

Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Vernacular House Forms of the Vaishnav Community in Vadnagar, India

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Abstract

Traditional houses are more than just physical structures; they are architectural manifestations of the socio-cultural factors present in communities. Across various traditional architecture settings around the world, the spatial organizations, construction techniques, material usage, and settlement patterns of houses have come into being in response to the socio-cultural values and lifestyles of the communities that inhabit them. This relationship between culture and built form is also evident in India, where different communities have always expressed their cultural identities through distinctive architectural forms. Despite extensive studies on vernacular architecture, limited research explicitly links socio-cultural practices with spatial configurations in specific religious communities. One such example is the traditional house forms of the Vaishnav community, which reflect deeply rooted socio-cultural values. In this context, this research examines the factors influencing the house forms in Vadnagar, India.

The research employs case studies as a methodology within the qualitative research paradigm. Several data-gathering techniques are employed to gather data. Primary data collection was done through detailed architectural documentations, including measured drawings of plans and sections, and photographic documentations. They reveal the spatial organizations and the architectural characteristics. Interviews and informal discussions were conducted with the residents to understand the socio-cultural background of the Vaishnav community, along with their lifestyles, daily activities, beliefs, and cultural practices.

Findings reveal that the spatial organizations, hierarchy of spaces, interior elements, and patterns of space usage are deeply influenced by the religious beliefs, social structures, cultural values, and everyday lifestyle practices of the community. Spaces within the houses are organized according to levels of privacy, ritual practices and beliefs, and social interactions, reflecting the close relationship between culture and the built environment. The research thus concludes that socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the architectural spaces and built forms of Vaishnav community houses in Vadnagar, India.

Keywords: Socio-cultural aspects, Culture, Traditional House forms, Vaishnav community, Vadnagar, India

Introduction

Architecture has always been influenced in various ways by metaphysical factors, beliefs, religions, and rituals. As a result, the built forms varied according to the locations, expressing different socio-cultural beliefs and traditions (Rapoport, 1969). Traditional house forms are made in response to the basic needs of the communities in a specific region, with significant effects of climatic and socio-cultural conditions. They are often built by the local people themselves. In fact, traditional architecture is deeply connected to the cultural identity of a community, often reflecting regional and ethnic qualities. Houses in particular regions, serve as cultural expressions shaped by inherited traditions and influenced by factors such as religions, customs, beliefs, values, and traditional construction technologies (Hamka & Sri Winarni, 2021).

Architecture directly or indirectly represents cultural identity of the people. Every community has its own unique culture upon which its architecture is developed. Traditional architecture and culture are closely interrelated concepts that enable people to shape meaningful built environments, characterized by distinct identities and personalities expressed through their architectural elements and features. Similarly, traditional house forms in India are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural values of the communities that live within. Settlement patterns, spatial organizations, and architectural expressions vary by locations, and are influenced not only by the climate and available materials, but also by religions, caste systems, occupational practices, and timeless cultural values. In India, traditional communities have always developed different residential types that represent their collective identities and ways of life, with the houses acting as reflections of social life, religious practices, and everyday cultural behavior.

Within the broader context of culturally responsive architecture, Gujarat has a diverse range of traditional settlement patterns shaped by its various socio-cultural groups. In fact, Vadnagar, an ancient fortified town in Gujarat serves as a great example of this continuity in traditional settlement planning. There are different community houses in the old urban fabric of Vadnagar which represents certain religious beliefs and social interactions. Indeed, everyday practices collectively inform the spatial configurations of the houses.

The Vaishnav community in India is a well-known community whose house forms reveal significant insights into the socio-cultural factors influencing architecture. Their community arises from their allegiance to Vaishnavism, which is a branch of Hinduism formed by Bhagavatism, centred on the worship of Vishnu, also known as Krishna or Rama, as the supreme God and the creator of life. Originating in the Vedic era, it is identified by devotional worship and multiple beliefs. Various sects worship Vishnu and his avatars, especially Krishna, and follow different religious traditions. Over time, four major sampradayas (lineages) have developed, each providing insights into the relationship between God and the human souls. In fact, the Bhakti movement has introduced the Vallabhacharya sect, known as 'Rudra-sampradaya' or 'Pushtimarg,' to Gujarat in the early 16th century A.D. Initially founded by Vishnu Swami and later expanded by Vallabhacharya, the movement emphasizes the 'grace of God' through Bhakti. The Pushti tradition focuses on worshipping Shreenathji as Bal Krishna and performing various forms of seva at regular intervals according to the ritual practices established in Pushtimarg's Seva Kram. Despite their significance as a community, contemporary knowledge about their house forms and social practices are hard to come by.

In this context, this research examines the relationship between culture and architecture as it manifests within the built environment of Vaishnav community, with a focus on understanding how the socio-cultural factors are reflected in their house forms. The aim is to explore the intricate relationship between architecture and culture as expressed within the traditional Vaishnav community of Vadnagar. The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To establish the relationships between daily lifestyles, religious practices, cultural beliefs, and architectural features of traditional architecture.
2. To identify the spatial organisation and architectural characteristics of the house forms of the traditional Vaishnav community.
3. To identify how the socio-cultural factors are reflected in the architectural characteristics of the Vaishnav community houses.

Theoretical Framework

This research is founded within a multidisciplinary framework that integrates vernacular architectural studies and socio-cultural theory to examine the interlinked relationships between built forms and community identity in traditional architecture. Rather than viewing architecture merely as a physical structure, the study treats it as a living built-environment shaped by daily practices, traditions, religious beliefs, and the social structure of a community.

Among those who have theorized the relations between house forms and culture, Rapoport (1969), Denyer (1978), AlSayyad Boudier (1989) and Oliver (2006), stand out. Rapoport (1969) discusses factors affecting vernacular architecture and points out that socio-cultural influences serve as the primary force, with other forces such as climate and technology acting as subsidiary and altering forces in forming traditional architecture. In fact, according to him, the shapes of houses are influenced mostly by the cultural factors, rather than physical factors such as climate or materials. He argues that houses not only provide shelter, but also reflect people's beliefs, values, social structures, and lifestyles. He further emphasizes the importance of family structures, traditions, religions, and social interactions in shaping space organization and use. Indeed, Rapoport (1969) highlights the importance of vernacular architecture, which evolves naturally within communities and reflects local lifestyles.

