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ISSN 2584-0282

*International Journal of Arts,
Architecture & Design,*
Vol. 4(2), July 2026

doi.org/10.62030/2026Julypaper4

Published: 31st July 2026

Received: 21st April 2026

Accepted: 26th June 2026

Published by:
World University of Design

The Embodied Experience of Vernacular Architecture: A Case Study on the Material and Art Aspects of *Kathkuni* Style in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh

ABSTRACT

The recent trend in architectural literature has made a shift from understanding architectures as mere representations or signifying systems, towards a more experiential dimension and beyond the visual bias. They are not seen as a static backdrop but as part of a continuous dialogue with the body, mind and the environment. The study employs the method of embodied experience of architectures for a more intimate and meaningful interaction. The space between the self, the perceived and the conceived is traversed through the regions architectural landscape where the body, the object of experience and the mind are in a continuous process of interaction and communication to understand the spaces of the studied aspects of material and art from a more experiential point of view. In this process, the study also highlights some of the important facets of *Kinnauri* architectural heritage such as indigenous knowledge, ancient designs and generational skills, inherited and practiced by the local craftsmen known as the *oras*. These artisans and craftsmen have been responsible for making the earthquake resistant *kathkuni* architectures from locally available resources. They not only craft tools to build and sustain the structure but embellish it with intricate carvings and art work that bears testimony to the articulation of a harmonious balance between nature and culture of the region throughout centuries, where the physical and the spiritual come together to manifest sacred spaces of everyday living. This is required for further sustenance of not only the architectures arts and aesthetics but its credibility and meaning in socio-cultural life of the people and adaptability to the changing environment.

Keywords – Vernacular Architecture, *Kathkuni* Style, Indigenous Knowledge, Phenomenology, Embodied Experience, Drawing

1. Introduction

The traditional vernacular architecture of Kinnaur represents the cultural values of its people and the ecological sensibility which is manifested in its materiality, art and aesthetics that has been practiced for past many centuries in one of the many architectural styles found in the region, commonly known as the *kathkuni* style or the 'hill architectural style' (Chetwode, 1973). This particular architectural style also expands across the Himalayan region, varying in its structural and artistic characteristics. While spanning generations of aesthetic, structural and functional use, it is said to have inherent sustainable characteristics and is an important landscape attribute (Alves, 2017). The advent of erratic climatic condition, weather anomalies, changing socio cultural and economic characteristics has prompted the need to address vernacular architectural practices of indigenous areas as they are an outcome of locally sourced raw materials, artistic skills, designs and

techniques that are attuned to the physical and cultural conditions of the place. The *kathkuni* style is made by alternating wood and stone layers for the basic framework of the house and the functional and aesthetic attribute of an open and a closed verandah called *tongang* and *motongang* respectively, are added to the floors above the ground floor, this feature comprises entirely of wood. The trimmed fascia of the roof is also made by wood with detailed carving and intricate art work added as an embellishment. Features like these are hardly visible in the modern constructions and vague modified version are seen in hybrid constructions. The wooden carvings are done by hand and the contemporary steel trimmed fascia are cut by machines, which is considered less expensive.

A deep concern here arises from the fact that there is a trade of priceless and authentic artwork for imitating machine-made designs. The traditional vernacular attributes in many cases are being transferred in meaningless forms to the new constructions using machines and other modern technologies without realizing their actual implicated meaning and cultural significance. Further, ‘the iconization of rural culture and value is exploited for contemporary consumption’ (Park & Coppack, 1994) to which Postalci and Atay (2019) also add by stating that ‘cultural features are also used in spatial design to create architectural product identity on the global stage, which more often ends up in kitsch.’ There is a loss in meaning that comes with mass production and a more market-oriented display of these cultural features, highlighting only the visual appeal for consumption that are driven by capitalistic goals. Experiencing architectural spaces of these traditional vernacular buildings at a more intimate and experiential level may help to bridge the gap between understanding of sacred spaces and a more meaningful representation in hybrid and modern constructions. The recent trend in architectural literature has made a shift from architecture as mere representations or a signifying system and its visual bias to an experiential dimension where these vernacular structures are not seen as a static backdrop but as part of a continuous dialogue with the body, mind and the environment. Viewing these structures from such a perspective can help create meaningful experiences for space users (Bonabi, 2025).

An interdisciplinary approach will add to this new perspective of approaching and understanding architectural spaces. The study employs the method of embodied experience of architectures for a more intimate and meaningful interaction. The space between the self, perceived and the conceived is traversed through the regions architectural landscape where the body, the object of experience and the mind are in a continuous process of interaction and communication to understand the spaces of the studied aspects of material and art from a more experiential point of view. In this process, the study also documents, represents and highlights some of the important facets of *Kinnauri* architectural heritage such as indigenous knowledge, ancient designs and generational skills. This is required for further sustenance of not only its arts and aesthetics but its credibility and meaning in socio cultural life of the people and adaptability to the changing environment. The scope of the study is also to bring forth the issue that the dependence on indigenous technologies and practices of vernacular construction, art and design is decreasing and is at a risk of getting completely eroded without even analyzing its potential in the growth and development process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Vernacular Architecture

