaran*, a guardian deity often associated with Lord Shiva, one of the *Trimurti* (Hindu trinity).¹⁴ In Tamil Hinduism, *Lord Shiva* is closely associated with non-Brahmin villages, even though such temples are often served by Brahmin priests.¹⁵ This association suggests that these temples are predominantly frequented by non-Brahmins, as Brahmins typically

prefer more orthodox deities, a caste-based segregation operating within institutional religious space. Nevertheless, the urban fabric of the village fosters social cohesion amongst the caste group residing in the neighbourhood. The main street serves as a communal area, strengthening social connections among residents, who are often relatives by blood or proximity. Religious ceremonies and auspicious events, such as weddings or blessings for newborns, typically began with processions along the nadutheru, inviting villagers to join from the main street or adjoining paths, and culminate in a ritual circumambulation around the temple. The route of these processions reflects caste hierarchy, as residents negotiate the right for the procession to pass by their homes or to display their status in other neighbourhoods.¹⁵ *Amma's* house, located on the main street, remains a key site for such processions and gatherings, as she noted (see Figure 4). However, *Amma* also observes that families no longer place as much importance on who organizes the processions, and it is now more commonly regarded as a community affair.



Figure 4: Screenshots from a video of residents of Galivar Kandigai lined along the main street as a religious ritual is performed by the priests. (Source: WhatsApp video from the author's mother, 2022, 1:34 min).

The temple is ultimately venerated through its physical placement at the centre of the village. It is an identifier of the village's kinship network, which many scholars have detailed using the Tamil word for home, *ur*.¹⁶ Ethnographer Valentine Daniel writes about the importance of *ur* and its influence on personhood for South Indian Tamils in particular as:

“One of the most important relationships to a Tamil is that which exists between a person and the soil of his *ur*... “*Ur*” is defined to approximate a named territory that is 1) inhabited by human beings who are believed to share in the substance of the soil of that territory, and 2) a territory to which a Tamil cognitively orients himself at any given time.”¹⁷

The temple one frequents in South India can identify their *ur*, and therefore the relative location of their home, the village it belongs to, and the community of family, friends and neighbours it is associated with. Hindu temples are equally integral for maintaining religious ties in the West. There are roughly four purpose-

built temples and ten converted warehouse temples in the GTA, with the majority located in Scarborough. These temples were established in the last four decades when large numbers of Hindus began immigrating to Canada. Unlike purpose-built temples, warehouse temples are located outside of urban centres, in inactive industrial zones with little cultural programming and pedestrian foot traffic, and therefore less chances of encounter with the dominant public in the GTA. The facades of these warehouse temples allow for little personalization, anonymizing the programmed use of these spaces as converted Hindu temples. While the presence of the temple in South India is celebrated as an urban center and a marker of identity, these qualities are lost in the urban organization of warehouse temples in the GTA. Instead, their marginalization into inactive industrial zone and location in the physical margins of the city can produce an “othering” effect for South Indian Hindus seeking to practice religion outside of their homes.¹⁸ Hindus seeking to practice religion outside of their homes, a spatial diminishment that directly inverts the centrality the temple held in the village, and that helps explain why the domestic interior, in the diaspora, must carry so much of what the street and the temple once held together.¹⁹

2.2. Land and the Food Axis

Alongside the temple’s role as a spatial anchor of community identity, the relationship between the home and the land it rests upon constitutes an equally foundational axis of South Indian domestic life, one in which agricultural labour, food production, and ecological relation extend the boundaries of the home outward into shared fields, communal networks, and the more-than-human world. Yet this relationship is organized differently across migratory contexts: in my mother’s village, land is held in common, structured by caste, and inseparable from everyday domestic life; in the GTA, it is privatized, parcellated, and largely severed from the communal logics that once made it meaningful.

Agricultural activity is a central form of housework in South India’s agrarian economy. While this labour is socially organized through caste hierarchies and land ownership in often exploitative ways, it also produces intimate relationships between land, trees, plants, humans, and more-than-human beings. The rudimentary nature of agricultural technologies in South India sustains an interdependent local economy, in which households rely on one another for food, labour, and everyday domestic goods. This community-scale organization of domestic care is deeply structured by caste. Social hierarchies are made explicit through occupational and ritual distinctions: temple priests, patrons, farmers, and landholders occupy the highest rungs of South Indian caste society, while barbers, funeral drummers, toddy tappers, and agricultural labourers are relegated to so-called “untouchable” castes.²⁰ These hierarchies are enforced through spatial and social restrictions, including prohibitions on clothing, jewellery, movement through certain paths, entry into upper-caste temples, and participation in religious rituals.²¹ My parents were raised as kammavaru, a dominant

Hindu agrarian caste community classified as a forward caste outside India's reservation system. Historically, Kammas have converted land-based wealth into socioeconomic mobility. In our interviews, *Nana*²² reflects on how caste hierarchies were enacted within everyday domestic life in his village: lower-caste individuals hired for agricultural or household labour were not permitted to sit freely or enter certain areas of kammavaru homes, revealing how caste distinctions were spatially maintained within the domestic sphere.



Figure 5: The farmland (*polam*) near the author's maternal home.

Nana's memories of the *polam*²³ (Figure 5) recall the land as a place to eat, gather, bathe, and play, revealing that an ontological connection to home is not rooted solely in the architecture of the dwelling, but in the land it rests upon and the relationships it sustains with plants, animals, trees, and neighbours. These relations position housework as an inherently ecological practice, a sensibility affirmed through the Greek root *oikos*, meaning home, from which three related terms emerge: *ecumene*, referring to inhabited land; *economy*, the management of resources; and *ecology*, the relationships between organisms and their environments.²⁴ Taken together, these meanings frame housework as the intersection of residing and settling, managing and planning, and providing and consuming, processes that in South India are inseparable from the land itself. As Indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes of sweetgrass, plants are “both medicine and a relative,” holding value that is at once material and spiritual.²⁵ The agricultural practices of the South Indian village, which sustained both human and non-human life, offered not only material security but a deep relational connection to the earth, rooting the family in place and defining homeland through the ongoing reproduction and care of land.

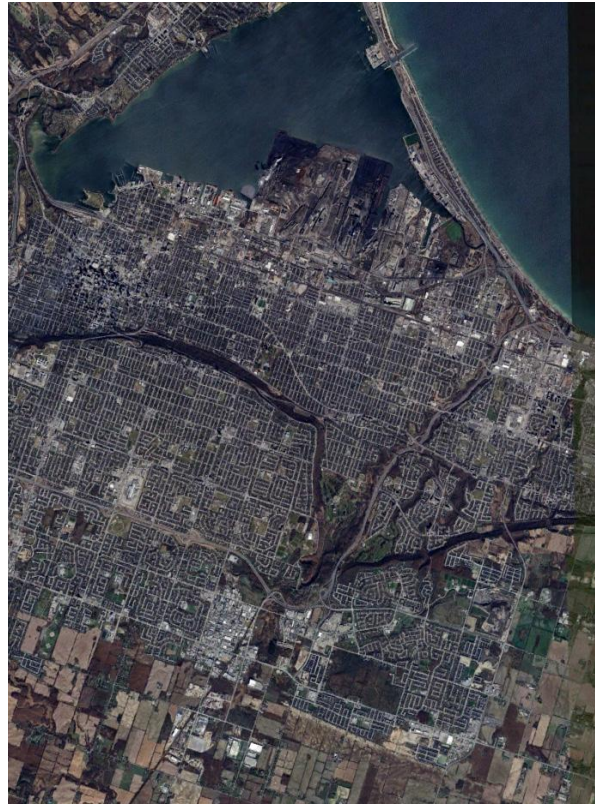


Figure 6: Aerial view of Hamilton, Ontario, organized on a grid morphology.

In the GTA, this spatial ideology encounters a built environment organized on an entirely different logic. Homes are arranged on a colonial grid (Figure 6) that divides and parcellates land into ownable property, collapsing diverse domestic landscapes into uniform formations and commodifying the land. The urban fabric rids residents of access to shared agricultural space such as the *polam*, the commons that in South India extended domestic life outward into community. It then becomes the responsibility of the diaspora to creatively re-practice agricultural activities within these constraints. In my family's Hamilton home, this is evident in the quotidian labour invested in maintaining our backyard vegetable garden. The abundance of produce left the family with excess food throughout the warmer months, prompting exchanges with extended family, neighbours, and friends residing across the GTA. These exchanges produced what feminist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham describe as a "diverse economy," encompassing exchanges and labour practices beyond paid work under capitalism.²⁶ Throughout the summer, friends, family, and neighbours visited the garden to pick produce for their immediate families; in return, prepared meals, preserves, plants, flowers, yard tools, and domestic knowledge, including recipes, cooking advice, and gardening tips, were shared. Unlike the *polam* in Kandigai, which served as shared open farmland between neighbours, the Hamilton garden is tucked within the boundaries of a residential lot, open only to invited guests. Despite this

privatization, the sharing of the earth's fruits and the reclamation of residential property as fertile agricultural land becomes a small act of resistance against the capitalist-colonialist alienation of ecology in Western housework practices. The backyard, serving as open “freespace,”²⁷ provides an adjustable framework for users to re-create their cultural values, recalling bell hooks’ concept of the homeplace, where both joy and oppression coexist, and where the creation of a garden within a colonizing framework of land organization becomes an assertion of belonging on one’s own terms.²⁸

3. THE DOMESTIC REALM: THE HOME

3.1. Male and Female Zones

The interior of the Agraharam house is organized as a spatial argument: a progression from the most public and least pure at the front, to the most private and most sacred at the rear. This argument does not dissolve with migration. It is carried into the GTA home in the bodies and habits of those who grew up within it, reasserting itself in the gendered spatial patterns of community gatherings even where its architectural enforcement has disappeared.

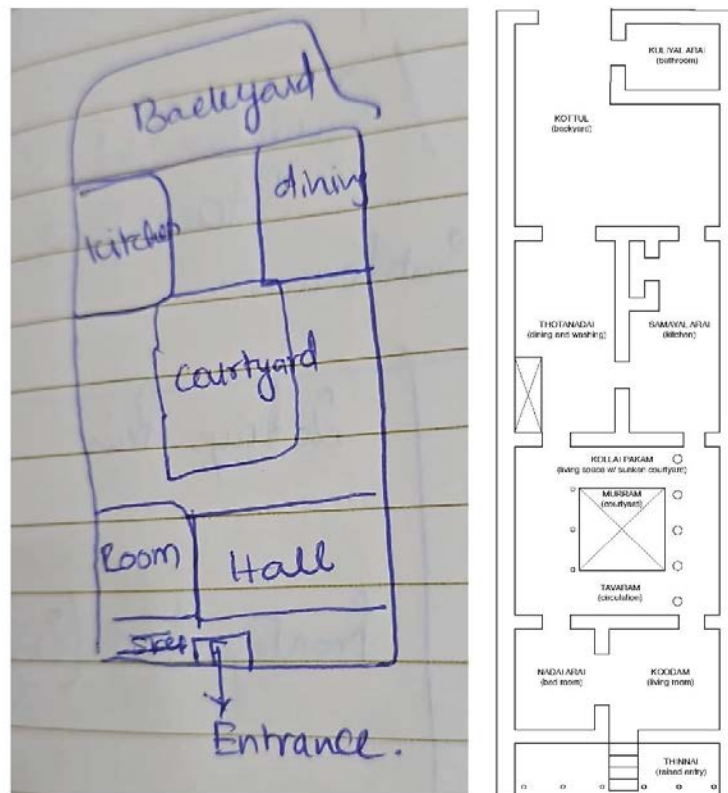


Figure 7: Left to right: Amma’s sketch of her family home (Drawing by author’s mother. Pen on paper, 2024) and a digital recreation of the house’s floor plan. (Source: Author, floor plan of Amma’s house, AutoCAD Drawing).

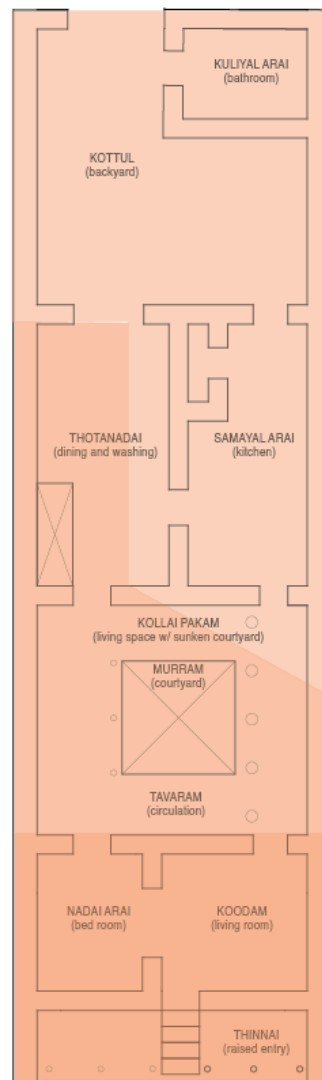


Figure 8: First, second, and third zones of the agraharam — entry, living, and service areas — indicated by dark, medium, and light tones, respectively.

To explore the interior spatial qualities of Agraharam houses, the analysis focuses on *Amma's* house, depicted through a sketch (Figure 7) by my mother and, its floor plan (also Figure 7), recreated digitally by the me. The Agraharam style is characterized by a division into three distinct sections: the mudhal kattu (translated as the first zone; the entryway), the irandham kattu (second zone; living area), and the moonam kattu (third zone; service section) (Figure 8). The mudhal kattu includes the thinnai, a shaded verandah with built-in seating, supported by pillars, located at the house's entrance. This space serves as an informal, transitional space that facilitates social interactions among family members and the wider community while protecting the house's main entrance. *Amma* notes that often residents would gather at the thinnai, or household members would lounge in this space. As a "transition space," the thinnai bridges the public and private realms, reflecting the

socio-cultural ethos of traditional society and providing a gradual shift from exterior to interior.²⁹ According to Kulbushan Jain in *Thematic Spaces*, the thinnai's raised plinth was traditionally reserved for higher-caste individuals, such as Brahmins.³⁰ The verticality of the pillars and the subtle horizontal level changes demarcated this area as a "front and male zone," a guarded threshold under the authority of the household's patriarchal figures.³¹ While the thinnai encouraged social interaction, it also functioned as a regulated space, monitored by these patriarchal figures. Given that Agraharam houses were traditionally occupied by Brahmins, this dual function of the thinnai highlights its role in controlling interactions with outsiders. Its caste-driven regulatory function is further emphasized by the provision of a separate entrance through the backyard for domestic workers from lower caste groups, who were prohibited from entering through the thinnai to maintain purity of the entrance.³² During *Amma's* time, although caste segregation remained, the thinnai ceased to be a strictly male zone as many households began to build compound walls around their property. This shift allowed women and children (Figure 9) to relinquish their previous exclusion from the space, yet if the thinnai's gendered regulation loosened at the threshold, it persisted deeper within the home.



Figure 9: Ma's female family members and children occupying the thinnai during the home's housewarming puja (religious ritual).

In the GTA home, the house is separated into similar zones of front, middle, and back, the front being the most public domain, the middle functioning as a service core, and the back containing the most privatized areas of the house. This zoning logic, while organized around different principles than the Agraharam's purity gradient, nonetheless produces comparable degrees of privacy and publicity at the scale of the unit, floor, or

house. Architectural historian Avi Friedman has noted that the North American suburban home, despite its appearance of openness and flexibility, is in fact highly prescriptive in its spatial hierarchy: the living room performs domesticity for visitors, the kitchen mediates between public and private, and the bedrooms and back spaces are withdrawn from social view (Figure 10).³³ This hierarchy is not neutral as it encodes particular assumptions about family structure, social life, and the appropriate uses of domestic space that are often at odds with the spatial needs of immigrant households. Where the Agraharam's three-zone progression was explicit and ritually justified, the suburban home's equivalent hierarchy is implicit, naturalized through convention and building typology rather than announced through cosmological principle. Yet, both systems organize bodies, labor, and social relations across a front-to-back gradient in ways that are far from accidental.

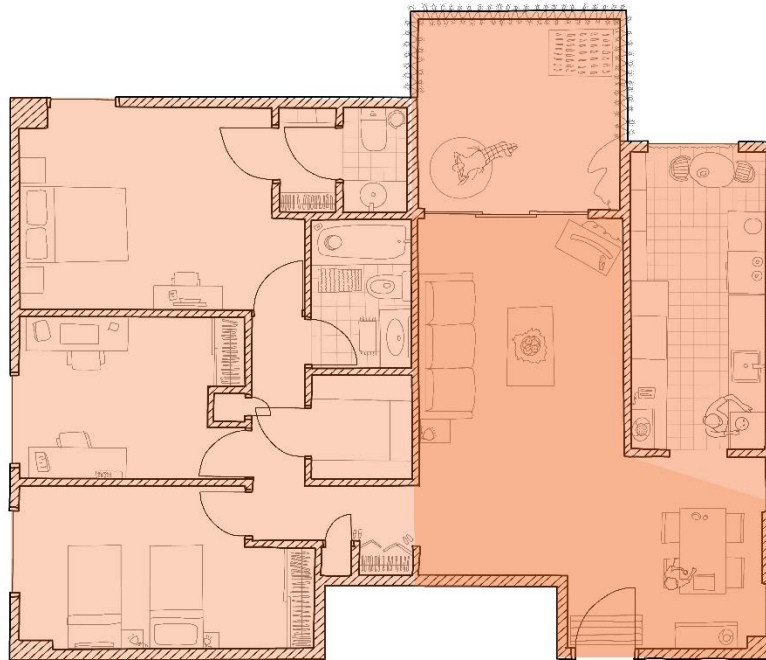


Figure 10: Exemplifying Friedman's spatial hierarchy of public (dark), private (medium), and service zones (lightest) of the Mississauga apartment.

It is within this spatial framework that the gendered sorting of the Agraharam reasserts itself, though in transformed terms. In the GTA home, the thinnai has no equivalent, but the gendered sorting of bodies across domestic space does. These gendered spatial practices continue to manifest in GTA homes during family and community gatherings. Men often occupy basement spaces, rear porches, or garages to share drinks, activities that, as *Amma* notes, were historically concealed from the view of women and children. While no longer enforced as a strict rule, this spatial separation persists as a practice of respect, its enforcement having shifted from architectural constraint to social convention. Meanwhile, women tend to

gather in living rooms or kitchens, where conversation, gossip, and the labour of hosting unfold. In their work on Italian Americans, Judith G. Goode, Karen Curtis and Janet Theophano argue that “through the food system, women express and maintain their social positions in the community,” a dynamic that holds equally in the South Indian diaspora, where women sustain their social positions through foodwork and the management of systems of reciprocity among households.³⁴ This labour aligns with what Micaela di Leonardo terms kin-work: the maintenance of social ties through everyday, often invisible, forms of care and obligation that are spatially concentrated in the kitchen and living room even as they extend outward across the entire kinship network.³⁵ Together, these patterns reveal how gendered divisions of space and sociality remain embedded in domestic life across migration as a result of the habits the Agraharam once enforced.

3.2. The Courtyard and Its Substitutes

The second section of the house, *Irاندham Kattu*, includes the murram (courtyard) and the *nadai arai* (enclosed living room). In Agraharam housing, the courtyard is the central organizing element, around which all other spaces are arranged. It provides privacy while allowing sunlight and natural ventilation to penetrate the adjacent interior areas. The *Vastu Purush Mandala* (Figure 11), — a metaphysical square divided into 81 equal parts, forms the diagrammatic foundation for the house’s layout, aligning each section with specific household activities.³⁶ For instance, creation-related activities such as marriage or prenatal rituals, are performed in the central courtyard, believed to be the location of the Lord Brahma, the Creator. This instills within the house a spatial representation of Brahmin religious principles.³⁷ Household activities, particularly those traditionally associated with women, such as food preparation, often spill into the courtyard, while men, as previously noted, traditionally occupied the *thinnai*, a space designated as a male zone. *Amma* notes that, although the *thinnai* eventually ceased to be a male zone, spaces like the courtyard and its associated work remained within the female domain. This change marked the shift of women’s work from private to more visible spaces, highlighting a transformation in social dynamics but the persistence of gendered tasks reveals how these roles have remained largely unchanged.

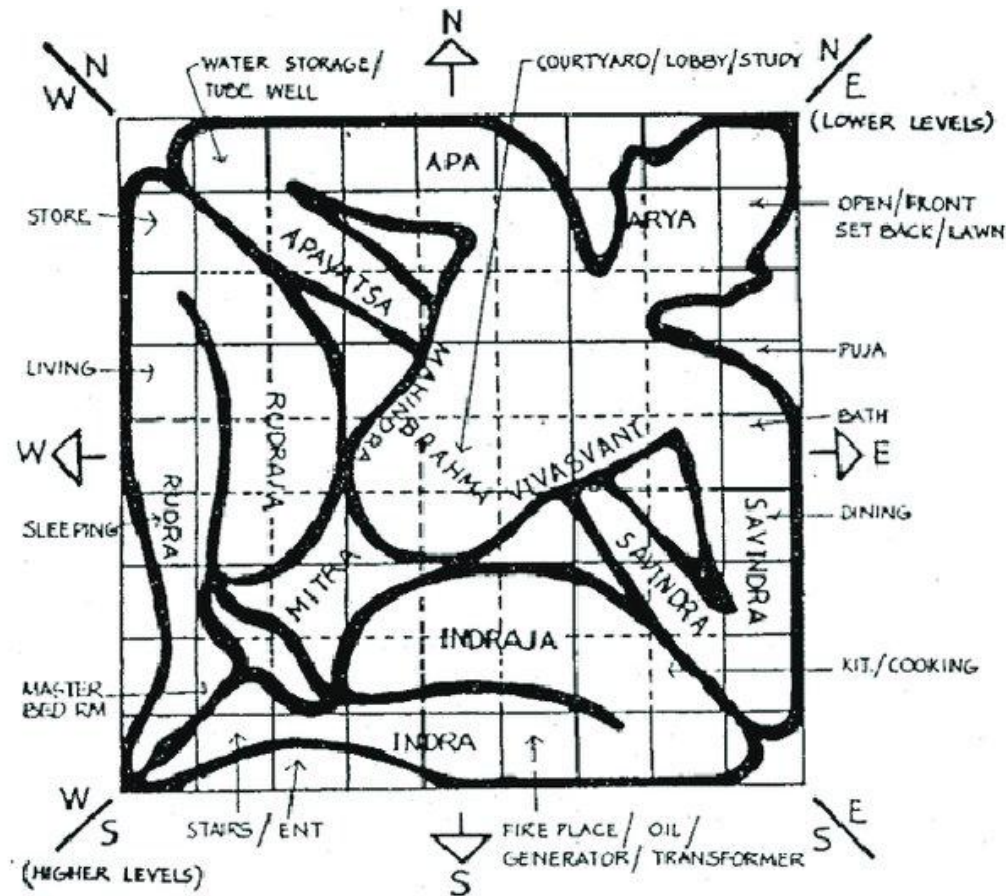


Figure 11: Illustration of the Vaastu Purusha Mandala, a Hindu architectural framework by Reena Thakur Patra (2017), highlighting the courtyard as the location of Lord Brahma.