He says,

“A house is a human fact, and even with the most severe physical constraints and limited technology, Man has built in ways so diverse that they can be attributed only to choice, which involves cultural values”

Rapoport, 1969:60

According to Rapoport (1969), Max Sorre introduced the term ‘genre de vie’ to describe the socio-cultural influences on house forms, including religious, material, and social aspects. Houses and villages are tangible representations of the *genre de vie*, reflecting their symbolic significance. In fact, he points out that ‘genre de vie’ includes ethos, national identity, and worldviews. Some of the main characteristics of the genre de vie that built environments possess are as follows: basic needs, family, social position of women, privacy, social intercourse, defence and religion (Rapoport, 1969). Supporting this, Redfield (1957,1969) explores how human societies shifted from small, isolated folk cultures to complex, urbanized, and literate civilizations, while constructing houses that arose primarily on the basis of shared beliefs, collective values, and kinship ties where social cohesion relies on people feeling and doing things together

Similarly, Oliver (2006) defines culture as the complete system of the values of a society, practices, and material expressions including its built environment, which collectively shape the meanings and the purposes of the lives of people and are acquired and passed on through social learning rather than genetic transmission. Vernacular architecture is understood as the outcome of traditional knowledge systems that adapt to local conditions, available materials, and social structures. It represents a built form closely related to the physical environment and cultural values of a community, demonstrating how people spatially adapt to their surroundings and ways of life.

In contrast, Denyer (1978) however, is inclined to demonstrate the role of climate and technologies in addition to social and cultural forces as being deterministic in traditional house forms. This, she infers from her investigations in African Traditional Architecture, which appears to succumb to the harsh climate and availability of materials and technologies.

Moreover, Nezar AlSayyad and Bourdier (1989) also demonstrate how culture, climate, and society shape indigenous and traditional dwellings. In fact, AlSayyad as the President of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE), has promoted the conceptions of tradition and the idea that contemporary societies are slowly abandoning the traditions, in making architecture, which the traditional societies employed in making buildings as well as doing everyday things.

Overall, there is a general understanding that social and cultural aspects play a more deterministic role in defining house forms while the other forces such as climate and technologies play modifying roles as Rapoport (1969) has argued. Bringing together these approaches, the framework shows traditional houses as expressions of cultural values, where architecture is continuously shaped through socio-cultural processes. Rapoport's framework is widely applied to understand how traditions, belief systems, and collective identities are embedded within architectural forms. This study adapts these theoretical ideas to establish the theoretical framework for the analysis. They thus buttress this investigation of the vernacular house forms of Vaishnav community in Vadnagar, India.

Literature Review

There have been many studies carried out on vernacular architecture which recognize it as a direct manifestation of socio-cultural, environmental, and economic contexts. As already argued by Rapoport (1969), the formation of the house type is not determined by the climate or the technologies, but depends on culture, social organizations, and symbolic aspects present in daily life. Indeed, he says that: "culture is the primary generator of house form," where spatial organization reflects values such as family structure, privacy norms, and religious practices. (Rapoport, 1969).

Thurky (2014) adds that architecture and culture have complex and multidirectional relationships. It is apparent that every built environment must be planned and designed with the needs and activities of its users in mind. These needs are always a result of their lifestyles, ways of thinking, and social needs that originate from their culture, traditions, and customs. Therefore, people's living spaces must reflect their culture. In this manner, culture and architecture are interconnected.

Lawrence (1987) argues that history, cultural values, and aesthetic sensibilities of a community are embedded within its architecture, which can be understood as a physical manifestation of culture. In a similar way, Hall (1966) emphasizes the complex relationship between architecture and culture. He suggests that architecture not only reflects cultural conditions but also actively shapes them by influencing how people live, work, and interact. For instance, the spatial organization of public spaces can communicate social hierarchies and levels of community participation, while residential designs often embody family values and promote specific forms of social cohesion and interactions.

According to Misra (2016), South Asian vernacular architecture traditions are usually community-based, where construction techniques are developed through indigenous practices of building that reflect social norms, group identities, and generational knowledge. The findings from similar research on the relationship between the built environment and socio-cultural factors influencing the house forms reveal how the spatial organisations of the built environments support socio-cultural values and identity of the communities.

Srivastava and Das (2023) note that Indian vernacular architecture reflects a strong integration of climate responsiveness and socio-cultural identity, where spatial planning is guided by daily practices, rituals, and social hierarchy. These show that Indian houses cannot be understood independently from the socio-cultural structures. Similar studies on Indian traditional settlements reveal that houses cannot be understood independently from the socio-cultural structures within which they evolve.

Although existing studies establish a strong relationship between socio-cultural factors and vernacular house forms, much of the current research remains focused on broader vernacular traditions, climatic responsiveness, material systems, and settlement morphology. Limited research specifically examines how socio-cultural factors directly influence the spatial organization and architectural characteristics of traditional houses within specific religious communities such as those in Gujarat.

However, some studies do exist. These studies on the traditional settlements of Gujarat discuss courtyards, 'otlas,' and community-based spatial organizations. Very limited research specifically examines the Vaishnav community of Vadnagar. In fact, existing literature does not comprehensively analyze how socio-cultural factors influence the spatial organization and

traditional house forms of this community. It is for that reason that, this study is conducted to address this research gap.

Research Methodology

This research examines the influence of socio-cultural factors on the spatial organization and architectural characteristics of traditional houses of the Vaishnav community in India. It adopts a qualitative research approach. Case studies are employed as the research methodology because they provide a detailed understanding of how socio-cultural practices influence architectural forms and spatial organizations within their real-life contexts. Primary data was collected using data gathering techniques such as measured drawings, photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews with the residents.

Selection of the Case studies

Case studies were selected based on the following.

1. Two case studies were selected based on the age: It was considered meaningful to choose only the houses that had existed in the settlement for around 100 years with people having lived there for a long period of time.
2. The residents of selected houses should have taken part in Vaishnav cultural and religious practices.
3. The selected houses retain the integrity of their original spatial configurations with minimal alterations, allowing a better understanding of the socio-cultural influences on house forms.

Data Collection Techniques

1. **Measured drawings:** Detailed measured drawings of plans and sections were made in order to understand the physical layouts and spatial organizations of spaces within the selected houses. Initial dimensions were recorded on-site in rough sketches and then were converted into scaled architectural drawings, producing scaled floor plans and analytical diagrams. Documentation of the case studies was done during the site visit to Vadnagar in January 2026.
2. **Photographic Documentation:** Photographs were taken systematically to record architectural details, materials, construction elements, spatial arrangements, furniture placement, religious spaces and ornamentation to understand how the cultural values and identity is reflected in architectural expressions.
3. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** During the site visits and documentation of the selected houses in Vadnagar, semi-structured interviews were carried out with the residents to understand the socio-cultural significance of different spaces and architectural elements. The interviews focused on family structures, religious beliefs and practices, privacy, household activities, and space usage. Responses were recorded through written notes and audio recordings, with the participants' consent, and were later transcribed into written text, and diagrams for analysis.
4. **Activity mapping:** This involved the recording of how the houses were used during daily life activities as well as other social and religious activities. Activity mapping was done during the field visits which recorded the movement patterns, space usage and interactions among the family members. This method helped to understand the daily lifestyles and the impact of social interactions on spatial organizations of the houses.
5. **Direct observations:** Observations were conducted during the site visits, during morning and evening hours, when domestic and social activities were actively taking place. These revealed how the residents interacted with the different spaces during their daily routines. They focused on household activities, movement patterns, social interactions, placement of religious spaces within the houses and symbolic expressions present in the carvings and ornamentations. They show the

cultural values and identity of the Vaishnav community. Observations were documented through photographs, sketches and notes during the site visits.

