



Dismantling Culture and System of Settings: A Critical Conceptual Framework for Reading the Built Environment

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Abstract

Although culture is widely recognized as shaping the built environment, scholarship often remains descriptive and methodologically unclear about how cultural determinants become spatially manifest and ideologically consequential. Addressing this gap, especially with respect to vernacular settings, this study proposes an integrated framework that couples dismantling culture with the system of settings construct to operationalize culture for spatial reading. Using a conceptual-analytic method (critical literature reading and theoretical synthesis), culture is decomposed into values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems and aligned with system of settings analysis, which treats environments as ordered relations among space, time, activity, and communication. The framework shows that (1) culture becomes spatially legible through staged translation via activity systems; (2) the system of settings mediates cultural registration across fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed features; (3) typologies (vernacular, spontaneous, traditional, modern-formal) differ by cultural embeddedness; and (4) translation is hermeneutic, delimiting possibilities rather than prescribing form. These results provide an interpretive grammar for culturally responsive design and post-occupancy evaluation and motivate subsequent empirical testing through comparative field studies.

Keywords: activity systems, cultural embeddedness, interpretive spatial analysis, socio-spatial translation, vernacular environments.

Dismantling Budaya dan System of Settings: Kerangka Konseptual Kritis untuk Membaca Lingkungan Binaan

Abstrak

Meskipun budaya secara luas diakui membentuk lingkungan binaan, kajian ilmiah kerap masih bersifat deskriptif dan kurang memberikan kejelasan metodologis mengenai bagaimana determinan budaya termanifestasi secara spasial serta menghasilkan konsekuensi ideologis. Untuk menjawab kesenjangan ini, terutama dalam konteks lingkungan vernakular, studi ini mengusulkan kerangka terpadu yang menggabungkan dismantling budaya dengan konstruk system of settings guna mengoperasionalisasi budaya sebagai perangkat pembacaan spasial. Melalui metode konseptual-analitik (pembacaan kritis literatur dan sintesis teoretis), budaya diurai menjadi nilai, norma, gaya hidup, dan sistem aktivitas, kemudian disejajarkan dengan analisis system of settings yang memandang lingkungan sebagai tatanan relasional yang teratur antara ruang, waktu, aktivitas, dan komunikasi. Kerangka ini menunjukkan bahwa (1) budaya menjadi terbaca secara spasial melalui translasi bertahap yang dimediasi oleh sistem aktivitas; (2) system of settings memediasi perekaman determinan budaya pada fitur fixed, semi-fixed, dan non-fixed; (3) tipologi (vernakular, spontan, tradisional, modern-formal) berbeda berdasarkan derajat cultural embeddedness; dan (4) proses translasi bersifat hermeneutik, yakni membatasi medan kemungkinan alih-alih merekomendasikan bentuk. Temuan ini menyediakan "tata-baca" interpretatif bagi perancangan yang responsif budaya dan evaluasi.

Kata-kunci: analisis spasial interpretatif, keterlekatan budaya, lingkungan vernakular, sistem aktivitas, translasi sosio-spasial.

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Introduction

The built environment is constitutive of human experience, functioning not simply as a material backdrop but as an active socio-spatial medium through which individuals and collectivities negotiate cultural meanings and ecological conditions. Accordingly, it is more productively theorized as a system of settings: a relational configuration of spatial form and social practice that structures conduct, encodes cultural values, and mediates processes of social integration [1, p. 21].

Extending this proposition, the system of settings construct has been elaborated across environmental psychology [2], spatial theory [3], and urban sociology [4], [5]. Although these fields privilege different explanatory registers, they converge on the claim that space possesses irreducible socio-cultural properties that shape well-being, collective identification, and participation. Within this view, a system of settings comprises not only physical fabric and spatial arrangement but also situated practices and symbolic orders through which place is produced and recognized [6]. Space is therefore not neutral; it co-produces social life by enabling, constraining, and rendering legible particular relations and power-laden dynamics [3], [7].

A substantial body of empirical and theoretical work further demonstrates that spatial configuration conditions the unfolding of everyday sociality. More permeable and open layouts may intensify co-presence and interaction [8], whereas enclosed or segmented arrangements can attenuate attachment and cohesion [9]. Beyond configurational openness, spatial affordances [10], culturally saturated symbols [11], and navigability parameters such as walkability [12] shape interpretation and use. Design decisions thus operate as socio-material interventions with distributive effects—reconfiguring behavior, access to resources [13], health outcomes, and the articulation of collective identity [14].