Amma also recalls that a Tulsi plant was placed at the center of the courtyard, viewed by Hindus as an earthly manifestation of the Goddess Tulsi, an avatar of Goddess Lakshmi (the Goddess of wealth and fertility).³⁸ Traditionally, married women of the household will perform a circumambulatory ritual around the plant, similar to the processions around and within a Hindu temple, praying for the health and well-being of their family. Adjacent to the courtyard, in the kollai pakam (living room), a cupboard houses the domestic shrine, displaying images and idols of deities. During the Vedic Age (1500 BCE – 500 BCE), the sacred texts of Hinduism, closely followed by Brahmins, established the practice of vratas (religious observances), which were carried out by women within the domestic sphere.³⁹ *Amma* notes that while devotion to the gods remains central to ensuring overall family well-being, it is the women who continue to organize and perform these rituals. This enduring practice reflects how traditional Hindu society has instilled in women the role of carrying out religious rituals as selfless acts of domestic service—a cultural tradition passed down from older to younger generations, often from mother to daughter or daughter-in-law.

Within the domestic sphere, the circular movement of people typical of Hindu temples is collapsed into a rectangular enclosed room containing a shrine. The prayer room thus creates a temple inside the house, which South Asian sociologist Puja Sahney describes as the “imparting [of] sacredness to the entire dwelling”.⁴⁰ Sahney notes that Hinduism has never been institutionalized in the sense of belonging to a single temple; rather, it is internalized, lived, and observed through everyday ritual.⁴¹ Shrines and portraits allow inhabitants to worship the divine within domestic space, guided by a logic of purity that emphasizes engaging with deities under clean conditions, such as after bathing. In the GTA, this spatial connection to the sacred must be remade creatively within a housing stock that neither anticipates nor accommodates it. After migration, it is South Indian women who most often carry this responsibility, keeping cultural and religious ties visible through meals, festivals, ceremonies, and holidays celebrated at home, and through dedicated home shrines. The locations of home shrines are dictated by cardinal direction, as the shrine must face north or east; ideally, built-in linen closets in GTA homes will face in either of these directions, or a dedicated prayer room is used instead.

Like the Agraharam, GTA homes collapse the cyclical circulation designed into Hindu temples into rectangular rooms, a compression that poses particular difficulties when hosting religious ceremonies, where it becomes difficult to crowd around the shrine in the compact hallways or bedrooms of GTA homes. In the Mississauga apartment, a home shrine was created at the back of the kitchen using a cupboard purchased on Facebook Marketplace. Later, in the Hamilton home, as a way of marking permanence in Canada, my parents invested in a custom-built shrine that fully occupied the prescribed dining room (Figure 12), which was deemed unnecessary in order to create a singular, open space for religious gatherings. Within the GTA housing stock, built-in prayer rooms remain atypical, and domestic interiors continue to follow a logic of whiteness despite the large population of racialized diasporic residents, an exclusivity embedded in the built environment itself.⁴² As a result, shrines are often assembled less permanently through furniture and objects, frequently by women, who carve out sacred space within an otherwise secular home.



Figure 12: Custom-built home shrine in the repurposed dining room, author's Hamilton residence.

Yet, the absence of the courtyard in the GTA home is not only a loss of light and ventilation but also a loss of a shared spatial infrastructure for communal domestic life. Where the Agraharam courtyard drew household members together around food preparation, ritual, and everyday gathering, the North American suburban home replaces this shared center with a series of compartmentalized, single-function rooms in which each space is assigned a prescribed use and the boundaries between them are hard rather than permeable (Figure 13). Interior walls and floors become barriers that discourage communal undertakings of housework between family members, isolating domestic labour as a result. The formal spaces of the GTA home, the living room and the dining room, are made visible, communal, and accessible, while the spaces of domestic labour necessary to maintain and reproduce a household are hidden away, their work rendered spatially and socially invisible. This arrangement encodes a set of assumptions about what domestic life should look like: leisure is a shared and presentable activity; labour is a private and individual one.

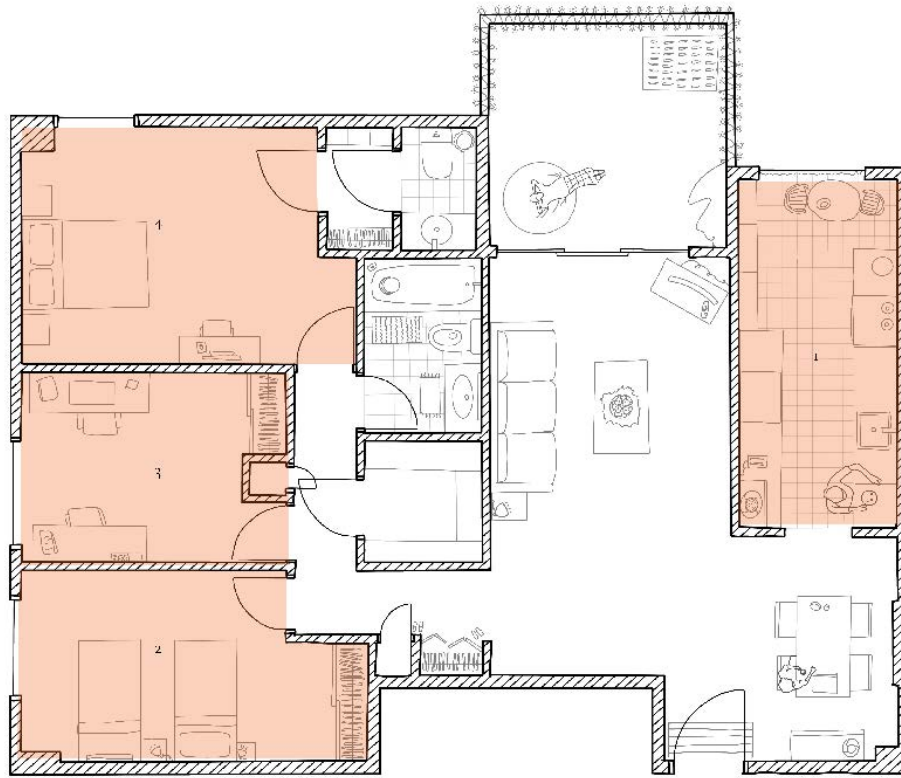


Figure 13: Mississauga apartment floor plan showing individualized rooms attributed to the family members of the house. 1. Kitchen, 2. Author and author's sister's bedroom, 3. Author and author's sister's study room, 4. Amma and Nana's bedroom

This logic reaches its clearest expression in the so-called “kitchen triangle,” the ergonomic organization of stove, sink, and refrigerator into a compact, efficient unit, which was developed in the early twentieth century as a rationalization of domestic labour through Taylorist efficiency principles.⁴² As Dolores Hayden documents in *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, this consolidation of food preparation into a minimal, self-contained unit was explicitly designed to isolate the housewife within a privatized kitchen, severing the communal and cooperative dimensions of domestic foodwork that had characterized earlier household arrangements.⁴³ Christine Frederick’s influential *Household Engineering* (1919) formalized these principles, positioning the kitchen as a site of individual scientific management rather than shared labour, a spatial ideology that has been reproduced largely unchanged in the North American housing stock ever since.⁴⁴ The effect is not only spatial but social: cooking, once a communal activity that spilled across communal space and drew multiple household members into shared labour, is concentrated into a zone designed for one person working alone. In the family’s Mississauga apartment, this dynamic was acutely felt. Each resident had a designated private space, and while privacy was gained, it also bred isolation (see Figure 13). The single-function nature of the rooms meant that domestic labour such as cooking and food preparation was spatially

confined, its communal dimensions designed out. Comparing the floor plans of South Indian homes to those of the GTA reveals not simply an absence of shared spaces like the courtyard, but the presence of a spatial ideology actively opposed to the communal organization of domestic life that the Agraharam once made possible.

Yet this spatial ideology is not simply accepted. Within the constraints of the suburban home, the family negotiates the absence of communal space through a series of creative spatial practices that redistribute domestic labour back across the house and beyond it. Cooking extends beyond the kitchen and dining room into living rooms for taste tests, closets, garages, crawl spaces, and cold rooms for storage, and the backyard vegetable garden for planting, tending, and harvesting (Figure 14). The dining table reorients bodies toward one another around a shared workstation, recreating the socialized food preparation once practiced on the Permalpattu porch or Ambattur balcony. As my sister notes, it functions throughout the day “as extra counter-space, a desk, a place to eat, and to prep food,” informally uniting household members in foodwork and revealing how furnishings can enable communal practices within otherwise compartmentalized domestic layouts. At the scale of the community, this negotiation extends beyond the individual household: gatherings rotate across the homes of South Indian families in the GTA, with food preparation distributed across multiple kitchens and assembled at one location. Larger events, organized through the *Hamilton Tamil Sangam* and the *Milton Tamil Sangam*, take place in backyards, temple halls, and church basements, spaces that function as informal communal infrastructure in the absence of the shared street and courtyard the naduthuru once provided.



Figure 14: Food preparation set up on the dining table (left) and backyard gazebo (right) of the Hamilton house, extending cooking labour outside of the kitchen and into semi-public spaces.

3.3. The Sacred Kitchen and the Dispersed Food Axis

These religious beliefs and spatial principles extend still deeper into the house in the final section of the Agraharam house, the *Moonam Kattu*, which consists of the *samayal arai* (the kitchen), and the backyard. Unlike the other rooms, the kitchen is an enclosed space located at the rear, connected to the backyard. According to *Vastu Purusha Mandala*, the kitchen is ideally situated in the southeast or northwest corner of the house based on the belief that fire propagates through the southeast direction. This positioning was particularly significant, as cooking was traditionally done over an open fire and even today, food preparation for special occasions is often carried out over an open fire. For upper-caste Hindus, food preparation was closely intertwined with religious practices.⁴⁵ The kitchen's sacred status is highlighted by Monier Williams in 1903:

“The kitchen in every Indian household is a kind of sanctuary or holy ground... The mere glance of a man of inferior caste makes the greatest delicacies uneatable.”⁴⁶

The kitchen is typically separated by a door or narrow entryway to shield food preparation from the presence of lower-caste domestic workers, who would receive meals through the backyard exterior.⁴⁷ In contrast to the Western concept of the open kitchen, the Agraharam kitchen is intentionally concealed from the anterior areas of the dwelling. *Amma* argues that this arrangement was also effective in containing the smoke produced by the wood-burning hearth and the fragrances of Indian cooking, a practical justification that sits alongside the ritual one, each reinforcing the other.

In traditional Indian society, the kitchen is a gendered space, with cooking largely considered a female activity.⁴⁸ However, this space of female labour and cooperation paradoxically forbids a woman's presence during menstruation. Specifically, during her period, a woman is isolated for three days and takes a purifying bath on the fourth day, at which point she resumes her normal status and can re-enter the kitchen on the fifth day.⁴⁹ As *Amma* notes, women are ordered to stay away the public view during this time. She recalls that it was common for her and her sister to sleep in the backyard during this time, with food being served away from the living spaces. Rooted in Hindu beliefs, this practice reflects the notion that a menstruating woman's body is “impure,” and could contaminate sacred spaces, ironically reinforcing a social hierarchy where women, regardless of their caste, are positioned similarly to lower-caste individuals. Moreover, the kitchen — often seen as a smog-filled, inherently chaotic, and messy environment—is paradoxically regarded as purer than the woman who maintains it. This contradiction highlights the outdated patriarchal discourse embedded within Hindu practices. As *Amma* often jokes, had we been menstruating in my grandmother's house, we wouldn't even have been allowed to enter the house. In addition to this, the kitchen features other distinctive elements, such as the adjacent thotta nadai, a space designed for dining on the floor, and a small sunken

courtyard. This courtyard serves multiple functions, including washing utensils, acting as a chimney, and functioning as a light well to brighten this traditionally darker space. The kitchen and the dining room lead out to the backyard where a washroom is located at the end of the lot, placed outside as it was considered an impure space.

In the GTA, the sacred enclosure of the Agrapharam kitchen encounters a built environment organized around an entirely different logic, one rooted in the Taylorist rationalization of domestic labour. Exemplified by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's 1926 Frankfurt Kitchen,⁵⁰ influenced by industrial efficiency principles, and formalized through the scholarship of Christine Frederick and Lillian Gilbreth, the North American kitchen was designed to optimize cooking labour through the compression of food preparation into the smallest possible space.⁵¹ Gilbreth's kitchen triangle positions the working body toward the walls, an arrangement replicated across GTA homes through fixed counters, cabinetry, and plumbing that conceals, isolates, and individualizes cooking labor even at the bodily scale (Figure 15). Amma notes how the advanced technology of domestic appliances in GTA homes resulted in less time spent on housework activities like cooking. While these approaches make domestic labour more efficient, they do not liberate it from its invisible, isolated, and individualized constraints.

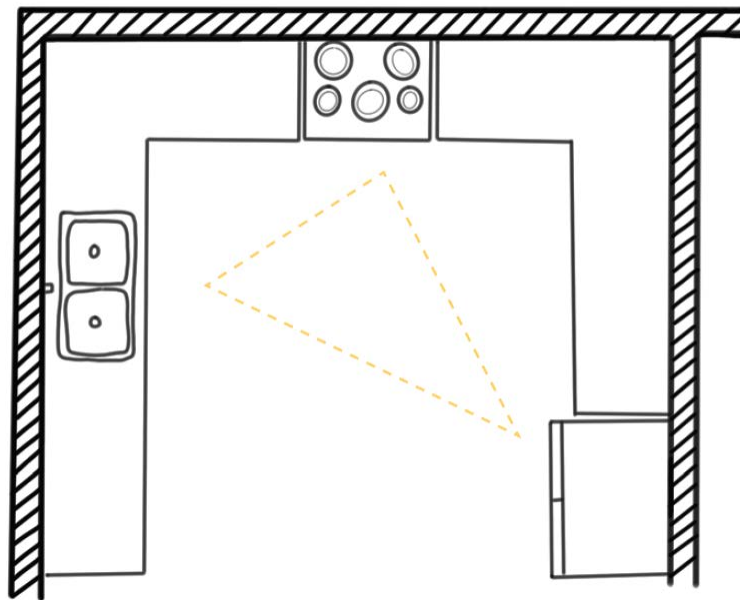


Figure 15: Diagram illustrating psychologist and engineer Lillian Moller Gilbreth's kitchen triangle rule, which brings together the sink, stove, and fridge into a triangular formation for maximum efficiency.

What the Agrapharam kitchen achieved through sacred enclosure, the immigrant home negotiates through dispersal. In the Hamilton home, large-scale cooking often takes place under the backyard gazebo over an

open fire, reassembling the elevated fire stoves of the South Indian ancestral home within the suburban lot. In the earlier Milton townhouse, limited outdoor space led to cooking on a camping stove in the garage, with the door propped open for ventilation and smells drifting into the street. Punjabi-Ontarian art and architectural historian Sajdeep Soomal describes a similar practice in his grandmother's Cambridge, Ontario garage, where a second stove is used to prepare tadka and fried foods so that strong smells do not permeate the house. With the garage door left open for ventilation, this "open-door policy" blurs the boundary between garage and neighbourhood, effectively recreating the domestic courtyard where cooking, socializing, and storage once coexisted.⁵² My family's cooking practices similarly reassemble the socialized food preparation that once took place in the Agraharam courtyard, now dispersed across dining tables, back decks, gazebos, gardens, and garages across the GTA. These extensions of cooking beyond the fixed kitchen reveal how standard North American layouts, shaped by built-in counters, cabinetry, and plumbing, hide, isolate, and undervalue housework, and how spatial improvisation becomes a quiet act of resistance to this isolating logic.

4. CONCLUSION

All spaces within the Agraharam house, from the *thinnai* at the front to the backyard at the rear, are organized in a way that reflects a gradual progression in purity, with each area corresponding to specific cultural and religious values. The *thinnai*, at the entrance, is considered the most impure space, while the kitchen, the purest, is located at the rear, concealed from public view. This organisation mirrors the proportional relationship between purity and privacy, with spaces deemed more sacred according to Brahmin Hindu values intentionally concealed from the outside world. As *Amma* recalls, the original house had no windows and was reliant on daylight from the courtyards alone. The house has since been demolished and rebuilt by *Amma's* cousin. Slowly, across the state, Agraharam houses are being modernized, often through demolition and reconstruction. In some cases, land politics influenced by caste ideology have played a central role in the destruction of these homes. *Amma* shares that when a Dalit family — Dalits being members of communities historically designated as "Untouchable" — moved into the neighborhood five years ago, a villager raised concerns with the municipality, dissatisfied with the presence of someone from this caste group. The villager claimed the houses on the nadutharu were built on a waterbed, and as a result, these homes are now slated for demolition due to alleged encroachment. These houses, occupied for over four decades by families *Amma* considers kin, are being torn down because the community was offended by the arrival of an "outsider." *Amma's* mother, in tears, believes that the forced removal of these homes and the families they shelter will forever alter the social fabric of the village.

The demolition is not a coda to this paper's argument but perhaps its sharpest expression: caste does not require ancient architecture to operate, but finds equally effective instruments in municipalities, planning decisions, and the bureaucratic language of infrastructure. The Agraharam housing type is a built manifestation of a social order that structured every inch of domestic life in the service of hierarchy, and the ongoing cycle of caste-based power politics in domestic spaces reveals that this order is far from archaic.

Nor does caste remain fixed in the village, but travels, encoded in spatial practice, domestic habit, and the organisation of bodies across thresholds, into the homes this paper has traced from Galivar Kandigai to Mississauga and Hamilton, Ontario: the alignment of temple, street, and home as an axis of community belonging; the relationship between land, agricultural labour, and domestic life; the gendered sorting of bodies across front, middle, and rear zones; and the sacred enclosure of the food axis. In each case, the ideology persists across migration, but the forms available to express it have changed dramatically. The warehouse temple at the industrial margin of the GTA inverts the centrality the village temple once held. The backyard vegetable garden reassembles the *polam* within the privatized lot. The gendered gathering patterns of community events reproduce the thinnai's male zone and the courtyard's female domain without any architectural enforcement. The garage stove and the backyard gazebo disperse what the *samayal arai* once enclosed. What changes across migration is not the need these spatial ideologies serve but the materials from which they must be built.

The most significant shift is from architectural enforcement to embodied practice. In the Agraharam, the spatial ideologies of caste and gender were built into the purity gradient, the regulated threshold, the concealed kitchen. In the GTA, they persist through the choices women make about where to cook, which room to give to the shrine, how to mark the door. The house no longer enforces these ideologies through architecture alone; it is the women who inhabit it who carry them forward, in their bodies and their daily labour. This internalization is not liberation. The work of cultural maintenance falls, as it always has, on women, performed now in isolation rather than within the communal scaffolding of the nadutharu, without the reciprocal networks of obligation and care that once distributed that weight across households. But it is not mere reproduction either. The shrine installed where the dining room once was, the garden opened to neighbours, the cooking that refuses to stay within the kitchen and spills instead toward the street: these are spatial arguments, small and persistent, about what a home must contain and what a community requires of its members. The caste system is not archaic, nor is its operation limited to those who consciously uphold it. It moves through planning offices and property lines, through the design of kitchens and the zoning of industrial land. And neither, in the end, is the capacity of those who live within its inheritance to remake home on their own terms, from whatever materials, spaces, and traditions remain available to them.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

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**CO-CREATING FRAMEWORKS FOR
SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE:
TRADITIONAL BALINESE SPATIAL
PHILOSOPHY AND SURF CULTURE
AS CATALYSTS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE**

Siti Balkish Roslan, Hidayati Ramli

CO-CREATING FRAMEWORKS FOR SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE: TRADITIONAL BALINESE SPATIAL PHILOSOPHY AND SURF CULTURE AS CATALYSTS FOR DESIGN PRACTICE



Balinese spatial philosophy — encoded in Tri Hita Karana, Sanga Mandala, and Tri Mandala — embeds ecological and metaphysical order into the built environment. This paper argues that the encounter between these traditions and global surf culture co-creates new frameworks for sustainable architecture in Bali. Through design analysis of three case studies (Pura Tirta Empul, Penglipuran Village, and Green School Bali) and a structured survey of twenty-two surf practitioners, five emergent spatial typologies are identified: the Threshold Space, Ecological Core, Communal Platform, Creative Sanctuary, and Functional Vessel. These typologies position cultural cosmology as a generative resource for contextually grounded, future-oriented sustainable design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Balinese architecture holds to the concept of living in ultimate harmony with nature. The Balinese way of life is deeply rooted in religion, culture, and tradition, and seamlessly transcends from the individual and community to the spaces they inhabit.¹ Its architecture is a testimony to the Balinese way of life: a physical portrayal of beliefs that is simultaneously cosmological, ecological, and social. The spatial regulation system — elaborated through principles including *Tri Loka* (hierarchical cosmology), *Hasta Kosala Kosali* (proportions and orientation), *Tri Mandala* (vertical zoning), and *Sanga Mandala* (sacred spatial orientation) — embeds metaphysical order into the built environment, where space is not merely functional but ritualistic and symbolic.

At the foundation of this cosmological system is *Tri Hita Karana*: the tripartite Balinese philosophy of balance among the individual's relationship to the divine (*Parhyangan*), to other human beings (*Pawongan*), and to the natural environment (*Palemahan*).² This philosophy has been identified as one of the most coherent indigenous sustainability frameworks in Southeast Asia, encoding centuries of ecological attentiveness into spatial practice. The *Kaja-Kelod* axis — oriented toward the sacred mountain Gunung Agung and away toward the sea — governs the placement of every space from the most sacred to the most profane, ensuring that the built environment participates in a cosmic order rather than standing apart from it.

The first documented wave surfed in Bali was at Kuta Beach in 1936 by the American expatriate Bob Koke, who subsequently established the Kuta Beach Hotel with his partner Louise Koke and associate K'tut Tantri.³ This was the beginning of surf culture and the creation of surf spaces in contemporary architecture in Bali. In the decades that followed, Bali's emergence as a global surf destination catalyzed an unprecedented encounter

between its indigenous spatial traditions and an incoming culture carrying its own distinctive ecological sensibility.

