



# Decoding Spatial Narratives: The Role of Vernacular Architecture in Community Identity

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**Abstract:** Vernacular architecture plays a crucial role in shaping spatial narratives that define community identity, cultural heritage, and social interactions. Traditional settlements reflect local environmental adaptations, socio-religious values, and historical continuity, yet they are increasingly under threat from urbanization, commercialization, and policy-driven development. This paper examines how vernacular spatial narratives are constructed, sustained, and transformed in contemporary urban contexts, focusing on Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye as case studies. Using a qualitative research approach, including ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, spatial mapping, and archival research, the study analyses key architectural features, material choices, and spatial configurations that contribute to place-making and identity formation. The findings reveal that courtyards, narrow alleys, decorative motifs, and communal spaces serve as critical markers of cultural identity, reinforcing collective memory and social cohesion. However, rapid modernization, tourism-driven gentrification, and unsustainable urban policies are disrupting these narratives, leading to spatial fragmentation and identity loss. The paper concludes that adaptive reuse strategies, community-led conservation efforts, and policy reforms are essential for integrating vernacular spatial principles into contemporary urban planning while preserving cultural authenticity and historical continuity.

**Keywords:** vernacular architecture, spatial narratives, community identity, urban transformation, heritage conservation.

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## 1. Introduction

Vernacular architecture is an essential aspect of cultural identity, embodying traditions, environmental adaptations, and social structures that have evolved over generations. Unlike modern architectural trends that emphasize uniformity and efficiency, vernacular settlements are deeply rooted in local customs, spatial practices, and historical continuity, reflecting the lived experiences of communities. Across different regions, the spatial organization of these settlements conveys narratives of heritage, belief systems, and communal interactions, making them critical components of place-making and identity formation (Rapoport, 1969; Oliver, 2006). However, the increasing pressures of urbanization, commercialization, and modernization pose significant challenges to the preservation of these spatial narratives. Many vernacular settlements are undergoing transformations, with traditional building forms being replaced by contemporary structures that often disregard historical and socio-cultural significance (Zou et al., 2022). In China, for example, Huizhou's traditional courtyard houses (Siheyuan) have historically served as symbols of Confucian values, family hierarchy, and communal living, yet rapid urban development is eroding their presence and altering their function (Fang et al., 2024). Similarly, in Türkiye, Behramkale's Ottoman-era houses and organic street networks, which have long been central to community interactions and trade, are being increasingly repurposed for commercial tourism, leading to displacement and identity loss (Boyacıoğlu et al., 2023). While research on vernacular architecture as cultural heritage is well established, limited studies focus on how spatial narratives persist, evolve, or disappear in response to modernization and urban planning policies (Rong et al., 2025). This study explores how vernacular spatial narratives contribute to community identity, using Huizhou and Behramkale as case studies to examine how architectural elements, materiality, and spatial configurations encode cultural memory and social cohesion. The research further investigates how contemporary urban transformations impact vernacular identity and what strategies can be employed to sustain these spatial narratives within modern cityscapes. By employing a qualitative methodology, including ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, spatial mapping, and archival research, this study provides insights into the dynamic interaction between vernacular spaces and modern urban realities (Verma et al., 2022). Findings suggest that while courtyards, alleys, decorative motifs, and public squares function as tangible symbols of cultural heritage, they are increasingly threatened by rapid modernization and unsustainable tourism-driven development. The study argues that integrating adaptive reuse strategies, policy interventions, and community-led conservation initiatives into contempo-

rary urban planning can help ensure the long-term sustainability of vernacular spatial narratives, maintaining their relevance in modern architectural discourse.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The study of vernacular architecture and spatial narratives is deeply rooted in theories that explore the relationship between space, place, cultural identity, and social interactions. Understanding how vernacular settlements shape and sustain community identity requires an examination of key theoretical perspectives that explain the production of space, place attachment, and the socio-cultural significance of architecture. This section outlines the theoretical foundations that guide this research, focusing on space and place theory, Lefebvre's concept of spatial production, and vernacular architecture as a socio-cultural construct.