Yet a persistent difficulty in architectural research and practice remains: translating the analytically diffuse concept of culture into operationalizable spatial variables. Frequently, the linkage between configuration and socio-cultural dynamics is neither documented nor theorized with sufficient rigor, producing disjunctions between spatial form and lived experience [15]. This problem foregrounds the need for a conceptual apparatus capable of rendering cultural determinants spatially explicit, analytically tractable, and evaluable.

To meet this need, the dismantling approach is advanced here as an analytic strategy for decomposing culture into components that can be systematically related to space—specifically values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems. Under this framing, culture is treated less as an ineffable abstraction than as a patterned social system amenable to operationalization in both design and analysis [1, p. 97].

Crucially, dismantling supports two complementary pathways of inquiry: an ideational pathway anchored in values and normative orders, and a practical pathway grounded in recurrent activity patterns. Each can be translated into spatial typologies that index social structure [16]. For example, privacy conventions, hierarchical relations, and communal practices may be materialized through public-private gradations, nested boundaries, and transitional thresholds [17]. The analytic reach of this framework can be strengthened through instruments such as space syntax and systematic mappings of environmental-quality attributes [18], [19].

Within this conceptual architecture, comparative analysis across built-environment typologies becomes feasible. Four broad categories—vernacular, spontaneous, traditional, and professional (modern-formal)—may be differentiated by degrees of cultural embeddedness, modes of spatial production, and planning rationalities [1, p. 27]. Vernacular environments, generated through situated knowledge and collective participation [20], [21], often sustain cultural continuity and support sustainability imperatives [22], [23]. By contrast, professional environments—shaped by formal aesthetics, technical regulation, and market logics—may introduce discontinuities with local contexts and lived cultural repertoires [24], [25].

This divergence signals a pronounced epistemological and practical tension between adaptive, context-responsive modes of spatial production and normative, universalizing paradigms of design. While the literature widely acknowledges that culture matters for space, it often remains either descriptive or prescriptive, lacking a robust mechanism for translating cultural variables into spatial structures that can be read, compared, and evaluated systematically. Consequently, a significant research gap persists concerning how culture might be conceptualized—and methodologically mobilized—as an operational system within spatial analysis and design [14], [26].

In response, the present study advances an integrated framework that couples dismantling culture with system of settings analysis as a means of examining—and, by extension, informing—the culture–space nexus. The central objective is to develop a structured mode of reading and translating cultural elements—values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems—into spatial configurations, built-environment typologies, and conceptual instruments for contextual evaluation.

The study's contribution lies in its cross-disciplinary synthesis and its explicit treatment of culture as a system that can be spatially mapped through a sequenced analytic procedure. This yields an interpretive framework and conceptual reading tool intended to bridge cultural abstraction and spatial organizing logics. In turn, the proposed approach provides a basis for developing culturally grounded, socially resilient built-environment knowledge that remains pertinent amid intensifying globalization and ecological pressures.

Methods

The methodological posture of this study is deliberately framed not as a procedural toolkit but as a conceptual-analytic apparatus for interrogating the culture–built-environment relation. The inquiry foregrounds dismantling culture as a mode of theorization: a systematic decomposition of cultural determinants—values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems—through which ostensibly diffuse cultural constructs are rendered analytically tractable and critically connectable to spatial configuration. Method, in this formulation, functions as an epistemic strategy that supports reflexive interpretation and theory-building, rather than as a narrowly instrumental protocol.

The framework is structured by two complementary pathways. The first addresses culture's excessive abstraction by translating it into more empirically legible modalities of social expression (e.g., kinship formations, social networks, and collective identity). The second addresses culture's excessive generality by specifying the mechanisms through which broad cultural constructs are articulated across worldview, value systems, normative orders, and quotidian practice. In combination, these pathways constitute a composite conceptual architecture that enables the culture–space nexus to be read with greater analytic resolution and critical depth.

The study further advances a conceptual synthesis between dismantling culture and the system of settings construct. Here, the system of settings is

understood as an ordering of relations among space, time, and activity that organizes interaction and stabilizes patterned conduct. By aligning the outputs of dismantling with the system of settings frame, the analysis proposes that cultural elements are not merely antecedent influences on spatial form; they are also expressed, mediated, and communicated through socio-spatial arrangements as symbolic and relational meanings embedded in everyday life.