6. **Focus group discussions:** Focus group discussions were conducted with the local residents from different age groups to understand collective cultural values, religious practices, community traditions, and patterns of spatial use within the Vaishnav community. The discussions focused on festival celebrations, social interactions, neighborhood activities, and changes in the traditional lifestyles. This method helped identify the invisible socio-cultural layers influencing architectural spaces beyond individual household experiences.

Introduction to the Case Study

Vadnagar is located $23^{\circ}47' N$, $72^{\circ}39' E$ towards the northern part of the state of Gujarat. It is a historical town renowned for its legends, battles, temples, forts, gates, and large bodies of water. According to history, Solanki rulers have constructed a protective fort with six gates that covers one kilometre East-West and 700 meters North-South. The Northern segment's fortification wall is semi-circular and is aligned to the Sharmistha Lake. There are six entrances: Arjunbari gate in the North, Nadio and Amtol gates in the West, Ghaskol and Pithori gates in the South, and Amarthol darwaza in the East. Vadnagar has rich historical architecture including Kirti Toran, Hatkeshwar Mahadev Temple. It also has waterbodies such as Gauri Kund, Paschim Mehta ni Vav and Zunzunia well.

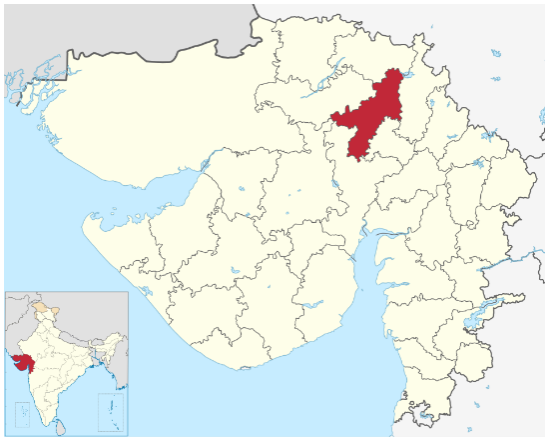


Fig. 1: Location Map of the Vadnagar Region
Source: wikimedia.org

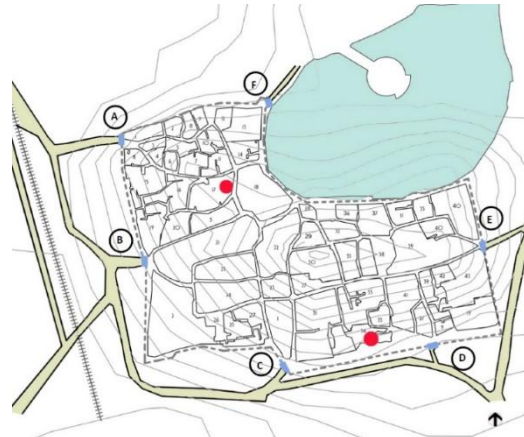


Fig. 2: Location Map of Vadnagar
Source: wikimedia.org

Vadnagar is shaped by the local climate. It has a hot, semi-arid climate characterized by hot summers, a warm, humid monsoon season, and mild, dry winters.

The traditional houses located within the fortified town of Vadnagar, chosen for the study, are as shown in the Fig.2. They are 100 years old and belong to the Vaishnav Community. The houses possess many characteristics of the typical Vaishnav community house forms responding to traditional rituals and lifestyles. Although both houses have gradual modifications over time to accommodate changing functional needs, their original structures and traditional characteristics remain preserved, demonstrating the continuity of cultural practices within the built-environment.

Findings

The selected case studies were analyzed using socio-cultural factors derived from the theoretical framework developed by Amos Rapoport to understand the relationship between house forms and culture. Rapoport (1969) identified determinants such as privacy, religious beliefs, social interactions, cultural values, identity, symbolism, and daily lifestyles. Based on these parameters, the case studies were examined to understand how the built forms respond to both the tangible and intangible aspects.

Interviews and focus group discussions revealed that daily seva rituals have a significant impact on the lifestyle and spatial organization of the traditional Vaishnav houses. Residents stated that rituals such as *Mangala*, *Shringar*, *Rajbhog*, *Sandhya Aarti*, and *Shayan* are conducted on a daily basis in the houses, mostly in the *Puja* room. One resident said that:

“Food prepared in the *Rasodu* is first offered to Thakurji before consumption, so the space must remain pure and clean.”

Respondent A: interview on religious practice

In fact, most residents said that the sacred spaces should remain undisturbed during the worship and daily seva practices.

Interviews indicated that Vaishnav community expresses its cultural and religious identity through symbolic elements such as the Vaishnav tilak. In fact, residents were observed wearing the U-shaped ‘Urdhva Pundra’ (Gopi Chandan) tilak on their foreheads and nose bridge as a symbol of devotion and protection. Respondents also indicated that the tilak shows Lord Vishnu's lotus feet which represents purity and divine beauty according to the Vaishnav tradition. These symbolic practices reflect the religious identity and cultural values of the community. Overall spatial organization of the houses uses local vocabulary and nomenclature to identify the internal spaces used by the residents in their daily lifestyles and the cultural practices.

Table 1: Local terminology of spaces documented in the case study

Source: Author

No	Local name	Description	Spatial Quality	Spatial Characteristics
1.	<i>Otla</i>	The transitional space from outside to inside of house. It defines the boundary of the dwelling and forms a raised platform, with steps providing access into the home.	Public	Open
2.	<i>Parsal</i>	It is the front part of the house, typically used as a reception area and a formal space for social interaction.	Semi- public	Semi-open
3.	<i>Chowk</i>	It is the central open space of the house that connects all other areas and serves as the main hub for daily activities.	Semi-private	Open
4.	<i>Baithak</i>	Formal Living room	Semi-private	Closed
5.	<i>Rasodu</i>	The kitchen is placed near the chowk and the traditional tanka. In some cases, it is located separately from the main living area.	Semi- private	Semi-open/ Closed
6.	<i>Paniyaru</i>	Dedicated raised platform in house located near courtyard for keeping drinking water usually the earthen pots, copper vessels and similar items	Semi-private	Semi-open
7.	<i>Ordo</i>	A private space (rooms) usually closed with openings.	Private	Closed
8.	<i>Puja room</i>	Sacred space of dwelling used for worshipping the God	Private	Closed
9.	<i>Chowkdi</i>	Space use for clothing wash and vessels generally placed in <i>Chowk</i> or <i>Parsal</i>	Semi-private	Semi-open