According to Bera (2019) the term ‘vernacular’ is derived from the Latin word ‘vernaculus’ which means domestic, native or indigenous, a style that is specific to the region or surrounding culture (Oliver, 2003). From the initial use of the term ‘vernacular’ which was used to denote a regionally recognizable language pattern, the application of the term has diversified over the years to building

forms of folk origin with lately as an umbrella term for anything that is not high style, as mentioned by Heath (2003). Brown and Maudlin (2012) state that the term vernacular architecture first appeared in the post war period of 1950's and 1960's and with the progression in time it was understood as 'a functional shelter for people and animals and stores to meet their needs but more as complex social and cultural relations spatially constituted from locally sourced materials and response to climate and environment', more recently 'it has become the study of cultural impact of specific people upon building practices in a specific place'. According to Jackson (1984) architecture is not just a simple dwelling space where 'form follows function' but is also meaningful in the expression of cultural identity. Traditional vernacular architecture, which is an outcome of a non-professional act of generational passing down of indigenous skill and knowledge (Manurung et al., 2022) is attuned to the cultural and physio-geographic conditions of a place. It can be 'resourceful for contemporary architectures by learning how the vernacular architectures have deep respect and perfect communion with the natural environment' and 'the perfect relation and understanding of user's needs' (Creangă et al., 2010). This is when architectures steps beyond the restricting category of a physical manifestation and static backdrop to not only an artform that is 'an important visual language' rooted in history and culture (Yang, 2024) but which also continuously generates 'a non-verbal communication which evokes meaningfulness in its users' (Verma & Panchal, 2021).

2.2 The Kathkuni Architectural Style of the Study Region

Kath-Khuni, which means 'wooden corner' (Atrey, 2019) is a prominent sight of the traditional cultural landscape of Himachal Pradesh. The *kath-khuni* construction 'alternates timber and stone to create structures that are both resilient and expressive' and the 'construction itself embodies and enables cultural life' (Singhal et al., 2025). Also known as the 'Indian Hill architecture', it can be found over the Western Shiwalik range of the Sub Himalaya between 3000-10000 feet. Himalayan cedar, which is insect proof like teak, is grown around 6000-10000 feet and has a lifespan of around 1000 years, is used in the process (Chetwode, 1973). In Kinnaur the old architectures are still relevant as they 'affect people' in the sense, as inspirations in making new houses with a hint of the past reflected in their design, form and structure. The functional spaces of the rooms that are allotted to various socio cultural and religious activities are still an important component in making new houses and the geographical, climatic and environmental factors that are also responsible for the traditional vernacular architecture and other expressions of culture (De Blij, 1977) still play a role in contemporary constructions.

2.3 Embodied Experience, Felt Body and New Phenomenology in Architectural Studies

Paterson (2011) states that geography in more recent times, has been concerned with the embodied experience of architectural spaces while attempting to understand them. This has led to a shift from visual bias that refers to architecture as a mere representative and signifying system, leaning towards a more critical approach of more than visual perspective, to which he adds includes a range of sensory-somantic and affective experiences that include but are not limited to the visual or mere retinal but deeper than skin sensation, thus referring to it as the embodied encounter. Supporting the previous statement, Bonabi (2025) argues that 'critiques of architecture in this context often highlight its shift towards visual dominance, where the multisensory and profound aspects of experience are overshadowed. This results in a form of architecture that treats space as three-dimensional devoid of meaning, perceives users as detached observers, and reduces architecture to mere objects.' Gregory and Torino (2024) state that 'experience is not mere sensation; it is on the contrary interaction of living with the environment.' Here, it is seen that the role of the living body is emphasized in relation to the built environment which as a result creates multisensory experiences that may help understand those spatial

aspects of architectures that are not only seen but can also penetrate beyond the visual layers and dive into the empathetic, emotional, sacred spaces that the body encounters and experiences. Gregory and Torino (2024) further add that ‘the body we are referring to is not the object body, but the living body or the felt body.’ This ‘felt body’ is emphasized more profoundly under new phenomenology. In the South East Asian context Chiranthanut (2020) talks about the sacred space in the house of the Tai speaking communities are part of ‘intangible cultural wisdom heritage’ that play a significant role in the design and formation of their houses and this space has been reproduced from generation over generation. According to El Amrousi et al. (2019) there is a re-emergence of *majlis* and *liwan* as a cultural counter space to the rapid sprawl of modernity in UAE, with an increased concern towards sustainability, culture and identity, which they refer to as an example of ‘neo heritage.’ It seems like Downing et al. (2008) view buildings as living, that are not opaque but transparent to analogies and metaphors that expands its comprehension beyond objects that are fixed in time and space as they state that ‘buildings have boundaries of foundation, wall, or roof, parts of which could be thought of as the ‘skin’, these various skins of the building have become more porous as the fields of architecture expands while aligning itself with a new moral code, one that is inclusive of our biological reality and the embodiment of ideas, systemic evolution, and ecological necessities’. Soltani and Kirci (2019) also redirect attention towards accounting the body and the environment in architectural discourse and state that ‘architectural work is not experienced as a series of isolated retinal pictures, but its fully integrated material, embodied and spiritual essence’.