The concept of space and place is central to architectural and urban studies, particularly in the context of how people attach meaning to the built environment. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) differentiates between space as an abstract concept and place as a meaningful entity shaped by human experience. According to Tuan, places acquire cultural, social, and emotional significance through lived interactions, making them integral to identity formation and memory construction. In vernacular settlements, this transformation from space to place occurs through spatial practices, rituals, and shared community experiences. For instance, Huizhou's courtyard houses are not just architectural forms; they represent Confucian ideals of family hierarchy and collective living, fostering a strong sense of belonging among residents (Fang et al., 2024). Similarly, Behramkale's Ottoman-era urban fabric, with its narrow alleys and public squares, reflects centuries-old traditions of trade, communal gatherings, and cultural exchanges (Boyacıoğlu et al., 2023). By applying Tuan's space and place theory, this study investigates how vernacular settlements cultivate deep-rooted cultural identities through spatial configurations and usage patterns.

Building upon this perspective, Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space provides a framework for analyzing how vernacular settlements evolve under modern urban pressures. Lefebvre asserts that space is not just a passive backdrop for human activities but an actively produced and contested entity shaped by social, economic, and political forces. He categorizes space into three dimensions: perceived space (physical and material aspects of the built environment), conceived space (designed and regulated aspects such as urban planning policies), and lived space (the experiential and symbolic meanings attached to places by communities). This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for examining how modernization and gentrification impact vernacular spatial narratives. In Huizhou, for example, government-led urban redevelopment projects are altering the conceived space, replacing traditional wooden courtyard homes with modern concrete structures, thereby disrupting centuries-old spatial relationships and social interactions (Rong et al., 2025). Likewise, in Behramkale, the transformation of residential buildings into commercial tourist accommodations is reshaping the lived experience of the settlement, reducing authentic community engagement and daily spatial practices (Laotan-Brown, 2025). Lefebvre's theory allows this study to critically assess how vernacular spaces are being modified, contested, or lost in the process of urbanization and to explore potential strategies for reintegrating traditional spatial logics into modern urban development.

Another foundational theory relevant to this research is Amos Rapoport's (1969) concept of vernacular architecture as a socio-cultural construct. Rapoport argues that vernacular settlements are shaped more by cultural traditions and social structures than by aesthetic considerations or formal architectural principles. He emphasizes that environmental adaptation, social organization, and cultural symbolism determine the spatial logic and materiality of vernacular buildings. In both Huizhou and Behramkale, the architectural forms reflect local responses to climate, available resources, and socio-religious norms. Huizhou's timber-based courtyard houses are designed to facilitate air circulation and natural lighting while maintaining privacy, aligning with Confucian ideals of order and hierarchy (Fang et al., 2024). In contrast, Behramkale's stone-built homes and organic street layouts serve both environmental and social functions, offering thermal insulation against Mediterranean climates while reinforcing communal living patterns (Boyacıoğlu et al., 2023). Rapoport's theory helps contextualize how architectural decisions in vernacular settlements are informed by cultural logic rather than mere functional or economic factors.

Additionally, Paul Oliver's (2006) work on vernacular architecture and cultural sustainability reinforces the argument that traditional settlements are not relics of the past but living entities that continue to evolve. Oliver contends that vernacular settlements are characterized by a "bottom-up" approach to design, where communities actively participate in shaping and modifying their built environment in response to changing needs and external influences. This perspective challenges the dominant top-down urban planning models that often impose generic development strategies without considering local identity and cultural heritage. The study applies Oliver's insights to assess how community-driven conservation efforts and adaptive reuse strategies can help sustain vernacular identity in contemporary cities, rather than treating these settlements as static museum pieces or erasing them in favor of modernization.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives, this research frames vernacular architecture as an active, evolving spatial practice rather than a fixed historical artefact. By combining Tuan's place-making theory, Lefebvre's spatial production framework, Rapoport's socio-cultural perspective, and Oliver's ideas on cultural sustainability, this study develops a comprehensive understanding of how spatial narratives are constructed, challenged, and adapted within vernacular settlements. The application of these theories allows for a nuanced analysis of Huizhou and Behramkale, examining not only their historical significance but also their current struggles against urban homogenization and gentrification. The study ultimately aims to highlight how traditional spatial logics can be reintegrated into contemporary urban planning, ensuring that vernacular identity and cultural heritage remain relevant in modern architectural discourse.