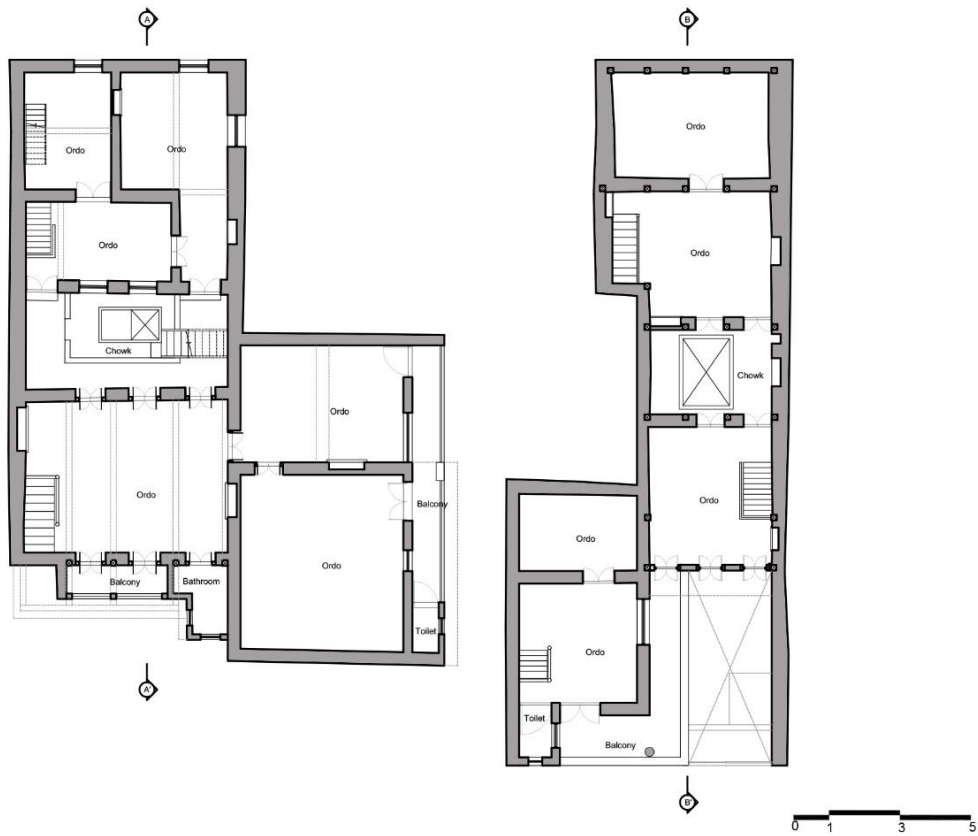


Fig. 3: Ground Floor Plans
Source: Author

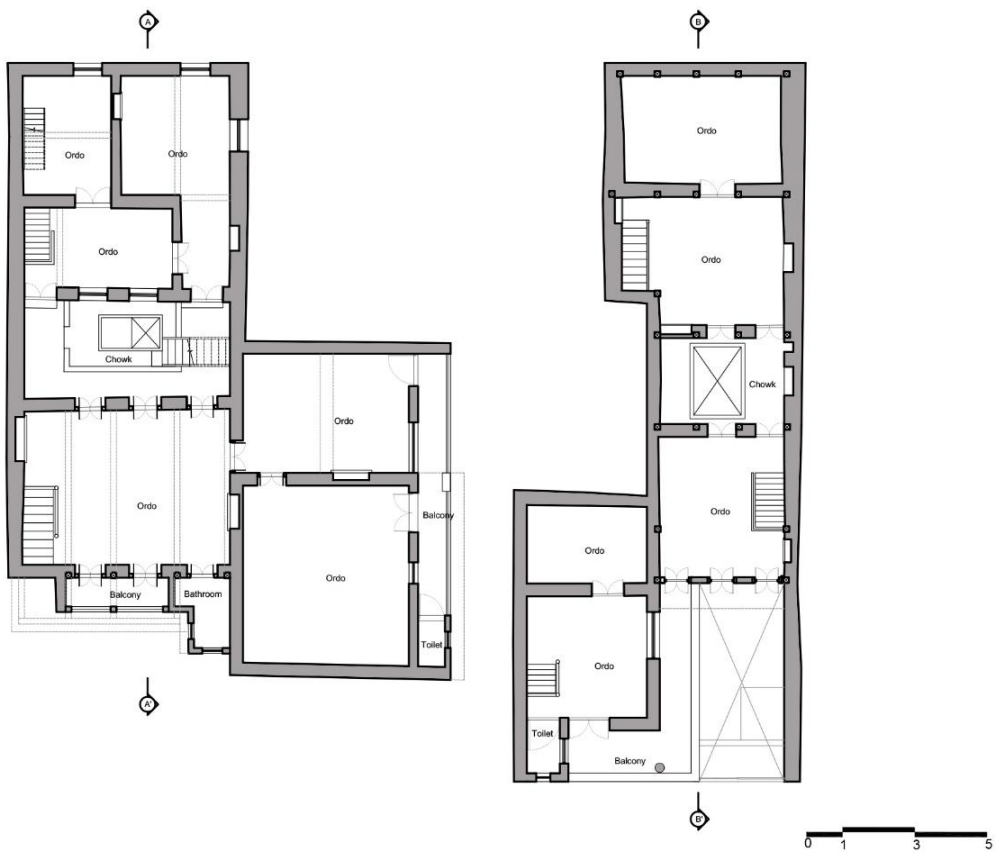


Fig. 4: First Floor Plans
Source: Author

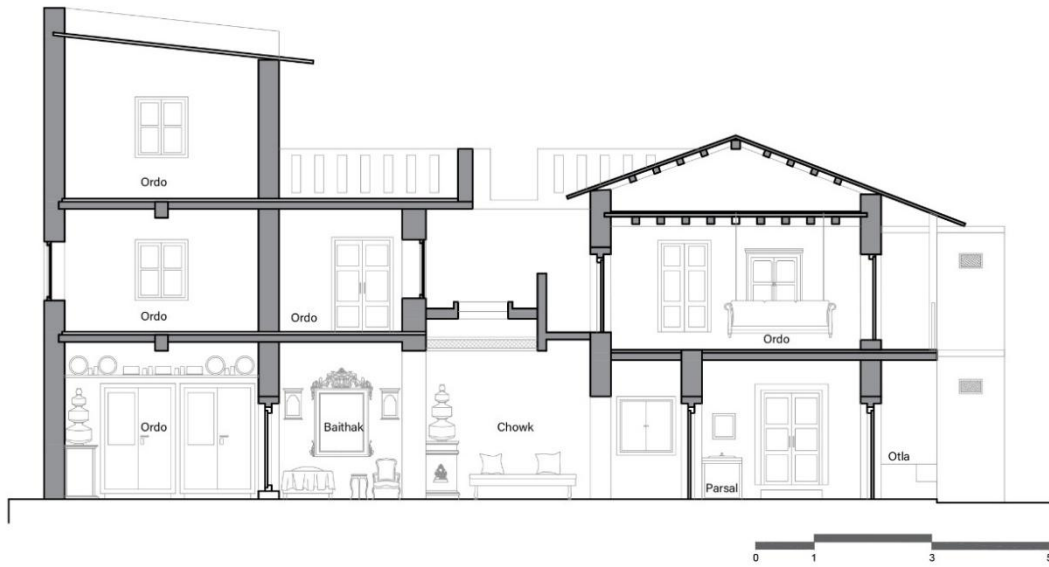


Fig. 5: Section AA of the Case study 1
Source: Author

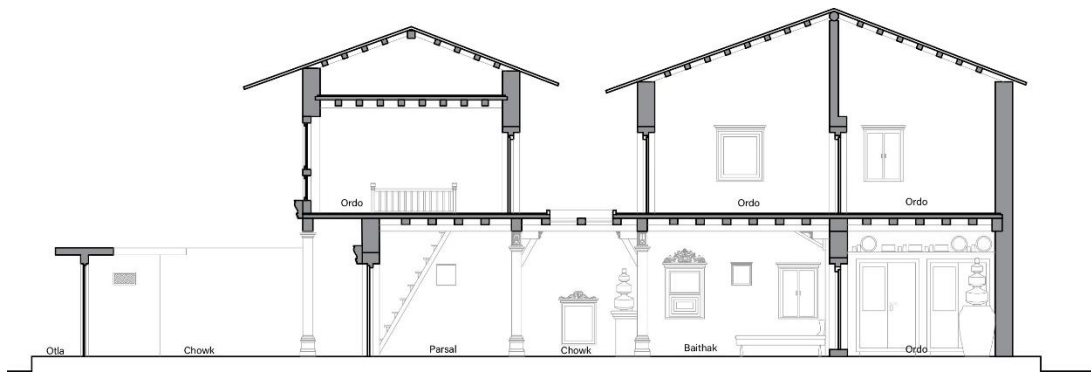


Fig. 6: Section BB of the Case study 2
Source: Author



Fig. 7: Photographs of the Case studies 1 & 2
Source: Author

Privacy

The spatial organisation within the houses reflects a clearly defined hierarchy of privacy. In fact, the arrangement of spaces within the house shows a clear hierarchy of privacy, organized as a gradual transition from public areas to semi-public, semi-private, and finally private spaces. Each space has a unique influence on everyday living and usage patterns. The kinds of activities that take place in these zones are influenced by the degree of visibility, accessibility, functional requirements, spatial proportions, and socialization.

Otla is a public zone that acts as a threshold space both spatially and functionally by allowing people to engage in social interactions with the neighbours. Semi-public spaces such as *Parsal* is a semi-open space at the entrance. The semi private space inner chowk provides light and ventilation in the house and becomes a focal point where *Paniyaru* and *Puja* space are located.

Baithak is a family oriented semi-private space. These spaces are accessible while maintaining a level of privacy suitable for inviting visitors. In contrast, the most private areas such as the *Ordo* on the ground floor, typically used for storage and bedrooms, as well as the *Ordo* and terraces on the upper floors are set aside for personal and family use. The