Within this orientation, the analytic strategy proceeds through a critical reading of relevant scholarship and representative cases, undertaken to demonstrate that the culture–space relation is itself a theoretically productive construction capable of extending and sharpening disciplinary debate. The evidentiary basis is therefore predominantly theoretical and interpretive, oriented toward the articulation, specification, and clarification of conceptual linkages.

Figures 1–3 are employed as conceptual schemata to render explicit the analytical sequence of dismantling culture and its integration with the system of settings framework. Each figure is interpreted and adapted from Rapoport's conceptual models [27], [28], with selective adjustments to terminology and relational emphasis to align with the study's analytic objectives. Accordingly, the figures are treated not as empirical outputs but as heuristic devices that support a systematic reading of correspondences between cultural components and spatial configuration. The methodological framework is then operationalized through the two dismantling models detailed below.

Dismantling Culture: Addressing Excessive Abstraction

The first model targets the reduction of cultural abstraction by mapping “culture” onto more observable and differentiable forms of social expression, including family structure, social networks, roles, status relations, identity formations, and institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical descent from culture as a macro-category to more operational social forms—i.e., the dismantling of “culture” as a response to excessive abstraction.

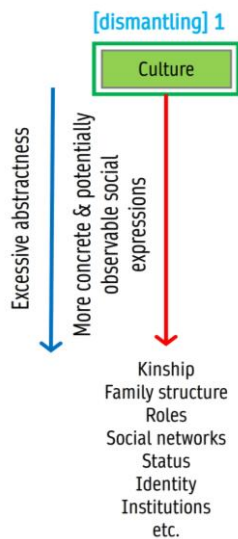


Figure 1. Dismantling approach 1: reducing excessive abstractness
 Source: Interpreted and adapted from Rapoport [27, p. 8] in [1, p. 93].

Through this pathway, relations between cultural values and spatial form become more traceable. For instance, preferences for extended-family co-residence may be spatially registered through requirements for shared communal areas, graduated public-private zoning, or internal hierarchies of rooms within domestic layouts.

Dismantling Culture: Addressing Excessive Generality

The second model addresses cultural generality by decomposing culture conceptually from worldviews to activity systems. Figure 2 represents this as an expressive chain in which values generate schemas and meanings that subsequently crystallize into norms, social expectations, lifestyles, and activity systems.

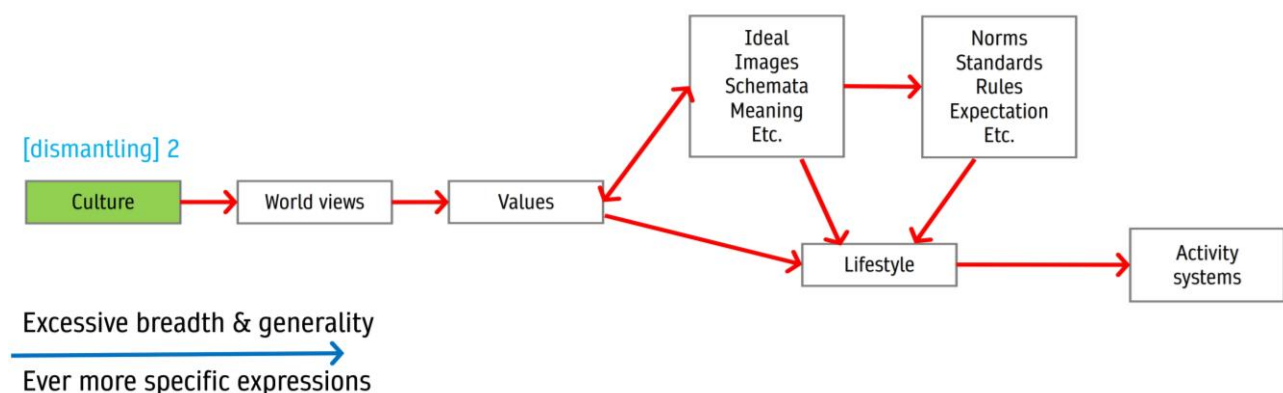


Figure 2. Dismantling approach 2: reducing excessive breadth and generality
 Source: Interpreted and adapted from Rapoport [27, p. 8] in [1, p. 95].

This sequence facilitates the derivation of design- and research-relevant parameters from specific value commitments. For example, the value placed on familial connectedness may be traced to activity systems such as shared meals or deliberative gatherings, which, in turn, imply spatial requirements for flexibility, visual permeability, and proximity.