### 3. Literature Review

The study of vernacular architecture and spatial narratives has been widely explored in architectural and urban studies. This section critically reviews existing research on vernacular settlements, their role in shaping cultural identity, and the challenges of modernization. It examines previous works, identifies key themes and theoretical perspectives, and highlights research gaps that frame this study's approach to Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye as case studies of vernacular spatial narratives.

#### 3.1 Vernacular Architecture and Cultural Identity

Vernacular architecture plays a crucial role in reinforcing cultural identity, social organization, and environmental adaptation. Scholars emphasize that vernacular settlements are not just functional spaces but symbolic environments that encode cultural values and traditions (Kamal & Nasir, 2021). Oliver (2006) defines vernacular architecture as a product of long-standing cultural adaptation to climate, geography, and social structures, making it a vital aspect of place-making and heritage preservation. Similarly, Rapoport (1969) highlights that vernacular settlements are shaped more by cultural and social factors than by formal architectural principles, arguing that architecture must be understood as a reflection of lifestyle, belief systems, and social structures. Several studies have examined vernacular architecture's impact on identity formation in different cultural contexts. Alnaim and Noaime (2024) analyse traditional settlements in Saudi Arabia's Nadji region, revealing that neighbourhood clustering enhances social cohesion and strengthens community ties. Similarly, Fang et al. (2024) investigate Huizhou's interior spaces, demonstrating how wood-carving imagery and courtyard configurations narrate historical, familial, and spiritual values. These studies emphasize the role of architectural elements in reinforcing social identity and cultural continuity.

However, despite the resilience of vernacular forms, many traditional settlements are threatened by cultural erosion due to urbanization, economic transformations, and modernization policies. Boyacıoğlu et al. (2023) analyze vernacular transformations in rural Türkiye, concluding that rapid urbanization and tourism have significantly altered spatial configurations, leading to the loss of vernacular identity. This aligns with Zou et al. (2022), who argue that vernacular spaces are being reconstructed through tourism, often commercializing heritage in ways that distort its original spatial and cultural narratives. While these studies establish the significance of vernacular architecture in cultural identity formation and spatial narratives, they often focus on historical documentation rather than examining how vernacular settlements adapt to contemporary urban pressures. This study builds on these perspectives by investigating the on-going transformations in Huizhou and Behramkale, assessing how spatial narratives persist, evolve, or are disrupted in response to urbanization.

#### 3.2 Spatial Narratives in Architecture

The concept of spatial narratives explores how built environments communicate cultural memory, guide social interactions, and reinforce identity formation. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) introduced the idea that places acquire meaning through human experiences, emotional connections, and historical events, shaping a collective sense of belonging. This notion aligns with Henri Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spatial production, which categorizes space into three interrelated dimensions:

Perceived space (the physical and material aspects of a settlement),

Conceived space (the planned and regulated aspects shaped by urban policies and governance), and

Lived space (the subjective and symbolic meanings assigned by inhabitants).

These perspectives are particularly relevant to vernacular settlements, where spatial arrangements are not only functional but deeply embedded in social and cultural experiences. Joseph and Jha (2023) examine how maps, landscapes, and spatial structures serve as repositories of cultural storytelling, emphasizing the role of vernacular spaces in shaping historical memory and community identity. Similarly, Muktiono (2024) applies a semiotic approach to city identity analysis, revealing that urban elements such as streets, squares, and building facades carry symbolic meanings that define a place's character.