Here, phenomenology helps in creating experiences that not only steps into but also goes beyond the tangible and the visual dimension to a more experiential endeavour where the body, the object of experience and the mind are in continuous interaction as part of the lived experience. This is what (Bonabi, 2025) also states as ‘lived experiences’ where action is emphasized and ‘immediate perceptions, spontaneous emotions and thoughts are at the forefront’ as opposed to mere observation of ‘non lived experiences’ and also different from ‘life experiences’ that ‘unfolds over an extended period, encompassing one's life and expanding as time progresses.’ Here, the ‘New Phenomenology aims to become a thoroughly empirical endeavour focusing on the concept of a state of affair rather than the concept of a thing in describing a phenomenon as such’ where ‘the human relation to the environment is characterized by continuous contemplation in ubiquitous embodied communication’ (Andersen, 2024). Kraftl (2010) states that ‘the bodily practices, allows geographers to explore the way that the built environment is shaped and given meaning through the active and embodied practices by which it is produced, appropriated and inhabited.’ His statement calls for a focus not just upon what people think about buildings but also what they do in them challenging the assumed boundaries and enacting on the role of the body in buffering the boundary between the building and the mind. Current trends in literature have focused on the ‘acting on’ and ‘doing’ rather than on simple symbolic representation of buildings, seeing building as spaces of continuous activity, everyday practice and motion rather than static backdrops and visual artifacts. With embodied practices and performances the body ‘assumes a position of centrality’ and for the buildings to be understood in such a way the practice of embodiment is crucial, which is to experience these spaces through performing in them and therefore the act of ‘doing’. Hence, ‘numerous contemporary architects may be regarded as practicing architecture inspired by phenomenology’ through ‘embodied first-person experience’ (Waterton, 2019). ‘Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the basic structure of human experience and understand from a first-person point of view’ (Landes, 2012). Andersen (2024) states that the New Phenomenology conceived by Hermann Schmitz focuses on the more experiential dimension of architecture and the felt body drawn from those experiences by an individual, he writes that ‘Schmitz distinguishes between the physical body that can be seen and touched, and the felt body that is the place of affective involvement’, ‘the embodied,

first-person experience is determined solely by embodied dynamism and embodied communication’ (Andersen, 2024) and this experience is ‘recorded in notes, sketches and/or photographs, and subsequently summarized in a short description’, ‘the aim is not to give a complete and exhaustive account of all the aspects of the respective works but rather, through an embodied first-person perspective, to say something meaningful that may help uncover characteristics of the experienced buildings as part of the embodied communication’ (Andersen, 2019).

2.4 Drawing as a Tool to Help Express the Embodied Experience of Different Aspects of Vernacular Architecture

‘Within the realm of phenomenology, applications including material, transcendental, and embodied can be used to approach mathematics, the sciences, art and architecture’ (Linde, 2017). Geography has always been interest in visual art which ‘stems from field practices within the discipline, observing, sketching and mapping landscapes’ (Cant & Morris 2006) and which is why drawing and other form of visual art as mediums and methods are so crucial in understanding the distribution and characteristics of natural as well as cultural attributes across a landscape. The act of perceiving and then representing through drawing is beautifully put into words by Pal (2001) who states that ‘images have many lines and also tends to outline a human life’. In reference to understanding architectural attributes, Chetwode (1973) says that ‘under certain circumstances freehand drawing is more effective than the camera in recording architectural detail’. ‘Though drawing has been much discussed as a medium for design and of communication in architecture, but the potential of its role as a medium for analysis, though recognized, has not enjoyed the same attention’ (Unwin, 2011). Art in the further study is used as a tool and medium of ‘critical exploration’ (Hawkins, 2012) as well as of ‘communication’ (Ohri, 1975) in showing ‘the journey’ traversed from perceived to the conceived space through engaging the body, mind, architectural landscape and surrounding environment as part of a continuous dialog in understanding architectural spaces especially focused on material and art aspects through an embodied experience.

3. Methodology: Adopting Field Investigation Techniques, The Embodied Experience of Vernacular Architecture

Table 1. Types of Traditional Housing Structure in Kinnaur

Different Regions Identified for Variation in Traditional Housing Structures Through the Method of Geographical Area Sampling based on Geographic, Climatic and Cultural Factors	Types of Traditional Housing Structures	Name of the Villages where the Field Survey was Conducted
Upper Kinnaur Region	• Stone Masonry with flat roof • Mud Block Construction • Mud Shuttering Construction	----
Middle Kinnaur Region	Hill Architecture/ <i>Kathkuni</i> Style or Alternative Layer of Stone and Wood Construction with Flat Roof	Moorang, Kanam, Jangi, Ropa, Sunnam, Asrang
Lower Kinnaur Region	Hill Architecture/ <i>Kathkuni</i> Style or Alternative Layer of Stone and Wood with Sloping Slate Roof. In some rare cases Sloping Wooden Roof were also observed	Kalpa, Rogi, Powari, Kilba, Kafnu, Katgaon, Yangpa, Sungra, Nichar, Chagaon, Chota Kamba, Nigulsari, Chansu, Bara Kamba, Urni, Yulla

The qualitative nature of this research employs a methodological framework guided by investigation techniques as listed below.

