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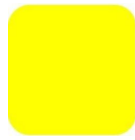
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## FROM LOCAL PRACTICE TO URBAN TACTIC:

Learning from Hong Kong's Vernacular Spatial Practice

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### Abstract

In the dense urban fabric of Asian cities, anonymous colonization of public space is a common practice. Every city inherits its unique techniques and behavioural habit to adapt within its own urban setting, creating an integral part of the city life experience. It is a result of the tension between the scarce and expensive privately owned space and opportunistic public space.

This paper takes Hong Kong as a study field to identify the tactical characteristics of the existing local practice in the public domain, in turning leftover urban spaces into usable resource, with limited infrastructure - an unique vernacular practice of self-built urbanism.

### Keywords

interobject, urban vernacular, public space, adaptive, tactical urbanism

**Topic:** T02 - Integral Planning / Processes and Design Aspects

### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a theoretical framework for the discussion on a series of vernacular architectural intervention that is present in every well-developed districts in Hong Kong; and to apply this framework to the observation on these commonly found typologies. These rarely discussed city elements, designated in this paper as *interobject*, addresses the phenomenon of architectural vernacular mediates between the assumed environment demonstrated by the designed *context* and the actual desired environment demanded by the *cultural habits*. This needs to be theoretically represented amongst other well-studied local vernacular, due to its pervasive presence in the city. Previous architectural and anthropological studies focus on those vernacular, commonly acknowledged by the general public and the city of Hong Kong as local culture. These chaotic urban constructs are often neglected, overlooked as illegal disorder resulted from incapability of the governmental control. Nevertheless, they are created and inhabited by the majority of Hong Kong population and characterize the local urban experience.

The paper will further examine this knowledge acquired from existing vernacular on the concept of tactical urban intervention by an architectural installation in a community space. It will outline the set of legal control on strictly regulated public spaces in Hong Kong and the findings from this installation in Mei Foo housing estate. Accordingly, this paper calls for the necessity to study on this "invisible" vernacular, not only its presence closely related to our

daily life activities in Hong Kong, but also because it potentially profound our perception on vernacular and urbanism within our architectural discourse.

## 2. Spontaneous Urban Vernacular

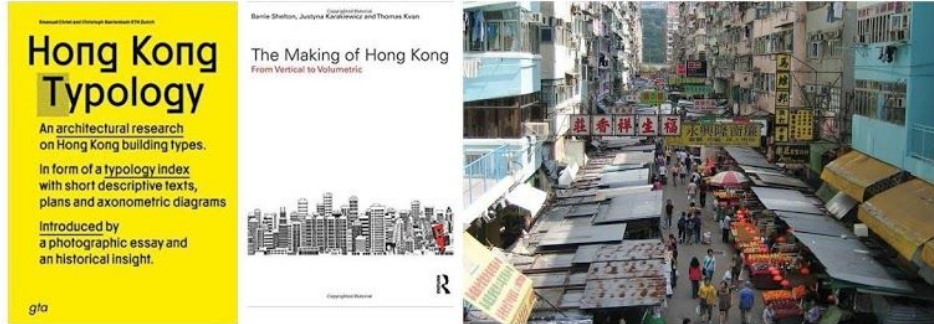


fig.1 photo of Hong Kong literature and city

Our current architecture discussions, with regard to the city of Hong Kong as an existing context, focus on the knowledge and study on the architect-designed environment, primarily of large development projects. They document buildings of different era into taxonomy of types and programs, and planning strategies, such as new towns and land reclamation, in response to historical events and natural geographical constraint, all of which are of efforts of government control. (Zhang 2009; Christ and others 2010; Shelton 2011) Through such literatures, architects and planners attempt to establish a conceptual understanding and simplification of the actual city, not to mention whether or not and how such abstraction is processed into their designs in our city. Furthermore, the actuality of Asian cities, like Hong Kong, is far more complex than what can possibly be explained by the selected case studies in the above-mentioned literature. Due to the active spontaneous architectural involvement of the anonymous citizens, composing most of what we encounter, experience and interact in daily life, these literatures effectively formulate systematic catalogues of the centrally controlled city framework and sanitize out the complexity and richness of the actual city. According to Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, although these overwhelming phenomenon are not explained by the city of Hong Kong, they might well explain what Hong Kong is. (TSUKAMOTO, KAIJIMA, and KURODA 2001) To avoid seeing the city from insights, analogies, and stimulation from unexpected Images, we look into the study of these anonymous phenomenon, which may be supplementary to and help reinforce our knowledge of the “properly designed” context, and vice versa. (Venturi, Brown, and Izenour 1972)