Surf culture, far from being merely recreational, carries a profound spiritual and environmental consciousness. Wheaton (2024) has documented how surfing cultivates a deep ocean identity — a form of blue-space consciousness — that shapes practitioners' relationships with coastal environments and, by extension, with the built spaces they inhabit.⁴ The spiritual dimension of surfing — its capacity to transform the practitioner's relationship to nature — finds a remarkable resonance with Balinese spatial philosophy, particularly the concept of *Segara* (the sea) as a place of purification and spiritual significance.

The encounter between Balinese spatial philosophy and global surf culture has produced a multidirectional cultural imposition alongside a negotiated co-creation of new frameworks for sustainable architecture. Surf spaces are now expected to embody sustainability not merely in material choices but in holistic spatial experience. Sustainability is reframed as a metaphysical state: the building itself participates in a reciprocal relationship with nature and, in doing so, transforms its inhabitants into stewards of the environment.

Through a critical mixed-method triangulation — comprising design analysis of three significant Balinese spatial typologies and primary survey research with 22 surf practitioners in Bali — it demonstrates that the dialogue between Balinese spatial traditions and surf culture generates a new architectural language. Locality offers a spiritual grammar of space, while surf culture brings an ethic of environmental activism and global visibility. Together, they produce a model of architecture that is context-responsive, socially embedded, and future-oriented. This paper contributes to architectural theory by positioning Bali's surf spaces as living laboratories where insider traditions and outsider practices converge.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Balinese Spatial Cosmology

Balinese architecture is a comprehensive cosmological system that governs every dimension of the built environment. *Tri Loka* structures spatial hierarchy into three vertical registers: *Utama* (the upper, sacred, associated with the divine), *Madya* (the middle, the human sphere), and *Nista* (the lower, the profane and impure). This cosmological layering finds physical expression in the planning of every settlement, temple, and domestic compound. Paramadhyaksa and Dwijendra (2021) have demonstrated the precision with which traditional Balinese village architecture applies these orientation principles, showing that even minor deviations from the Kaja-Kelod axis produce measurable social and spiritual consequences within communities.⁵

Sanga Mandala operationalizes this cosmology at the settlement scale through a nine-directional spatial grid in which cardinal directions are associated with different qualities of sacredness and use. The most sacred spaces are oriented toward *Kaja* (toward Gunung Agung, the sacred volcano) and the most impure toward *Kelod* (toward the sea). *Hasta Kosala Kosali* further embeds this cosmology in the individual body: architectural proportions are derived from the measurements of the occupant, ensuring that the built environment is literally calibrated to human being. The domestic compound is planned as a microcosm of the cosmos: the family shrine (*sanggah*) at the most sacred *Kaja* position, sleeping quarters toward the center, and service and impure spaces toward *Kelod*.

What is most significant for the present argument is that Balinese spatial philosophy is fundamentally ecological in nature. Dwijendra (2026) argues that traditional climate-adaptive strategies, embedded in centuries-old manuscripts and spatial practices, offer a sophisticated model for climate-resilient architecture today.⁶ Dewi, Dwijendra, and Pranajaya (2025) demonstrate through analysis of traditional housing that Balinese architectural wisdom constitutes a genuine blueprint for climate-responsive design, with documented strategies for natural ventilation, thermal mass, solar orientation, and ecologically sourced materials.⁷ Crucially, these strategies are spiritually grounded where the care for the natural environment is an expression of *Palemahan*, the harmonious relationship with nature that is one of the three pillars of *Tri Hita Karana*.

2.2. Surf Culture and Ecological Consciousness

Surf culture is frequently misread as a hedonistic or merely recreational subculture. Academic scholarship has increasingly challenged this reading. Nardini (2019) situates surfing within broader traditions of physical culture and place-making, demonstrating that the act of surfing produces cultural heritage and a distinctive ethic of environmental stewardship.⁸ Mach and Ponting (2017) show that surf communities often develop governance frameworks for protecting the very ecosystems — reef systems, coastal habitats — that make surfing possible, constituting a form of bottom-up marine conservation.⁹

Wheaton et al. (2021) argue that coastal communities engaged in ocean recreation develop a distinctive relationship to blue spaces that mirrors, in secular terms, the sacred water relationships encoded in Balinese temple culture.¹⁰ Surfers' need for a clean, thriving ocean is both practical and existential: the degradation of coastal environments is experienced as a direct threat to spiritual as well as physical wellbeing. This ocean consciousness positions the surfer as a natural ally of ecological spatial practice — and, in the Balinese context, as a cultural interlocutor who finds in *Tri Hita Karana* a philosophical framework that gives depth and cosmological grounding to intuitions they already hold.

The spiritual dimension of surfing is particularly relevant to the co-creation thesis. The revival of surfing's

spiritual dimension — documented across the scholarly literature — constitutes a meaningful practice embodying physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits. With this embodiment, the practice is extended to the space itself: within the reverence of surfing, the practitioner becomes steward and protector of nature. This transformation, from recreational user to ecological guardian, parallels the Balinese conception of the human being as *Pawongan*: a social and relational being whose wellbeing is inseparable from the health of the community and the natural environment.

2.3. Co-Creation as the Analytical Lens

The concept of co-creation — drawn from collaborative design and participatory planning literature — is applied here to describe the negotiated production of spatial frameworks that occurs when insider traditions and outsider practices encounter one another over time. This is an amalgamation of the dynamic and conflicted exchange in which both Balinese spatial philosophy and surf culture are transformed by the encounter.

Yates (2008) provides a foundational theoretical frame in arguing that sustainable design is fundamentally a cultural practice: it cannot be abstracted from the values, beliefs, and ecological knowledges of the communities that inhabit it.¹¹ The co-creation thesis extends this argument to posit that sustainable architectural frameworks emerge most robustly when multiple cultural systems — in this case, Balinese cosmological architecture and the ecological ethics of surf culture — enter into productive, sustained dialogue. The result is a genuine architectural language that is legible to both culture and traditions, and carries the ecological commitments into built form.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a critical mixed-method triangulation designed to capture both the material dimensions of co-created spatial frameworks and the subjective, ethnographic dimensions of how surf practitioners in Bali understand, imagine, and inhabit space. Three complementary methods were deployed in sequence and then integrated through critical design analysis.

First, design analysis was conducted of three significant spatial typologies that represent Balinese spatial philosophy in traditional and contemporary form: Pura Tirta Empul (sacred temple, Tampaksiring, Gianyar); Penglipuran Village (vernacular planned settlement, Bangli Regency); and Green School Bali (contemporary sustainable institution, Sibang Kaja, Badung). Each case was analyzed for its application of Balinese spatial principles — particularly *Tri Hita Karana*, *Sanga Mandala*, and *Tri Mandala* — and for its relevance to the emerging typologies of sustainable surf architecture.

Second, a structured survey was administered to 22 respondents drawn from the international surfing and surf-adjacent community in Bali. Respondents were invited to rate 16 spatial typologies for an ideal surf home on a five-point scale from 'Not Important' (1) to 'Essential' (5), and to respond in open-ended form to questions about how living in Bali had shaped their spatial imagination. Respondents represented eleven nationalities — including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovakia, and Japan — with surfing experience ranging from novice (0–5 years: n=11) through intermediate (5–10 years: n=4; 10–15 years: n=3) to expert (15 years and above: n=4). Respondents included educators, designers, engineers, entrepreneurs, surf coaches, and artists, offering a cross-sectoral perspective on the surf lifestyle and its spatial aspirations.

Third, the quantitative and qualitative findings of the survey were triangulated through critical design analysis: the spatial priorities identified in the survey were mapped against the spatial principles embedded in the three case studies, allowing patterns of convergence and divergence to be identified and theorized. This triangulation enables the paper to move between the material specificity of built precedents and the lived, subjective experience of surf practitioners—and thereby ground its theoretical claims in both architectural evidence and ethnographic testimony.

4. CASE STUDIES: LIVING LABORATORIES OF CO-CREATION

4.1. Pura Tirta Empul: Sacred Water and the Spatial Threshold

Pura Tirta Empul, established in 962 CE during the reign of King Chandrabhayasingha Warmadewa, stands at Tampaksiring in Gianyar Regency as one of Bali's most revered water temples. Its spatial organization exemplifies the *Sanga Mandala* system in its purest form: the innermost sanctum (*jeroan*) houses the sacred spring; the middle zone (*jaba tengah*) serves as a transitional space for ritual preparation; and the outer courtyard (*jaba sisi*) accommodates the broader public. The movement from exterior to interior is a graduated sequence of purification, each threshold marking a deepening intimacy with the sacred. Suryono (2021) has documented how the preservation of these sacred spatial hierarchies in contemporary Balinese public buildings continues to structure architectural culture across the island.¹²

What is most striking about Pura Tirta Empul from the perspective of surf architecture is the spatial treatment of water. Despite the Balinese cosmological tradition of locating the sea and water toward the *Kelod* (impure) direction, the temple's sacred spring overrides this hierarchy: water here becomes generative of the most sacred spatial zone rather than its antithesis. This cosmological complexity — water as simultaneously *Kelod* in settlement planning and *Utama* in temple space — encodes a nuanced ecological knowledge where

water becomes contextually significant. The surfer's relationship to water carries a comparable complexity. The ocean, for the surf practitioner, is both physically demanding and spiritually restorative, both the site of risk and the source of renewal.

The spatial lesson for surf architecture lies in the elaboration of the threshold. The graduated entry sequence of Pura Tirta Empul — from the public road through successive courtyards to the innermost sacred spring — finds a parallel in the surf home's need for spaces of ritual transition between the ocean and the domestic interior. The outdoor shower, the gear-washing station, the mudroom: these are not merely functional amenities but ritualistic passages, marking the surfer's movement between different states of being. In the language of Balinese spatial philosophy, they constitute a *Madya* zone — the human realm of preparation, transition, and mediation between the impure (ocean, salt, exertion) and the domestic sacred (rest, nourishment, creativity).

4.2. Penglipuran Village: Communal Spatial Ethics and Vernacular Sustainability

Penglipuran Village in Bangli Regency is internationally recognized as one of the world's most coherently planned traditional settlements and consistently ranked among Southeast Asia's cleanest villages. Its spatial organization is a masterclass in the application of Balinese spatial philosophy at the community scale. Prabawa, Purwanto, and Tarigan (2026) have demonstrated through space syntax analysis that the village's main axis — running precisely along the *Kaja-Kelod* orientation from the *Pura Puseh* (village origin temple) at the sacred end to the village cemetery at the *Kelod* end — generates both spatial legibility and social cohesion.¹³

Each family compound in Penglipuran is organized according to *Hasta Kosala Kosali*, with the sacred family shrine (*sanggah*) at the *Kaja* end and sleeping quarters and service spaces toward *Kelod*. The *bale banjar* — the communal pavilion — functions as the spatial and social heart of the village, the architectural embodiment of *Pawongan*: the harmonious relationship among community members. The bamboo groves covering approximately 45 hectares surrounding the village are protected by village *awig-awig* (customary law): their harvest, regeneration, and use are governed by collective agreement, not individual preference. This constitutes, in contemporary terms, a community-managed ecological resource — a vernacular form of green building governance.

Marhaeni et al. (2023) document the ecological philosophy of *Asta Bumi* — the traditional Balinese understanding of the eight dimensions of the earth — as a framework through which Penglipuran's residents maintain their spatial and environmental practices under significant tourism pressure.¹⁴ The village's successful preservation of vernacular form in the face of globalization offers a model for how cultural spatial

principles can resist commodification without becoming museified. The relevance to surf architecture is twofold: first, the village demonstrates that sustainability is most robustly achieved when embedded in communal governance and spatial ethics rather than individual choice. Second, the *bale banjar* typology — an open, multi-functional communal platform — emerges directly in the survey findings as among the most aspirational spatial elements for the surf community.

4.3. Green School Bali: Contemporary Translation of Balinese Spatial Principles

Green School Bali, established in 2008 in Sibang Kaja, Badung, by John and Cynthia Hardy, represents the most significant and internationally visible contemporary attempt to translate Balinese spatial and ecological philosophy into a functioning institutional building. The school's primary material — locally harvested bamboo — was chosen for its ecological credentials and deep embeddedness in Balinese architectural tradition, where bamboo has long been associated with vernacular construction, sacred use, and community ceremony. Sastrawan et al. (2026) document the sustainability outcomes of this integration, demonstrating measurable reductions in embodied carbon and operational energy relative to conventional construction.¹⁵

The school's spatial organization deliberately echoes *Tri Mandala*: the Heart of School building — a spiraling, three-storey bamboo structure — functions as a contemporary sacred center from which pavilions and learning spaces radiate outward in decreasing degrees of ceremonial intensity. Open-air classrooms without walls dissolve the boundary between interior and exterior, enacting the Balinese spatial ideal of indoor-outdoor integration at an institutional scale. The absence of mechanical air conditioning becomes a philosophical stance where the building participates in its climate rather than resisting it, modeling the *Palemahan* relationship with the natural environment for every student who inhabits it.

Mustika et al. (2025) demonstrate that green building certification in Bali requires a dual sensitivity to both international sustainability standards and Balinese contextual values — a finding that directly supports the co-creation argument of this paper.¹⁶ Green School Bali achieves this dual literacy by treating bamboo as a culturally embedded design language where the material speaks simultaneously to ecological performance and to Balinese spatial tradition. The result is an architecture that is simultaneously traditional and radical, local and globally legible — a paradigm case of co-created sustainable design.

5. FINDINGS: SPATIAL TYPOLOGIES OF THE SUSTAINABLE SURF HOME

5.1. Quantitative Analysis: The Spatial Priority Matrix

Analysis of the 22 respondents' ratings across 16 spatial typologies, scored on a five-point scale, produces the ranked matrix presented in Table 1. The highest-priority spaces are Surfboard Storage Room (mean score 3.82/5.00), Shared Garden and Green Space (3.64), Energy Efficient Design (3.32), Dedicated Office and Creative Space (3.27), and Indoor Living Room (3.23). The lowest-priority spaces are Ocean View Living Space (2.18), Surf Workshop (2.27), and Meditation and Yoga Space (2.36).

SPATIAL TYPOLOGY	MEAN SCORE (/5.00)	PRIORITY TIER
Surfboard storage room	3.82	High
Shared garden/Green space	3.64	High
Energy efficient design	3.32	High
Dedicated office/Creative space	3.27	Medium high
Indoor living room	3.23	Medium high
Laundry room/Gear washing station	3.18	Medium high
Outdoor shower space	3.00	Medium
Garage for surf vehicle	3.00	Medium
Outdoor community space	2.86	Medium
Multi-functional community room	2.77	Medium
Mudroom/transition area	2.73	Medium
Pool and lounge area	2.73	Medium
Outdoor living room	2.45	Lower
Meditation/Yoga space	2.36	Lower
Surf workshop	2.27	Lower
Ocean view living space	2.18	Lower

Table 1: Spatial Priority Matrix — Mean Importance Scores for 16 Spatial Typologies (n=22). Scale: 1 = Not Important; 5 = Essential. Priority Tiers: High ≥ 3.50 ; Medium-High 3.00–3.49; Medium 2.50–2.99; Lower < 2.50 .

Several findings demand particular attention. First, the prominence of surfboard storage room as the single highest-priority space confirms the functional primacy of equipment management in the surf lifestyle. However, the second-ranked space — shared garden and green space (3.64) — is not a functional surf amenity at all. Its high priority (rated 'Essential' by 5 respondents and 'Very Important' by 7) suggests that respondents are designing for a holistic lifestyle ecology in which proximity to green, living nature is considered essential. This finding is directly consonant with the Balinese principle of *Palemahan* — the harmonious relationship with the natural environment — that is embedded in *Tri Hita Karana*.

Second, energy efficient design ranking third (3.32) signals that ecological sustainability is a constitutive value in the surfer's spatial imagination. Of the 22 respondents, 3 rated it 'Essential' and 8 rated it 'Very Important' — making it one of the most consistently highly rated spaces across demographic groups. Third, the lowest-scoring space — Ocean View Living Space (2.18) — directly challenges the stereotype of surf architecture as driven primarily by the spectacle of the ocean. Respondents appear to value proximity to the ocean for functional access and spiritual engagement, not visual display, suggesting a more intimate and working relationship with the sea than the commodified resort typology would imply.

The survey also reveals a cross-cutting communal ethic: Outdoor Community Space (2.86) and Multi-Functional Community Room (2.77) rank above several surf-specific spaces, including Surf Workshop (2.27) and Garage for Surf Vehicle (3.00). This prioritization of shared over individual space echoes, with remarkable precision, the Balinese emphasis on communal spatial organization most clearly expressed in *Penglipuran's bale banjar* typology.

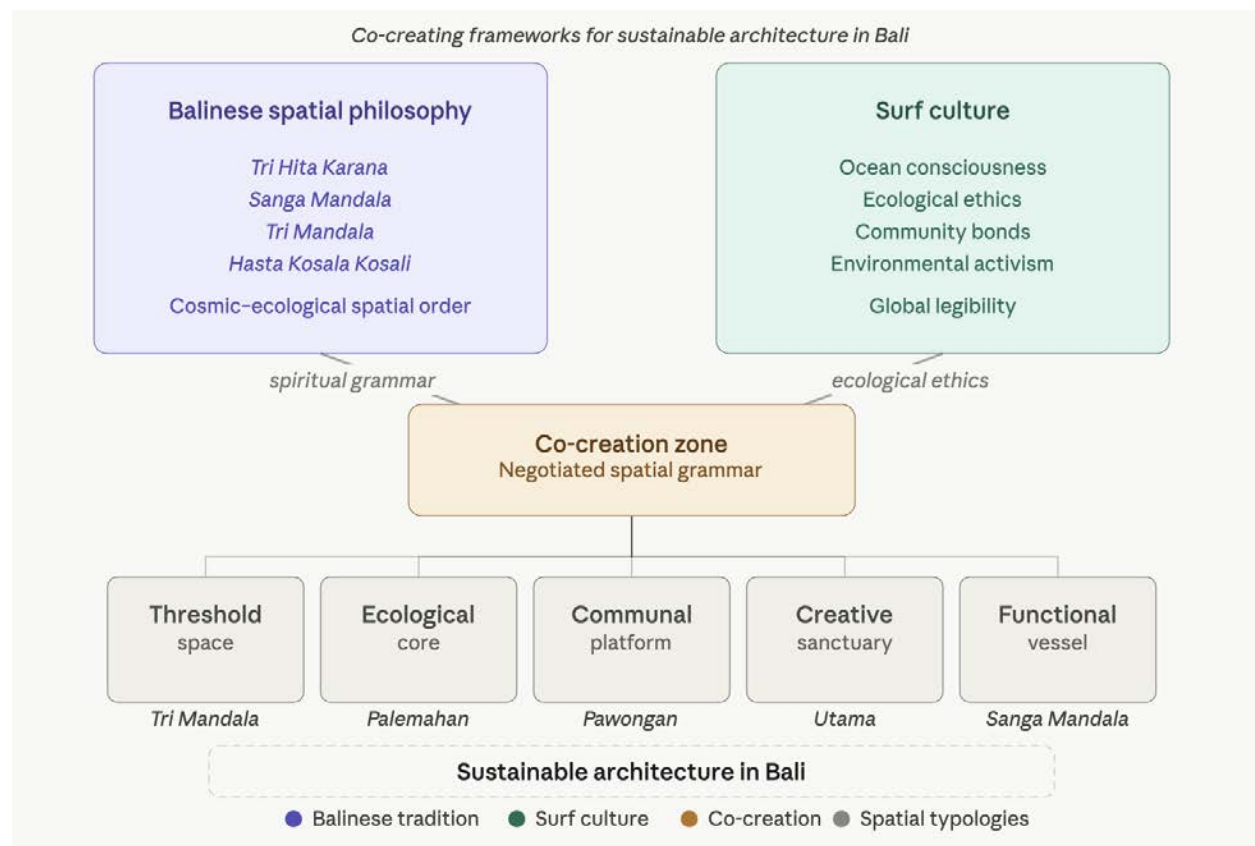


Figure 1: Conceptual framework diagram illustrating the co-creation of sustainable spatial frameworks through the intersection of Balinese spatial philosophy and surf culture.

5.2. Qualitative Analysis: Cultural Influence and Spatial Imagination

Of the 22 respondents, 15 (68%) reported that Balinese culture and tradition had influenced them personally; 5 (23%) reported no influence; and 2 (9%) responded ‘Maybe.’ When asked whether this influence extended to their thinking about everyday spaces, 14 (64%) responded affirmatively. Crucially, when asked whether their experience of Balinese culture would inform future space-making, 11 (50%) responded ‘Yes’ and 9 (41%) ‘Maybe’ — meaning that 91% of respondents anticipated some degree of Balinese influence on their future spatial decisions. Table 2 summarises these findings.

SURVEY DIMENSION	YES	NO	MAYBE
Has Balinese culture influenced you personally?	Yes: 15 (68%)	No: 5 (23%)	Maybe: 2 (9%)
Has it influenced everyday spatial thinking?	Yes: 14 (64%)	No: 4 (18%)	Maybe: 4 (18%)
Will it inform future space creation?	Yes: 11 (50%)	No: 2 (9%)	Maybe: 9 (41%)

Table 2: Cultural Influence Survey Findings — Balinese Culture and Future Spatial Practice (n=22).

Qualitative responses illuminate the mechanisms of this influence. Five distinct spatial themes recur across respondents’ open-ended answers, each mapping onto a principle of Balinese spatial philosophy:

5.2.1. Indoor-outdoor dissolution

Multiple respondents articulate a fundamental shift in their understanding of spatial boundaries. One respondent (Netherlands, 10–15 years in Bali) describes seeking ‘more indoor-outdoor feeling instead of only indoor... multi-functional spaces.’ Another (Malaysia, engineer) envisions ‘a home with indoor living space, but with a huge sliding door for the living room, to bring the outdoor in, but also able to close it when needed.’ This oscillation between connection and containment mirrors the Balinese architectural treatment of the *bale* — an open pavilion that engages with its surroundings while remaining spatially defined — and the more general principle of *Madya*: the human realm as mediating between nature and the sacred interior.

5.2.2. Communal spatial ethics

One respondent (Wales, UK, 10–15 years in Bali) explicitly references Balinese vernacular models: ‘I like the communal meeting places that are common in Balinese villages. The large platform spaces in the traditional compound homes provide easily accessible places for family and friends to relax, talk, eat, and socialize.’ This articulation constitutes a direct translation of the *bale banjar* typology into the aspirational spatial program of the surf home — evidence of co-creation in action.