- The entire study area in the beginning was first divided into different broad intra-regional categories on the basis of different types of traditional vernacular houses observed during the initial field visit. The identification and categorization were done by considering the intra-regional climatic, physio-geographic and cultural factors. This geographical delineation on the basis of differential characteristics for the collection of samples is also known as geographical or area sampling. The middle and lower region of Kinnaur were selected for the study of *kathkuni* housing type of vernacular architecture, as this housing type mainly and majorly persists in these two regions. Kumar et al. (2016) have categorized 4 types of house construction of the *Himachali* houses based on the material used, 1) Wood and stone or the *kathkuni* type. 2) Mud: rammed earth block walls for cold, arid, alpine and desert regions. 3) Mud mortar: prepared from soil or clay and 4) Stone construction, that uses different sizes of stones. These traditional vernacular architectures of houses in reference to Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh can be generally categorized into different regions where they can be majorly found as seen from Table 1. The Hangrang region and The Tashigang area or the Upper Kinnaur region, Kunu Charang Region and Nessang Region constitute vernacular architectures that are majorly of stone, mud and mud mortar construction and are identified with flat roof. The middle Kinnaur region which includes the Ropa valley region, the Shumso region, Jangram region and Moorang region are majorly characterized by the *kathkuni* type of architecture with flat roof. The lower Kinnaur region is characterized by *kathkuni* type of architecture but have sloping roof made of stone slate and shingle or sometimes wooden slates were also used, though the usage of wood with time has become rare. This study is particularly concerned with the *kathkuni* type found majorly in the middle and lower regions of Kinnaur.
- Landscape reading and observation was done as part of an initial a priori survey of the entire study area through travelling and visiting different sites which helped in the identification of different architectural types found in the region. A field survey was then conducted in the middle and lower regions of Kinnaur that identified with the *kathkuni* type of architecture. The houses were initially selected randomly. Snowball sampling technique was initiated afterwards as locals were able to guide to the resource persons who could give detailed description and held knowledge on the traditional building methods of the *kathkuni* type as well as its different attributes. ‘To counter the dichotomies of culture and nature, vernacular and the ‘other’ why not express architectural criticism in architectural form instead of words’ as stated by Bruno Zevi and ‘operative criticism’ by Manfredo Tafuri as mentioned in Sabatino (2009) emphasized the experiential dimension over the perceived formalism (Sabatino, 2009). This influences the presentation of the following work in which the field data is analyzed and represented from the perceived space to the conceived space with help of diagrams, illustrations, sketches and photographs. Illustrations, sketches and drawings were used as art tools to express the physical and cultural experience of the architectures sited and their spaces that are studied, understood and experienced. The use of these visual methods in presentation are ‘not used to state a final proposition but rather to help to give it a perceptual structure that can sustain imaginative engagement’ (Bafna, 2008).
- Personal in-depth semi-structured and open-ended interviews were carried out with the resource persons, the locals and a special category of house makers and artists known as *oras*.
- The representation of an object of inquiry from one space to another (perceived to the conceived) invites spatial configuration and aspects of different dimensions. The inquiry here does not simply

follow the description of field observation of the material and art aspect but shows a gradual process of transformation from one space to another with the help of sketches and illustration as a method. The chain of thought, feelings, sensation and emotions is expressed from the authors perspective from being in the field, having personal interactions with the craftsmen and living and embodying the architectural spaces. This approach is specially adopted to make an attempt towards bringing closer the theoretical and empirical aspects of the study.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Material and Construction

An illustration in Figure 2 and 3 shows the main elements, *thelo*, *tokoth* and *manang* that are used with long wooden beams to make the basic framework of a *kathkuni* house. The layer that contains stones is piled along with the framework or *dhanca* between two wooden beams or layered and adjusted to the wooden framework at the end (also see Figure 1). The wooden beams used in the old structures were made of *dyar* or *deodar* tree. In some case wood from *chilgoza* or pine tree was also used. *Manang* which is a small wooden element, helps to keep the two adjacently and horizontally placed wooden beams together and for them to not fall apart from their positions. It also helps prevent the structure from earthquake by giving it tensile strength. *Tokoth* works as a nail but is bigger and rectangular in shape, both these elements are made of *thom* (in the local dialect), a tree with small leaves found in the region. It is said that the wood when boiled and given to animals, cures them from various diseases. The wood from this particular tree was also used to make *hal* to plough the fields in the past which is now replaced with iron. The alternating wooden beams or *pangdarang* and the layering of the stone *chinai* should be of equal width and symmetry for all layers for an aesthetic display as well as strength.



