The Junction of Interior Territories: Chinese shop–houses in Chong Kneas, Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the Chinese community and their shop-houses as the linking element between their unique culture and their identity within the floating village of Chong Kneas, Cambodia. The domestic built environments of the Chinese community are analysed within a theoretical framework which incorporates three principal elements, identification with space, sense of belonging, and cultural identity. This vernacular study applies interdisciplinary methodology to examine Chinese shop-house spatial development with a particular emphasis on interior territorial intersections, and also merges theoretical and experimental approaches in order to develop a deeper understanding of the junction of interior territories where the private and public realms intersect.

INTRODUCTION

Tonle Sap Lake is the largest fresh water lake in Southeast Asia, and lies in the central plains of Cambodia. The Tonle Sap River is the main tributary of the lake, and inundates the surrounding agricultural land for several months each year. The vast majority of the population around the Tonle Sap Area lives in poverty and their livelihood depends solely on the resources that the lake has to offer.[1]

A substantial population of Cambodians resides in villages on the surface of the lake itself. One of these is the floating village known as Chong Kneas, which exhibits its own unique rhythm and harmony in response to the changing seasons. The villages encompass diverse cultural groups, including the majority ethnic Khmer, as well as Vietnamese, Cham Muslim, and Chinese minorities. (Figure 1).

The current settlement trends are attributed to a variety of causes, such as not owning land, family disputes, economic issues, and lack of education and skills. Subsistence fishing is the most favoured means of income chosen by the occupants of the village. An estimated 80,000 people live in floating villages around Tonle Sap, and the Khmer population constitutes the majority.[2]

The first century BCE marks the beginning of successful Chinese immigration into the Tonle Sap area. The relationship between the Chinese immigrants and the local Khmer culture remained quite harmonious and successful until the advent of the Khmer Rouge movement in 1970, led by Pol Pot. Under the Khmer Rouge, the Chinese suffered considerably and were massively victimised. The Sino-Khmer immigrant population was decimated and forced to leave the urban centers. During this period, the brutality of the regime, in combination with disease, starvation and overwork reduced the Chinese population by half.

Following the Pol Pot period, the Chinese community re-emerged and re-asserted their position in Khmer society. Their readiness to adopt Khmer culture and traditions is considered to be the primary reason for their successful integration into the host society. Their ability to speak the Khmer language also contributed to their seamless integration into Khmer culture. The Chinese are typically the usurers, traders, shopkeepers and intermediaries of the community. Their successful engagement with trade defines the Chinese community as the economic power within the economically impoverished Tonle Sap area. Unlike their Vietnamese and Cham Muslim counterparts, the Chinese are engaged in a large-scale fishing and processing industry, as well as in retail enterprises. Their economic strength gives them control over the Tonle Sap Lake and its resources.[3]

Above
Figure 1: Aerial view of Chong Kneas from Phnom Kraom during dry season

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The four different ethnic groups (Khmer, Vietnamese, Cham Muslim and Chinese) have created a complex socio-cultural matrix within the area. While physical and environmental factors such as climate, methods of construction, available materials and technology have remained the same for all, the individual communities have nevertheless displayed distinct ethnic variations. In particular, the Chinese built environments have distinguished themselves from the rest with their shop-house typology and relatively robust and detailed building facades and interiors (Figure 2).

In order to establish the conceptual foundation of the study, it is essential to investigate some of the contextual definitions. The term 'vernacular' is not sufficient, on its own, to describe the built environments of this study area. Amos Rapoport has classified built environments in terms of building materials, forms and construction methodologies. His categorisation divides the built environments into three distinct categories: primitive, pre-industrial and high-style.[4] However, there is growing recognition of an emergent new typology.

The terminology 'Urban Informality' has entered the architectural lexicon to describe the cultural poverty, marginality and the manifestations of informal building processes in urban built environments.[5] I label the floating structures of Chong Kneas as Hybrid Informal Preindustrial Vernacular, where the individual building forms display distinct cultural and ethnic backgrounds and traditions. The structures are built by the owner or the tradesman. The buildings are mostly constructed with local materials, such as palm leaves, bamboo strips, and Koki wood, although non-indigenous modern materials, such as corrugated and stainless steel sheet metal, are also used as part of the material pallet of the hybrid structures.

In his article entitled 'Belonging: Towards a theory of Identification with Space', Neil Leach proposes a schematic framework for a theory of identification with space, sense of belonging, and, eventually, the connection between the built environments and cultural identity. During the process, he uses three different theoretical models.[6] He starts with 'narrativasation' to describe the process of territorialisation, continues with 'performativity' to establish an understanding of sense of belonging, and uses 'mirroring' to explain the identification with a particular space. The data collected here indicate a minimum of twelve separate yearly movements, during which the entire village collectively relocates. Understanding how the Chinese identity and cohesiveness of the community is maintained during this perpetual mobility, as well as the role of interior territories, lies at the heart of this investigation. The Chinese domestic dwellings, with their additional retail component, encompass multiple layers of territories, from the public to the most private realm, including the spiritual dimension.