### 3. Urban Vernacular as Reflexive interobject



fig.2 photo of Hong Kong self-built

Anonymous architectural interventions in Asian cities are pervasive, not without a reason, for it being “a difficult activity demanding the investment of resources - economic, time, energy, effort, and so on - for a purpose”. (Rapoport 1990) Hong Kong has a long history of spontaneous urbanism contributed by the anonymous citizens, an act generally termed “self-built” - most notably in last century the Kowloon walled city, Tai O water village, squatter hut settlements that also exist now at numerous locations, where the users have control of their environment for what they need. (楊煒強 2012) Such local skills and tradition, that we here termed “**vernacular**”, have continuously evolved and emerged into a different form of contemporary urbanism within our surrounding context. The paper aims to discuss such vernacular urbanism, including those previously studied by other scholars<sup>1</sup>, within a parallel theoretical framework and it is defined as follows: - “A physical or perceptual architectural response, conceived by the immediate inhabitants, that intervene on the government-controlled or given environment to make sense for each inhabitants’ cultural and behavioural need within.” For the purpose of this study, the paper will term this reappearing architectural response, **interobject**; the physical government-controlled environment, **context**; and the cultural activity, **cultural habit**.

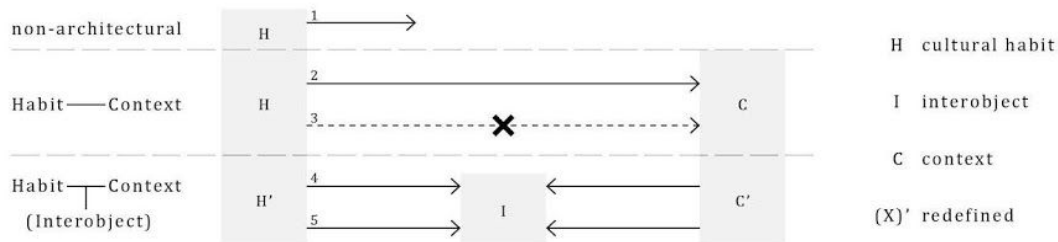


fig.3 diagram of context/interobject/behaviour

**Context**, due to its irrelevance to the specific **cultural habit** (scenario 3 in figure 3), inspires the need for **interobject** in two conditions. Firstly, because of its physical stability, it exists as a historical “urban artefact” that was once designed to serve the inhabitants. “In this sense a historical building ..... may be disconnected from its original function, or over time take on functions different from those for which it was designed”. (Rossi 1984) It remains as an infrastructure to support current **cultural habit** or, if otherwise fail to do so, become potential site for retro-adaptation via **interobject**. Secondly, as a product of abstract design

<sup>1</sup> Vernacular studies in Hong Kong and other asian cities : 我是街道觀察員--花園街的文化地景, Home Street Home : Hong Kong's Self-build Communities , Deep Water - Public Spaces in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong, 棚 . 觀 . 集 : 關於竹棚、戲曲及市集文化的探索, 花牌, 棚屋上下, Portraits From Above, Hong Kong in Between, 二次性的建築 : 另一種建築的自由, Invisible Logic- Hong Kong as Asian Culture of Congestion

theory and knowledge about the city, particularly in a fast-changing environment with diverse and complex cultural identity, like Hong Kong, **context** often fails to relate to the local **cultural habit**. It therefore encourages continuous effort and creativity on **interobjects**.