Fig. 1. Traditional *Kathkuni* Type of Construction in Kinnaur

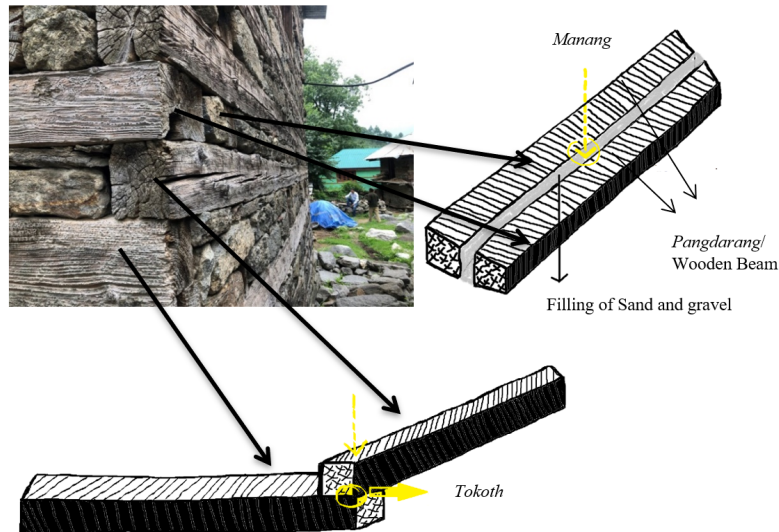


Fig. 2. The placement of *tokoth* and *manang* which are the two most important elements of hill architecture in Kinnaur that holds the structure together and gives it tensile strength. It helps prevent and protect the structure from falling apart during an earthquake, as the Himalayan region is prone to it.

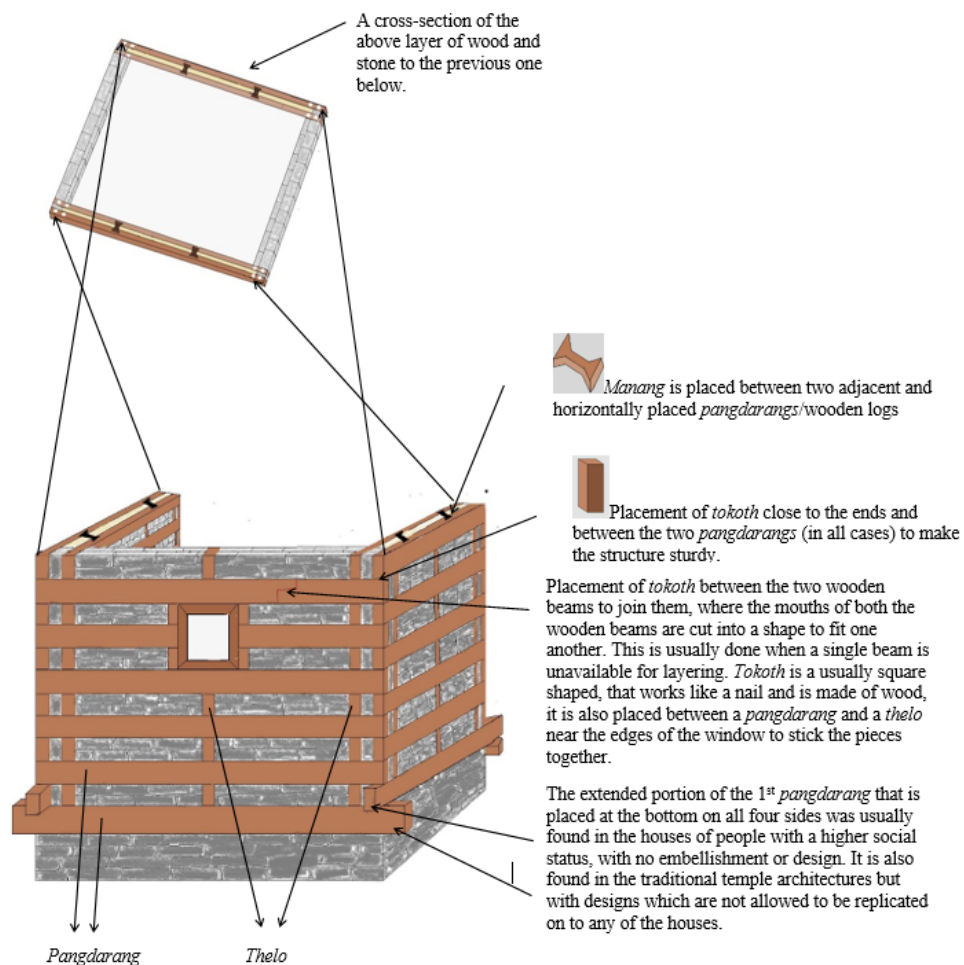


Fig. 3. Morphology of traditional hill architecture or the *kathkuni* style of alternate layering of wood and stone. In middle Kinnaur it is found with flat roof and in lower *Kinnauri* houses it is found with sloping stone slate or sloping wooden roof.