The post-structuralist approach of reading cultural objects as text extends to the notion of cities, which can be read as an 'urban narrative', which has become a 'genre', where the cities are considered as an emblem or microcosm of culture.[7] If we consider the term urban as a collection of built environments where social/cultural interactions occur, then the hybrid informalities of Chong Kneas can be similarly narrated to represent its complex cultural matrix. According to Neil Leach:

Nation as narration is never an abstract narration but a contextualized narration which is inscribed around certain objects.[8]

Leach has located architecture within this field of objects. He begins his discussion by defining the role of the built environments in this process of narration, and argues that the readings we obtain are a mere reflection, rather than a property of the object itself. In order to support this notion, Leach refers to Fredric Jameson's description of building functions 'The buildings are inert and merely invested with meaning.'[9]

He further supports his argument by describing Walter Benjamin's approach to building appropriation which is defined in a twofold manner, by use and by perception. Benjamin further articulated the optical and tactile nature of perception during the process of appropriation 'Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit.'[10]

Leach emphasises the importance of repetition of these appropriations and their role in strengthening the memory. Consolidation of memories therefore can help us to understand and identify with the built environments. Leach summarises: 'Just as words can be understood by the way they were used similarly buildings can be understood by the narratives of their inscribed use.'[11]

Leach also refers to Michel de Certeau's theory of territorialisation which is achieved through spatial tactics.[12] Through the repeated process of movement we become familiar with the territory, and, as a result, we find meaning in that territory. He further argues that we make sense of space through walking practices, and repeat those practices as a way of overcoming alienation. Spatial tactics provide connections and find meaning in otherwise abstract places. In the case of Chong Kneas, narrativisation through spatial tactics is achieved in fluid environments via canoe or motor boat. The speed of perception and appropriation of these built environments is relatively fast in comparison to the spatial tactics achieved through walking practices, and relies heavily on optically based appropriation. Verbal or gestural chance encounters are acknowledged within the temporal confines of moving vehicles.

As such, the Chinese shop-houses, with their critically chosen locales conducive to commerce, have created a chain of urban nodes where the social activities of the community take place in a steady state. They provide a space of pause in the continuous movement of both users as well as the built environments. These pause points in the continuum of the Chong Kneas narrative also represent the microcosm of the culture, and act as conduits to unify and to provide a performance stage for the community's collective identity.

In order to establish a sense of belonging, Leach uses Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity'. According to Butler, our actions and behaviours, not our biological bodies, define our identity. The social reality is not a given, but is continually created as an illusion through our language and body gestures. She refers to linguistic theories, 'speech acts', where we construct our social reality by enacting the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us.[13] The Chinese self identity is performed in micro-social scale in both the private and public domains of the shop-house with varying degrees of concentration.

Leach also discusses how the communities might claim territories by way of literal performances which are acted out within a given architectural stage, and through which they develop certain attachments to place. Fortier has also explored how, through spatial tactics, such as the repetition of ritualistic symbolic acts often conducted in religious contexts, spaces are appropriated by certain groups. The spaces in which they are enacted become spaces of belonging. The retail interiors of the Chinese shop-houses undertake the role of rhizomic stages, where a certain attachment to place occurs through the repeated spatial acts which are engendered by the social realities of the community; they become the spaces of belonging where members of the community exchange news, bring food offerings and purchase items of need as they appropriate space.

Leach approached identification with a psychoanalytic theory of mirroring, and he identified one of the primary properties as specular. He asserts that identification is always a question of recognising the self in the other. For the identification with an architectural environment to take place, he refers to the process of 'introjections' of the external world into the self and the 'projection' of the self onto the external world, until an equilibrium state has been achieved.[14] Finally, he defines this equilibrium state as the state where identification takes place. He strengthens the static model of identification forged through a reflection, as though in a mirror, with the notion of performative aspects of the gaze. He redefines the process of identification through mirroring as a series of performative modes of perception by means of which a mirroring can be enacted and a sense of identification with the place can be developed and reinforced through habit. Neil Leach concludes:

> *Architecture may facilitate a form of identification and helps engender a sense of belonging. From this point of view architecture may be seen to play a potentially important social role.*[15]

The equilibrium state of mirroring takes place in the relative permanence of the interior spaces of the Chinese shop-houses, where the performative aspects of gaze and tactile appropriation/ perception initiate the dialectic process of identification with place. This notion is further reinforced by the habitual acts which are enabled by the relatively fixed location of the shop-houses. Leach surmises that 'Through a complex process of making sense of place, developing a feeling of belonging and eventually identifying with that place, an identity may be forged against an architectural backdrop. As individuals identify with an environment, so their identity comes to be constituted through that environment. This relates not only to individual identity, but also to group identities.'[16] The semi-public territory of the shop-house interior expands beyond the confines of exterior walls to the immediate exterior porch and docking area by means of performative acts, and causes the boundaries between interiors and exteriors to collapse. This environment with expanded boundaries engenders group and individual identities, and in turn it is defined by them.