5.2.3. Ecological moderation

One respondent (Indonesia) offers the most theoretically precise articulation: ‘In true Balinese culture, spaces should be in harmony with the natural surroundings ... every space should be built and stand in moderation and respect — the exact opposite of the enormous development that is currently happening.’ This statement encodes *Tri Hita Karana* as a critique of contemporary development, demonstrating that Balinese spatial philosophy provides ethical as well as technical resources for sustainable design.

5.2.4. Spiritual attentiveness

One respondent (Singapore, 5–10 years in Bali) notes that ‘...in every home or office, a space is reserved especially for Balinese prayers. It makes you think and live more spiritually, that a power greater than you and bigger than reality exists.’ This spontaneous identification of sacred domestic space by a non-Balinese surf practitioner demonstrates the depth to which Balinese spatial philosophy penetrates the imagination of long-term residents.

5.2.5. Nature as context, not commodity

One respondent (Malaysia, designer, 5–10 years in Bali) articulates a nuanced ecological attentiveness: ‘Being in Bali makes me more connected to nature — the sunrises, climates, seasons, wind direction — influenced the way I build... nature has a bigger influence on me.’ This orientation toward dynamic natural systems — rather than static visual amenity — directly mirrors the Balinese cosmological sensitivity to orientation, season, and the living forces of place.

5.2.6. Emergent Spatial Typologies

Synthesizing the quantitative rankings and qualitative themes, five emergent spatial typologies for the sustainable surf home can be identified, each carrying both functional and cosmological dimensions:

- a. The Threshold Space: Combining the outdoor shower, mudroom, and gear-washing station into a ritualized zone of transition between ocean and interior — analogous to the hierarchical entry sequence of Pura Tirta Empul. This typology transforms the functional task of equipment management into a spatial practice of ecological attentiveness: the surfer who showers, rinses gear, and transitions through this zone is enacting a *Madya* passage, marking the boundary between the wild and the domestic.
- b. The Ecological Core: Centering the home on shared garden and green space, and energy-efficient design, this typology enacts *Palemahan* — the relationship with nature — as a structural principle. Green

infrastructure becomes the organizational heart of the dwelling, from which other spaces radiate.

- c. The Communal Platform: Drawing directly from the bale *banjar* model, this typology combines multi-functional community room, outdoor community space, and shared garden to create a zone of social life extending beyond the nuclear household. It embodies *Pawongan* — the harmonious relationship among community members — as a built form.
- d. The Creative Sanctuary: Integrating dedicated office and creative space with meditation and yoga space, this typology creates a zone of reflection and creative practice. It echoes the Balinese association of *Utama* — the upper, quiet, spiritually elevated — with intellectual and creative life, positioning creativity as a form of spiritual practice.
- e. The Functional Vessel: Housing the surfboard storage, laundry and gear washing, and garage as the practical armature of the surf lifestyle — placed, following *Sanga Mandala* logic, at the most accessible and least ceremonially charged zone of the home. This typology acknowledges the material demands of the surf lifestyle without allowing them to dominate the spatial imagination.

6. DISCUSSION: CO-CREATING FRAMEWORKS FOR SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE

6.1. The Negotiated Spatial Grammar

The evidence assembled through design analysis and primary survey research points to a consistent conclusion: the encounter between Balinese spatial philosophy and surf culture has produced a genuine co-creation of new frameworks for sustainable architecture. The negotiation is asymmetrical — Balinese traditions offer a millennia-old spatial cosmology, while surf culture contributes a contemporary ecological ethics and global legibility — but neither party to the exchange is unchanged by the encounter.

Balinese spatial principles find renewed relevance and global audience through their resonance with the surfer's ecological consciousness. Wiryawan et al. (2026) argue that the central challenge for Balinese spatial governance today is precisely to maintain these traditions against the pressure of tourism development.¹⁷ The survey data suggests that the surf community, paradoxically, may constitute one of the forces most committed to preserving the ecological foundations that make Balinese spatial philosophy coherent. Ninety-one per cent of respondents anticipated future influence of Balinese spatial culture on their design decisions: these are not tourists but practitioners who have absorbed Balinese spatial values into their own design imaginations.

The five emergent typologies constitute a spatial grammar that is simultaneously surf-functional and Balinese in its underlying cosmological logic. The Threshold Space enacts *Tri Mandala* zoning; the Ecological Core enacts *Palemahan*; the Communal Platform enacts *Pawongan*; the Creative Sanctuary enacts *Utama*; and the Functional Vessel is positioned according to *Sanga Mandala* principles. The surf home, designed according to these typologies becomes a spatial cosmology — a built environment organized by the same principles that structure Balinese temples, villages, and domestic compounds.

6.2. Sustainability as Metaphysical State

The paper's most significant theoretical contribution is the reframing of sustainability as a metaphysical state of the built environment. This reframing emerges directly from the encounter between Balinese cosmological architecture and surf culture's spiritual attentiveness to natural environments.

In Balinese architectural tradition, the building is a participant in the cosmic order — aligned, proportioned, oriented, and maintained in ways that honor the relationships between humans, the divine, and nature. Yudiantini (2021) demonstrates that this traditional conception of sustainable built design in Bali produces environments that are ecologically functional and spiritually coherent.¹⁸ Dede et al. (2026) document how the principle of harmony with nature in spatial planning produces demonstrable outcomes in disaster risk reduction as well as ecological wellbeing — demonstrating that the metaphysical and the practical are not opposed in Balinese spatial thought but mutually constitutive.¹⁹

Surf culture's spiritual dimension provides a ready translation of this ontological shift for a global audience. The surfer who has spent years in Bali develops, through the encounter with Balinese spatial philosophy, an architectural imagination that is no longer satisfied with merely functional or aestheticized space. The survey respondent who identifies Balinese prayer space as transforming their relationship to 'a power greater than reality' is not describing a decorative influence; they are identifying a fundamental shift in how they understand the purpose of built space.

6.3. Co-Creation and the Future of Contextual Sustainable Design

The model of co-creation demonstrated in Bali carries implications beyond its immediate geographic context. Rauzi and Sari (2024) demonstrate analogous dynamics in coastal resort architecture in Lampuuk Beach, Aceh, where vernacular spatial principles offer resources for sustainable design that international green building standards alone cannot provide.²⁰ Bao (2025) extends this argument to the marine environment itself, proposing that architecture's role in coastal ecosystem restoration requires precisely the kind of cultural-ecological sensitivity that the Bali case exemplifies.²¹

The model suggests that the most generative sustainable design frameworks emerge from the specific encounter between local cosmological knowledge and the ecological consciousness of those who choose to inhabit particular places. In Bali, this encounter has produced a distinctive architectural language: one that blends traditional spatial cosmology with contemporary environmental ethics, insider traditions with outsider practices, spiritual grammar with activist vocabulary.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the intersection of traditional Balinese spatial philosophy and global surf culture constitutes a living laboratory for the co-creation of sustainable architectural frameworks. Through design analysis of Pura Tirta Empul, Penglipuran Village, and Green School Bali, and through primary empirical research with 22 surf practitioners in Bali, it has demonstrated three principal findings.

First, the spatial priorities of the international surf community in Bali are structurally aligned with Balinese cosmological spatial values: the primacy of shared green space, communal gathering, ecological moderation, and indoor-outdoor integration reflects, in secular and globalized terms, the spatial ethics of *Tri Hita Karana*. The surfer is a cultural interlocutor who has internalized, through prolonged habitation and ecological practice, the same relational values that Balinese spatial philosophy encodes in built form.

Second, five emergent spatial typologies — the Threshold Space, the Ecological Core, the Communal Platform, the Creative Sanctuary, and the Functional Vessel — constitute a new architectural vocabulary that is simultaneously surf-functional and Balinese in its cosmological logic. These typologies offer concrete design guidance for surf architecture that is context-responsive, ecologically grounded, and culturally legible.

Third, sustainability is most robustly understood in this context as a metaphysical state: the building participates in a reciprocal relationship with nature, and in doing so, transforms its inhabitants into stewards of the environments they inhabit. This reframing has implications for architectural theory and practice well beyond the Bali context.

The co-creation of these frameworks is multidirectional. Balinese traditions offer a spiritual grammar of space that gives depth and cultural grounding to the surfer's ecological consciousness; surf culture brings a global visibility and an environmental activism that gives contemporary relevance and reach to Balinese spatial philosophy. The surf home in Bali becomes a prototype for a new relationship between culture, nature, and the built environment — one that positions cultural and cosmological knowledge as the most powerful tools available for the design of truly sustainable architectures in an era of environmental crisis.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

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RESEARCH ON THE SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION AND OWNERSHIP EVOLUTION OF FUQING HEYUAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILY DEVELOPMENT: SPATIAL CODING AND TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICE BASED ON THE FIVE CONNECTIONS NETWORK

Lin Peng, Xi Lin, Bing Hua Zhang

RESEARCH ON THE SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION AND OWNERSHIP EVOLUTION OF FUQING HEYUAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILY DEVELOPMENT: SPATIAL CODING AND TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICE BASED ON THE FIVE CONNECTIONS NETWORK



The architecture of the overseas Chinese hometowns in eastern Fujian in modern times is the material projection of the transnational network of overseas Chinese in their hometowns. Existing studies have mostly focused on the description of material forms, leaving a research gap where the spatial-social interstructure relationship is broken. This paper takes the Lotus Garden in Liqiao District, Fuqing as the research object, integrates family oral history, 1956 house division contracts, architectural field research and historical materials research, introduces the family five-connection network analysis framework, and combines network resource quantification, spatial syntactic analysis and architectural symbol decoding to restore the shaping mechanism of the Zhou family's transnational practice on the space of the overseas Chinese house. The study found that the construction of the third phase of Heyuan precisely corresponded to the changes in the intensity of the five connections network. Kinship, karma, geography, divination, and material connections jointly encoded the architectural form, circulation lines, and ownership. The division of property in 1956 was centered on kinship and clan law to complete the division of space usage rights; In contemporary urban renewal, the transnational five-connection network has become the core support for property rights preservation. This paper reveals that overseas Chinese houses are living social Spaces driven by the five connections, providing a micro-family perspective and quantifiable analytical paradigm for the study of architectural heritage in overseas Chinese hometowns.

1. INTRODUCTION: REINTERPRETING OVERSEAS CHINESE HOUSE SPACES FROM THE FIVE CONNECTIONS NETWORK

1.1. Question Raised: The “Spatial-social” Break in the Study of Overseas Chinese Hometowns’ Architecture

The modern coastal overseas Chinese hometowns in eastern Fujian formed a unique transnational social form due to the wave of “going to Southeast Asia” migration. The capital, materials, information and social relations of overseas Chinese families flowed across regions, profoundly reshaping the architectural space of their hometowns. At present, domestic research on the architecture of overseas Chinese hometowns is mostly focused on the description¹ of the material form of the buildings, such as usage and design techniques,² origin,³ historical narration or the connotation⁴ of the design, reflected modern ideas,⁵ and the influence⁶⁻⁸ of foreign cultures on them. Or they explore the historical evolution and regional culture⁹⁻¹⁰ of overseas Chinese settlements from a macro perspective, with less attention paid to the direct shaping effect of the micro-social network of scattered families on the construction of individual overseas Chinese houses, functional iteration, and ownership reconstruction.

At the same time, anthropological studies of overseas Chinese hometowns, which focus on family and social structure, mostly view architecture as a static carrier and do not establish a quantitative association of social

relations - spatial forms - ownership rules. This creates a core research gap: How exactly does the family's five-connection network, centered on kinship, geography, karma, divination, and material connection, leave decodable traces in the location, construction, circulation, decoration, and property rights division of overseas Chinese houses through observable spatial practices? The suspension of this question makes it difficult for the study of overseas Chinese hometowns to reveal their essential attributes as “transnational social Spaces”.

1.2. Research Subjects

Fuqing is located in the southern part of the Min Dong branch and is a key transportation hub between Min Dong and Min Nan. Bordering the Putian and Xian regions to the west, and with a semi-island terrain and numerous bays and ports, among which Haikou Town is one of the starting points of Fuzhou's “Maritime Silk Road”, Fuqing has become the most famous hometown of overseas Chinese in southeastern Fujian. The special geographical location has led to the influence of diverse architectural cultures on Fuqing's residential buildings. According to a 1960 survey, there were about 110,000 overseas Chinese in Fuqing, with the largest number in Indonesia, about 73,000, and about 30,000 overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia.¹¹ According to the data, the early Fuqing overseas Chinese were mainly concentrated in several regions of Southeast Asia, with the largest number in Indonesia.

Heyuan, a representative modern overseas Chinese house in the Liqiao district of Fuqing, has gone through three phases of construction, the division of property in 1956, and the property rights game of urban renewal in 2021. It has completely preserved the spatial traces of cross-border network intervention and is a typical sample for analyzing the interstructure of the five connections of the family and the overseas Chinese house space. (Figure 1).

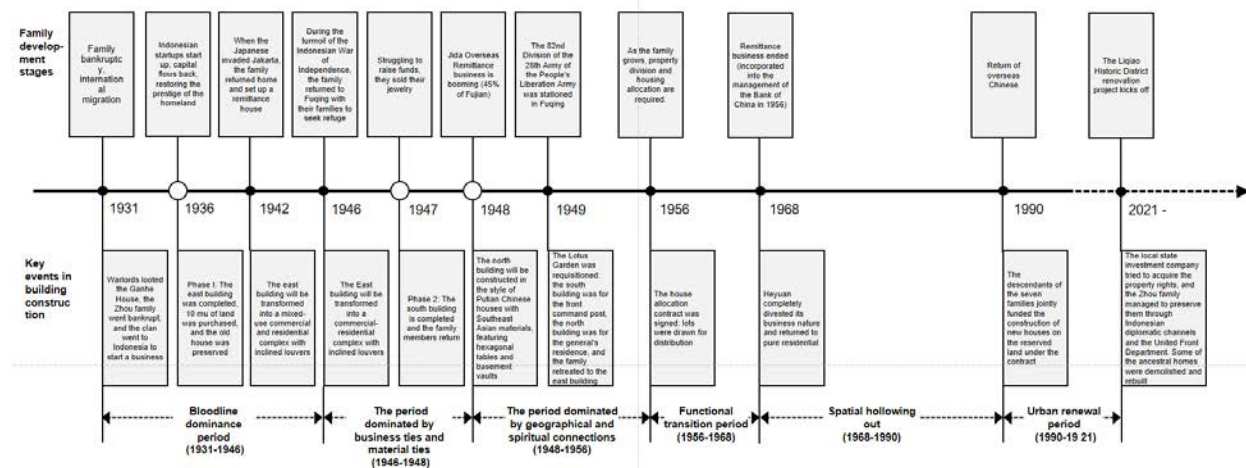


Figure 1: Timeline of the construction and development history of Fuqing Heyuan. (Source: Authors).

2. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERACTION MECHANISM BETWEEN THE FAMILY FIVE CONNECTIONS NETWORK AND THE OVERSEAS CHINESE HOUSE SPACE

2.1. The Core Dimensions and Hierarchical Structure of the Five Family Ties

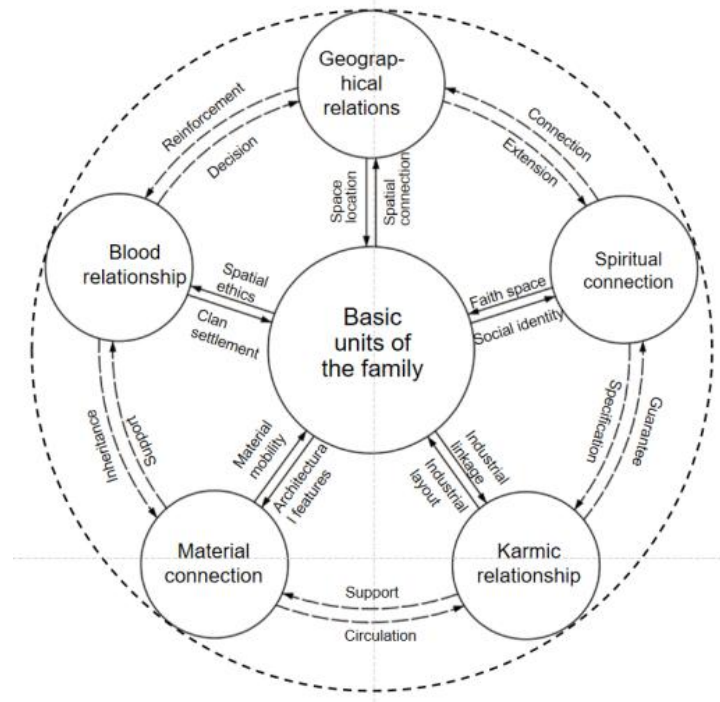


Figure 2: Diagram of the family's Five Connections network. (Source: Authors).

The “Five Connections” culture is an academic concept¹² distilled by Mr. Lin Qitan based on the survival and development characteristics of overseas Chinese. The “Five Connections” is a classic theory that explains the social connections and resource integration of overseas Chinese, specifically referring to the five social relationship networks of kinship, geographical connection, professional connection, spiritual connection, and material connection.^{13, 14} The five family ties referred to in this article are micro-relationship systems based on the core family of overseas Chinese as the basic unit and with the background of transnational dispersion, distinct from the concept of five ties at the macro ethnic level, and are the direct driving force for the construction of overseas Chinese house space and the evolution of ownership. In combination with the family Five Connections network diagram in Figure 2, it can be seen that the family five connections are not isolated and parallel, but form a hierarchical three-dimensional structure of core - support - assistance:

Among them, blood ties are bound by bloodline, clan law and marriage, which is the foundation of the family order and determines the spatial ethics and the rules of ownership distribution; The geographical anchor points are the hometown of Fuqing, the place of residence of Indonesia, and the shipping hub of Hong

Kong, which determine the location of the building and the translation of regional symbols; Business connections are based on remittances, shipping, and trade, which support the accumulation of family capital and shape financial Spaces and functional flow lines; The five connections are based on transnational building materials, craftsmanship, and material circulation, determining building materials, construction methods, and decorative symbols; The divine connection is based on ancestral worship, local beliefs, and sacrificial rituals, which unite family identity and define sacrificial Spaces and ritual lines.

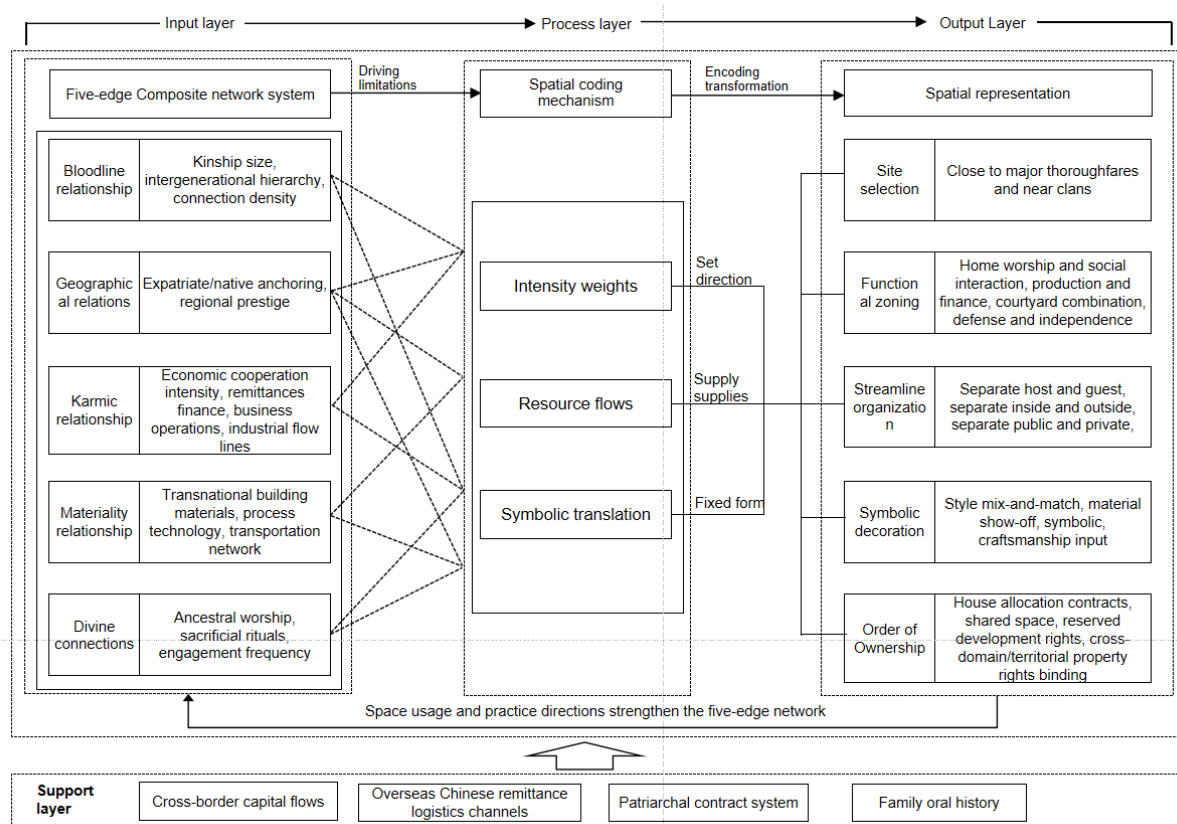


Figure 3: Framework diagram of the five-dependent network → Spatial coding theory. (Source: Authors).

The five relationships are nested and dynamically balanced: kinship governs the clan order, geographical location anchors the spatial location, industrial connection provides economic support, material connection lays the material foundation, and spiritual connection sustains spiritual identity. Together, they form the underlying logic of the survival of overseas Chinese families across borders and the construction of the homeland space.

2.2. From “Five Connections Network” to “Spatial Coding”: From Social Relationship Theory to Spatial Analysis Tools

Based on the family five-connection theory, this paper constructs the Five-connection network $\rightarrow$ Spatial coding analysis framework (Figure 3) to complete the transformation from abstract social relations to observable spatial practices. The framework consists of four levels: input layer, process layer, output layer, and support layer, and fully reveals the core mechanism of “how social relations transform into architectural space”.

The theoretical hypothesis of the “Five Connections Network - spatial coding” proposed in this paper contains two core sub-propositions that respond to the research gap of the “space-society” break in overseas Chinese architecture: Proposition one is that the dominant five connections will determine the dominant space type. That is, at different historical stages, one or several types of relationships in the Five Connections network will dominate, and the intensity of resources and the demands of actors will be “encoded” into the spatial form, functional zoning and circulation organization of the building. Proposition 2: Changes in the intensity of the five connections will drive the reorganization of spatial flow lines. With the waxing and waning of different dimensions in the five-element network, the internal flow lines of buildings (financial flow lines, residential flow lines, sacrificial flow lines, social flow lines) will merge, separate, or transform accordingly. When multiple demands of the five Elements clash, the space evolves as a compromise or alternative.