In the context of vernacular settlements, spatial narratives are conveyed through architectural forms, spatial hierarchies,

and material symbolism. Rong et al. (2025) analyse Confucian courtyard houses in China, demonstrating how changing socio-economic conditions are reshaping their symbolic significance and lived experience. Likewise, Song and Gu (2025) discuss how rapid urban development in Macao's Cotai region is altering historical spatial narratives, reshaping vernacular landscapes into commercialized tourist spaces. While previous studies provide valuable insights into spatial narratives in architecture, few have explored how vernacular settlements adapt their spatial narratives over time in response to modernization and urban transformation. This study contributes by examining how spatial narratives in Huizhou and Behramkale are being reshaped by contemporary socio-economic pressures and what strategies can help sustain their cultural significance.

### **3.3 Challenges of Modernization and Vernacular Adaptation**

The rapid expansion of urbanization, globalization, and tourism-driven development presents significant challenges for the preservation of vernacular identity. Scholars argue that many traditional settlements are undergoing drastic transformations, leading to spatial homogenization and cultural displacement (Ishrat et al., 2023). Laotan-Brown (2025) critiques heritage restoration projects that prioritize aesthetics over lived experiences, asserting that many preservation efforts focus on physical reconstruction without considering social and functional continuity. Similarly, Tiwari and Vij (2024) discuss the adaptation of neo-vernacular architecture in contemporary temples in India, illustrating how modern design integrates traditional spatial patterns while responding to contemporary needs. Their study suggests that vernacular adaptation does not necessarily mean loss, but rather an evolution that accommodates modern realities while retaining cultural significance. Further research into policy-driven conservation efforts reveals a lack of comprehensive strategies for preserving vernacular settlements. Rong et al. (2025) highlight how Chinese courtyard houses are rapidly disappearing due to inconsistent heritage policies and urban redevelopment pressures. In contrast, Alnaim and Noaime (2024) argue that Saudi Arabia's approach to neighbourhood clustering could serve as a model for balancing urban growth and cultural preservation. These discussions emphasize the need for sustainable and community-centred conservation strategies. This study builds upon this literature by investigating how contemporary architects, policymakers, and residents can work together to sustain vernacular identity without compromising modern development.

### **3.4 Research Gaps and Contribution of This Study**

While extensive research has examined vernacular architecture, spatial narratives, and cultural identity, several gaps remain. First, most studies focus on the historical significance of vernacular settlements, with limited attention given to how these spatial narratives evolve in contemporary urban contexts. As modernization continues to reshape urban landscapes, there is a need to understand how vernacular settlements are adapting to these changes and what strategies can be employed to maintain cultural identity in modern cities. Second, while scholars have analyzed individual case studies of vernacular settlements, there is a lack of comparative research that examines diverse cultural contexts. This study addresses this gap by conducting a cross-cultural comparison of Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye, highlighting universal patterns and regional variations in vernacular spatial narratives. Lastly, most research on vernacular preservation focuses on physical conservation rather than the lived experiences of residents. This study integrates qualitative methods, including ethnographic observations and interviews, to examine how local communities perceive and navigate changes in vernacular settlements. By exploring both physical and experiential aspects of vernacular identity, this research contributes to theoretical discourse on spatial narratives and practical strategies for sustainable urban planning.

## **4. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology with a comparative case study approach to examine how spatial narratives in vernacular settlements shape and sustain community identity. The research focuses on two distinct yet comparable vernacular settlements: Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye, both of which exhibit rich architectural heritage and strong spatial narratives but face challenges due to modernization and urban transformation. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, the study integrates ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, spatial mapping, and archival research, allowing for a multi-dimensional exploration of how vernacular settlements evolve and adapt in contemporary urban settings.

### **4.1 Research Design**

This research follows a multi-method qualitative approach, combining both primary and secondary data sources to understand spatial narratives and their transformation over time. By employing a comparative case study methodology, the study analyzes similarities and differences in spatial identity, architectural configurations, and social dynamics in the selected settlements. The research integrates the following data collection methods:

Research Method	Purpose	Data Collected
Ethnographic Observations	Understanding how space is used in daily life	Spatial behaviors, interactions, movement patterns
Semi-Structured Interviews	Capturing local perspectives on architecture	Verbal narratives, cultural meanings of spaces
Spatial Mapping and Analysis	Documenting key architectural elements	Floor plans, site plans, materiality analysis
Archival Research	Tracing historical evolution of settlements	Maps, old photographs, government policies

Each method provides unique insights into the social, cultural, and architectural significance of vernacular settlements, allowing for a holistic analysis of how spatial narratives are preserved or altered in response to contemporary urban changes.