FIELD STUDIES AND DATA COLLECTION

The field work was completed during the end of the dry season in April 2007. A total of twelve houses, three houses from each of the dominant cultural groups, were visited, and physical environments were drawn and documented quantitatively. In addition, each head of the household was interviewed as part of the qualitative data gathering process where the informal family histories and origins were revealed, and, as a sign of friendship and good will, gifts were exchanged. The sample size was limited to twelve houses since the pattern of data was established at the end of the second set. Interviews with the community leaders also provided a political perspective. The research methodology was geared to answer the questions within the framework of vernacular studies from an architectural point of view. Anthropological methodologies were borrowed and combined with architectural research techniques. Ethnographic observations were documented via

photography and video and field sketch formats. The interdisciplinary approach provided a more focused understanding of the cultural make-up of the area. Specifically, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered in the areas of environment, materials, resources, production services, decoration and symbolisms, plus personal object and object placements with evident ethnic implications, typologies and uses (Figure 3).
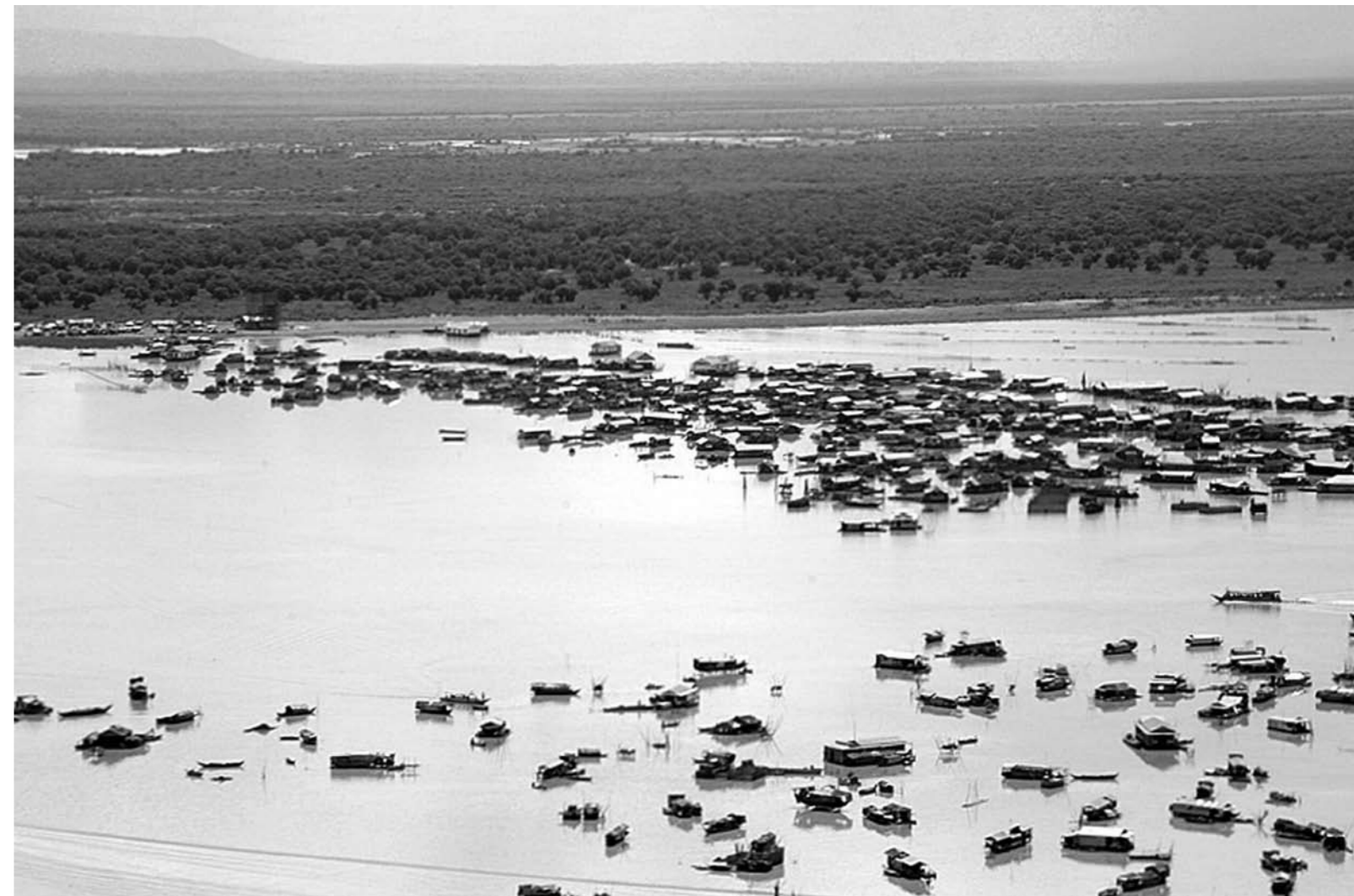
Above
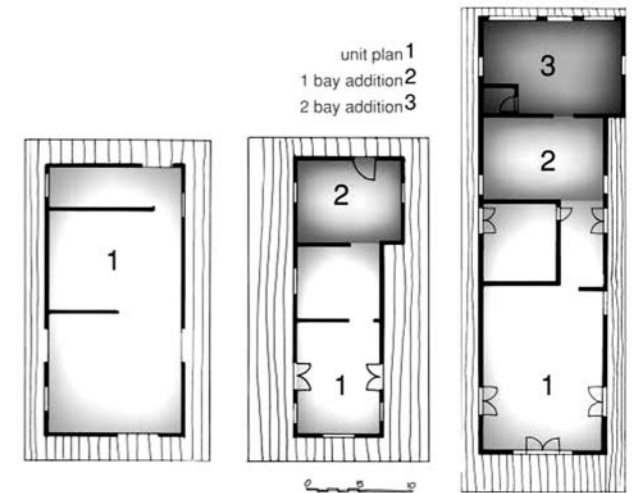*Figure 3: Chong Kneas on Tonle Sap Lake, Dry Season*
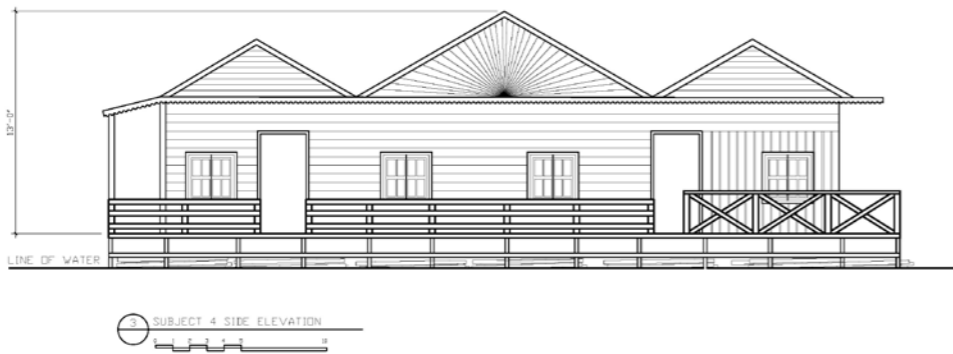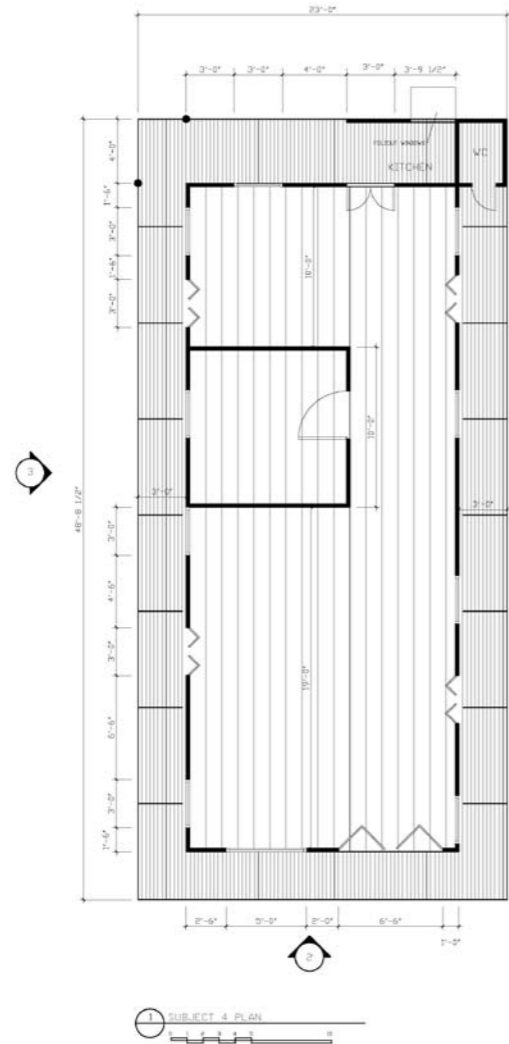
An English-speaking guide from Siem Reap was hired, along with two local guides from Chong Kneas, primarily for transportation and translation. In addition to their primary duties, the local guides also acted as conduits and provided cultural and traditional introductions to the individual homes. They were instrumental in deciphering the socio-cultural nuances of the community. The data gathering process consisted of three distinct segments. First, the structured questionnaire was prepared and implemented with a focus on specific household information from each ethnic group in the areas of education, economic structure, ownership, family makeup and socio-cultural engagement. Second, a set of data on the architectural elements, space planning, decorations, uses and functions along with materials and production was collected quantitatively via photographic and video documentation (Figure 4).