To make the theoretical framework implementable and verifiable, this paper operationalizes the definition of the five-edge network, clarifies the observable indicators and spatial representation, transforms the abstract relations into analyzable academic variables, and lays the foundation for subsequent spatial syntactic verification and empirical analysis.

2.3. Research Methods

This study takes the family development cycle as the time thread and employs a mixed research approach, combining four methods: historical archive analysis, oral history collection, architectural field mapping, and five-relationship network quantification. The core materials include the original 1956 House Division Contract, business records of Jida Overseas Remittance House and overseas remittance letters, which are used to extract information such as the logic of spatial division and the remittance contributions of each house; In the oral history section, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 descendants of the Zhou family from Fuqing, Indonesia and Hong Kong to complete architectural measurements and material identification, using spatial syntax to quantify spatial features, and ultimately achieving a combination of

qualitative analysis and quantitative verification. It provides a solid chain of evidence for decoding the interconstruction logic of social relations and physical space in the construction of the Lotus Garden and the evolution of ownership.

The limitations of this framework are: 1) the quantification of certain dimensions of the five-connection network (such as the divine connection and the geographical connection) is rather difficult, and 2) there is a certain degree of subjectivity in setting the weights. To alleviate this problem, this paper adopts the following strategy: qualitative ranking (high/medium/low) for metrics that cannot be precisely quantified, supplemented by interview triangulation verification; sensitivity analysis was conducted to test the robustness of conclusions drawn with different weights; the quantification results are only used as supplementary evidence, and the core argument still relies on the deep mutual verification of spatial morphology and oral history.

Through the above-mentioned theoretical tools and analytical framework, this paper aims to provide a replicable and testable analytical approach for the study of the “social-space” interstructure of overseas Chinese hometowns’ architecture.

3. THE SPATIO-TEMPORAL EVOLUTION OF THE FIVE-RELATIONSHIP NETWORK OF THE ZHOU FAMILY AND THE SPATIAL COUPLING OF THE PHASED CONSTRUCTION OF THE LOTUS GARDEN

3.1. The Coupling Law of the Intensity of the Five Connections Network and the Staged Construction

The construction of the third phase of Heyuan is not merely an addition of buildings, but a material projection of the dynamic changes in the strength of the Zhou family’s transnational five-link network. Based on the dominant transformation of kinship, geographical, industrial, material, and spiritual connections as the core staging basis, combined with the family development cycle and architectural sequence, the construction of the Lotus Garden from 1936 to 1956 was divided into four core stages, and through oral history, contractual documents, and architectural measurement triangulated verification, the strength of the five connections was assigned (high/medium/low/hidden), as shown in the following table:

Time periods	Stage characteristics	Bloodline	Geographical	Karma	Material causes	Divine connection	Dominating Space events
1936-1942	Bloodline-dominated period	high	Medium	Low → Medium	low	Hide	The east building was constructed while the old house was preserved
1942-1946	The period of rising karma	Medium	Medium	high	Medium	low	The front hall of the East building will be converted into Qiaohui Village
1946-1948	The period dominated by karmic and material connections	high	Medium	high	low	low	Rapid construction of the south building, wartime financial defense
1948-1956	The period dominated by geographical and divine connections	Medium	high	high	high	high	The North tower has been completed, and the power display and sacrificial lines have been restructured

Table 1: Time series of the strength of the Zhou family's Five Connections Network (1936-1968)

Table 1 shows two clear axes of evolution. First, the alternation of dominant types: from the single-pole dominance of bloodline (1936-1942), to the ascending period of karmic connection (1942-1946), then to the dual compromise of karmic connection and material connection (1946-1948), and finally to the compound dominance of geographical connection and divine connection (1948-1956), the architectural phases fully match the peak transition of the intensity of the five connections.

Second, the directional coding of spatial forms: Bloodline dominance shapes the patriarchal ethical space, karma - material connection dominance shapes the financial defense space, and geographical - divine connection dominance shapes the display of power and the reconstruction of the sacrificial space.

3.2. Bloodline Dominance Period (1936-1946): The Revival of Kinship and the Establishment of Karmic Connections in the East Tower

After the Zhou family's bankruptcy and cross-border migration in 1931, the Zhou family completed the capital return in 1936, relying on the commercial accumulation in Indonesia. The remaining members led the construction of Donglou, with the core demand being to rebuild the ancestral home and strengthen the kinship bond, rather than just to live there.

The East Building was constructed in 1936. It is a single-story brick, stone, and earth structure with a floor area of approximately 320 square meters. It is the earliest completed main building in the construction sequence of the Lotus Garden. During this period, the Zhou family's business establishment in Indonesia was not long, and capital accumulation was still in its early stage. Therefore, the five connections code of the

East Building showed obvious characteristics of “bloodline dominance, initial emergence of business connections, limited material connections” as follows:

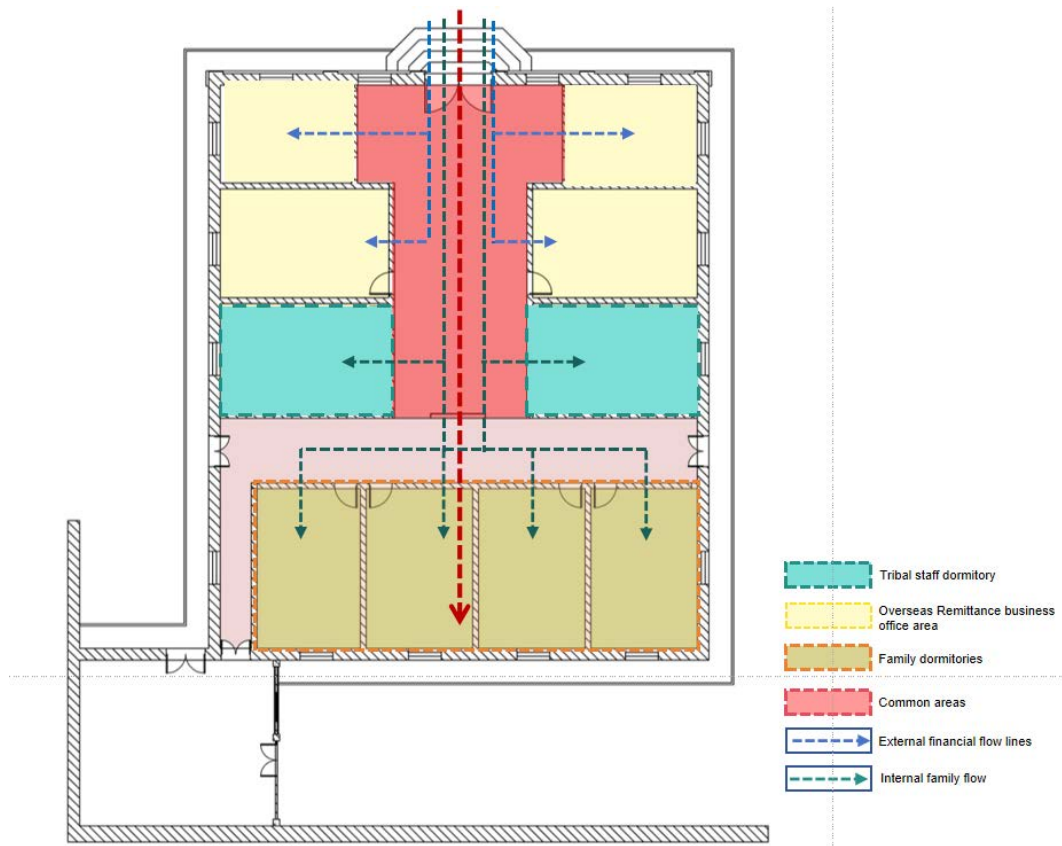


Figure 4: East building: from a single residential space to a mixed-use space of commercial and residential. (Source: Authors).

The spatial coding feature of the bloodline relationship is high. The old Zhou house was not demolished in the east building. Instead, it was transformed into a storage and kitchen. This “juxtaposition of the old and the new” is a typical reduplication of bloodline memories - the old house bears the traces of the ancestors’ lives and cannot be completely erased. The interior of the east building follows the order of seniority: the front hall is set up as the core public area for family gatherings and hospitality; The back is designated as family quarters, creating a bloodline ethical spatial layout of “public in front and private at the back” and “superior in front and inferior at the back”. This layout is in line with the patriarchal principle of “the upper room is the noble room and the back room is the family” in traditional Mindong dwellings, indicating that even in the context of transnational capital involvement, bloodline order remains the first rule of spatial organization. The spatial coding features of the geographical relationship are moderate. The location is close to the Liqiao Street Tianhou Palace Wharf, which is convenient for water transportation for relatives returning home overseas and for unloading imported building materials. The superimposition of the pier and

the Tianhou Palace makes the building naturally embedded in the local geographical and religious network of the hometown. But since the Zhou family's transnational network was still expanding in the 1930s and no Indonesian elements were transplanted to the building facade, the geographical score was set as "medium". The spatial coding of business ties began to emerge during this period. After the establishment of the Fuqing branch of Jida Overseas Chinese Association in 1942, the front hall of the east building was transformed into the Overseas Chinese Association reception area. It creates a spatio-temporal superimposition function of "daytime financial transactions and nighttime family gatherings", achieving compatibility between business ties and bloodline Spaces (Figure 4).

The spatial coding characteristics of the relationship between objects are lower at this stage. Constrained by the poor circulation of materials during the war and the limited initial capital accumulation of the family, the use of imported materials during the construction of the east tower was more restrained. Limited use of imported materials from abroad: cement was only used for the colonnade arches and the balustrades of the vase columns, and the main structure was made of native red bricks and wood. This strategy of "importing on the surface and being domestic on the core" reflects the instability of wartime material connections, with only foreign goods in key parts symbolizing the family's connection to the overseas. From a semiotic perspective, this limited expression of material connection constructed a "recognizable but not ostentatious" identity of the overseas Chinese house, in sharp contrast to the later grandeur of the North Tower, which used all imported materials. The spatial coding feature of the divine connection was more concealed at this stage. Although the old house was converted into a storage area, the stove and the place where the ancestral tablets were placed were deliberately preserved, forming the earliest sacrificial corner. This practice originated from the tradition of the integration of the kitchen god and the ancestors in eastern Fujian, but at this time the divine connection had not yet been given an independent space and was only in a hidden state.

3.3. The Period Dominated by Karma and Material Relations (1946-1948): Wartime Compromise and Financial Defense in the South Tower

In 1946, the war in Indonesia led to a large-scale return of the family, and remittances became the core of the family's survival. During this period, business and material connections were the two dominant of five connections; kinship was the essential support, and geographical and spiritual connections were secondary. Spatial coding centered around "financial security, emergency accommodation, material compromise".

The south building was constructed in 1947, with two floors and an outer corridor on the ground floor. It is a mixed structure of rammed earth and wood, and its five connections code shows a distinct duality and tactical compromise.

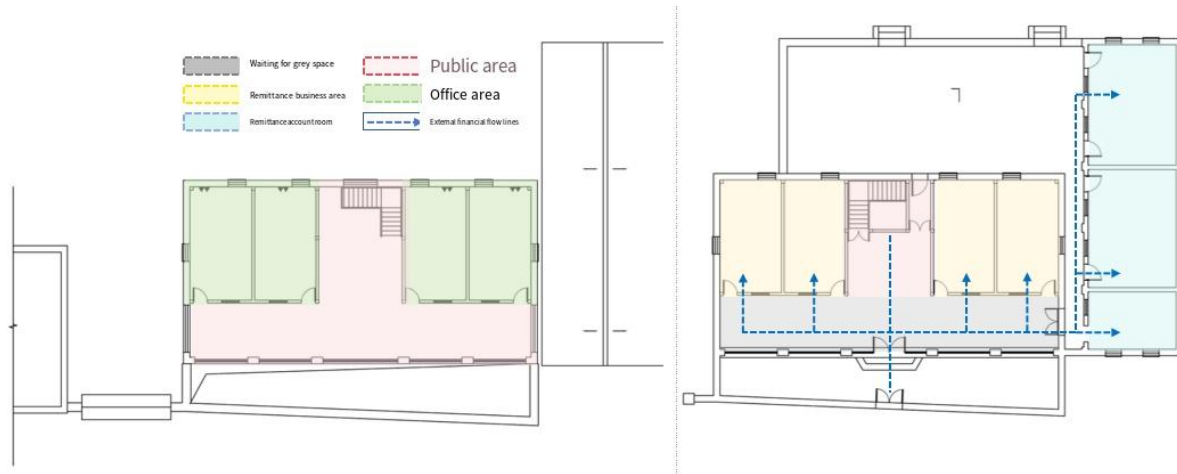


Figure 5: South building: the core office area of Jida Qiaohui Zhuang Fuqing Branch. (Source: Authors).



Figure 6: Facade of the South Building. Left: front; right: back. (Source: Authors).

The spatial coding characteristics of the business connection relationship are relatively high at this stage. The ground floor of the south building is designated as the core office area of Jida Qiaohui Zhuang, and the street-facing corridor forms a gray space for financial transactions, achieving physical isolation between depositors and the private domain. At the back of the second floor, there is an accounting room, which serves as a space for financial confidential operations, taking into account the convenience and security of remittance operations (Figure 5).

The spatial code of the relationship of objects shows a binary split feature. Due to the poor access to the entrance during the war, the materials used in the south building show an internal and external divide feature: the street-facing facade uses thick plain red brick square columns and wooden canopies, maintaining the decent image of the financial facade; the side and back facades are made of white lime walls made of reeds,

glutinous rice paste and red soil, and the Windows are simply edged with red bricks. The exposed square wooden columns inside confirm the oral memory of the predicament of “small beams and poor quality” (Figure 6). This “outward dignity, inward survival” construction strategy is a typical spatial compromise code in a shortage of material conditions. The spatial coding feature of karma relations is characterized by high density at this stage, with the second floor of the south building and the east building jointly carrying the residential function of the tribe members. Due to the cramped rooms and poor sound insulation, the tribe developed a spatial boundary in the auditory dimension: using Indonesian dialect when discussing financial business and overseas letters, and switching to Fuqing dialect when communicating with family members and fellow villagers. The dialect switch creates an invisible, confidential flow in the environment of the south building where there are no physical partitions, effectively preventing sensitive information from being leaked unintentionally. The spatial code of the geographical relationship is defensive, with the ground floor corridor reaching a depth of 2.4 meters, a scale that provides a comfortable waiting space in the rainy climate of Fuqing, while also serving as the first line of spatial barrier of the Lotus Garden - the outside depositors are effectively separated from the corridor area and cannot peek into the living space of the families inside. The geographical defense demands overlap spatially with the functional requirements of the financial front desk.

The interior of the south building is covered with dark wooden floors and painted with tropical green ceilings. Green woodwork, a common element of colonial architecture in Indonesia, has been transplanted to Fuqing by the Zhou family, both as a physical attachment to the memory of life in the expatriates and as a covert declaration of identity - beneath the facade of wartime chaos and material scarcity, the family's connection to the overseas world has never truly broken.

3.4. The Period Dominated by Geographical and Divine Connections (1948-1956): Social Display and Clan Integration in the North Tower

In 1948, the business of Jida Qiaohui Village reached its peak. The core demands of the family shifted from “survival and operation” to the display of regional prestige and the integration of clan order. During this period, geographical and spiritual ties were dual dominant and five ties were supported at a high level, and spatial coding completed the upgrade from “practical function” to “power symbol”.

The North building was constructed in 1948. It has two floors, an L-shaped floor plan, clear red brick walls and a hexagonal observation deck. It is the most exquisite and theoretically valuable building in the Lotus Garden.



Figure 7: Facade of the North Building. (Source: Authors).

For a purely social and ceremonial place. Its wide and deep verandas, tiled floors and green wooden ceilings create a Western-style social setting; the Qing-style armchairs, round tables and the wooden plaque of “Gengdu Di” in the interior maintain the traditional patriarchal ethics. The key lies in the reorganization of the sacrificial lines: the ancestral tablets are moved from the old house in the east tower to the main hall on the first floor of the north tower, creating a more ritualistic center of worship. During the festival, the first stop for overseas people returning home is the main hall of the north building - the sequence of “worship ancestors first, then reunite” places the divine connection at the starting point of bloodline reunions and establishes the priority of ancestral worship in the entire family’s activities. In this stage, the spatial coding of karmic ties is characterized by power, with a basement on the ground floor of the north building, which was originally a money vault for storing huge remittances of cash. The space is located at the base with the best view of the entire complex - the hexagonal terrace connected to it provides panoramic surveillance of the entire courtyard and the surrounding neighborhood. The combination of the vault and the watchtower brings financial power and spatial surveillance power into one: a storage place for money also becomes a lookout post for power. Karmic connections no longer serve daily transactions here, but are elevated to the status of a symbol of family dominance. The spatial coding of material connections also showed a higher characteristic at this stage, with the Zhou family using their own “Hong Kong-Fuqing” shipping network to bring back high-grade cement, fine hardwood and Western tiles. The balustrade of the vase column and the cement tile floor are a deep blend of imported materials and local craftsmanship. In contrast to the “outwardly frugal” compromise strategy of the south building, the material code of the north building moves towards a comprehensive and confident display, marking that the cross-border logistics channel is fully unobstructed, and the family can gather global building materials in their homeland without restrictions.

The hexagonal platform is a key symbol in the construction process of this stage. It is not only a

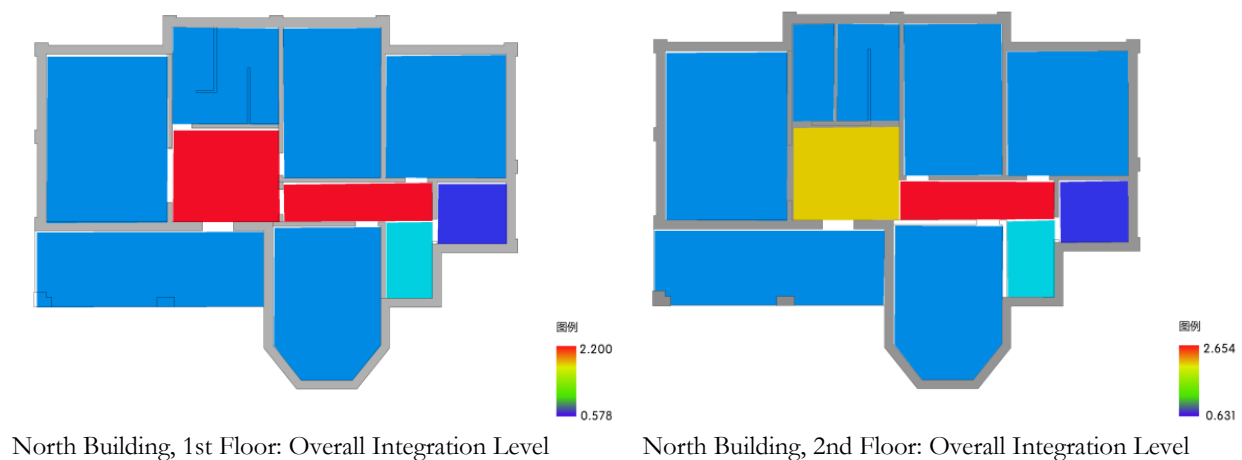
morphological innovation but also an improved “panoramic open view” power device. The traditional Mincdong dwellings are centered around the inner courtyard, with closed walls restricting the surveillance of the outside; The hexagonal terrace breaks through this limitation, allowing the owner to overlook the flow of people in the Liqiao district and their own courtyard from multiple angles on the second floor. The underlying metaphor of this spatial installation is the “right to watch” brought by transnational capital - the Zhou family has risen from a local gentry to a family of overseas Chinese leaders with a cross-regional and even global perspective. Through the high vantage point of the hexagonal terrace, the family has a panoramic view of the spatial order and social relations of itself and its homeland, completing a status reversal from “the watched returning home” to “the master of the panorama”.

3.5. Spatial Syntactic Verification: Quantified Evidence from the Five Connections Code

3.5.1. Spatial syntactic analysis design

Spatial syntactic theory holds that the topological structure of space contains social logic - the way space is structured determines accessibility and monitoring capabilities at different locations, thereby shaping the behavioral patterns of users. This chapter uses the Convex Space analysis method to model the Spaces of the east, south, and north towers of the Lotus Garden in different functional states, calculate the Integration and Control of each space, and test the calculation results against the five types that dominated each historical period. The aim is to reveal the spatial coding patterns of the five-edge network (Figure 8).

3.5.2. Key findings



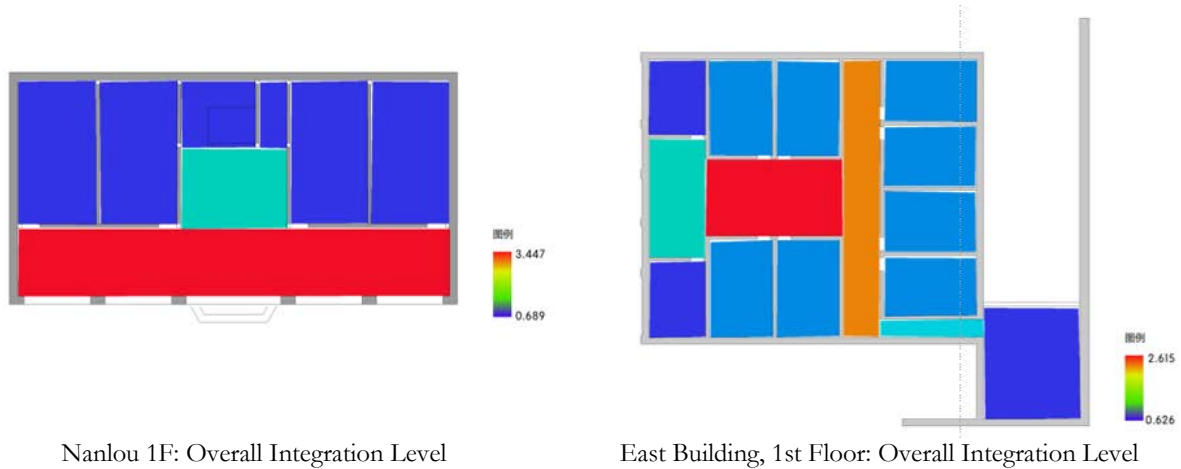


Figure 8: Spatial syntax analysis of the East Building, South Building, and North Building in the Lotus Garden. (Source: Authors).