Combined Approach: Linking Culture and the Built Environment

To construct an analytic bridge between cultural determinants and spatial structure, the study integrates the two approaches into a unified framework. Figure 3 depicts a systemic mapping between cultural components (values, norms, lifestyles, activity systems) and the spatial forms of the built environment.

Within the diagram, each cultural element is assessed in terms of its feasibility for being linked directly to the organization of space, time, and communication within the system of settings. As cultural expressions become more concrete and practice-proximate, their capacity to inform built-environment features increases—across fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed domains.

The three figures are thus intended to consolidate the study’s line of reasoning through conceptual visualization. Overall, the methodology foregrounds a cross-disciplinary integration of architectural theory, sociology, environmental psychology, and philosophies of space as a platform for extending scholarly discourse on culturally grounded built environments.

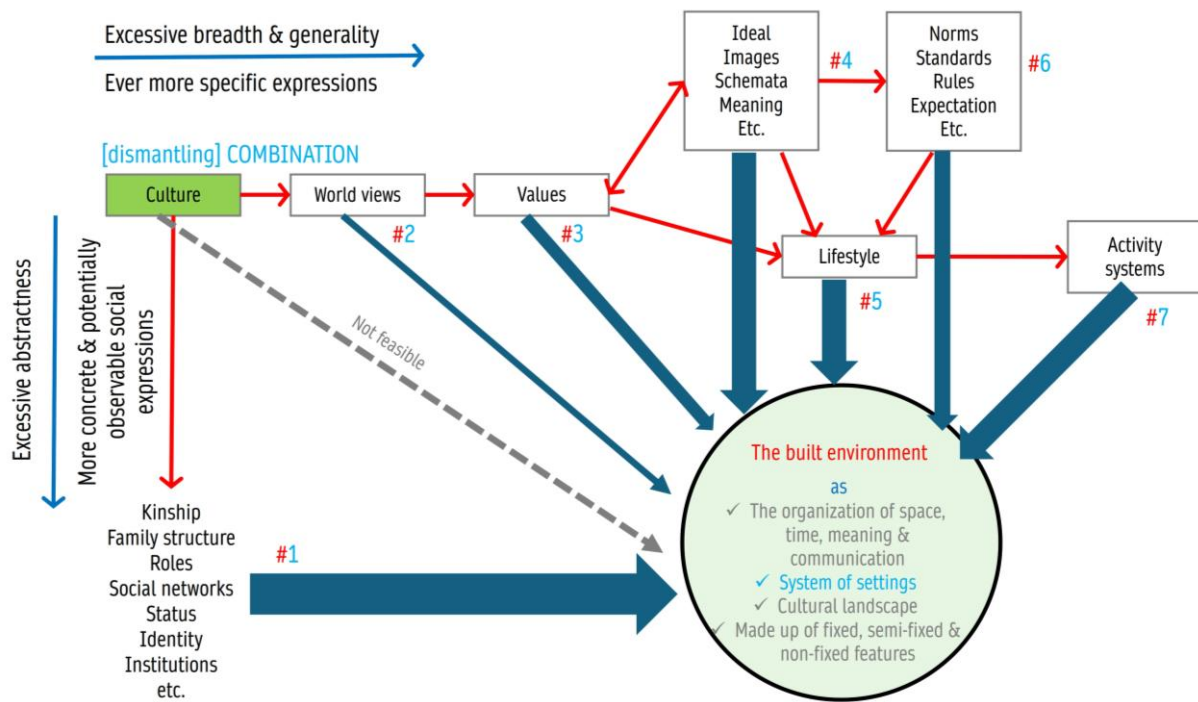


Figure 3. Combined dismantling approach: linking cultural components to the built environment
Source: Interpreted and adapted from Rapoport [28, p. 149] in [1, p. 98].

As a conceptual inquiry, this approach is not designed to capture empirical variation directly. Rather, it seeks to formulate an analytical framework that can structure subsequent reading, comparison, and eventual empirical testing through data-driven field research.

Results: Conceptual Outputs of the Framework

The principal outputs of this study are articulated as a consolidated conceptual framework that renders the translation of culture into spatial configuration analytically explicit through the combined use of dismantling culture and system of settings analysis. These “results” are not posed as empirical generalizations; instead, they are advanced as interpretive products that furnish a disciplined grammar for reading the culture–space nexus.