Finally, a third set of quantitative data collection, centred on the active measurements and drawings of plan and elevation of the floating structures, provided in-depth information about the architectural elements, interior planning and functions, and, to a degree, space use patterns. Household and surrounding areas were anthropologically observed and video documented to ascertain the type and frequency of social interaction. Aerial views of the village were taken and further verified by the village leader for culturally oriented settlement patterns. In addition, vehicle type and movements were documented via video recording.
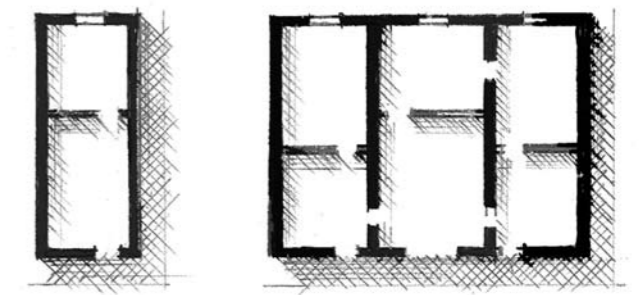
SPATIAL VARIATIONS OF SHOP-HOUSE INTERIORS

The data showed similar basic needs for all the ethnic groups, such as protection, gaining a livelihood, comfort and shelter. However, Khmer house plans were distinctly different from the other three cultural groups in showing no interior partitions, and, as such, they established the unit plan for all of the structures under investigation. The house plans of the remaining cultural groups were similar to the unit plan with the exception of 2 or 3 bay additions (Figure 5).

Parallel unit aggregations of form are also observed in house forms and roof lines. A close inspection revealed that the unit form which is predominantly adopted by the economically deprived Khmer households has similarities in spatial distribution and concept to the Chinese rural housing unit known as Jiang. [17] (Figure 6). The Jiang is considered to be the structural unit which forms the basis for the development of Chinese rural vernacular domestic structures, and which is employed to reflect the clearly defined social hierarchy of the culture. [18] The current data also indicated that social status is clearly observed and reflected in the aggregation of the units in Chong Kneas. Occupants with higher economic power and social status, into which the Chinese minority fall, have opted for house plans with two or three unit additions.

plan. unit plan and additional bays

The house plans developed linearly from the public areas to private spaces, with a strong sense of symmetry. The most private area is a sleeping area, which is located towards the left hand side of the house when viewed through the front entrance, and which is reserved for the young daughters. Religious icons are permanently displayed in the public domain of the house at ceiling level, thus establishing the spiritual vertical axis of the interiors (Figure 7).

The surface articulations, roof lines and façade decorations of the houses reflected the ethnic backgrounds and the economic status of the occupants quite effectively. The use of reeds, palm leafs, bamboo and thatched roofing were utilised by the poorer families, while sheet goods, koki wood and corrugated metal were favoured by the relatively well-to-do occupants of the Chinese minority. The houses are renewed approximately every three years, and each occupant generally adhered to the same materials and forms, in order to maintain their cultural and economic position within the community.

All of the cultural groups exhibited kitchen and cooking areas of similar size and location. Domestic environments were definitely defined as a female domain and were purely functional. Social interactions took place mostly in the homes and their ubiquitous wrap-around porches, in the retail shops, and, finally, in the religious establishments. The living rooms occupied the front two-thirds of the house proper. In the case of Chinese shop-houses this area was reserved for commercial activities. On average, floating houses were 40 feet in length and 20 feet in width, with a two foot wide surrounding patio and docking area.