hierarchy of spaces are shown in the Fig.8 where the graph shows four colour dots and lines. The dots represent the nature of spaces, and the lines represent connectivity. Red colour denotes a private space, light orange colour denotes a semi-public space and dark orange colour denotes semi-private space, while the yellow colour denotes a public space. As can be seen, the need for privacy influences the linear spatial organization of the house, where spaces gradually transition from public to private zones.

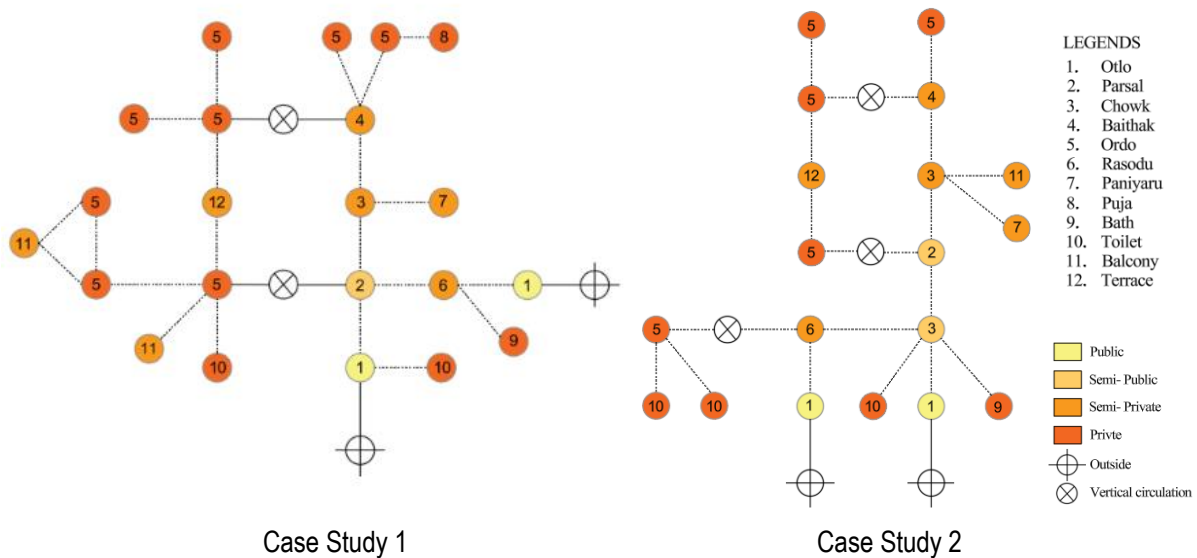


Fig. 8: Hierarchy of Spaces
Source: Author

Religious Beliefs

The Community believes that specific places, such as the *Puja* space, *Rasodu* (kitchen), and *Paniyaru*, are extremely sacred and that proper hygiene must be followed. It has been observed that these locations are arranged around the Chowk so that they can take advantage from natural light. Family members can only go to those areas after cleaning themselves in order to maintain cleanliness. As noted during the focus group discussion, the community does not like outsiders to visit the sacred space. Thus, the location of the *Puja* room must be in the most private area.

The *Puja* space in the house-1 has been initially located only near *Chowk*. However, over time, it has been shifted into the most private space in *Ordo* to maintain privacy and less

disturbance. In the house-2, *Puja* space is located in chowk to get light and ventilation. Since kitchen is treated as a sacred space, maintaining ritual purity is essential. Therefore, it is located separate from the main living space. It is notable that religious beliefs influence the placement and hierarchy of sacred spaces within the house.

