



Crafting Culture: The Role of Vernacular Architecture in the Expression and Performance of Communal Identity within Arts Spaces

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17922736>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 23-11-2025

Published: 10-12-2025

Keywords:

*Vernacular Architecture,
Rural Theatre, Community
Art, Space-Making,
Traditional Practices,
Creative Pedagogy*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interrelationship between vernacular space-making and the performance of communal identity in rural arts spaces in Kerala. Based on ethnographic fieldwork within a grassroots cultural collective, it examines how architecture functions not merely as a backdrop but as a participatory element in the creation and sustenance of artistic practices. Here, everyday materials, ancestral rituals, performative traditions, and environmental intimacy shape a living, breathing arts ecology. The paper argues that traditional built forms act as collaborators in the creative process, where spatial configurations, material memory, and shared experience coalesce to foster a vibrant pedagogy of the arts. Through field observation, interviews, and reflective documentation, the research investigates how such space-making supports identity formation, creative learning, and cultural sustainability. Keywords: Vernacular Architecture, Rural Theatre, Community Art, Space-Making, Traditional Practices, Creative Pedagogy. This study examines the dynamic interplay between vernacular space-making and the enactment of communal identity within rural arts venues in Kerala. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with a grassroots cultural collective, it contends that architecture transcends its conventional role as mere backdrop to become an active participant in the cultivation and perpetuation of artistic practices. In this context, quotidian materials, ancestral rituals, performative traditions, and a profound environmental intimacy collectively shape a living and evolving arts ecology. The paper posits that traditional built forms function as integral collaborators in the creative process, wherein spatial configurations, material memory, and shared



experience converge to nurture a vibrant pedagogical framework for the arts. Employing methodologies such as field observation, interviews, and reflective documentation, the research investigates how such processes of space-making facilitate identity formation, foster creative learning, and promote cultural sustainability.

1. Introduction

In Kerala's agrarian villages, architecture is a collective expression intricately woven into daily life rather than an isolated design act. Cultural events take place in spaces such as courtyards, earthen thresholds, and thatched pavilions—areas shaped not merely for performance but through the act of performing itself. These spaces actively engage in rituals, storytelling, workshops, and community gatherings. Influenced by local materials, climate responsiveness, and generational knowledge, these spatial interactions foster a harmonious balance among form and function, aesthetics, and activity. This study examines a rural arts ecosystem where architecture and performance intersect to create a pedagogy grounded in tradition, collaboration, and sensory engagement. It portrays the built environment not as a fixed entity but as a temporal, expressive medium that is continuously enacted, inhabited, and reshaped by cultural practices.

2. Research Problem

The increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary art and design has yet to adequately address the integral relationship between vernacular architecture and communal art practices within academic research. A significant gap persists in documenting how traditional rural architectural forms serve as foundational platforms for artistic expression, cultural pedagogy, and identity formation. This study aims to fill this gap by critically examining the role of embedded spatial practices in fostering communal creativity and by exploring how these insights can contribute to evolving methodologies in art and architecture education.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the role of vernacular architecture in nurturing community-based art forms.
2. To understand how spatial configurations and materials influence creativity and social cohesion.
3. To document and analyse rural traditions that integrate performance, ritual, and pedagogy.
4. To propose a framework for participatory and culturally embedded design practices in arts and architecture.



4. Review of Literature

The spatiality of vernacular architecture has long been framed through the lens of cultural sustainability. Christopher Alexander (1979) describes the “timeless way” of building as a process shaped by communal needs, rituals, and patterns. Homi Bhabha (1994) conceptualises space as a locus of negotiation where identity, memory, and culture intersect. Kumar (2020) extends this into the realm of performance, positioning theatre as an architectural language embedded in daily life. Jain (2021) emphasises the ethical dimension of traditional practices—spaces that are not only environmentally sustainable but culturally resonant. Narayanan & Sreeja (2022) draw attention to theatre collectives in rural Kerala, where space, soil, and narrative form a unified field of artistic expression. Menon (2023) links rural architecture with memory-making, revealing how built environments serve as vessels of collective experience. This body of work frames the theoretical background for examining space not just as built form, but as an evolving medium of cultural and creative engagement.

5. Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative, ethnographic approach supported by reflective documentation. Fieldwork was conducted over a three-week engagement with a rural arts collective in central Kerala.

Observation: Participant observation during ritual performances, storytelling sessions, and art workshops provided firsthand insight into spatial usage.

Documentation: Sketches, photographic logs, spatial mappings, and daily journals were maintained.

Interviews: Informal yet focused conversations were held with artists, facilitators, and local participants to understand intent, memory, and material choices.

Analysis: Thematic coding and cross-referencing were used to identify recurring spatial-artistic patterns and symbolic associations. The research emphasises subjective immersion, prioritising lived experience over detached analysis, to faithfully represent the performative and participatory nature of rural creative practices.