Vira Sachakul has classified South East Asian shop-houses in two distinct categories, namely, commercial and residential shop-houses. [20] The residential shop-houses are a single family dwelling which has a business located within the premises for additional income generation. Commercial shop-houses, on the other hand, privilege the business aspect of the dwelling. Based on the field data, in Chong Kneas the Chinese minority predominantly prefers
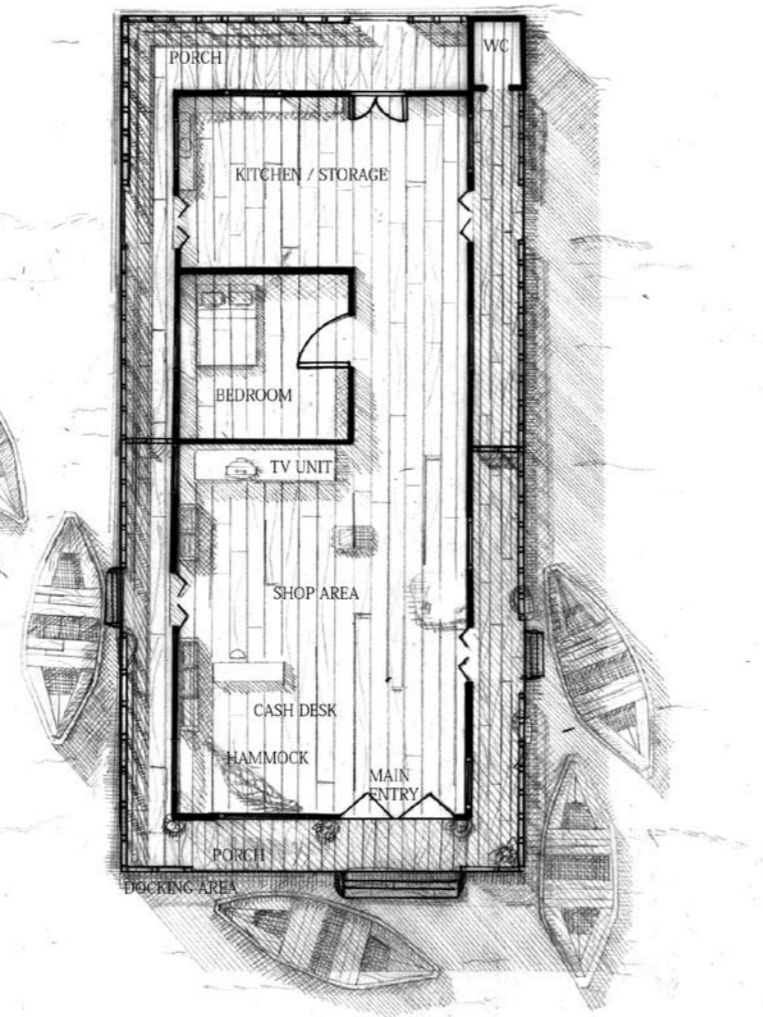
the residential shop-house type dwelling. The shop activities are not evident from the exterior; however, the front of the house is optimally oriented with respect to the main street to ensure easy customer access and good visibility. At night, the living rooms are configured to accommodate the dining and living activities of the family while, during the day, they are reconfigured to emphasise shop displays and the sales area. Usually the house-wives are responsible for the store, while the husbands are primarily occupied with commercial fishing activities. Vistas are organised in the dwelling in such a way that the shop owner has visual control over the entry points and the docking area. The front of the house is utilised for storage and shop displays and acts as a semi-public domain.

An in-depth analysis of the spatial and use patterns of the shop-houses reveals the presence of surrounding layers of territorial domains with increasing surface areas. One can quantitatively identify five different layers of physical territories with varying degrees of movement in the Chinese shop-house interior and its vicinity:

1. Public territory: the occupants are mobile in the liquid setting of Tonle Sap Lake
2. Docking area semi-public territory: the occupants are transitional but stationary in the liquid setting of the surrounding docking area
3. Porch area semi-public territory: the occupants are stationary in the relative solidity of the porch area
4. Shop area semi-public territory: the occupants are stationary in the relative solidity of the front shop area of the dwelling
5. Private domain: the occupants are stationary in the relative solidity of the sleeping quarters.