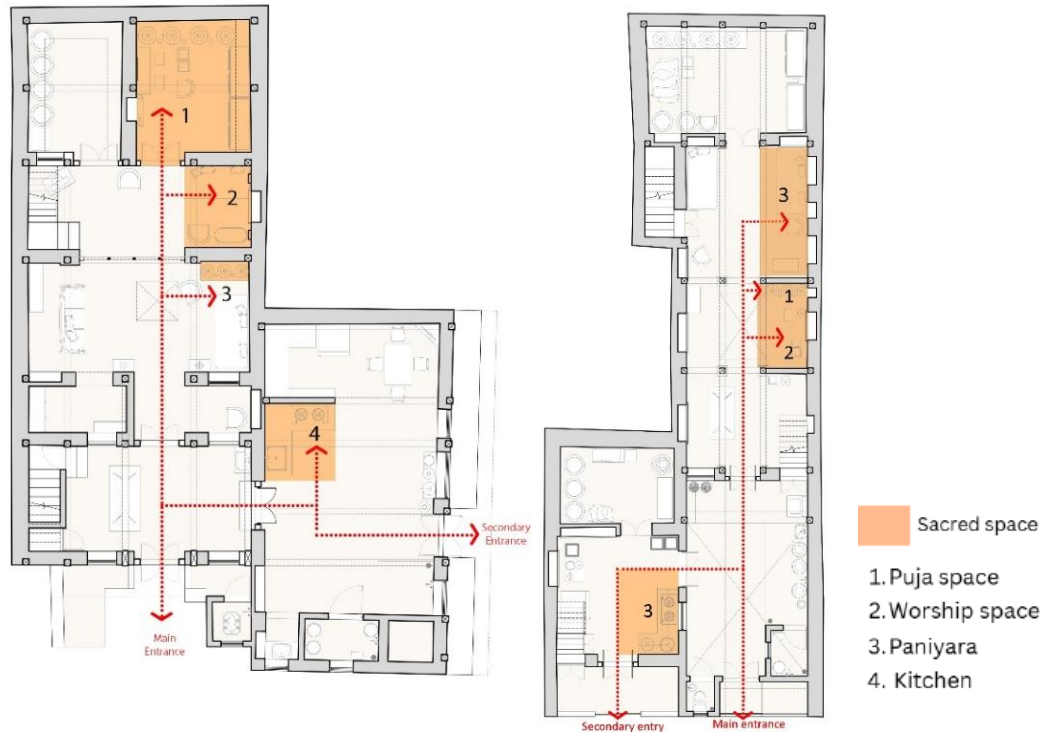


Fig. 9: Sacred Spaces of the House

Source: Author

Social Interactions

The interaction spaces are divided along the house depending on social activities occurring in various zones of the house. *Otla* is a public interaction space that defines the entrance and connects the street to the house. It is usually utilized by women to hold different activities such as reading newspapers, chopping vegetables, sitting and chit-chatting with the neighbours, etc. In fact, *Otla* becomes the most public element of the house where people from the neighbourhood can frequent. The space known as *Parsal* functions as an important semi-private social space within the house. It provides a covered and comfortable place, protecting people from strong sunlight but still allows for interactions in a semi-open area. *Parsal* is frequently used by men to interact with the neighbours in the mornings and in the evenings.

A swing is a common interior element which is found in the *parsal*. Internal living spaces such as the *Baithak* and *Chowk* are semi-private spaces for receiving guests while maintaining a sense of privacy. *Baithak* is used primarily to welcome the male guests, while the female guests are used to sit in the kitchen or the adjacent space. Women often gather and interact in the kitchen, where they cook as well as hold social and shared activities.

Thus, the spatial organization of a traditional house reflects a strong relationship between architecture and social behavior. As seen, social spaces in the traditional Vaishnav houses are organized according to the gender roles, which influence how people interact and occupy the different spaces. This reflects the cultural norms that underlie the social structure, interactions, daily activities, and levels of privacy based on specific roles of men and women. Spatial organization also reflects gender-based roles in space usage, where certain spaces are occupied and used differently by men and women according to everyday social and cultural practices.



Fig. 10: Social Interaction Spaces in the House
Source: Author

Cultural Values

The interior elements show the cultural values of Vaishav Community. *Baithak* is decorated with the portraits of different avatars of Lord Vishnu while *Paniyaru* is decorated with traditional vessels and pots of brass and copper. The private space *Ordo* is used to grain storage and is decorated with copper and brass vessels. The wooden swing kept in every Vaishnav house expresses cultural values. The traditional niches are decorated by wooden cupboards which are decorated with religious elements. These elements express cultural identity, social status, and religious beliefs of the community through the built form.

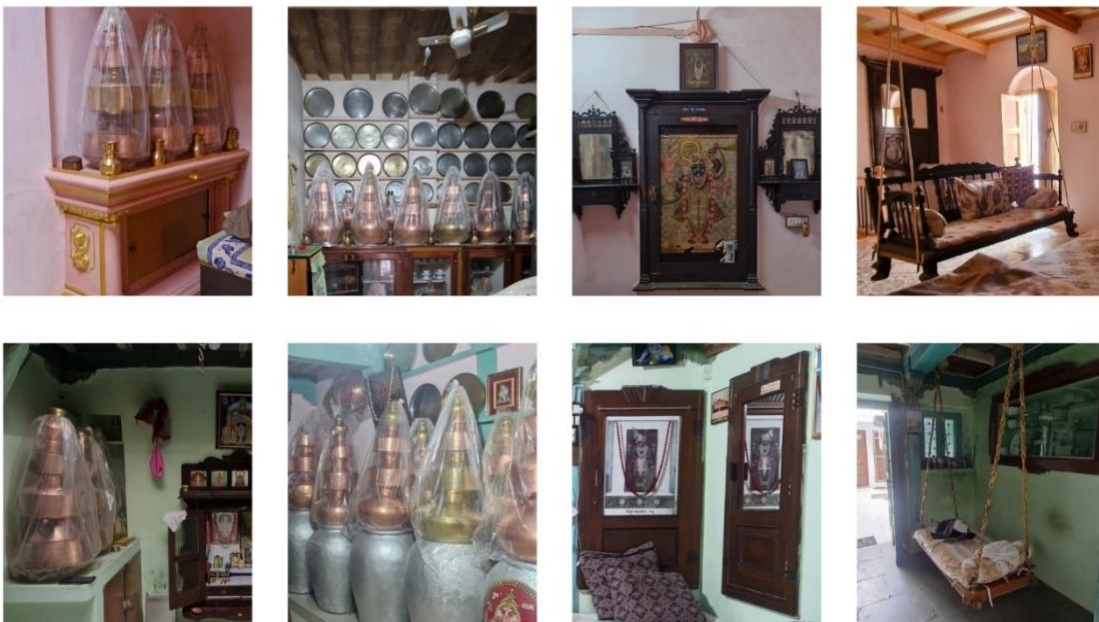


Fig. 11: Elements Expressing the Cultural Values Depicted in the house
Source: Author

Identity and Symbolism

The cultural values are symbolized by the Ganesha motif above the door. The Ganesha idol can be seen outside *Ordo*, which is used for grain storage and is the *Puja* space. *Paniyaru* is richly decorated with the idols of Ganesha symbolizing sacredness. People believe that the Ganesha motifs carved on traditional house doors serve as a protective guardian (Vignaharta), removing any obstacles, keeping off any negative energy, and bringing wealth and good fortune into the house. Ornamentation on the facades symbolize the economic and social status of the Vaishnav community.

Tulsi plant is a symbol of identity within Vaishnavism. Therefore, every Vaishnav house also has a holy Tulsi plant in front of the house. They worship it daily and light a lamp in front of it every day.