The key spatial indicators calculated are shown in the following table:

Architecture/Space	Degree of integration	Degree of control	Dominate the five conditions	Function Interpretation
Front Hall of the East Building (Remittance Period)	0.82	0.31	Karmic connection	High integration facilitates customer access, corresponding to financial flow hubs
Bedroom at the back of the east building	0.41	0.18	Bloodline	Low integration, private residence
Ground floor corridor of the south building	0.79	0.22	Karmic connection	High integration, external depositor flow lines, but low control (unable to monitor internally)
The second floor of the south building account room	0.35	0.67	Karma + blood ties	Low integration but high control - hidden deep but able to monitor the entire building, corresponding to financial secrets and Indonesian-language usage areas
Hexagonal terrace in the north building	0.91	0.53	Geographical + divine connection	The highest degree of integration and higher control, panoramic surveillance of the entire hospital, corresponding to the power show
North Building Basement	0.12	0.05	Business connection	Extremely low integration, physical isolation of the vault

Table 2: Calculation of spatial indicators.

The results reveal a clear pattern: the spatial demands of different relationship types in the five-edge network correspond precisely to different combinations of “integration - control”.

In terms of indicator correspondence, the public financial space driven by business connections pursues high integration and low control, such as the front hall of the east building and the outer corridor on the ground floor of the south building. High integration ensures the convenience of financial business, while low control avoids creating a sense of surveillance and oppression for customers. Confidential financial Spaces driven by business conditions are characterized by low integration and high control, such as the accounting room on the second floor of the south building. The low integration ensures the privacy of the space, and the high control enables monitoring of the surrounding space. Kinship driven private living Spaces are characterized by low integration as the core feature, such as the bedrooms at the back of the east building, which insulate external distractions through low accessibility; The power display Spaces driven by geographical and divine connections pursue high integration and high control, such as the hexagonal terrace in the north building, which serves as both the social center of the entire compound and panoramic surveillance, while the basement in the north building, as a financial defense space, presents extremely low integration, achieving physical isolation of remittance cash. The quantification results of the spatial syntax confirm that the dominant type of the five connections directly determines the combination pattern of spatial integration and control, which is in perfect agreement with the theoretical logic of the five-connection spatial coding, further verifying the directional shaping effect of the five-connection network on the spatial form of the overseas Chinese house.

4. FIVE-LINK CONTEMPORARY REPRODUCTION: SPATIAL GAMES AND TRANSFORMATION IN URBAN RENEWAL

Wuyuan Network's shaping of the Heyuan space did not stop with the completion of the North Tower in 1948. The division of property in 1956 institutionalized the Five connections and embedded them in the spatial ownership structure. Over the following decades, with the emigration of people and the advancement of urban renewal, this institutional legacy has undergone the test of hollowing out, the activation of crises and the transformation of functions.

4.1. Institutionalization of the Five Ties: Reconfiguration of spatial ownership following the division of property in 1956

In 1956, Mrs. Zhou presided over the signing of the "House Division Agreement", which finely divided the three buildings and ancillary Spaces of the east, south and north of the Lotus Garden among the seven rooms. The contract was not a mere document of property division, but an institutionalized operation of the Five Connections network - with kinship and clan law at its core, it incorporated bloodline order, geographical public nature, and cross-border assets of inheritance into a unified ownership framework to

complete the spatial reproduction of the clan order.

4.1.1. Bloodline order and spatial value gradient

The contract follows the “lottery order, pick one by one” procedure. The three buildings present a clear value gradient: the north building is the most exquisite and symbolic, and the third, fourth, and sixth rooms are occupied by the first three lots drawn; The south building, which is of medium living quality but has commercial value in its street-facing shops, is chosen from the second and long rooms of the fourth and fifth lots; The east building, which is old but carries ancestral memories, is divided by the fifth and seventh rooms of the last two lots. The correlation between the spatial value gradient and the centrality of the five connections of each branch awaits further quantitative verification.

4.1.2. The maintenance of the community based on geographical and kinship ties and the public nature of space

The contract stipulates that “Wells, courtyards, flower and fruit plots, toilets, etc. are all public and used,” forcibly embedding the geographical public domain in the subdivision of property rights to prevent the estrangement of blood ties caused by the division of family. For undeveloped land, the contract freezes the right to development: in the future, any family that is capable of building the main house does not need to be valued; if multiple families need it at the same time, it is decided by drawing lots, thus protecting the future space rights of the weaker family and avoiding the erosion of the kinship community by the division of karma.

4.1.3. Cross-border binding of karma and stability of spatial order

The contract states that “half a seat of the Coconut City Nanjing Hotel will be shared by seven rooms”, including overseas property within the scope of division. Nanjing Hotel is the core node of the family’s cross-border business network, and this clause achieves a double lock of “separation in the homeland and co-ownership overseas”: each room in Fuqing is given an independent private space, and the property in Indonesia is set as an indivisible public asset. If any house wants to sell its domestic share, it will face the consequences of giving up its overseas rights or facing collective opposition, thus elevating kinship from a moral constraint to a hard property right constraint and building a community of common interests across borders.

4.1.4. The reshaping of clan life and spatial flow lines under virtual boundaries

Get balanced. During festivals and sacrifices, the lines of the rooms converge again in the main hall of the north building and the common square, forming a rhythm of the clan life that alternates between daily separation and festival convergence, constituting the temporal reproduction of the clan order.

4.2. Property Rights Game 2021: Intense Mobilization of the Five Connections Network



Floor plan of property rights division of Building East in the Lotus Garden



South Building Ownership Division Plan 1f



South Building Ownership Division Plan 2f



North Building Ownership Division Plan 1f



North Building Ownership Division Plan 2f

Figure 9: Schematic diagram of housing allocation. Source: Self-drawn based on the original 1956 Housing Allocation Contract.

In 2021, the renovation project of the Fuqing Liqiao Historical and Cultural block was launched, and the Lotus Garden was listed as a protected restoration object. However, the local state-owned investment company attempted to acquire the property rights of the renovated buildings and demolished the new house built by the Zhou family in the 1990s under contract, the ancestral house on the east side of the east building and the bungalow on the north side. Faced with the crisis of the change of ownership of the ancestral property, the Zhou family quickly activated the transnational Five Connections network:

Bloodline (first link) : Descendants of the Zhou family living in Indonesia unite their demands through family communication channels, establish a common goal of “defending ancestral property”, and provide a legitimate basis for mobilization. Business connections (2) : Members of the family who have achieved success in business use decades of accumulated political and business connections to contact the Indonesian foreign service, transforming the overseas Chinese business network into diplomatic intervention capabilities. Geographical (third chain) : Through communication between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia and the Chinese Embassy in Indonesia, the demands are formally conveyed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, and then through the United Front Work Department and Overseas Chinese Affairs office system to Fujian Province and the local government of Fuqing, completing the cross-border administrative connection. Material connection (Fourth chain) : Family members collect historical materials such as old photographs, original 1956 contracts, overseas Chinese remittance letters, and records of overseas Chinese remittance shops as material evidence of property rights and historical value. (5) Divine Connection: In the expression of the appeal, emphasize the irreplaceability of the ancestral home as a place of ancestral worship, elevate the issue of property rights to a cultural and emotional issue of “respecting the deceased and remembering the past”, and obtain moral support.

This top-down diplomatic - administrative channel forms a closed loop with bottom-up family mobilization. After several rounds of negotiations, the property rights of the three main buildings of the renovated Heyuan were finally returned to the Zhou family, and the demolished ancestral home was rebuilt in its original state; The new house built in the 1990s was not rebuilt because of the uncoordinated appearance, and the family received corresponding economic compensation.

This game validates the continuous effectiveness of the Five Connections network in contemporary times: kinship gives legitimacy and mobilization basis, karma provides high-level resource channels, geography completes cross-domain administrative connection, material connection provides irrefutable evidence, and spiritual connection gives moral height. The Five Connections network woven by the 1956 contract was instantly and strongly activated in a discrete state, proving that it is not only a driving force of modern construction, but also a living mechanism that transcends generations and transforms into practical resources

in times of crisis.

5. CONCLUSION: THE FIVE CONNECTIONS NETWORK AS A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE STUDY OF OVERSEAS CHINESE HOUSE SPACE

This paper takes the Lotus Garden in Fuqing as a case study and, by integrating oral history, contractual documents, architectural surveying and mapping, spatial syntactic analysis and the quantification of the Five Connections network, establishes an analytical framework of “Five Connections Network - Spatial Coding”, revealing the deep interconstruction logic between the social relationship network of discrete families and the architectural space of the hometown of overseas Chinese.

5.1. Implications of Conservation practice

At present, the protection and revitalization of architectural heritage in overseas Chinese hometowns are generally faced with two predicaments: first, the property rights are scattered, and the demands of various factions are different, making it difficult to reach a consensus on protection decisions; The second is that the value assessment focuses on the age of the building, the uniqueness of the style or the integrity of the structure, and neglects the function of the building as a carrier of the social network. The research in this paper provides targeted solutions to these practical dilemmas:

First, introduce the “Five-condition Weight assessment” tool. It is suggested that the indicator of “Five ties intensity” be added to the census and classification of architectural heritage in overseas Chinese hometowns, specifically including: The amount of bloodline memory carried by the building (such as the degree of preservation of ancestral houses, the share in the housing allocation contract), the density of historical karma connections (such as the former site of overseas Chinese remittance institutions, traces of financial activities), the uniqueness of material connections (such as the types and scale of imported materials), and the activity of spiritual connection rituals (such as the frequency of festivals and sacrifices and the range of participating families). The four sub-items above can be weighted to form a combined score based on the protection target. Empirical evidence shows that although the East Tower of the Lotus Garden was built the earliest, its ritual activity and the amount of bloodline memory are significantly higher than those of the South Tower. If evaluated only by building value, it may be underestimated - the five-element weighted assessment can correct this bias.

Second, incorporate the Five Connections network into the property rights negotiation mechanism. For overseas Chinese houses where the house division contract is still valid, protection planning should not bypass the five connections network within the family but should proactively use it as a communication

platform. In practice, it is advisable to identify families or individuals with a higher centrality of the five connections (such as family members who contribute a large number of remittances, have a large number of overseas assets, and frequently participate in rituals), and prioritize negotiating restoration plans and revitalization models with them. These highly centered members often have a say in the network, and their attitudes can influence the decisions of the entire family. In the 2021 property rights game at Heyuan, it was the cross-border linkage of high-centricity factions such as the three-room and four-room factions that enabled the security demands to receive diplomatic responses in a short period of time.

Third, respect the priority protection of ritualistic Spaces. The study found that karmic connections have special characteristics that are different from the other five: even when families are separated and daily living is hollowed-out, karmic connections drive sacrificial Spaces (such as the main hall of the ancestral home, the place where ancestral tablets are placed), which remain the core anchor for the periodic return of separated people. Therefore, in the practice of revitalizing and utilizing overseas Chinese houses, undisturbed core Spaces should be reserved for sacrificial ceremonies, and they should not be completely converted into commercial or exhibition venues. This principle plays an irreplaceable role in maintaining the continuous sense of identity of separated families.

5.2. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study, along with its findings, inevitably faces limitations in terms of data, methods, and extrapolation scope. The first is limitations in data completeness and accuracy. The measurement of five-point centrality relies on data such as remittance contributions and shares of overseas assets, while some remittance archives have been lost in the course of history, and some key data can only be cross-verified through oral history and cannot be fully quantified and precise. Future research could combine more systematic family letters, shipping bills of lading, and business registration records in Indonesia and Hong Kong to construct a dynamic transnational family economic network model and upgrade the weights of the five connections from qualitative assignment to continuous variable.

The second one is context-dependent weighting Settings. The weights assigned to blood ties, karma, material ties, geographical ties, and spiritual ties in this paper are based on the specific context and oral history of the Zhou family's division of houses in Heyuan in 1956. In other cases, the reasonable distribution of weights may vary depending on the historical stage, family structure, and archival conditions. Therefore, what is proposed in this study is not a set of fixed weights but a parameterizable evaluation framework.

Lastly, the third is expansion of spatial syntactic correspondence patterns. The “integration degree/control degree - Five types” correspondence pattern summarized in this article is based on Heyuan, a modern

overseas Chinese house in eastern Fujian. Since the original block texture of the Liqiao block where Heyuan is located has been remodeled during urban renewal and cannot be restored to the original spatial texture of the block, this paper only examines the convex space syntax inside the building and does not include the external street network and the spatial analysis at the urban scale. In future studies of the same kind, the overall street and alley topology where the overseas Chinese houses are located can be incorporated into the model to examine how the five-link network affects the morphological evolution of overseas Chinese settlements on a larger scale.

This study opens up a new approach to interpreting “space” from the perspective of “relationships” in the study of overseas Chinese architecture, and replaces the social networks of scattered families at the center of architectural analysis. This framework can be tested, revised, and enriched in more cases in the future, eventually forming an interdisciplinary paradigm of architectural anthropology and spatial sociology with the characteristics of Chinese hometowns.

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

Working Paper Series

INTERPRETING TRADITION FROM THE MARGINS: TEMPORALITY, PRACTICE, AND CRITICAL HERITAGE STUDIES OF SQUATTERS IN HONG KONG

Yiran Wang

INTERPRETING TRADITION FROM THE MARGINS: TEMPORALITY, PRACTICE, AND CRITICAL HERITAGE STUDIES OF SQUATTERS IN HONG KONG



This paper takes Hong Kong's squatter settlements as its research object—a unique form of informal housing—and employs the theoretical lens of critical heritage studies to examine the dynamic translation process of local practices in traditional settlements within modern urban contexts and its challenge to mainstream heritage conservation paradigms. As a significant housing typology in Hong Kong, squatter settlements once accommodated nearly 75% of the city's population, yet the squatter issue has now evolved into a crucial urban and cultural challenge for Hong Kong society. The development and transformation of these settlements profoundly reflect the dual influences of colonial history and modernity, providing an exceptionally valuable case for understanding the complexities of tradition translation.

The study reveals that the translation process within squatter communities demonstrates distinctive temporal and spatial characteristics. Temporally, this process unfolded through three critical phases: the “survival temporality” (1940s-1960s) where immigrant groups adapted vernacular construction techniques to create “temporary housing”; the “frozen temporality” (1970s-1990s) during which the government dehistoricized informal settlements through the Squatter Registration Policy; and the “heritage temporality” (2000s-present) where cultural tourism capital reconstructed squatter settlements as “vanishing traditions.” Spatially, the practices within these settlements exhibit unique adaptive characteristics, including transformations in architectural spaces and forms, the influence of daily social organizational patterns on settlement spatial morphology, and cultural symbolic systems embedded within spatial landscapes.

Through the analytical framework of critical heritage studies, this research identifies three fundamental contradictions in the tradition translation process of squatter settlements: at the cognitive level, the authorized heritage discourse's emphasis on material preservation overlooks practical essence; at the cultural level, diverse cultural groups contest interpretive authority over tradition; and at the power level, socioeconomic and political factors intervene in value assessment systems. The study demonstrates that the value of squatter settlements as “gray heritage” resides precisely in those local practices deemed informal by authoritative discourses.

This research argues that effective tradition translation should be grounded in respect for the temporality and spatiality of informal settlements, prioritizing residents' local practices and daily experiences as the core basis for value recognition. These findings not only address the neglect of “gray heritage”—including Hong Kong's squatter settlements—within heritage studies but also contribute to critical heritage research by establishing a dual analytical framework connecting ‘everyday practices’ and ‘institutional discourses.’

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background and Problem Statement

The notion of the “translation of tradition” seeks to move beyond the entrenched understanding of tradition as a stable form of heritage transmitted from the past into the present. Rather than asking whether tradition has been preserved intact, this paper approaches translation as a processual concept. It examines how tradition is continually reconstituted through everyday practices and spatial forms, thereby sustaining a form of dynamic continuity under changing social, political, and spatial conditions. This question is particularly pressing in marginalized environments, where the continuity of tradition rarely depends upon the

preservation of stable material forms, but is instead sustained through ongoing adaptation and transformation.¹

Consequently, this study explores how, within the context of Hong Kong's radical urban change, squatter settlements articulate a resilient logic of tradition-translation through dynamic spatial practices. In doing so, it contests mainstream heritage discourses that have often excluded informal spaces from the field of heritage recognition.

1.2. The Semantic Dislocation of “Squatter” in British and Hong Kong Contexts

A critical starting point for understanding the question of squatter settlements in Hong Kong lies in examining the semantic dislocation of the term “squatter” across different cultural and political contexts. In the British legal and social context, the term “squatter” primarily refers to a person, and by extension to questions of rights.² Etymologically, it denotes the unauthorized occupation of vacant buildings or land, which, by the mid-twentieth century, had developed into a form of radical social protest.³ Within this context, the squatter was understood as an agentive subject, whose practices were closely linked to housing rights, social justice, and the contestation of private property regimes. In the Hong Kong context, however, the term underwent a marked process of semantic materialization. The term “Liao(寮)”, commonly used in relation to squatter, is documented as early as the 1823 Gazetteer of Kaiping County, where it referred to a rudimentary self-built shack.⁴ Yet after the Second World War, as the colonial government sought to manage the rapid influx of refugees and the pressures of urban expansion, official attention shifted from residents' housing claims and tenure rights to the administrative and legal status of built structures. In colonial policy and legal documents, “squatter” increasingly came to refer less to people than to a specific type of built structure.

Dimension	UK	HK
Object	People	Buildings (and the residents living inside)
Spatial context	Private estates and unoccupied buildings	Squatter on government land
Source	Originates from legal issues such as housing rights	Originates from urban space and buildings issues
Historical semantics	Related to housing rights and social protests	Related to poor housing and marginalized groups
Public semantics	Seen as “activists” or “illegal occupiers”	Seen as “disadvantaged groups” or “historic inhabitants”
Policy position	Involving criminal and civil offenses	Control, demolition, and historic preservation coexist

Table 1: The difference between the UK and Hong Kong regarding the term “squatter”. (Source: Author).

This structure-centered usage reclassified squatter settlements as “illegal structures”, thereby obscuring residents’ housing claims, everyday practices, and forms of urban participation. It reveals how colonial governance rendered a complex lived environment into a singular, administratively legible object.

1.3. Case Background: Tai O and Cha Kwo Ling

In order to examine how tradition is translated within informal settlements shaped by different environmental conditions, this study selects two different marginal settlements in Hong Kong as its cases: Tai O, a waterfront settlement; and Cha Kwo Ling, an urban-fringe settlement in Kowloon.

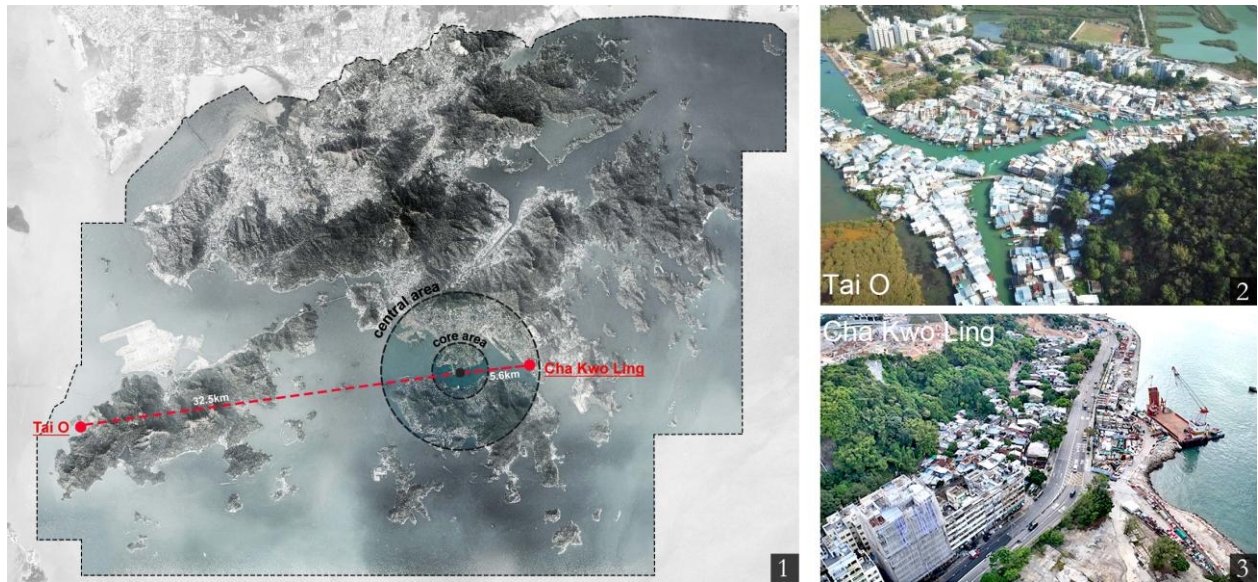


Figure 1: 1) Location map; 2) Aerial view of Tai O; 3) Aerial view of Cha Kwo Ling. (Source: Composite figure by author; base map adapted from Google Maps; image 2 from The Conservancy Association; image 3 from the Former Cha Kwo Ling Kaolin Mine Site Development (Phase 2) project website).

Tai O is located at the western end of Lantau Island. Before Hong Kong became a British colony, it had already developed into an important fishing and salt-producing center along the South China coast.⁵ Its distance from the colonial urban center of Victoria allowed it to maintain a relatively autonomous social structure closely connected to marine resources. Its most iconic spatial form is the stilt house, which was closely intertwined with waterways and related industries such as salt production, sail-making, and salted-fish processing.⁶ Although Tai O has often been labelled the “Venice of the East”, this study understands it instead as a productive landscape, showing how Tanka water-dwelling communities translated the marginal space between land and water into a living community through informal building practices.

By contrast, Cha Kwo Ling is located on the eastern coast of the Kowloon Peninsula, within today's Kwun Tong District and close to the dense urban core. It developed around Hakka stonemasons who settled there from the late eighteenth century onwards. As one of the former "Four Hills of Kowloon", Cha Kwo Ling was once a major source of granite for Hong Kong's early urban construction.⁷ With the decline of quarrying and the acceleration of urbanization, it gradually shifted from a prosperous quarrying settlement into an urban squatter settlement surrounded by high-rise buildings.

Taken together, these two cases allow this paper to examine not merely a particular form of tradition, but two different ways in which marginal settlements are made visible, fixed, remembered, or consumed.