First, the study specifies a sequential, staged translation chain by which culture becomes spatially intelligible. Rather than presuming a direct correspondence between “culture” and form, the framework decomposes culture into interdependent components—values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems—that operate as proximate determinants of socio-spatial organization. This staged logic links cultural abstraction to spatial ordering by showing how recurrent, institutionally stabilized activity systems provide the immediate medium through which cultural commitments are sedimented into configuration.

Second, the framework formalizes the relationship between cultural components and the system of settings as an operational medium. The system of settings is conceptualized as an ordering of relations among space, time, and activity within which values and norms acquire spatial presence and practical enforceability. On this account, the most practice-proximate cultural elements—activity patterns and situated social practices—exert the most direct leverage on built-environment features across fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed domains.

Third, the study derives a typological reading apparatus grounded in degrees of cultural embeddedness. Vernacular, spontaneous, traditional, and modern-formal environments can be differentiated by the extent to which cultural systems and spatial systems are mutually integrated. Vernacular environments tend to exhibit tighter coupling between values, activity systems, and configuration, while modern-formal environments more often disclose disjunctions between universalizing design rationalities and users’ culturally situated practices.

Fourth, the framework clarifies that culture-to-space translation is fundamentally conceptual and hermeneutic rather than mechanical. Values and norms do not causally “generate” form in a deterministic sense; they delimit a field of possibilities that channels the organization of activity and socio-

spatial relations. The culture–space relationship is thus treated as an analytic construction that enables critical interpretation of built environments, not as a prescriptive design algorithm.

Taken together, these results yield an analytic framework through which culture may be treated as an operational system readable in spatial terms—supporting structured assessment, comparison, and critical reflection on built-environment configurations across contexts.

Discussion: Theoretical and Disciplinary Implications

This discussion positions the framework’s conceptual outputs within wider cross-disciplinary debates on culture and space, foregrounding the theoretical stakes of treating culture as operational rather than merely symbolic. The central implication is that the culture–built-environment relationship does not proceed through form as an immediate representation of culture; it is mediated through staged translation across values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems. By integrating dismantling culture with the system of settings construct, the study relocates culture in built-environment scholarship from contextual background to a structured analytic system that can be read spatially and examined critically.

Culture as an Operational Variable in Spatial Analysis and Design

In alignment with Rapoport’s argument that culture functions as an active variable in built-environment production [1], the present framework extends this position by demonstrating how culture can be operationalized via a sequenced analytic procedure. Against accounts that reduce culture to symbolic ambience or descriptive attribute [11], the model treats values, norms, lifestyles, and activity systems as relationally coupled components that co-produce spatial organization.

Here, dismantling culture operates as a bridging mechanism between the abstraction of value commitments and the material-configurational specificity of space. While scholarship on the symbolic meaning of space remains indispensable [6], the framework adds an explicit tracing logic for following cultural determinants as they are transformed into practice and, subsequently, into spatial structure. Culture is thereby positioned not only as a reservoir of meaning, but as a comparative system that can be specified, mapped, and evaluated across contexts.

Moreover, the model provides designers, planners, and researchers with a means of moving beyond intuitionistic cultural readings toward methodological approaches that are, in principle, open to systematic comparison and empirical testing. This orientation is particularly salient under intensified globalization and rapid urbanization, where frictions between global design rationalities and locally grounded value systems become acute. Under such conditions, dismantling culture functions simultaneously as an analytic instrument and a strategic mediator between cultural plurality and universalizing efficiencies, contributing to design and research models that can be read, experienced, and negotiated across cultures and generations [16], [29].

The System of Settings as a Medium of Culture–Space Translation

The positioning of the system of settings as a medium of culture–space translation reinforces established claims that the built environment constitutes an ordering of relations among space, time, and activity [1], [4]. The framework adds an important specification, however: the system of settings is not neutral infrastructure. It is a socio-spatial arena in which norms, hierarchies, and culturally patterned practices are repeatedly enacted, contested, and stabilized.

This argument resonates with scholarship on public space and third places emphasizing the capacity of settings to structure interaction and consolidate collective identity [4] [30]. The distinctive contribution advanced here is to specify how the system of settings lens supports multilevel readings—physical, social, and symbolic—such that culture–space relations are not reduced to formal morphology but are apprehended as dynamic socio-spatial processes.

Universality of Spatial Principles and Cultural Specificity

The framework further suggests that tensions between universal spatial principles and cultural specificity are more productively theorized as a dialectical relation than as a binary opposition. This stance is consistent with views that spatial meaning is co-produced through social experience and user interpretation [3], [6]. Design, accordingly, can be approached as a hermeneutic practice in which ostensibly universal principles are continuously interpreted through culturally situated lenses.