## 4.2 Case Study Selection

A comparative case study approach is employed to analyze two culturally rich vernacular settlements: Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye. These settlements were selected based on the following criteria:

- (1) Historical Significance – Both settlements have deep-rooted architectural and cultural traditions.
- (2) Unique Spatial Narratives – They exhibit distinctive spatial configurations and material expressions that contribute to community identity.
- (3) Threats from Modernization – Both settlements face pressures from urban expansion, gentrification, and commercialization.

Settlement	Key Architectural Features	Cultural Significance
Huizhou, China	Traditional courtyard houses (Siheyuan), wood carvings, high-walled compounds	Confucian values, social hierarchy, and family lineage
Behramkale, Türkiye	Stone houses, narrow alleys, Ottoman-era facades	Communal living, trade networks, and historical defence structures

## 4.3 Data Collection Techniques

### 4.3.1 Ethnographic Observations

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period in both settlements to capture daily spatial practices, community interactions, and changing architectural landscapes. Observations focused on:

- How residents interact with space (e.g., communal gatherings in courtyards, pedestrian movement in alleys).
- Daily spatial practices (e.g., use of shared spaces, seasonal adaptations of architecture).
- Changes in architectural elements over time (e.g., introduction of modern materials, structural modifications).

Activity	Huizhou, China	Behramkale, Türkiye
Social Gatherings	Courtyards used for family events, tea ceremonies	Central squares used for community meetings, evening markets
Circulation	Hierarchical street network, narrow alleys connected to courtyard houses	Pedestrian pathways and organic street layouts, emphasizing communal interaction
Seasonal Use of Space	Summer use of open-air courtyards, winter adaptation with screened enclosures	Thicker stone walls retain heat, roof terraces used in summer

### 4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted, 15 in each settlement, with residents, architects, urban planners, and heritage conservationists. The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed for personal storytelling and experiential insights.

Interview Questions Included:

- (1) How does vernacular architecture contribute to your sense of identity?
- (2) What changes have you noticed in spatial organization over time?
- (3) How do you perceive the impact of modern construction on traditional settlements?

Interview Group	Number of Participants	Key Insights
Local Residents	15 (per case study)	Emphasis on community-based living, preservation of cultural values
Architects and Planners	10	Focus on integration of vernacular elements in modern design
Heritage Conservationists	5	Concern about loss of authenticity due to tourism and gentrification

### 4.3.3 Spatial Mapping and Analysis

Architectural elements were documented through sketches, GIS mapping, and photographic analysis. The study focused on key spatial features such as courtyard configurations, building facades, material usage, and alley networks.

Feature	Huizhou, China	Behramkale, Türkiye
Courtyards	Large, enclosed for privacy and family hierarchy	Open, communal for public engagement
Materiality	Timber, clay tiles, ornamental carvings	Limestone, rough-cut stone, minimal decoration
Street Layout	Hierarchical, defined by Confucian principles	Organic, influenced by topography and trade routes
Decorative Elements	Wood carvings, inscriptions reflecting folklore	Islamic motifs, Ottoman-era ironwork

### 4.3.4 Archival Research

Historical records were examined to trace the evolution of settlements and identify changes in vernacular forms. Government planning documents, maps from the 18th and 19th centuries, and restoration policies were reviewed.

Source	Huizhou, China	Behramkale, Türkiye
Historical Maps	18th-century town plans	Ottoman-era settlement records
Government Policies	Traditional housing regulations	Heritage conservation laws and adaptive reuse policies
Restoration Projects	Efforts to preserve wood-carved facades	Modern gentrification concerns

## 5. Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents the data analysis and key findings of the study, focusing on how vernacular spatial narratives contribute to community identity in Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye. The findings are organized into spatial organization and identity, symbolic architectural elements, everyday spatial use, modern challenges, and preservation strategies.