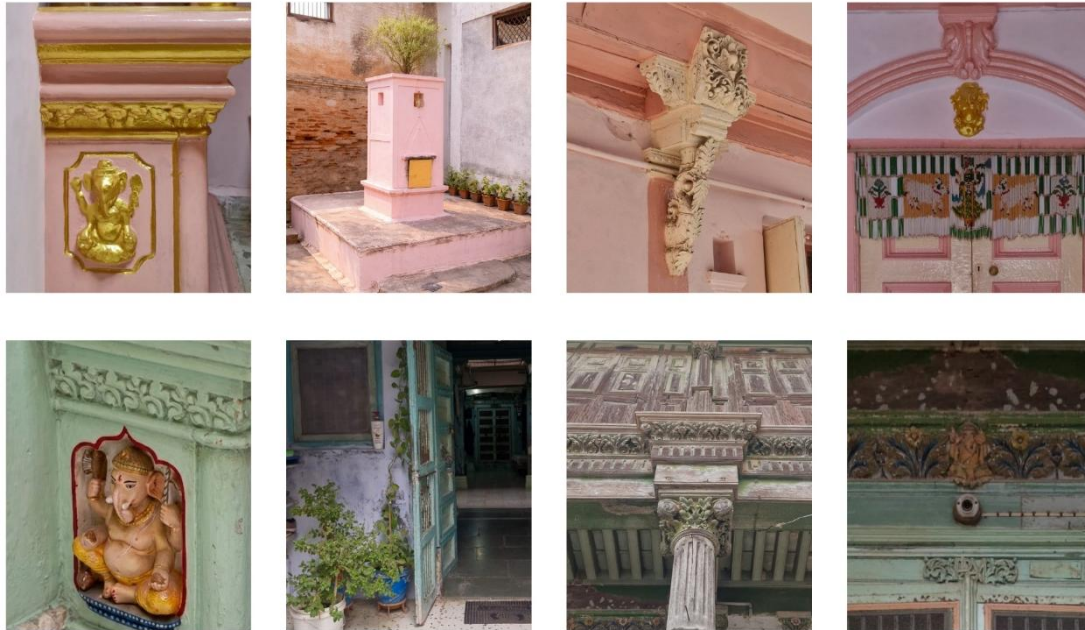


Fig. 12: Elements Expressing the Symbolic Values of the Vaishnav Community
Source: Author

Daily Lifestyle

The activity movements recorded show the usage of spaces and the activities that take place in the different spaces of the house. As observed, the ground floor is occupied and active mostly throughout the day while the first floor is used commonly for sleeping and storage. The activities and the movements of the males and the females in the house is shown in the Figure 13 where the green color denote the movements of the females and the red color denotes the movements of the males. The females occupy the kitchen and chowk for the household activities such as cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the household, etc. The males usually use the *Baithak* throughout the day for reading newspapers, resting during the afternoons and watching TV, etc. Parsal and Opla are used during the evening by both the males and the females. The bathroom and the toilet are occupied in the morning hours for personal hygiene.

In the house 1, chowk acts as the family gathering space where the females and the males of the house spend most of the time. The *Puja* space is used only during the ritual hours of the day. There, in the morning both the males and the females spend their time performing worshipping and prayer.

In both the houses, the first-floor *Ordo* is used only for sleeping at night by the residents. This indicates that the house form is shaped strongly by the daily activities of its inhabitants. The central chowk and *Baithak* acts as the primary space, supporting circulation, interactions, and multiple function of the residents. Indeed, the kitchen becomes the most functional space for women throughout the day.

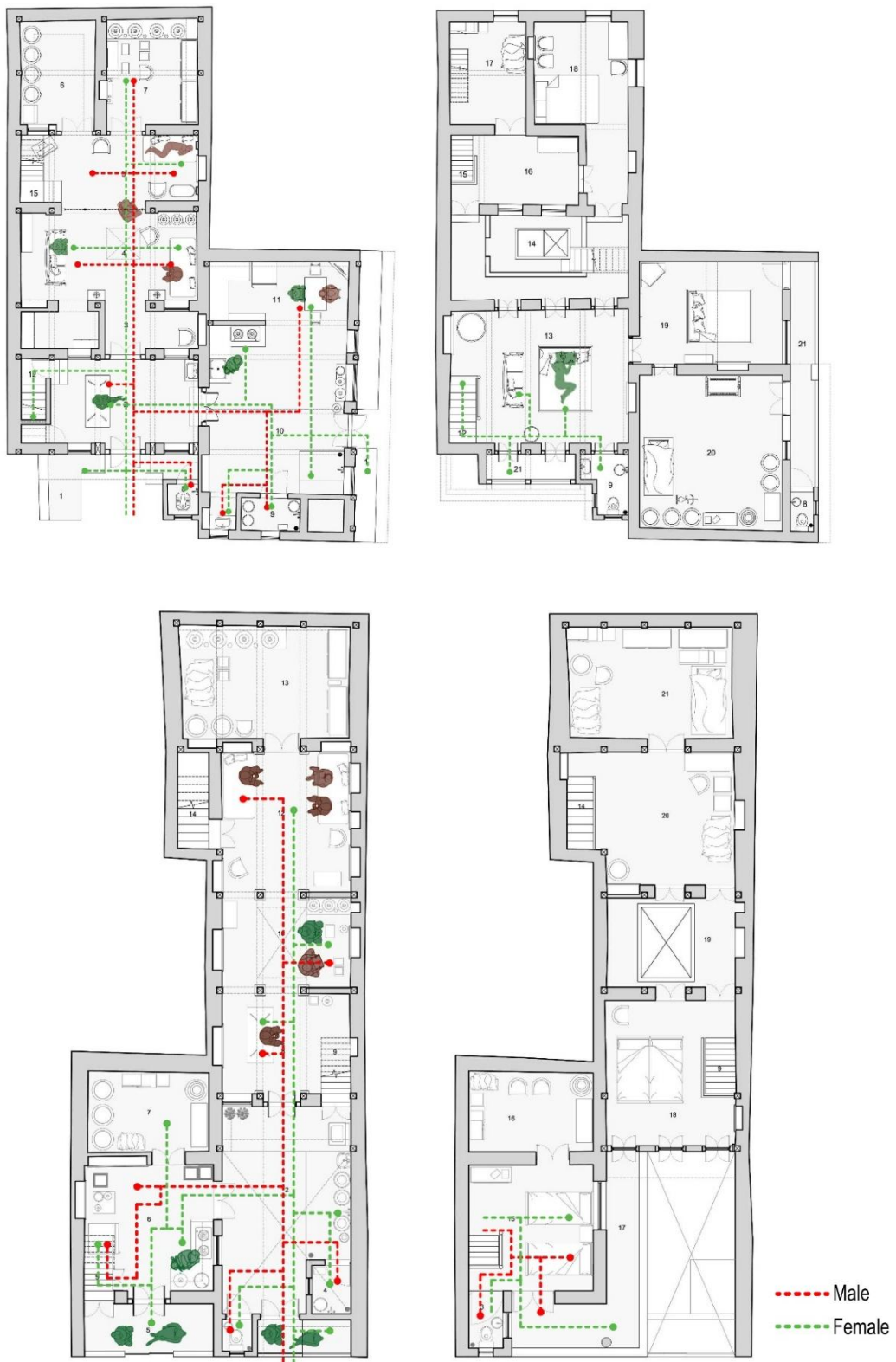


Fig. 13: Activities and movements within the house
Source: Author

Discussion

This research focuses on culture, rituals, and traditions as key aspects in understanding the manifestations of traditional built forms in Vadnagar. The study examines the socio-cultural and religious factors that influence the house forms of the Vaishnav community. Earlier, houses were not designed by professional designers; instead, they were based on the functional needs of the residents as expressed in their cultural needs, identity and religious beliefs.