The narration of these territories is quite complex and different in scale and form due to the relative movement of the context and the occupant. However, the retail area merges both individual and collective identities and plays a salient role in establishing a sense of place for the Chinese minority as well as the community (Figure 8).
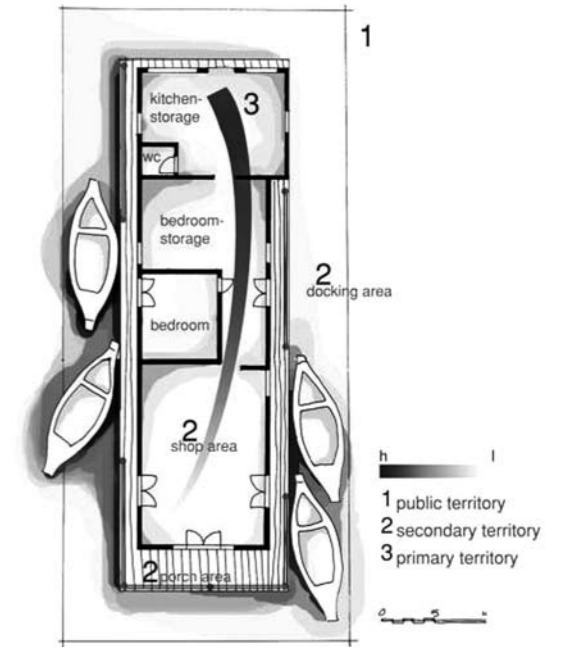
subject 7. plan. shop-house territory study 2. (privacy)

1 public territory
2 secondary territory
3 primary territory
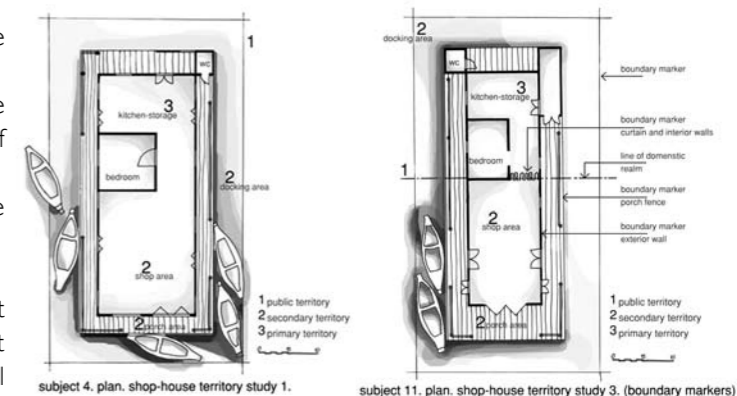
subject 4. plan. shop-house territory study 1.

1 public territory
2 secondary territory
3 primary territory

subject 11. plan. shop-house territory study 3. (boundary markers)

1 public territory
2 secondary territory
3 primary territory

Opposite
Figure 7: Typical Chinese Shop House Plan.

Above
Figure 8: Chinese Shop-House Territory Studies for boundary markers and privacy.

Human territoriality can be defined as a set of behaviours that a person exhibits in response to his or her physical environment within the culturally specific context. Sundstrom and Altman defined human territorial behaviour as an habitual use of particular spatial locations.[21] In the current study, territoriality is considered to be a set of spatial (physical) systems in which specific behavioural acts are performed. Territories adopt different levels of visibility and permeability in their boundaries. In the case of the Shop-houses of Chong Kneas discussed previously, territories are separated by boundaries with varying degrees of opacity and permeability. Altman has classified the territories more succinctly into three distinct segments: Private, Secondary and Public territories.[22] Based on Altman's classification, one can examine the shop-house territories, (Figure 8) in terms of behavioural acts as follows;

Public Territory: Tonle Sap Lake constitutes the first layer of the sphere of territories that surround the shop-house, where social norms are observed as privacy regulators. It is fluid and constantly changing, with an invisible boundary. It is transitional, and spatial tactics are limited to the gaze/optical which is synchronised with the speed of a canoe or a boat. Therefore narrativisation and, consequently, identification with place is elusive, and social interactions are limited in time and space (Figure 9).

Secondary Territory: This territory consists of three sub-segments: the first of these territories is the invisible belt of water within which the territorial size is defined by the width of a canoe (5 feet wide by 12 feet long). In this territory, the canoe is docked and all physical movements cease. It is narrated, and spatial tactics involve haptic experiences which henceforth initiate the process of identification with place. Social interactions which are regulated by the cultural norms start at a human scale with the request for permission to dock from the owner. It is publicly available, but is otherwise a privately controlled area (Figure 10).

Opposite left
Figure 9: Narrating the main street..

Above
Figure 10: Canoe docking area (left) and young daughter purchasing fresh vegetables from a floating vendor for the family meal (right).

The next layer of the secondary territory starts at the two foot wide porch area, which is separated from the previous territory by a non-functional, purely visual fence. This boundary delineates the psychological beginning of the home territory. It also creates a porous boundary which allows access and presents an opportunity for a stage where the personal and group identities can be performed, and, consequently, where identification with place can occur. It is privately owned and controlled, and publicly accessible on a temporary basis. This is the area where the occupants display their plants and small decorative items which are indicative of their social status and culture, dry their fish and laundry, greet passers-by in canoes, and communicate with the neighbours. The porch area is the stage where the Chinese and community identities are performed publicly (Figure 11).