4.2 The Local Artists/Craftsmen/Masons known as the ‘*Oras*’

The construction of these architectures and the artistic details that are added is all done by the local *karigars* or craftsmen, artists and masons known as *oras*. Their families have been responsible for carrying out and keeping alive the indigenous techniques, skills, design and craft for generations. They understand the ancient art of house and temple building and the associated paraphernalia that have been practiced in the region from ancient period, though succumbing to modifications with time. Swangla et al. (2021) state that ‘traditional knowledge refers to knowledge innovation and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world, developed from experience gained over centuries and adapted to local culture and environment’ which plays an important role in expressing the physical characteristics and underlying cultural meaning of the vernacular houses. Many of the attributes of the houses such as the windows, doors, roofs and fascia have detailed carvings and designs. This art is an outcome of balance and articulation that represents a symphony of the surrounding environment when perceived through the senses, vivid in the display of its structure, material, colors and construction that is also synchronic to the cultural practices. The *oras* are a lineage of local professionals and since many generations have been devoted to the art of traditional house making and temple building for the local deities. The skills to be acquired and to be replicated by commoners is quite difficult. Designs as well as some other elements used in the temples need immense precision and also cannot be used on the houses as it is considered sacrilegious. There is a lot more attention which should be given to these local artisans and their work as their families have been crafting skills and knowledge for generations admired but rarely understood by the other locals themselves as well as non-natives. There is a sense of perfection and professionalism in old traditional structures, one reason is the way the structure is built, its building technique and the tools used. The entire construction is calculated, the designs and layout of the houses may vary according to the needs and choices of its habitants. The buildings reflect a sense of aesthetic, strength, material used, skills and indigenous knowledge in tune with the surrounding nature and environment and yet aesthetically pleasing with immense precision in design and other artistic details.

Another thing to be noted here is that these structures, with the skills they are built have stood the test of time conforming to the climatic sensitivity and other physical and socio-cultural characteristics. The ornamentation or the wooden carving on the overhanging *verandah* as seen in Figure 4 could not be exactly identified for their implicated meanings even by the *oras* who were interviewed. These ornamentations are considered very old as many of these houses can be dated decades or sometimes even centuries back. If there is still a comparison to be drawn from some of the literatures, an example of the work of O’Brien in the paper “Architecture as Ornament: Louis Sullivan's Late Work” can be considered in which the author has identified basic ornamentation types. One of the forms of ornament in the given figure could be compared to the Medallion type or the geometrically structured type which presents the morphological development of ornament and the geometric pattern such as the circle as seen in Figure 4 both images which is termed as ‘containers of energy’ (O’Brien, 2020). Another type of ornamentation in his article called the still life type or ‘arabesque’ which is a space filling type can be associated to the wooden slabs placed vertically alongside the medallion type ornamentation in the Figure 4 second image. This type of ornamentation can also be seen in and around the traditional windows, called *hashen*, as seen in Figure 6. *Hashen* are small windows with intricate designs made by *oras* as an embellishment which serves more than just a functional purpose. The inspiration must have been nature itself as the ornamentation apart from the medallion type and the space filling type that have geometric patterns and intertwining vines with leaves and flowers, also have carving of different birds on the overhanging *verandah* as seen in both the images of figure 4. It can be noted that architecture has a role, as a work of art, to express a metaphysical or transcendental idea (Hendrix,

2013). These artistic expressions are critical and subjective as they need to be unfolded for the deeper meaning that raise these structures above and beyond just their functional utility.



Fig. 4 Ornamentation on an overhanging verandah in Nigulsari and Chagaon village

4.3 Experiencing the Art and Aesthetic aspects of Vernacular Architecture



Fig. 5. The first sketch shows a representation of a modern window in Sumra village that has precise geometric shapes, symmetry and consistency. The second sketch is of a Hybrid door in Sumra, with precision and geometry in carving but has traditional designs. The third sketch is of a traditional door in Hango village that is usually seen outside animal shed and ‘gwara’ (an open space outside the animal shed) made by putting together random pieces of wooden planks and the fourth sketch is of a window in Hango village that bears the size, shape, design and geometry of contemporary windows but are fitted in the traditional stone and mud houses.

This is representative of the hybrid and evolving architectural landscape of Kinnaur.

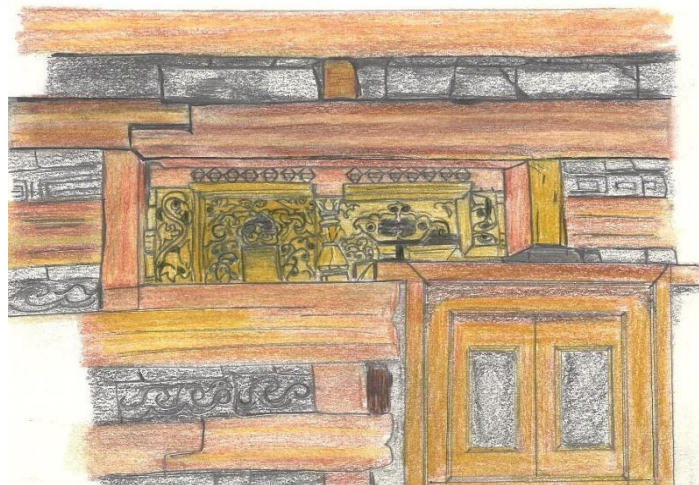


Fig. 6. A handmade sketch of a vernacular house and traditional windows or *hashen* in Middle Kinnaur