6. Results

Spaces as Dynamic Performative Grounds. The central courtyard emerged as a key spatial typology. Open to the sky, ringed with low plinths, and shaded by mango trees, these spaces facilitated dramatic



storytelling, musical rehearsals, and interactive group drawing sessions. Unlike rigid performance halls, these spaces evolved with the needs of the moment—hosting evening chants one day and clay modelling workshops the next. Other spaces—threshold verandahs (thinna), cattle sheds, grain stores—were also reimagined as backdrops for shadow play, storytelling, and theatrical improvisation. These structures weren't designed for performance; they became performance.

Material Intelligence and Sensory Pedagogy: Materials were not inert building blocks but tactile agents of learning. Clay, used for modelling and construction, connected children to form, weight, and gesture. Palm fronds, bamboo poles, and jute ropes were deployed in both spatial framing and prop-making. Participants spoke of “listening to the material,” reinforcing a pedagogy grounded in tactility and improvisation. The textures and smells of lime-washed walls, the crunch of coir underfoot, or the changing light on a mud floor—all became tools for attuning the senses, forming what can be described as material empathy. ###

Ephemeral Structures and Ritual Time Rituals like *Kalamezhuth* (powder drawings on earth) and Theyyam preparation spaces demonstrated temporality as a core design principle. These spaces were constructed for the moment—a day, a season, a cycle—and then dismantled or transformed. Spatial impermanence here was not loss, but renewal. The performative act extended to the land, marked by temporary pavilions made of banana stems and palm thatch. These ephemeral structures emphasised presence, intention, and rhythm, showing how temporality enriches the spatial imagination.

Social Architectures of Inclusion Workshops welcomed individuals of all ages—children, artisans, elders, and visiting artists. There was no audience-performer binary. The very act of being present, sitting in a circle, drawing together, or cooking for the group, constituted participation. This porous sociality was mirrored in spatial design: no fences, open transitions, shared platforms. The built environment thus encouraged communal authorship, emotional investment, and spatial democracy.

7. Discussion

The findings foreground a reconceptualisation of architecture—not as a static artefact, but as a living process. In the studied context, space is inseparable from story, gesture, seasonality, and sound. It is both the frame and the fabric of cultural expression. Architecture becomes performative: it responds, adapts, and co-creates meaning with its users. This aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) notion of “lived space,” where physical form is imbued with rhythms, interactions, and intentions. In Kerala's rural arts settings, this becomes especially vivid.



7.1 Towards a Pedagogy of Making

The act of making—in both art and architecture—is not individualistic, but collaborative and intuitive. Children learn shape and rhythm by drawing in sand; elders teach structure through palm weaving. These methods defy linear curricula, offering a pedagogy rooted in doing, failing, and reflecting. Such embodied learning blurs disciplinary boundaries. Architecture here is not “taught” but absorbed through performance, memory, and seasonal cycles. This has implications for how design education might embrace place-based, process-oriented learning.

7.2 Spatial Ethics and Sustainability

The use of indigenous materials and context-driven design reflects an ecological ethic. The buildings breathe with the landscape. Walls crack and are repaired with lime; roofs are rethatched after the monsoon. This ongoing maintenance is not a sign of failure but of the relationship between human, material, and land. Modern sustainability discourse can benefit from this ethic of care, where architecture is not perfected and sealed, but porous, seasonal, and evolving.

7.3 Architecture as Cultural Embodiment

Finally, the study affirms architecture’s role in encoding and transmitting cultural identity. Through ritual geometry, communal thresholds, and material gestures, space becomes a form of memory. When children walk barefoot on mud floors or trace figures in rice flour, they are not merely playing—they are performing their culture, and in turn, shaping it.

Conclusion

The phrase “Built for the Arts” takes on a deeper meaning in this context. It is not about designing stages or galleries, but about cultivating environments where art is lived. In these rural settings, architecture and art are not companions—they are kin. When space is made with sensitivity, slowness, and storytelling, it becomes a living archive—a soil where culture grows, transforms, and regenerates. The vernacular, then, is not a style but a practice—a way of making space that listens, remembers, and performs. This research affirms the potential of such practices to inform contemporary design and education, especially in an era seeking ecological, cultural, and creative renewal.

Recommendations



1. Integrate Vernacular Practice in Design Education: Encourage students to learn from rural artisans, materials, and performance traditions through field immersion.
2. Support Rural Cultural Documentation: Facilitate initiatives that archive disappearing spatial-artistic practices through visual and oral histories.
3. Create Interdisciplinary Studios: Foster spaces where architects, artists, and community members collaborate on participatory, ephemeral, and low-impact installations.
4. Promote Open and Inclusive Design: Emphasise porosity, adaptability, and community ownership in architectural projects, particularly those tied to the arts.

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