The last of the secondary territories is the shop area of the house, which is separated from the porch area by a visible, fixed but permeable boundary where various doors and windows open up to the porch. This is where the main social interaction takes place, identification with place occurs, and self and group identities are performed and forged. Both ocular and tactile appropriations of space take place. Owners publicly display their religious icons. Small Chinese symbols are placed around the door frames as an indication of commercial activity and for good luck. Personal items are folded and stored to make room for the shop displays. Occasional chairs and hammocks are located for both the occupants and customers to use. The most valuable items, such as television sets, ancestral photographs and music sets, are displayed here. This salient interior territory is where the identities are mirrored: in equilibrium, identification with place is achieved. It exists, in its duality, at the intersection of the sacred and the mundane, the public and the private, the exterior and the interior spaces (Figure 12). It is at this intersection that collective identity prevails and Chinese self-identity diffuses into the collective.

Special titles were not assigned to these groups of territories since they all merge into one realm in terms of their use and physical qualities.

Primary Territory: This is the back of the house where the occupants live and where most private quarters are located. Chinese bucolic images, wedding photographs, and small items of cultural origin such as plastic flowers, toys, and calendars are displayed here. Identification with space, sense of belonging, and national identity are manifested, mostly at the level of object placement, and are localised at the most private territory of the dwelling. Narrativisation of the public domain remains visceral and vicarious, and identity performance is reflective and contemplative. The private quarters occupy only one third of the available space. Hence, the space for human privacy is limited and freedom of choice is superceded by the economic needs of the family. Unmarried daughters share a sleeping area and undertake food preparation and other domestic chores for the family. The level of crowding reduces the chances of the occupant developing a self-identity. This area has the greatest potential to be the most powerful regulator of personal privacy, however a semi-permanent, ineffectual territorial marker – a door constructed from fabric curtain – to separate the retail area is not conducive to creating the desired level of privacy for the family. Consequently, the primary and secondary territories lose definition and distinctiveness (Figures 12 and 13).

Opposite
Figure 11: Porch Area.

Above
Figure 12: Chinese Shop-House Retail Area

CLOSING REMARKS

Belonging to a place can be understood as an aspect of territorialisation, and identity can be perceived as an extension of the sense of belonging. People and their physical settings can be defined as inseparable and a mutually defining unit. Identity is a performative discourse and one can also purport that identity is a form of territoriality: therefore it could be surmised that territoriality is also a performative discourse. The territorial performativity of the Chinese shop-house interiors – semi-public and public; creates the stage for the collective identity enactment of the community; so much so that the Chinese

self-identity becomes a diffused performance, a metastable construct, and depends highly on the localised negotiation of the private realm.

The movement patterns of the village are directly associated with the changing flood levels, as a result of which the entire village collectively relocates. The relative positioning of the houses and the individual communities are maintained, and reverse movement commences as the flood level decreases at the beginning of the dry season. During the movement of their domestic environments, the Chinese minority maintains a location for their houses which is most conducive to commerce.

High visibility and easy access are the criteria which determine the orientation of the shop-house. As a consequence, a cluster of similarly oriented Chinese shop-houses creates a retail activity area. It forms the central stage where the collective identities are performed at each location repeatedly, and it becomes the central point in establishing the sense of belonging and the collective identity of the village. The area of narration remains constant in spite of seasonal movements. Assembling and disassembling the community while maintaining similar relative positions constitutes a fluid, transitory discourse of territorialisation, in which rhizomic references can be made to the Deleuzian space. Spatial experiences are seldom static, and the changing nature of territorialisation makes the identification with space ephemeral and transitory. However, the traces left behind following each movement could be considered cumulative and to have rhizomic connectedness. Chinese shop-houses are simultaneously distinguished from and oriented within the Deleuzian space of continuity, with their own elastic boundaries and eroded spatial and social dialectics. They become strongly connected to the rhizomes of temporal change and constancy. They take their place in the network of 'genius loci' to establish the notion of rootedness. Territorial intersections become the merger points of spatial dialectics such as order and chaos, home and journey, inside and outside, and social dialectics of self and other, public and private. Ambiguity in the boundary conditions stresses the structured order of cultural identities and contributes to the production of a hybrid social space.

Even though Leach's bipolar theoretical framework gives a fundamental level of understanding of territorial divisions and people environment dialectics, it includes temporality only at a limited level. The dwellings are transactional unities of physical, environmental and temporal elements.[23] Future studies must incorporate temporal processes as linking elements between the people and their environments, and a wider data collection which incorporates social and spatial dialectics that defy conventional spatial narrations.

NOTES

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Opposite
Figure 13: Primary Territories; kitchen and sleeping areas.