The technique of free hand drawing and sketching was used for the Figure 5, 6 and 7 by author. Multiple layers of shading had to be done to get the exact colour and tone of the houses and windows and a rawness of the material used in construction is clearly seen as opposed to the perfection on the wall paints and also in the geometrics of structural framework in more modern construction within the region. Different tones of brown and yellow and basic grey, black and white pencils were used in images 6 and 7. There was a precision in carving of windows of middle and lower *Kinnauri* architecture and detailed designs, especially of the windows as seen in Figure 6. whereas the architectural feature of upper Kinnaur were much simpler. Drawing is used here with the intent to represent the architectural aspects through perceived senses of what was observed as well as

experienced and to use an artistic medium for the understanding and explanation of an artistic attribute. As for many who observe, it might be just a door, a window or a building but when experienced and perceived through an artistic medium, it talks about the expressions of the unknown and the unsaid, fostering inquisitiveness to know more about these vernacular architectures, its people and its inhabited spaces. Every attribute of a house has a quality, a door that makes you curious of what lies beyond, a transporting medium from one space to another. The windows have a different quality and purpose, a resting place with different spatiality, where one can get a breath of fresh air or experience a change of space without actually crossing a boundary physically. The method of sketching was employed to showcase the researchers expedition, an odyssey, a 'performative practice' (Ebbensgaard, 2017), a phenomenological embodied experience into the space of the vernacular architecture.



Fig. 7. A handmade sketch of vernacular house and traditional windows in Upper Kinnaur

The flowers and leaves protruding out from a stem in the carvings of *hashen* or the window in figure 6. third image and the intertwining vines that fill the spaces in a sense represent continuity itself. Smudge technique was used to get the faded and washed off effect which is due to severe geoclimatic factors like exposure to direct sunlight in high altitude, extreme windy conditions in some places, heavy rainfall in lower regions of Kinnaur during monsoons and dust storm and heavy snowfall which is experienced more in upper regions of Kinnaur. The difference in construction can also be clearly noticed due to the availability of different raw material specific to different location within the region. Chetwode (1973) in her essay on 'The Himalayan Temples: Drawing can be more effective than the camera in recording architectural detail' had also used sketches in her work to explain the temple

architecture of Kinnaur, there were insights that were revealed through drawing while studying architecture of a region which the images from the camera could not explain. The purpose of sketching was not just to display the aesthetics but how it can be used as an explorative method to understand why the different vernacular architectures across the regions landscape look a certain way. It also helped with the understanding of the spatial configuration better when the architectures as perceived and experienced on the field were transferred to a paper.

5. Discussion: Vernacular Architecture as Cultural Capital and what Representations Can Do

The vernacular architecture is representative of the unique indigenous knowledge and the local craftsmanship that should be considered as a form of cultural capital. This can help contribute towards intergenerational equity through continuity, cultural affinity and therefore help in maintaining the cultural identity of the region. The vernacular architectures that have been built over time represents the artistic skills which have been passed down from generations, practicing and perfecting skills with adjustments, placements, designs and carvings that is not only taught but inherited. The different architectural houses are a mix of individual taste, style, family needs and wants, artistic expressions, daily lifestyle, social conditioning and cultural norms. There is situatedness of particular styles to particular micro climatic regions in the study area but the differences in designs and artistic expressions can be noticed clearly. These artistic expressions like symbols, differences in designs and carvings makes these architectures diverse in their communicable ways, abstract, ambiguous, interpretive and non-discrete.

It was explained by one of the artisans that traditional skills of house making and temple making which are very detailed in artistic designs and structure need immense precision as the designs cannot be tampered. Ancient designs or as translated in Hindi *pauranic karigari*, example *mauri tham* which is wood and stone carving using specific designs, are only used in temples. In the construction of houses, the accuracy in *tokoth* placement between two wooden logs needs measurement, not taken with scale but an estimate which comes from years of experience. One of the *oras* explained that it is not easy for a person who is not an *oras* to comprehend how every element of the indigenous structures in the region has spiritual, environmental and cultural values underpinned under its overall façade that are reflected in the building structure, its organization of space and art. The local craftsmen associate to the vernacular architecture as artisans who with practice, experience and generational inheritance of skills embark on a daily journey to create artifacts that represents their faith and the faith of the community. They consider it their duty and feel accountable to create this work of art to the best of their ability which they undertake with their hands and manifest extraordinary pieces from ordinarily available resources. It is these human agents that help bind the natural factors with the cultural ones.

According to Muhammad and Said (2015), ‘architecture in a place is a result of multiple affairs that includes exchange of ideas, communication and transactions between people’, therefore, architectures are a result of and also induce the synthesis of human needs, desires, relationship with the environment and socio-cultural affairs. The old construction technique and material used can provide ‘significant leads for designers/ architects/ scientist involved in energy efficient and sustainable buildings’ as mentioned by Dhar (2022). The cultural aspects are also important which are referred to as ‘spatial performances that connect people, place, and memory’ as mentioned by Singhal et al. (2025). With the use of locally available raw material to sustain the architecture in the given climatic condition and the cultural hearth that has developed in and around giving it shape and inflicting it with many meanings, makes us accustomed with the fact that these structures are a lot more than what they are perceived for

and that such multifarious nature can exist in one frame literally or otherwise. To capture its essence in entirety within a drawing and illustrations is not possible, rather it is used as a visual representative tool in the article reflecting few attributes of the vernacular landscape, a figment of its essence, first perceived and then conceived as part of the experience on the field.