For the purpose of this study, all types of **interobjects** are identified by four common characteristics. 1) All of **interobjects**, being used and made, reflects the current architectural needs in relation to the local **cultural habit**. Hence the observation of **interobjects** reveals the unique culture of the people and the unique character of the city; as opposed to the observation of **context** that only reflect on local history and governmental regulations. Its relevance to present allows meaningful knowledge that relates to designs in the current **context**. 2) Different to sociological research, such as that carried out by William Whyte<sup>2</sup> and Jan Gehl<sup>3</sup>, where spaces are assessed as good or bad for the citizens based on various criteria, **interobjects** are regarded as an experimental product that are constantly and collectively refined, and hence considered a most appropriate solution to the community, based on the current inhabitants' skills, resource and other considerations. 3) **interobjects** exposed to particular set of situations reveal consistency in its architecture, inherent ways to solve particular problems with particular resource and skills shared within a cultural group, constantly reappearing across a cultural landscape.(Rapoport 1990) Through natural selection within the city, these patterns have evolved to be efficiently effective to solve local problems and are shared not only amongst the anonymous citizens, but also adopted by government officials and developers. (figure 9) (Alexander 1979) It is this architectural language that allow an anthropological understanding of the place. 4) Being direct responses to its immediate **context**, **interobject** is inherently an architectural product of retro-design. As opposed to a building design on a green field site, it is highly adaptive and interrelated to the existing urban fabric. The typological pattern in an **interobject** reveals variety as well as consistency. By observing a series of commonly found **interobjects** in Hong Kong, this study does not only aim to formulate an anthropological understanding of the cultural group from existing architecture, but it also explores an alternative design approach by adopting and intervening common patterns that are familiar to the inhabitants.

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<sup>2</sup> William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, D.C.: Washington, D.C. : Conservation Foundation, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Jan Gehl, *Life between Buildings*, 1. publ. ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987).

#### 4. Case Studies - street observation

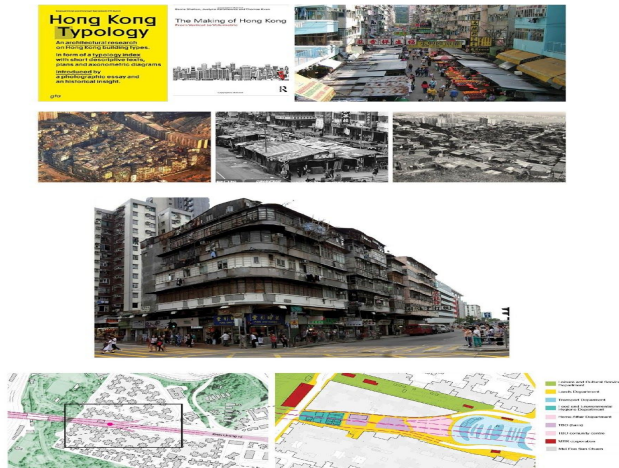


fig.4 photo of tong lau district

To build up this theoretical framework, the abstract definition of *interobject* is exemplified by a series of 8 architectural types commonly found within *context* of old districts, in which *tong lau*, or *tenement houses* in English, are the most dominant building type. The ownership and operational nature of *tong lau* and its adjacent streets makes possible the modification of the property by owners and tenants. These *interobjects* have not been systematically documented as an architectural discourse, especially for those nameless *interobjects* that are not glorified as typical Hong Kong vernacular. They are discovered primarily by walking and street observation within the neighbourhood.

##### 4.1 Case study

Due to the emphasis of this paper, to identify common cultural *interobjects* and to examine one possible approach to incorporate into a community space design, it will not explore for a documentary methodology to analyse each case. The 8 identified types are simply recorded in 3 aspects within the discussed theoretical framework - brief description of the *context* and *cultural habits*, a story about the making and the infrastructure of the *interobject*.



*extended eave*



fig.5 photo of extended eave

**context** - building facades, mostly where the adjacent land can be optimized for usage.

**cultural habits** - activities that is brought to outside and desired under protection from sun and rain.

**interobject** - retractable canopies has colonized most of the city building facade in Hong Kong. We can observe shop tenants, chain store company and cinema operator all adopted this *interobject* to extend their privately own space into the public domain. The semi-privatized programs are protected streetscape, covered alfresco dinner, semi-outdoor lobby and many other ambiguous spaces.

*urban living room*



fig.6 photo of urban living room

**context** - residual passage spaces and public parks

**cultural habits** - nearby community gather together at found desirable spots.

**interobject** - this is created by different form of objects providing infrastructure for seating of different scale - sometime in form of chairs and steps. Such pattern is usually created by abundant unwanted chairs, brought by inhabitants who are either the founder or followers of the urban living room and voluntarily contribute incremental effort from time to time.