Findings of this study show that the traditional house forms of the Vaishnav community in Vadnagar are not independent architectural entities, but are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural systems. The analysis of spatial organizations reveals a clear hierarchy of privacy, structured through sequential spatial transitions. In both houses analysed, the spaces are organized to articulate the hierarchy of public to private spaces. Even though the spatial organizations change based on the needs and beliefs of the occupants, the sequential pattern of privacy remains consistent. This demonstrates that the house forms are based strongly on the privacy requirements of the inhabitants, which determine the level of accessibility and movement of people within the different spaces of the house.

The findings also show that religious beliefs strongly influence the placement of spaces within the house. The *Puja* room, *Rasodu*, and *Paniyaru* are treated as sacred spaces requiring ritual purity and controlled access. The kitchen located separately shows how purity and cleanliness of space follow a strict religious belief system. The shifting of the *Puja* room in the Case Study 1 from the chowk to the more private *Ordo* shows how the socio-cultural and religious needs can influence changes in the house form. In the Case Study 2, the *Puja* space remains near the chowk to receive natural light and ventilation. In fact, this difference shows that even within the same community, people organize sacred spaces differently based on their ritual needs and priorities.

Social interactions within both the houses show how the belief systems and social behaviours impact use of space. Even within the same community, shared elements such as *otla* and *Parsal* show a degree of adaptability, because they are used by both men and women. This indicates that community-level social values impact, and even broaden, people's perspectives on space use. At the same time, gender-based space use is still visible in the internal organization of the house. Men use spaces such as *Baithak* and *Parsal* for formal interactions, while women generally receive guests in areas like the kitchen or *Chowk*. This shows how traditional gender roles remain deeply rooted in the belief system of the community and its impact on the functions of spaces.

The cultural values are strongly reflected in the continuous presence of traditional elements across both houses studied. *Paniyaru* and *Ordo* are highly decorated and show their cultural and functional importance within the house. The beautifully carved wooden niches highlight the rich tradition of craftsmanship and details of the community.

Most interestingly, the swing is a common element in every house. It is commonly located in *Parsal* or *Baithak* or in *Ordo* on the first floor. This element shows that even though changes have happened over time, the community has successfully preserved their cultural values. Indeed, the findings reveal that the cultural values are expressed through architectural and interior elements preserved through traditions of the community.

Identity of the community is reflected in the richly carved façades, ornamentation and interior elements such as Ganesha motifs on *Paniyaru* and above the door. The Tulsi plants, religious portraits across the house, elements dedicated to their religion such as 'Toran' showing Shreenathji portrait on doors articulate the religious identity of the Vaishnav community. In fact, integration of these elements show how architecture and interior spaces become a medium for expressing and preserving the culture and identity of the community over time. Through these architectural elements, it is revealed that the house is not merely a physical structure, but a reflection of the cultural identity of the people who reside within it.

The space use and daily lifestyle activity patterns depicted in the Fig 13 shows the use of spaces throughout the day. In both houses, the ground floor is the most actively used area throughout the day for cooking, washing, worship, social interactions, and resting, while the upper-floor *Ordo* is used mainly for sleeping at night. In the case study 1, chowk acts as the

main family gathering and circulation space, while in the case study 2, *Baithak* is the most used space. The kitchen is also an important space occupied mainly by women for daily household activities. These activity patterns show that the spatial organization of the house is shaped according to the everyday lifestyle and routines of the community. The central position of the chowk reflects its importance as the core activity space of the house, showing that daily lifestyles strongly influence the house forms.

These findings demonstrate that the traditional house forms of the Vaishnav community in Vadnagar manifests in response to the basic needs of the people such as daily activities and privacy, religious beliefs, cultural values and identity rather than just physical functions and structure.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand the relationship between socio-cultural factors and house forms within the Vaishnav community of Vadnagar, India. The study concludes that the traditional house forms of the Vaishnav community are strongly shaped by socio-cultural factors, where architecture functions not only as a physical shelter but also as a reflection of religious beliefs, cultural values, social structures, identity, traditions, and everyday lifestyle practices.

The spatial organizations and architectural characteristics of the traditional Vaishnav houses demonstrate a clear relationship between socio-cultural values and built forms through spatial hierarchy, functional zoning, circulation patterns, and architectural elements. The study further reveals that daily lifestyles, religious practices, and cultural beliefs are major factors influencing the organization and use of spaces within the houses.

The analysis concludes that the spatial arrangement and architectural design of traditional Vaishnav houses are based primarily on the traditions, ritual practices, privacy needs, and belief systems of the community rather than only physical or functional factors. The houses reflect the needs, activities, and cultural practices of the inhabitants, showing a close relationship between everyday life and the built-environment.

The research achieved its aims and objectives by analysing the spatial organization and architectural characteristics of traditional Vaishnav houses, examining the relationship between socio-cultural practices and built forms, and identifying how cultural values, religious beliefs, privacy, social interaction, and daily activities are reflected in the architectural spaces. The study also supports Amos Rapoport's theory (1969) that house forms are not merely shaped by physical factors, but are direct expressions of socio-cultural influences.

Strengths and weaknesses

One of the major strengths of this research is the detailed qualitative documentation of traditional Vaishnav houses through measured drawings, photographs, interviews, spatial analysis, and activity mapping. The study also establishes a direct relationship between socio-cultural factors and house forms using Amos Rapoport's theoretical framework.

However, this research is limited to two case studies within the Vaishnav community of Vadnagar, which may not fully represent the diversity of house forms across different regions or sects in India. It focuses mainly on socio-cultural influences and does not examine climatic, economic, or material-related factors. Moreover, aspects such as family structure and long-term transformations of the house forms require broader demographic and historical analysis.

Future scope

Future research can examine traditional house forms of different communities within Vadnagar to understand how the varying socio-cultural beliefs influence spatial organization and architectural character. Comparative studies between different religious and cultural communities can further explore variations in spatial organizations and architectural identity. Further studies can also investigate how contemporary changes such as urban development, modernization, migration, and evolving lifestyles affect continuity and transformation of traditional vernacular architecture.

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Ethical Practice: This research followed accepted ethical practices. It did not involve any personal data, nor did it coerce any participants to take part in this research under pressure. No person has been identified.

Availability of Data: Data presented in this research is selected from a larger data set and they are available for scrutiny by any legitimate organization.

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