2. TRADITION, TRANSLATION, AND CRITICAL HERITAGE IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS ENVIRONMENTS

Within the built environment, tradition has often been narrowly understood as a matter of material continuity, usually limited to the survival of inherited forms, specific materials, or decorative features.⁸ Such an understanding tends to equate cultural continuity with formal stability, permanence, and recognizability. As a result, buildings that appear visually 'authentic' or historically intact are more readily identified as objects of cultural value.⁹ This orientation is closely related to the institutional and epistemological framework that has long underpinned modern heritage conservation. Since the early twentieth century, heritage conservation has primarily focused on material entities such as monuments and sites, where value judgements rely on material survival and technical criteria. Even as the scope of conservation expanded, material integrity remained the implicit foundation for evaluation. Consequently, the authorized heritage discourse (AHD) tends to privilege complete and classifiable material objects, whilst often excluding fluid, hybrid, and non-standardized marginal settlements from the field of heritage recognition. In doing so, it overlooks forms of cultural continuity that are deeply embedded in everyday practices, social relations, and local memory, rather than sustained by form alone.

This material-centered understanding is therefore insufficient for interpreting marginal dwelling environments. As Amos Rapoport argues, an architecture-focused perspective neglects the complex interactions among the many factors behind built forms; it is precisely these forces, rather than isolated buildings, that are crucial to understanding why environments take particular forms and how they come to be interpreted over time.¹⁰ If tradition is understood only through material survival, continuity can easily be misread as the passive preservation of existing forms. This obscures the ongoing production of tradition through everyday life, spatial use, and institutional change, and risks mistaking formal instability for evidence of cultural rupture.

By contrast, the critical turn in heritage studies provides a more productive framework. Critical heritage studies (CHS) views heritage as a political, cultural, and social phenomenon, emphasizing that its formation and operation are always embedded within power relations and interpretive mechanisms. From this perspective, tradition is no longer a residual past sealed within material form. Instead, it is a dynamic process that is continually maintained, adjusted, and reproduced under changing historical conditions. It persists through repeated everyday actions and is re-inscribed with new meanings within changing social, spatial, and institutional contexts.¹¹ CHS does not simply reject materiality; instead, it rethinks the relationship between material form, social meaning, and interpretive power. Heritage thus shifts from a 'thing to be preserved' to a process that is continually interpreted and negotiated. Accordingly, tradition in this paper is understood as a processual condition generated through changing social relations and spatial practices.

This broader understanding is particularly important for informal settlements. Scholarship has shown that informality is not simply a lack of planning or legality. Rather, it constitutes a mode of life, a mode of spatial production, and a set of practices through which people engage with the city outside formal regulatory systems.¹² In these marginal spaces, the built environment is characterized by adaptive forms, produced through constant negotiation between residents and their unstable social and legal conditions.¹³ Although their material forms may appear temporary or fragmented, this instability does not necessarily imply the absence of tradition. On the contrary, these spaces record how residents sustain local life, social relations, and dwelling order through repeated spatial practices.¹⁴ Therefore, in marginal settlements, continuity is often sustained through adaptive continuities rooted in local knowledge, social networks, and everyday use.¹⁵ Tradition does not simply disappear in the face of change; it is maintained through ongoing pressure, adjustment, and negotiation in ways that are unfixed, non-standardized, yet resilient.

For this reason, the concept of 'translation' is more analytically useful here than the simpler notions of 'transmission' or 'preservation'. By 'translation', this paper does not refer to the unchanged transfer of a fixed cultural essence from the past into the present. Instead, it refers to the continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation of tradition as it moves through changing historical conditions, institutional arrangements, spatial practices, and narrative frameworks. In Hong Kong's squatter settlements, the continuation of tradition often appears as a form of adaptive continuity: through dwelling, building, memory, ritual, everyday interaction, and spatial use, places are repeatedly endowed with recognizable meanings, while emotional attachments and local identities are built up through practice.¹⁶ In this sense, value is not naturally attached to objects; it is produced through long-term interaction, repair, and negotiation between people and space. This logic of 'translation' helps to explain the seemingly dramatic transformations of marginal settlements. Rather than a rupture, change reveals tradition to be a practice-based form of existence, one that is constantly reinterpreted through local knowledge and daily life in response to new pressures.

Seen in this way, marginal dwelling environments offer a particularly useful field through which to examine the processual nature of tradition. Because these spaces have long existed in a state of flux in terms of legal status, material form, and social perception, they make clear that tradition is never simply preserved as a stable and unchanging form. What remains is a set of practical continuities sustained through everyday use, collective memory, social interaction, and emotional attachment.^{14,17} Heritage value, therefore, does not always exist in an explicit or immediately recognizable form. More often, it accumulates gradually through repeated spatial practices and acquires meaning through local narratives and social identity.

For this reason, the study of Hong Kong's squatter settlements should not begin with the question of 'how much of the original form remains'. A more constructive point of departure is to ask how tradition continues to be interpreted and translated through changing modes of spatial adaptation, everyday life, and social relations. This shift from formal preservation to adaptive continuity provides the theoretical foundation for the following analysis of the temporal transformation of tradition and its spatial practices within Hong Kong's squatter settlements.

3. THREE TEMPORAL REGIMES IN THE TRANSLATION OF TRADITION

3.1. Livelihood-driven Temporality: Productive Practices and the Formation of Marginal Dwellings (Late Qing – 1960s)

The initial formation of Hong Kong's squatter settlements should be understood within a longer history of coastal society. As early as the Song dynasty, Hong Kong's long coastline, tidal patterns, and modes of resource extraction collectively shaped the fundamental structure of early local life.⁶ In this period, the squatter was an early dwelling form in which production, habitation, and identity were closely intertwined. Stilt houses first emerged as a symbolic dwelling form for communities whose livelihoods were closely tied to the sea. Later, as migrants from mainland China moved southwards, land-based squatter villages gradually appeared, forming part of Hong Kong's marginal dwelling landscape alongside earlier water-based settlements. During the Ming and Qing periods, the intensification of coastal control and maritime prohibition policies forced previously dispersed water-based dwelling practices moved towards near-shore and inland marginal areas. After Hong Kong's opening as a colonial port, its shift from a peripheral coastal area into a colonial trading node gave rise to productive communities organized around specific livelihood systems, such as fishing, salt production, and quarrying, and inhabited by the laboring groups associated with these industries.

In Tai O, as noted above, the boat initially served both as a means of production and as a place of residence. By the late 19th century, old wooden boats were fixed along the shore, and simple shacks were built on wooden or stone posts. Later changes in roof form and number of storeys produced more stable stilt houses. Everyday activities such as cooking, mending nets, and salting fish often took place in the semi-open spaces at the front of the houses, while entrances usually faced the water to facilitate access by boat. Over time, these houses were connected by timber walkways, forming a public network akin to village lanes.

Stilt houses in Tai O were therefore not a static residential type, but a waterfront dwelling system bound up with fishing, salt production, waterborne transport, and household labor. Together with dockyards, sail-making, rope-making, oar-making workshops, and fishing organizations, Tai O formed a composite space of production, dwelling, and exchange. In this context, stilt houses should be understood less as individual architectural objects to be preserved, and more as a form of place continuity enacted through daily work and ritual. Their morphological transition shows that the continuation of tradition did not depend upon a fixed prototype, but was continually reorganized through changing livelihood practices and dwelling environments.



Figure 2: Evolution of Tai O stilt houses. (Source: Author).

Unlike Tai O, which was based on the fishing-salt economy, the early formation of Cha Kwo Ling was closely connected to coastal industrial and quarrying labor. From the late eighteenth century onwards, Hakka stonemasons settled in the area because of its quarrying resources, with different clans owning their own quarries.⁷ Local squatter dwellings used stone from nearby quarries and reflected local building techniques. Law Mansion, built in 1900, was constructed from local granite and initially served both residential and ancestral functions. As the quarrying industry developed, more people came to Cha Kwo Ling in search of work. By the post-war period, a thriving main street had formed along the coastal route. The settlement was not merely a place of residence, but a local lived world in which labor, trade, family life, and neighborhood interaction were closely interwoven. Cha Kwo Ling therefore embodied a form of productive continuity supported by industrial labor and local commerce. Together with Tai O, it shows that the early tradition of Hong Kong's squatter settlements did not follow a single spatial model, but developed different forms of practical continuity according to local economic foundations.

Within this livelihood-driven temporality, tradition was not a stable material object, but a process enacted through labor, dwelling, and local organization. In both Tai O and Cha Kwo Ling, there was no stable or easily recognizable architectural prototype. Instead, architectural forms were embedded in local society and everyday production, through which local meaning, social ties, and collective memory accumulated over time.

As Hong Kong's economy grew rapidly in the post-war period, squatter settlements increasingly attracted the attention of the colonial government as forms of illegal occupation of "Crown Land". They thus gradually shifted from being understood as part of traditional life to becoming objects of regulation and clearance, laying the groundwork for the next phase of administrative regulation and freezing.

3.2. Frozen Temporality: Historicization and Administrative Regulation (1970s–1990s)

If the early tradition of squatter settlements was primarily embodied in residents' continuous spatial adaptation through productive practices and everyday life, then from the 1970s onwards this process entered a period of administrative freezing. This shift resulted from the combined effects of internal industrial decline and external administrative regulation, transforming squatter settlements from dynamic sites of productive practice into space increasingly treated as static remnants.

Before the onset of comprehensive administrative control, the productive foundations of squatter settlements had already undergone systematic decline amid Hong Kong's broader economic restructuring. With competition from industrial salt production and the rise of offshore fishing, Tai O's traditional salt and fishing industries gradually weakened. As a result, the stilt houses, once part of a composite space of "production, dwelling, and exchange", increasingly lost their productive functions. Their morphological evolution therefore lost its core driving force, and they began to shift from productive dwelling structures into more purely residential containers. Similarly, after the 1970s, the stonemasonry culture of Cha Kwo Ling faced the impact of modern building materials, particularly reinforced concrete. The decline of quarrying marked the gradual dissolution of the occupational identity that had sustained community organization. Once stone houses no longer functioned as a spatial unity of production and domestic life for stonemason families, their internal partitions and functional adjustments were no longer shaped primarily by productive needs, but by the need to maintain basic survival on an increasingly congested urban fringe.

This transition was closely tied to Hong Kong's broader post-war socio-economic restructuring. Continued migration from mainland China sharply increased housing demand, while rapid economic growth and rising social expectations in the 1970s pushed the British colonial government, especially after the 1967 riots, to emphasize housing construction, livelihood improvement, and the reconstruction of governmental legitimacy. Measures such as the Ten-Year Housing Program marked a shift from passive response to comprehensive

planning, and squatter settlements were increasingly understood as obstacles to modern urban construction. Against this background of external social change and internal productive stagnation, the territory-wide Squatter Structure Survey of 1982 fixed squatter space administratively. It assigned numbers to approximately 578,000 squatter structures and required their location, dimensions, and building materials to correspond permanently with the survey records.¹⁸ Informal settlements that had previously existed through continuous translation were thus fixed at a single moment in time.

Cha Kwo Ling most clearly demonstrates the social consequences of this “dual freezing”: the internal decline of productive labor and the external fixation of space through administrative regulation. With the disappearance of quarrying, Cha Kwo Ling was increasingly framed in urban planning narratives as a “temporary zone” to be displaced for infrastructure and development. Around twenty squatter structures near the Asiatic Petroleum depot were first ordered to be cleared on fire-risk grounds; later, developers began acquiring land from villagers, producing a landscape in which old and new forms coexisted.⁷ Meanwhile, although modern transport strengthened residents’ external connections, it also weakened the everyday relations previously formed around the waterfront, temples, and village lanes. The long-suspended prospect of clearance left the community in a state of limbo, while the lack of long-term public investment accelerated physical deterioration and reinforced the official narrative of squatter settlements as “slum-like” spaces.

However, Cha Kwo Ling did not merely endure these pressures passively. Residents and local organizations continued to intervene in the settlement landscape through spontaneous or semi-spontaneous practices, seeking to sustain local meaning. For example, the villagers’ association continued to organize events such as the Tin Hau Festival. Through temporary bamboo theatre, Chinese unicorn dance, and ritual offerings, the temple square, lanes, and former waterfront routes were repeatedly transformed into communal public spaces. Meanwhile, the Cha Kwo Ling Community Centre helped residents organize concern groups and discuss improvements to the living environment.⁷ These practices demonstrate that, even as productive forces weakened and regulatory pressures intensified, residents continued to reshape publicness and visibility within the settlement. Although they did not overturn the administrative framework, they prevented the village from being reduced entirely to a static archive.

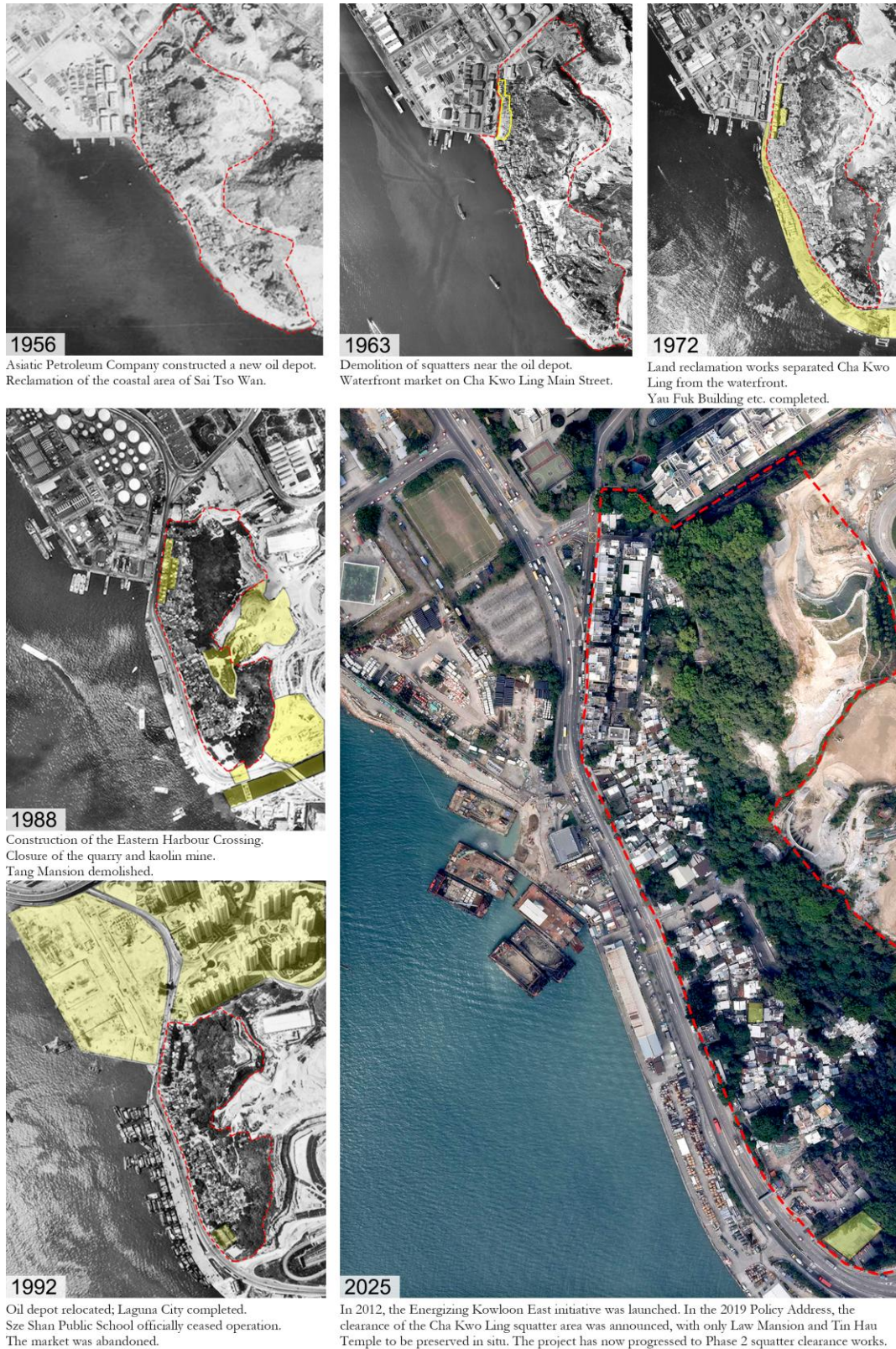


Figure 3: Historical evolution of Cha Kwo Ling squatter settlement and its surrounding urban context. (Source: Composite figure by author, adapted from historical aerial photographs from the Hong Kong government).

By contrast, stilt houses in Tai O experienced the paradox of “passive retention” during this period. The 1982 survey preserved the visual silhouettes of the stilt houses, yet because extensions were prohibited and building materials were restricted, these structures could not undergo corresponding morphological evolution as residents’ livelihoods shifted away from fishing and salt production. Residents were forced to choose between “illegally improving life” and “legally maintaining dilapidation”. At this point, the productive interface of stilt houses was gradually detached from its earlier functions and moved closer to the status of a visual landscape. Nevertheless, the translation of tradition in Tai O took the form of a restricted continuity. Even though repairs were obstructed, timber bridges, waterways, and the front platform of the stilt house continued to maintain basic connectivity through everyday use and collective cooperation. These ongoing resident actions suggest that Tai O’s tradition did not come to an absolute halt. Rather, change was displaced into more concealed and localized micro-practices, through which the foundation of the water-town community was maintained under the pressure of regulation.



Figure 4: Community rituals and festive practices in Cha Kwo Ling. (Source: Image 1 from Cha Kwo Ling Villagers Fraternity Association 10th Inauguration Ceremony & 18th Anniversary Magazine, 1995; image 2 provided by Mr Yim Luen-shing; image 3 from Instagram account (@hong__pics)).

In summary, between the 1970s and the 1990s, the translation of tradition in Hong Kong’s squatter settlements was forced into suspension. This freezing resulted from the internal loss of productive momentum and the external lock-in produced by administrative registration. These measures were also shaped by politically oriented choices designed to rebuild public confidence and strengthen the legitimacy of colonial rule.¹⁹ Through the status of “permitted temporary existence”, official narratives replaced historicity and lived continuity with formal legality. From this point onwards, the relationship between squatter dwellings and the residents who had long lived within them was forcibly separated. Tradition no longer depended primarily on local social relations or livelihood strategies, but on the extent to which administrators were willing to tolerate the “frozen condition”. Yet even within this compressed state, residents continued to sustain the residual vitality of tradition through ritual, cooperation, and micro-repair. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for the next stage of heritagization.

3.3. Heritagization Temporality: Impending Disappearance and Selective Narration (2000s–Present)

Since the early 21st century, the nature of Hong Kong's squatter settlements has undergone another process of translation. They were no longer understood merely through the status of "permitted temporary existence", but were gradually reconstructed as an "urban tradition on the verge of disappearance". In many cases, squatter settlements also came to be regarded as important points of origin in Hong Kong's urban history. Under this premise, squatter settlements ceased to appear only as residential spaces awaiting management, and began to emerge as objects of memory to be recorded, narrated, displayed, and selectively preserved. The "heritagization stage" discussed here therefore does not mean that the living continuity of squatter settlements was fully acknowledged. Rather, it means that their value began to be redefined through a framework oriented towards disappearance and selective narration.

The formation of this heritagization temporality was closely connected to Hong Kong's broader socio-political context from the 2000s onwards. On the one hand, with old district renewal and rising pressure for land development, urban governance increasingly emphasized land supply and spatial restructuring. On the other hand, following the demolition controversies surrounding the Central Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier, Hong Kong witnessed what has often been described as a "great awakening" of heritage consciousness. Public concern for identity, community, and collective memory increased significantly.²⁰ The concept of heritage began to extend beyond monumental architecture to include marginal spaces that carry everyday life, community identity, and collective memory. It was within this dual context of "renewal" and "conservation" that squatter settlements were made visible once again. As a result, squatter settlements gradually shifted from being a housing and land-management problem to becoming a cultural and political question concerning whether they should be retained, and how they should be remembered. Yet this heritagization did not indicate a fundamental transformation of the policy framework. The government's basic approach to squatter settlements remained centered on transitional management, land resumption, and compensation arrangements. This means that heritagization largely occurred under the precondition of planned clearance and redevelopment. It did not amount to the formal recognition of squatter settlements as living heritage in their entirety, but rather to a process of selective narration and partial preservation before disappearance.

Cha Kwo Ling most clearly exemplifies this selective heritagization under a clearance-oriented logic. With the confirmation of the redevelopment plan for urban squatter areas, Cha Kwo Ling was incorporated into a land renewal scheme centered on public housing development. At the same time, however, Cha Kwo Ling was re-narrated as a settlement with deep local history and accumulated cultural meanings. While emphasizing redevelopment, government documents also explicitly noted Cha Kwo Ling's century-long history and recognized the cultural heritage significance of its Tin Hau Temple and related festival activities. What

eventually emerged, however, was not the preservation of the settlement as a whole, but a fragmented mode of retention: highly symbolic nodes, such as the Tin Hau Temple and Law Mansion, were promised preservation in situ, while the vast majority of squatter dwellings, lane patterns, and everyday spaces were excluded from the scope of conservation.²¹ Meanwhile, publications, guided tours, and oral history projects such as *Travelling through Cha Kwo Ling* were framed through the idea that “memory is inheritance”, reconstituting the settlement as a “specimen” to be recorded, narrated, and inherited through memory. In other words, Cha Kwo Ling was translated at this stage into a memorialized past. Tradition no longer continued primarily through living residential practice, but increasingly through recorded culture, a small number of preserved fragments, and narrated local history.

Compared with Cha Kwo Ling, Tai O more clearly entered a path of tourism-led heritage reframing. Governmental and public discourse gradually came to describe Tai O’s stilt houses as a “symbol of the Tai O fishing village” and as “one of Hong Kong’s most distinctive landscapes.”²² Their cultural value was therefore first affirmed through visual recognizability and local distinctiveness. The stilt houses in Tai O were retained as an important component of the fishing village image and local brand. Yet this form of retention did not mean full recognition of the stilt houses as a complete “production–dwelling” system. On the contrary, their repair and reconstruction remained heavily constrained by squatter control regulations, and the visual demand to “preserve tradition” often came into conflict with residents’ practical need to improve their living conditions. More importantly, the original fishing-salt production networks and social relations that had once sustained Tai O’s stilt houses had already undergone profound transformation. As a result, “tradition” in Tai O was increasingly translated into a landscape symbol that could be viewed, consumed, and used to represent “fishing-village Hong Kong”, rather than remaining primarily a living community system capable of self-adaptation and development.



Figure 5: Mapping of everyday, community, and ritual spaces and the Tin Hau Festival procession route in Cha Kwo Ling Village. (Source: Source: Composite figure by author; photographs and annotations by author; base map adapted from the Lands Department, Hong Kong SAR Government).