*structural balustrade*



fig.7 photo of structural balustrade

**context** - road balustrade divider from street, mainly of two types

**cultural habits** - flea market owner, shop tenants and others share no particular type of behavioural relationship with the balustrades.

**interobject** - this *interobject* is not characterized by its construction, technique nor its behavioural pattern; but by the constant effort and creativity on the contextual balustrade. The balustrade by the road is regarded as an infrastructure, inherited with its material and embedded footing, providing structure for diverse ideas and intervention.

*stadium park*



fig.8 photo of stadium park

**context** - public football pitch stadium, adjacent to dense urban fabric

**cultural habits** - different cultural groups appropriate the stadium seating as ordinary public parks. It becomes places for talking, having take-away lunch, playing chess, meeting friends and least importantly watching football.

**interobject** - this *interobject* pattern is an example of perceptual architectural response to existing **context**. It is created by interpreting existing seat infrastructure inherently located at an open space with long vista, serving a variety of people in the surrounding neighbourhood.



*invisible garden*



fig.9 photo of invisible garden

**context** - undetermined form of locations. Typically, adjacent to privately owned spaces.

**cultural habits** - spaces are made pleasant, by this *interobject*, for non-specific *cultural habit*.

**interobject** - plants in pot, planter box or other forms, are economical and effective infrastructure, placed strategically to demarcate and associate spaces to private area and fade away its association with the public realm.

*worker nomad*



fig.10 photo of worker nomad

**context** - undetermined form of locations. It is typically open to public and free of charge - such as parks, plaza, lawn (designed for only for visual pleasure), bridges, pedestrianized street, etc.

**cultural habits** - domestic workers' habit of cultural group gathering. Their habit can be associated with the joy of picnic that uniformly appear across a range of *context*. They eat, dance, sing, exchange goods and practice other *cultural habits*.

**interobject** - this *interobject* pattern is also perceptual and adaptive to different existing *context*. It turns horizontal surface in every convenient public open spaces into picnic places. The making of the place is assisted by carpets of newspaper, fabric, cardboard or nylon canvas; and at times also by tent-like roof and partition elements.

*devoted worship*



fig.11 photo of devoted worship

**context** - undetermined form of locations. Encountered scenario includes building entrance, street, hills, seaside, house door, etc.

**cultural habits** - almost limited to the worshipping of Chinese religion (taoism and buddism)

**interobject** - objects in relation to worship, such as the pot for incense sticks, statues, the colour of red and, sometimes, miniature temple, are arranged in particular order to make sense for the **cultural habit**.

*bank-shift retail*



fig.12 photo of bank-shift retail

**context** - all banks in Hong Kong officially open from 9am to 5pm weekdays and 9am to 12am on Saturday. It is found as potential sites during off-hour for spontaneous commercial activities.

**cultural habits** - shops for daily goods (clothes, hats, nail cutter, stationery, accessories, dried fruit, shoes, etc)

**interobject** - the “shop” is designed in two forms - linear form along the bank shopfront or entrance hallway form utilizing entrance or ATM waiting lobby. The goods are displayed

horizontally on the floor or steps; or vertically on the glass wall and roller door by various techniques.

#### 4.2 characteristic of infrastructure and program

As identified and described in the above section, these architectural phenomena, sharing similar characters that define what this paper named **interobject**, have no apparent common characteristics between different **interobjects**, due to their highly specificity to each inherent **context** and **cultural habit**. This creativity, conceiving each Hong Kong **interobject** typology, allows the stable “patterns” (as defined by Christopher Alexander), shared amongst the cultural groups, to be modified and adjusted continuously as appropriate. Where the city vernacular products are named “environmental units” in *Made in Tokyo*, it is here named here “**interobjects**, for it being “a vague structure” that is neither a part of **cultural habit** nor **context**. The term was first coined by Mark Blechner, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, to describe the condensation of ideas or objects incompletely fused into a single dream element. (Blechner 2018) These elements are “vague, or merely hard to describe”, that “between two objects” may “set up a conceptual space or...a novel category.”(Blechner 2018) A parallel argument can be applied here to the intervention addressed in this paper - it is not an invention of **cultural habit** nor of building, landscape or city (**context**), but a creation by intervening both, that does not occur in the architects’ design (the waking life).