### 5.1 Spatial Organization and Community Identity

Spatial organization plays a crucial role in reinforcing community identity and cultural continuity. Analysis of the two case studies shows that both settlements exhibit unique spatial patterns that reflect their historical, social, and environmental contexts. In Huizhou, hierarchical street layouts, enclosed courtyards, and controlled access points reinforce Confucian family structures and social order. In contrast, Behramkale's organic urban fabric, with narrow alleys and open courtyards, emphasizes communal living and trade interactions.

Spatial Feature	Huizhou, China	Behramkale, Türkiye
Street Layout	Grid-like, controlled by social hierarchy	Organic, influenced by geography
Courtyards	Private, enclosed spaces within family compounds	Open, used for communal gatherings
Public Spaces	Confined to temple courtyards and tea houses	Central squares, open-air markets
Housing Clusters	Organized around family lineages	Integrated with trade routes and public spaces
Building Orientation	Aligned with Feng Shui principles	Oriented based on topography and wind patterns

The spatial arrangement of public spaces, housing clusters, and building orientation also plays a significant role in shaping social interactions and cultural expression. While Huizhou follows Feng Shui principles in determining spatial hierarchy, Behramkale's layout is shaped by its topography and historical role as a trade hub.

### 5.2 Symbolic Architectural Elements and Cultural Identity

Vernacular settlements often embed cultural narratives into their built environment through ornamentation, materials, and spatial configurations. In Huizhou, wood carvings and calligraphy inscriptions are integral to architectural storytelling, representing ancestral lineage, philosophical teachings, and local folklore. In contrast, Behramkale's Ottoman-era stone reliefs and ironwork decorations depict Islamic motifs and communal values.

Architectural Element	Symbolism in Huizhou	Symbolism in Behramkale
Wood Carvings	Depicts Confucian philosophy and family lineage	Rare, but present in decorative doors and beams
Stone Reliefs	Not common due to wood-based architecture	Common, featuring floral and geometric Ottoman patterns
Calligraphy Inscriptions	Found in entrances, symbolizing luck and prosperity	Found in mosques, markets, expressing religious values
Building Materials	Timber and clay tiles for flexibility and tradition	Limestone and rough-cut stone for durability

Material selection also reflects cultural adaptation and environmental sustainability. While Huizhou primarily uses timber and clay tiles for flexibility and natural insulation, Behramkale's reliance on limestone and rough-cut stone ensures durability and climate resistance.

### 5.3 Everyday Spatial Use and Social Interaction

The use of vernacular spaces in daily life reveals how architecture influences social practices and seasonal adaptations. In Huizhou, family gatherings are primarily held within enclosed courtyards, reinforcing Confucian ideals of privacy and hierarchy. Meanwhile, in Behramkale, open plazas and communal spaces facilitate public interactions and market activities, creating a dynamic social landscape.

Activity	Huizhou, China	Behramkale, Türkiye
Family Gatherings	Conducted in enclosed courtyards	Happens in open plazas and communal spaces
Religious Practices	Temples integrated into residential neighborhoods	Mosques centrally located in villages
Market and Trade	Small shops within alleyways	Large public markets as economic hubs
Seasonal Adaptation	Screened courtyards for winter, open spaces for summer	Thick stone walls provide insulation

Religious and economic activities are also structured around vernacular spatial layouts. In Huizhou, temples are integrated within residential neighbourhoods, reinforcing a connection between spiritual life and domestic space. In contrast, Behramkale's mosques are centrally located, serving as both religious and social hubs for the community.

### 5.4 Threats to Vernacular Identity and Modern Adaptations

The study reveals several major threats to the sustainability of vernacular spatial narratives. The most critical challenges include:

Threat	Huizhou, China	Behramkale, Türkiye
Urbanization	Demolition of courtyard houses	Encroachment of modern buildings
Tourism	Cultural commodification of historic sites	Rising property costs, displacement of locals
Material Change	Shift from wood and clay to concrete	Loss of traditional stone masonry techniques
Social Impact	Decline in multi-generational living	Changing role of public spaces

In Huizhou, modern construction methods are replacing wooden houses with concrete structures, affecting both the aesthetic and functional integrity of vernacular spaces. Similarly, in Behramkale, commercialization has led to the conversion of historic homes into boutique hotels and restaurants, shifting their original residential purpose toward tourism-related activities.