The investigation is more than visual perception, transcending boundaries of cognitive understanding and space being reproduced as the architectural representation through an embodied artistic medium is used with the aim of gaining insight on the architectural aspects as lived experience rather than being just perceived as a signifying system. Representation as a concept here steps beyond and becomes the 'force of representation- in - relation' (Anderson, 2018) where the role of representations from the signifier and the signified moves beyond to what representations are able to do. As a 'force of representation- in- relation' architecture was experienced as an intimate space through the lived experience between the researcher and the studied aspect of material and art. The experience has affected my perceptual ability and cognitive realization that percolates to the deeper and intimate encounters and understanding of indigenous architectural spaces. Whether its conducting further research of these architectural spaces or taking the research endeavours towards understanding other cultures, the connection that I made with the people during the study, the way these architectural spaces affected me, my experiences and my emotional journey throughout the whole process will travel with me where ever I go, not restricting me but opening up new doors to look at the world and be appreciative of its varying colours and textures, a metaphor one can deconstruct however they want to. This, for me is 'what the representations did.'

6. Conclusion: From a House to Home and from Materiality to Conscience, The Journal of Vernacular Architecture

Architectural representations vary across space and time and are continuously changing and evolving as cultural forms. It is only right to ponder on, how people make a shelter for themselves, for them to be situated in one particular location for a long time generating an emotional attachment and for it to be called home.

Kinnaur before it became an independent district in 1960, was part of the Mahasu district and even before that, it was a tehsil under the Bushahr kingdom, despite being a part of the Bushahr state there is barely any resemblance to its cultural characteristics (Sharma, 1976). One of many reasons that makes the region unique is its different dialects, cultural practices and belief system. The current architectural landscape is functional to fulfill everyday needs, providing a personal and communal space or a juxtaposed intimate and social space. As the phenomenon of globalization continuously persists, modernism has spread from centers to the peripheral regions and has resulted in the hybridized transformation of traditional vernacular structures. In addition to it, the changing climatic conditions and resource scarcity in terms of raw material such as timber, has put the relevance of the old *kathkuni* building structures into question for their sustainability and associated cultural practices.

According to contemporary socio- economic and cultural needs re-modelling and refurbishment in case of vernacular architectures is done where ecological and cultural considerations and representation are often compromised. The building material, methods, construction techniques, tools as well as people engaged with the traditional art of vernacular house making are being affected. While many attributes of the material aspects as discussed are still relevant, functional and hold meaning for the people but at the same time some of these attributes are succumbing to changes with the rapid pace of unchecked development. By realizing the traditional aspects as cultural capital that are attuned to the socio-cultural

and environmental surroundings and developing methods and approaches to study and document them while also incorporating them in performance and practice in different ways will foster their continuity and availability for future generations. The home is a living entity and comes alive when there are people, movement and activity in it. The abandoned, revived and reused spaces of the old are also vital as they are a living testimony to the once active and the bygone past with memories and identities associated to the people who at one time appertained to it. Therefore, the emphasis should not only be on how the cultural spaces look and function but also how people connect to it emotionally (Hassanein, 2018). ‘The beliefs and sacred space are the key parts in spatial organization’ (Chiranthan, 2020) that still persist in the contemporary vernacular architectures. Animism, rituals relating to the anthropomorphic spirits (with human attributes) and polytheism also creates a metaphysical environment of magical realism, where the material characteristics of the houses are rooted in both physicality and spirituality.

I conducted the fieldwork to observe and to study the various aspects of vernacular houses, through an embodied experience of engaging my senses and to imbibe the essence of the various aspects of the vernacular architecture by being in the place, participating in various activities for a lived experience and noting down all key elements that I thought were important for each studied aspect. I try and make an attempt to recreate that experience and the sense of place that I felt during the field work. The methods employed in this study come from an amalgamation of my experiences and also my attachment to the place and with the interviewees who helped me in the experience. Drawing, here serves not just as a tool of visualization, but also as a tool of conception (Arkell, 2013) and art was chosen as a medium of representation since it helps ‘manifests the “common knowledge” of a culture’ (Scruton, 1981) and helped move close to the essence of the studied aspects revealing that the vernacular architecture is the living space of practice, creation, mobility, complexity, what people create in the process of using, adjusting, readjusting, reorienting its space therefore making it live and dynamic. An ideal environment for a region will be in which a culture thrives in both physical and cognitive sense. The transition from a house to a home and from materiality to conscience is the continuing journey of a vernacular architecture.

Acknowledgement

This article is extracted from the Research work of Maya Negi, Ph.D. Candidate. The author would like to extend gratitude and a heartfelt thank you to Prof. Karanjot Kaur Brar who has supervised the research and also to the faculty of The Department of Geography, Panjab University who have sustained an environment of learning and engaging in new endeavours of research practices. The author would also like to extend gratitude to the research participants of Kinnaur for their time, valuable insights on the topic, consistent support and patience during the field work. Their encouraging response and engagement during the field visit is what made this research possible.

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