Furthermore, it is observed that all the common **interobject** typologies identified above are not constructed on privately-owned area, but colonize on unowned spaces/ public realm, because the scarce and expensive private land is limited to the wealthy minority in Hong Kong. This characterize **interobjects** as a vernacular product unique to Hong Kong, as opposed to those illustrated in *Made in Tokyo* and *Division and Multiplication*, where vernacular architecture is analyzed and found on private lots.(Bertram and Halik 2002; TSUKAMOTO, KAIJIMA, and KURODA 2001)

#### 5. Experiment at Mei Foo

By identifying a series of common **interobjects** in Hong Kong in previous chapter, this chapter outlines the strict legal controls on the government-owned spaces and the initial findings from a built installation, as an experiment testing the concept of adapting **interobject** in public space design.



## 5.1. Legal Control on Public Realm



fig.13 map of Mei Foo programs under flyover and ownership

The majority of land in Hong Kong is typically either sold or leased to private sectors for a certain number of year or belonged to the government. The latter, defined as the *public realm* in this study, where the majority of *vernacular* activities find its site for individual purpose, as described in the previous chapter. This public realm is generally managed by one of the following government departments in relation to the nature of the land: -

- Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) - public parks, plaza outside institutional buildings
- Highways Department (HyD) - street, road, traffic island, retaining wall, slopes
- Lands Department (LandsD) - other public accessible land

Application procedures differ significantly between different departments. With regard to the short term tenancy on the public plaza for the Mei Foo “Booktree” experiment, the application was submitted to the District Lands Office at Mei Foo, under LandsD, and it was further circulated amongst several other departments for different control.<sup>4</sup> A written proposal was also included in the application, outlining details such as the project name, event nature, duration, budget, building structure and its corresponding safety, security and emergency contact person, ticketing and etc. The project was given a temporary occupation permit for the course of one month, with several conditions relating public safety. The permit was not charged because the project was not for commercial purpose and it was a community project, free and open to the general public. It is a general practice for this kind of public events, lasting whether one day or one month, to apply for occupation permit and to purchase insurance. However, other activities, such as advertisement stand, weekly waste recycle collection booth, domestic worker gathering, etc, “are unofficially considered necessary to go through the complication with the government”, said the district council officer, whom we worked closely with for this experimental project.

<sup>4</sup> Other concerned government departments include - Home Affair Department - for issues raised by the community ; district council - for communication with the residents ; police force - for public safety and control in case of events ; fire department - concerning fire safety and possible hazard for evacuation ; Leisure and Cultural Services Department - for comment regarding public event ; Food and Environmental Hygiene Department - for licensing in case of events like performance and other entertainments.



## 5.2. intervened interobject

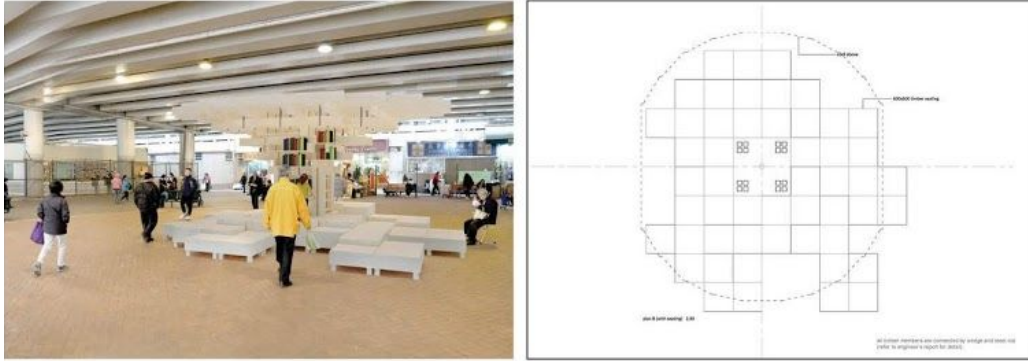


fig.14 plan & photo of Mei Foo “Booktree” experiment

Amongst the different types of *interobjects* as studied in chapter 4, two types were selected to integrate with a children bookshelf, which was requested by the project sponsor - extended eave : although a roof is not necessary for the Mei Foo site, this installation is foreseen to be relocatable to other external locations ; urban living room : being a plaza exposed to severe pedestrian traffic from the adjacent residential district, seats were considered to be necessary to engage the community to the public community bookshelf. The structure was designed to be fabricated in Shenzhen and assembled on site in 2 hours.