### 5.5 Strategies for Preserving Vernacular Identity

To counter these challenges, the study identifies several preservation strategies that balance heritage conservation with modern urban development. Key recommendations include:

Strategy	Implementation in Huizhou	Implementation in Behramkale
Adaptive Reuse	Restoring wooden houses for modern living	Converting old stone houses into cultural spaces
Policy Interventions	Government tax incentives for restoration	Strict urban zoning regulations
Community Engagement	Educational programs on vernacular heritage	Local-led preservation initiatives
Sustainable Tourism Models	Limits on commercial development in historic districts	Encouraging cultural tourism instead of mass tourism

In Huizhou, government-led tax incentives and educational programs on vernacular heritage have shown promise in

preserving traditional housing. In Behramkale, strict urban zoning laws and local-led conservation initiatives are helping mitigate the impact of tourism-related commercialization.

## 6. Conclusions

This study has examined how vernacular spatial narratives contribute to community identity by analysing architectural configurations, symbolic elements, and spatial interactions in two culturally significant settlements: Huizhou, China, and Behramkale, Türkiye. The findings reveal that vernacular settlements serve as repositories of cultural memory, encoding socio-historical values through spatial organization, materiality, and ornamentation. While these settlements have historically evolved in response to environmental and social needs, they are now facing significant pressures from urbanization, commercialization, and modernization, threatening their cultural continuity and architectural authenticity. A key insight from this study is that vernacular spatial narratives are not passive remnants of the past but actively shape and reinforce social identity in the present. The hierarchical courtyard layouts of Huizhou continue to reflect Confucian principles of order and family hierarchy, while Behramkale's organic street networks sustain a tradition of communal interaction and trade. Despite their differences, both settlements emphasize spatial intimacy, cultural symbolism, and functional adaptation, making them integral to the everyday lives of their inhabitants. However, the encroachment of modern urban policies, rapid tourism development, and material transformations are altering these spatial narratives, leading to a loss of identity and socio-spatial fragmentation.

The study also highlights the challenges of balancing heritage preservation with contemporary urban demands. In Huizhou, the shift from traditional wooden courtyard houses to modern concrete structures threatens the aesthetic and social fabric of the settlement, while in Behramkale, tourism-driven gentrification has transformed residential spaces into commercial hubs, affecting local livelihoods and spatial cohesion. These findings underscore the need for sustainable conservation strategies that go beyond static preservation efforts and instead focus on adaptive reuse, community-driven initiatives, and policy reforms that integrate vernacular spatial principles into modern urban planning.

To mitigate these challenges, this research proposes a combination of adaptive reuse strategies, strict zoning regulations, and community-led conservation models to ensure that vernacular spatial narratives remain relevant in contemporary urban contexts. Governments and urban planners must recognize that heritage preservation should not merely focus on maintaining physical structures but should also prioritize preserving lived experiences, socio-spatial interactions, and local cultural practices. Encouraging culturally sensitive tourism models, supporting traditional craftsmanship, and engaging local communities in decision-making processes are essential steps toward achieving a balance between modernization and cultural continuity. In conclusion, vernacular settlements serve as living archives of cultural heritage, and their spatial narratives must be understood, respected, and sustained to ensure the continued relevance of traditional architectural practices in contemporary urban environments. As cities continue to expand and evolve, a more holistic approach to heritage conservation—one that integrates both historical authenticity and contemporary adaptation—is crucial to maintaining the rich cultural identities embedded in vernacular architecture. Future research should explore digital documentation tools such as GIS and 3D modelling to preserve vernacular spatial narratives and investigate policy-driven approaches that support the integration of vernacular identity into modern urban planning. Ultimately, the survival of vernacular settlements depends on a collaborative effort between architects, urban planners, policymakers, and local communities to ensure their lasting significance in the built environment.

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