In sum, the heritagization stage since the 2000s does not mean that Hong Kong's squatter settlements have received fuller heritage recognition as a whole. On the contrary, it marks the emergence of a highly selective narrative logic. Under the pressure of impending clearance, redevelopment, or tourism development, the tradition of squatter settlements has been distilled into a limited number of memory fragments and landscape

symbols. Cha Kwo Ling exemplifies a form of demolition: the landscape of everyday community life is disappearing, replaced by a small number of retained symbolic nodes and an expanding body of memorial narratives. Tai O, by contrast, represents a form of tourism-led preservation: its physical form is partially retained, but its living practices and social relations are increasingly reframed within a consumable local landscape. Together, these two cases demonstrate that, in the heritagization stage, the tradition of informal settlements is no longer sustained as an integral form of lived continuity. Instead, under the combined force of power, capital, and social narration, it is translated into historical fragments available for display, commemoration, and selective retention. For this reason, the heritage value of squatter settlements cannot be judged solely by the fragments and images that have been preserved. It must instead return to the question of how spatial practices themselves continue to generate place meaning.

4. SPATIAL PRACTICE AND THE HERITAGE VALUE OF INFORMATIVITY

In the preceding discussion, this paper has shown how the “tradition” of Hong Kong’s squatter settlements underwent a dynamic process of translation across three temporal regimes: livelihood-driven, frozen, and heritagization temporalities. Yet these transformations were not abstract processes; they were always anchored in concrete physical environments and made visible through changes in spatial form. For incremental informal settlements such as squatter settlements, heritage value cannot be adequately assessed solely through the integrity, authenticity, or external appearance of existing built forms. If change is understood merely as deterioration, a more crucial issue is overlooked: residents have maintained the continuity of local life precisely through the continuous adjustment of space, interfaces of use, and everyday routes.

On this basis, this section shifts the focus of analysis from historical periodization to spatial logic, exploring another line of enquiry beyond “formal preservation”: how spatial practices continue to carry local knowledge, social relations, and historical experience through buildings and places. This shift concerns not only the technical criteria of heritage recognition, but also the core of informal settlements as living heritage. Space is not simply a container of life; rather, it is a process through which residents continually reshape place meaning through use, repair, organization, and everyday cooperation.

4.1. Adaptive Morphology and Material Transformation

The material environment of squatter settlements is often regarded by mainstream heritage perspectives as lacking “historical integrity” or “material stability” because of its fragmented, temporary, or materially hybrid character.¹⁵ Yet from the perspective of “translation”, this instability of material form is precisely an

expression of the resilience of tradition under the pressures of everyday life. In this sense, the heritage value of squatter does not lie primarily in whether a particular structure has retained its original appearance, but in how residents have negotiated the tensions between dwelling needs, regulatory constraints, and the risk of enforcement through subdivision, repair, and shared use. Cha Kwo Ling and Tai O present two distinct conditions. Cha Kwo Ling demonstrates a form of survival-oriented translation under regulatory pressure, where spatial adjustments occur largely under the constraints of law and the threat of clearance. Tai O, by contrast, illustrates an interface-based translation shaped by the overlap between environmental adaptation and landscape narration, where spatial organization reflects shifting relationships between production, sociability, and symbolic meaning.

First, the architectural morphology of Cha Kwo Ling reveals considerable adaptability. Within the settlement, original granite houses, later additions made of corrugated metal sheets, and repeatedly subdivided interiors should not be understood as mutually contradictory elements. Rather, they constitute a form of material juxtaposition shaped by the necessities of survival. This morphological condition reflects how residents flexibly adjusted their living environment in response to changes in household size, livelihood patterns, and government policy. The use of temporary materials was not simply a matter of economic constraint; it was also because more permanent materials could more easily lead to enforcement action against unauthorized building works. This seemingly “passive” material choice reveals the intertwined nature of resilience and constraint in informal settlements.

Furthermore, as external forms remained constrained over time by the uncertainty of clearance and registration control, spatial adjustment in Cha Kwo Ling increasingly took place internally. Households had to create as much usable space as possible without visibly altering external boundaries, in order to accommodate family expansion or the demand for subletting. Under these conditions, spatial adjustment was more commonly expressed through the re-subdivision of interiors, partial enclosure, and the inward retreat of spatial interfaces. Relatively complete dwelling units were broken down into multiple secondary units, forming “houses within houses” or structures of multiple subdivision. Law Mansion provides an illustrative example. Its use shifted from an original family residence to an ancestral hall, workshop, private school, and later subdivided rental space. These repeated functional changes and continuous internal repairs demonstrate how material form maintained community vitality through ongoing functional translation. Yet when dwelling pressure forced space to contract inwards, functions originally located inside the home, such as cooking, washing, and socializing, were pushed into public space, leading to a reconfiguration of privacy and publicness. Lane spaces were further compressed by temporary structures extending from both sides, while functions were redistributed between upper and lower levels, or between front and rear depths. As a result, lanes were no longer merely passageways; they became extensions of kitchens or living rooms, forming a

dwelling organization that was both constrained and highly malleable. In this sense, the present condition of Cha Kwo Ling cannot be reduced simply to poverty or physical deterioration. It should instead be understood as a process of morphological negotiation undertaken by residents under strict regulation and long-term uncertainty.



Figure 6: Incremental spatial subdivision and negotiated occupation of public space in Cha Kwo Ling. (Source: Author).

At the same time, the transformation of Tai O offers another mode of translation centered on the interface. The transition from dwelling vessels to boat-shaped huts and then to stilt houses appears to follow a smooth evolutionary path. Yet when the perspective returns to specific spaces and actions, this process was far from linear. It involved transformations in identity, settlement on land, changes in modes of production, and policy intervention. Initially, the houseboat functioned both as a productive tool and as a dwelling. Later, old boats were fixed along the shore, and simple huts were built on wooden posts. Subsequently, the dwelling space was raised, while columns, roofs, and internal layouts continued to be adjusted, producing a more stable stilt houses structure. In fact, these morphological changes emerged from residents' everyday needs. Once ashore, residents required more stable spaces for mooring and dwelling; they needed to berth fishing boats, process salted fish, mend nets, cook, and maintain everyday social relations. As a result, many activities did not take place within enclosed interiors, but on the platforms in front of the houses and on the connecting walkways. Changes in materials and construction were therefore direct responses to these practical needs.

The key to Tai O's stilt houses lies not in the individual building, but in the continuous interface formed between buildings, waterways, connecting bridges, and front platforms. Stilt houses are linked by timber bridges and connecting walkways. In front of each household is a platform extending towards the water, while between two rows of stilt houses there is a *chung*, or water channel, which functions both as a route for boats and as a space for residents' interaction and work. Here, timber bridges are not merely transporting infrastructure; they are closer to the lane system of a traditional village. The front platform of the stilt houses

is a semi-public space that supports household production, mooring, and neighborhood interaction. In spatial terms, Tai O's stilt-house system is organized through liminal interfaces. Public and private, production and dwelling, water and land are not clearly separated; rather, they interpenetrate through timber bridges, water channels and front platforms. For this reason, the stilt-house morphology of Tai O cannot be understood as a simple evolution from boat to house. The earlier waterborne habit of creating a kind of floating "land" through connections between boats has continued into the present.²³ Residents have continued to rely on these ambiguous interface relations to sustain everyday life and to respond to changes in livelihood, material use, and community organization after settlement on land. Even in later processes of tourism-led revitalization and landscape narration, what becomes most recognizable and consumable is precisely these interfaces: the connectivity of bridges, the accessibility of water channels, and the visibility of the front platforms of the stilt houses as a semi-public space.

However, the problem is that after the substantial decline of the original fishing and salt-production system, these interfaces remained, but their logic of use changed. Some continued to support residents' movement and social interaction, while others were transformed, or staged, as part of a "fishing village landscape" to be viewed, photographed, and narrated. The morphology of Tai O, therefore, did not naturally continue from a "waterborne tradition" into the present. Rather, it was retained through the combined effects of residents' struggles for in-situ reconstruction, the maintenance of water-based connections, and the negotiation of policy restrictions. The stilt houses landscape visible today contains both the long-formed logic of waterfront life and the later demands of regulation and tourism for external visual continuity. In other words, Tai O's present visible form should not be equated with the complete survival of its original practices. On the contrary, many spatial practices based on fishing and salt production have already been interrupted. What remains is often a form of basic connectivity maintained by bridges, water channels and front interfaces, together with the periodic reactivation of these spaces through festivals and religious activities.

The cases of Cha Kwo Ling and Tai O therefore show that the analysis of adaptive morphology should focus primarily on how residents adjust space under social pressure. In this respect, the heritage value of squatter dwellings does not lie first in whether a particular building has preserved its original form, but in how these spaces continue to record residents' negotiation of everyday pressures, institutional constraints, and spatial relations.

4.2. Everyday Organization and the Production of Place

Having discussed how the architectural forms of Hong Kong's squatter settlements have been continuously adjusted under practical pressures, it remains necessary to ask why these spaces have not lost their meaning through constant change. For squatter settlements, "place" is not defined by individual buildings or statutory

boundaries, but is produced through residents' everyday life, spatial occupation, and collective practices.²⁴ These practices transform the fragmented material environment of informal settlements into a lived world marked by belonging, social attachment, and community identity.

The sense of place in Cha Kwo Ling cannot be reduced simply to a "mutual-aid network". It should instead be understood as a form of spatial resistance developed under the long-term uncertainty of clearance. The historical memory of Cha Kwo Ling has not remained merely at the level of narrative. Rather, it has continued to be anchored in a spatial order centered on the Tin Hau Temple. The value here lies in the spatial system of communal life—the temple forecourt, village lanes, nearby shops, community facilities, and everyday social nodes. Villagers' organizations, the community center, and residents' groups in Cha Kwo Ling do not merely perform service functions; in practice, they constitute a set of informal rules parallel to formal planning. The temple forecourt is both a religious space and a space for discussion and mobilization. The lanes are not merely passageways, but have become spaces of information exchange, temporary gathering, and collective negotiation through long-term use. The community center, by organizing residents' meetings and concern groups, has helped transform dispersed households into a minimal but meaningful form of community. More importantly, this spatial occupation does not always take the form of large-scale collective action. It is also expressed through micro-spatial nodes. Threshold spaces in front of shops, together with temporary displays or informal arrangements, can transform lanes that were originally used for circulation into community nodes, giving these passages a social quality beyond their traffic function. These everyday practices gradually produce the place meaning of squatter settlements through long-term interaction between people and space. Such practices also assert the legitimacy of the community as a lived collective. Tragically, the recent clearance of Cha Kwo Ling Phase Two reveals the limitations of official heritage logic. By preserving only the 'Grade III' Tin Hau Temple and Law Mansion while clearing the surrounding dwellings, the government saves isolated structures but terminates the everyday networks that sustained worship, gathering, and community negotiation.

In contrast, Tai O shows how ritual activities can periodically reshape social cohesion and spatial order through spatial practice. While tourists may view the waterfront as a static backdrop from speedboats, for residents, it is a living narrative space driven by guilds and rituals. The most representative example is the Dragon Boat Water Parade. As dragon boats lead deity statues through the waterways, residents burn incense and worship from the front platform of the stilt houses and connecting bridges. At this moment, the parade does not simply 'take place' in a pre-existing area; it redefines the publicness of the space, weaving waterways, bridges, and stilt houses into an integrated spiritual landscape. This cyclical spatial activation means that tradition is not a museum-like display, but a social relationship repeatedly reaffirmed through collective action. Even as the fishing economy declines, this organizational logic based on religion, neighborhood

networks, and waterfront spatial practices continues to sustain Tai O's self-identity as a water-based community.

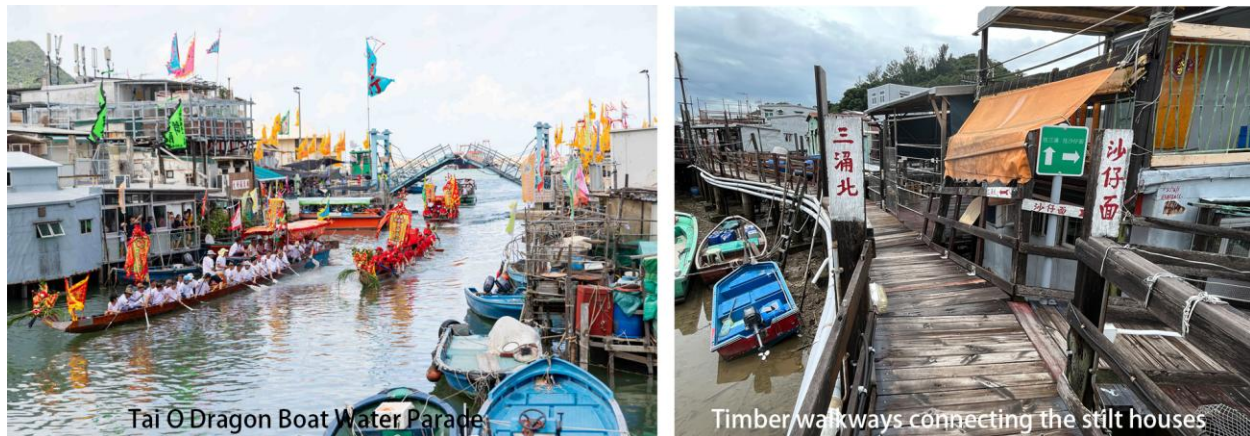


Figure 7: Water-based ritual practices and everyday circulation spaces in Tai O. (Source: (Left) the Intangible Cultural Heritage Office, “Tai O Dragon Boat Water Parade 2025”; (right) Author).

However, this ritual-supported narrative faces the risk of aestheticization. In current tourism discourses, stilt houses are often reduced to a nostalgic ‘fishing village landscape’. Historically, these were not isolated symbols but part of a productive landscape involving guilds and workshops. Under the policy of ‘natural wastage’, the dynamic evolution of the settlement has stagnated. Existing bridges and platforms, while retaining basic social functions, have seen their productive roles replaced by visual consumption. Once the social organizational functions are lost, and once the narrative quality of the deity-parade routes is detached from everyday life, these once vibrant spatial interfaces can easily deteriorate from a living community into a purely visual setting. Therefore, the heritage significance of Tai O lies not in ‘looking traditional’ but in whether these interfaces are still used by residents to generate cultural meaning.

Furthermore, the production of place in informal settlements is also reflected in everyday negotiations. Lacking formal management, the maintenance of public spaces and infrastructure and small-scale repairs depends on informal agreements and tacit understandings among neighbors. This governance, rooted in local knowledge and long-term co-presence, provides a still-effective model for managing complex neighborhood relations.

In sum, the place meaning of informal settlements is continually produced through social relations. Space, everyday time, social networks, and cultural rituals are inseparable from one another. The essence of squatter heritage is therefore closer to “heritage as a verb”: its value lies not in the object itself, but in the actions that continue to take place.²⁵ The assessment of heritage value in Hong Kong’s squatter settlements must therefore move from “static buildings” to “dynamic places”, focusing on how community belonging is

materialized through collective practice. This dynamic and relational understanding offers one of the most productive ways of recognizing the heritage value of informality.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evolution of Hong Kong's squatter settlements is not merely a history of shifting material forms on the urban margin. It is also a process through which tradition has been dynamically sustained through continual "translation" between institutional constraints and local survival strategies. This section examines the dialectical conflicts embedded in this process of translation and summarizes the theoretical contribution of this study to critical heritage studies.

5.1. Dialectical Conflicts in the Translation of Tradition

The question of squatter tradition has never been simply a choice between conservation and clearance. Rather, it involves deeper judgments about value, recognition, and the meaning of heritage itself. The case of Hong Kong's squatter settlements provides a critical lens through which to understand how tradition persists under the pressures of modernity. The following analysis reveals three primary contradictions within the translation of this tradition.

5.1.1. Material survival versus practice-based continuity

The case of Hong Kong's squatter settlements reveals a fundamental contradiction within heritage evaluation systems. Mainstream heritage assessment tends to ground the "authenticity" of tradition in stable and intact material forms, whereas the core value of squatter settlements lies in continuously enacted spatial practices. This conflict stems from what may be termed "ontological politics": official evaluation follows a static paradigm centered on material conservation, seeking to preserve heritage as a stable material object, while residents seek to maintain a way of life that can be continually adjusted under practical constraints. Its continuity is more often expressed through dynamic processes of repair, replacement, subdivision, and spatial redistribution.

Current policies of 'selective preservation' manifest this cognitive mismatch. When heritage is reduced to 'material islands' detached from their social contexts, the everyday practices that provide their cultural meaning are stripped away. This requirement for 'permanence' acts as a technique of governance through which informal spaces are excluded. By presupposing permanence as the threshold for recognition, squatter settlements—which rely on dynamic repair—are pre-emptively categorized as 'uncivilized' or 'unconservable'. However, Cha Kwo Ling and Tai O both prove that morphological change is often the very condition that

makes local continuity possible. Once the heritage framework recognizes only stable entities and denies continuously generated practices, the practice-based value of squatter settlements as living heritage is institutionally erased.

5.1.2. Authorized discourse versus local meaning: the struggle for interpretation

The translation of tradition is always accompanied by a power struggle over interpretation. From the perspective of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), squatter settlements are defined either as unauthorized structures to be cleared or as isolated symbols that may be selectively retained under particular conditions. For residents, however, spatial practices constitute living places that carry family memory, social relations, and identity. This is not just a difference in observational scale; it reveals how AHD uses classification and grading to recognize only fragments that are easily displayed, while excluding the wider social relations that sustain them. In this sense, the interpretive violence of authority does not always lie in outright denial, but in the authorization of parts to legitimize the dissolution of the whole.²⁶

The redevelopment of Cha Kwo Ling provides a clear example of this process. When the Tin Hau Temple and Law Mansion were designated as Grade III historic buildings, this form of isolated protection effectively legitimized the dissolution of the community's broader spatial order. The meaning of these structures derives from the festival routes, collective activities, and everyday social relations that surround them; once these relations are severed, the buildings may remain, but the place ceases to function as a lived social environment. In this way, by selectively confirming particular symbols, authorized discourse rationalizes the historicization of informal spaces as a whole. Thus, the evolution of squatter tradition becomes an ongoing struggle through which local meaning seeks visibility and legitimacy within the gaps of institutional power.

5.1.3. Development narratives and the dissolution of living heritage

In the context of contemporary urban renewal, the translation of tradition in squatter settlements often takes the form of disappearance through landscape-making and symbolic retention. The contrast between Cha Kwo Ling and Tai O reveals the multiple pressures placed on heritage by different development narratives. Cha Kwo Ling's redevelopment narrative breaks down a cohesive community into clearable plots and isolated monuments. By contrast, Tai O has been reframed through tourism as a visually recognizable "fishing village landscape", where a productive landscape—once defined by livelihoods—is replaced by a consumable scenic setting.²⁷

This shift places the dynamic nature of tradition at risk. Redevelopment treats communities as replaceable spatial variables, while tourism compresses them into static, nostalgic symbols. The Hong Kong experience

shows that when tradition is translated only into isolated landscapes or buildings, it is not preserved; rather, it is recoded as a governable and consumable “past”. Effective translation should instead focus on sustaining the capacity of actors to continue negotiating space within changing environments. Otherwise, tradition becomes a passive object of display rather than a dynamic system capable of self-repair and adaptation.

5.2. Conclusion: Informal Heritage as a Dynamic Process of Translation

This study does not seek to propose a standardized conservation scheme for Hong Kong’s squatter settlements. Rather, by examining their historical transformation and spatial practices, it aims to reconsider how we understand informal settlements and their traditions. Through the core concept of “translation”, this paper has argued that tradition in marginal spaces is not a residual form destined to disappear, but a resilient strategy for survival and cultural continuity.

The analysis of three temporal regimes has shown that the tradition of Hong Kong’s squatter settlements is processual rather than static. Within livelihood-driven temporality, tradition was expressed through productive practices closely tied to livelihood. Within frozen temporality, it was transformed into a defensive strategy of survival under administrative pressure. Within the current heritagization temporality, it faces the risk of being reduced to landscape imagery and fragmented remains. This trajectory demonstrates that the value of squatter settlements lies not primarily in stable material forms, but in their capacity to adapt continuously to social change. In this process, the flexible adaptation of Tai O’s stilt houses and the maintenance of social ties within the compressed spaces of Cha Kwo Ling both show that the continuity of squatter tradition depends upon ongoing repair, alteration, cooperation, and collective reconstruction. Therefore, the heritage assessment of informal settlements should not be limited to “material authenticity”. It should instead shift towards “practical continuity”, recognizing that everyday use, local knowledge, and social relations also constitute important dimensions of urban culture.

At the theoretical level, this study offers two insights into the discussion of informal heritage. First, it challenges the value judgements in heritage studies that privilege material stability, revealing the tension between official recognition based on stability and local traditions sustained through generative continuity. This tension is, in essence, a struggle over interpretive authority: what counts as heritage, and who has the right to define it. This provides a reference point for understanding similar forms of “grey heritage” elsewhere: heritage should not be regarded merely as an object of passive protection, but as a field of meaning continually negotiated and reconstructed by different stakeholders. Second, this study deepens the understanding of the cultural value of informality. Through the comparison between Cha Kwo Ling and Tai O, it becomes clear that informal settlements are not merely challenges for urban governance, but also important carriers of urban origins, grassroots memory, and local architectural knowledge.

Therefore, heritage conservation should neither freeze a disappearing moment nor reduce a complex community to isolated material remains. Instead, it should be concerned with how to sustain a social environment in which local knowledge, spatial practices, and relational networks can continue to respond to new realities. When Cha Kwo Ling and Tai O are understood as living heritage within urban history, rather than as residual traces of development, what becomes visible behind corrugated-metal extensions, narrow lanes, and waterside stilt houses is precisely the survival wisdom and social resilience at the heart of the city.

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Contributors

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Chenming Jiang,¹ Hao Wang²

¹ Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China

¹ chenming0121@sjtu.edu.cn

Dharshini Mahesh Babu

McGill University, Canada

dharshinimaheshb@gmail.com

Siti Balkish Roslan,¹ Hidayati Ramli²

¹ Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

² Souther Latitude Research Collective, Malaysia

¹ sitibalkish.roslan@xjtlu.edu.cn, ² hidayatiramli647@gmail.com

Lin Peng,¹ Xi Lin,² Bing Hua Zhang³

^{1,3} Fuzhou University, China

¹ 466416205@qq.com, ³ 719624174@qq.com

Yiran Wang

Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom

wangy575@cardiff.ac.uk