## 5.3. Public Reception and Observation



fig.15 photos of Mei Foo “Booktree” event

The “Booktree” installation was open to public from 2018.08.06 to 2018.09.14 at the Mei Foo plaza and fieldwork was carried out twice a week to observe on the public reception. The result is as follows:-

### 1. *initial reactions*

Mei Foo residents are not entirely familiar with public community project of this nature. Public facilities are normally regarded as official and organized, whereas the “Booktree” is an

open, unregulated, shared urban furniture where the community collectively look after the structure. However, in the name of art installation, the community, particularly the children, is willing to engage and interact. The intervened **interobject** raises both familiarity and curiosity.

## 2. *the community's books*

Mei Foo is typically known to be a middle-class housing estate, where the residents are wealthy and educated. The number of books donated by the residents outran the capacity of the shelves provided and had to be stored away. It clearly shows the need for a kind of bookshare facility at a convenient location.

The "Booktree" is initiated to engage primary children to build up their reading habit. It is observed that some children at early age might cause nuisance to others when treating the books as toys. Reading books in Hong Kong might hence be considered as a delicate activity, appropriate only amongst self-disciplined group.

## 3. *behaviour of different group*

By incorporating existing **interobjects** from the city, people are familiar with the relation with their body moment. Yet, its reinterpretation, such as urban living room into an interactive platform, allows other patterns to be combined and tested. The children run and explore on platform like a playground; the elderly sits along the edge and wait and meet others; domestic workers sit as they would on the lawn, eating lunch and video-calling their family; primary and secondary school students and adults browse on shelves for favourite books.

It proves a few things about the community: - Unregulated reading space is a desirable alternative library typology in Mei Foo; more importantly, the place asks for more seats for people to stay in and enjoy this plaza at central location of Mei Foo.

## 4. *habit of the regulated city*

Hong Kong people are used to living in an organized city where someone or party is responsible for the place. Questions about the contact persons were frequently asked for issues regarding cleaning and maintenance of the space and shelves, safety, control of books, book-borrowing procedure, etc. Rules seem to be important for the public when they enter a space they do not own, and the rules are generally followed and respected. In the instance where a bunch of books were stolen and sold, those who were willing to share were not satisfied with the uncontrolled nature of the facility and became discouraged to participate further.

## 6. Conclusion

Former studies on Hong Kong interpret the city as a highly organized urban fabric, as a result of engineered infrastructures and historical events. To respond anthropologically and architecturally to this overly simplified understand of the sophisticated actuality, focus had been emphasized on the obvious local vernaculars, that are appropriately recognized as architecture. Though the importance of local identity has been reinforced by these literatures, vernacular remains in the category of historical products, seemingly irrelevant to our current design practice in the city. According to the theoretical framework discussed in this paper, we no longer discuss vernacular practices by identifying architecture and

urbanism in a conventional sense. As a unique local vernacular mostly found in the public realm, these current urban practices, *interobjects*, suggests an opportunistic approach for alternative urbanism, that supplement the designed *context* within the actual city, into a holistic functional system.

Unlike designs in our architectural industry, *interobjects* are adaptive and sensitive to both immediate *cultural habit* and *context*. It showcases skills and techniques on modifying our environment - patterns shared amongst the anonymous "architects". Through simple observation on existing *interobjects*, the knowledge about the city is strengthened in two aspects - demand of current *cultural habit* on architecture; and how the *context* architecturally performs. Likewise, the experiment with the *interobject* installation in Mei Foo has triggered some understanding and potential about the place. Adopting *interobject* pattern in design, especially in community design, also seem to be an effective method to intervene and improve spaces for *cultural habits*.

The theoretical framework set up in the paper aims to encourage further discussions on urban vernacular. It also suggests the need to further investigate complex and "intangible" architectural phenomenon like *interobjects*, that conventional taxonomic analysis seems inappropriate.

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