From this perspective, the universal-particular tension becomes analytically tractable: universal principles are neither dismissed nor uncritically imposed, but refracted through local values and activity systems. The framework thus enables systematic reading of how cultural specificity modulates—rather than merely resists—universalizing design rationalities.

Activity Systems and Spatial Patterning

By foregrounding activity systems as the primary proximate pathway of culture-space translation, the study consolidates prior findings on the role of activity and behavior in shaping configuration [8], [10], [31]. Its additional contribution is to insist that activity systems are not autonomous behavioral sequences; they are embedded within, and conditioned by, the broader chain of values, norms, and lifestyles that determine which activities matter, how they are organized, and how they become socially stabilized.

Engagement with literature on housing preferences [32] and social attachment [9] further implies that configuration not only accommodates activity but also reproduces culturally mediated expectations and modes of belonging. Spatial design can therefore be read as a medium for articulating lifestyle and social order, rather than as a purely functional container.

Vernacular and Modern-Formal Environments through the Culture-Space Lens

The vernacular-modern-formal comparison situates the framework within debates on adaptability, cultural continuity, and technical efficiency [20], [22], [24]. The analysis does not position vernacular environments as normative ideals; instead, it treats them as illustrative instances of high integration between cultural and spatial systems. Conversely, modern-formal environments are interpreted as contexts in which integration is often interrupted by the predominance of universalizing design logics, regulatory regimes, and technical standardization.

Importantly, the dismantling-system of settings framework renders this tension analytically, rather than ideologically. It enables critical evaluation of how, and to what extent, modern design can adapt to local values and activity systems without forfeiting technical performance, while also opening conceptual space for more contextual and sustainable design trajectories.

Conceptual Implications for Design and Post-Occupancy Evaluation

Finally, the framework's significance extends to design implications and post-occupancy evaluation. In relation to scholarship on the discrepancy between residential aspirations and lived realities (the actual-aspiration gap) [33], the proposed culture-space apparatus can be mobilized as a reflective instrument for assessing whether built environments substantively articulate users' values, practices, and socio-spatial needs.

In contrast to evaluation approaches that privilege technical performance alone, the framework invites identity, meaning, and socio-ecological sustainability to be incorporated as evaluative dimensions [22], [23], [26]. The study's principal contribution, therefore, lies in consolidating conceptual foundations for culturally responsive built-environment research and design, underscoring the continuing need for approaches capable of bridging culture and space in systematic and analyzable ways.

Conclusion

This study sought to render the culture-built-environment relation conceptually explicit and methodologically legible by coupling dismantling culture with the setting-system construct. Against approaches that treat culture as an undifferentiated background condition or as a merely symbolic overlay, the proposed framework theorizes culture as an operational system that becomes spatially readable through a staged translation across values, normative orders, lifestyles, and activity systems.

A first conclusion is that culture-space relations are most adequately apprehended as mediated and sequential rather than as immediate form-culture correspondences. Values and norms do not causally determine spatial form in any linear sense; instead, they delimit a structured field of possibilities that channels practice and stabilizes recurrent activity systems. It is through these practice-proximate activity systems—organized in time, space, and communicative routines—that cultural commitments most directly register in the socio-material features of settings, across fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed domains.

A second conclusion concerns the analytic purchase of the system of settings as the medium through which such translations are effected and made readable. Conceived as an ordering of relations among space, time, and activity, the system of settings lens enables built environments to be interpreted simultaneously as configurational morphologies, social arrangements, and symbolic structures.

Consequently, the system of settings cannot be regarded as neutral infrastructure; it is a socio-spatial arena in which norms, hierarchies, and identities are enacted, contested, and reproduced through the routinization of everyday practice.

Third, the study suggests that degrees of cultural embeddedness provide a productive basis for differentiating built-environment typologies. Vernacular, spontaneous, traditional, and modern-formal environments can be interpreted according to the extent to which their cultural systems and spatial systems are mutually integrated. In vernacular contexts, cultural values and activity patterns often exhibit tighter coupling with configuration, supporting continuity and contextual adaptability. By contrast, modern-formal settings may generate discontinuities when universalizing design rationalities, regulatory regimes, or market imperatives supersede users' situated cultural repertoires.

At the same time, the vernacular-modern-formal distinction is most useful when treated analytically rather than ideologically. The framework does not prescribe vernacular form as an ideal; rather, it functions as a reading apparatus for examining how contemporary design negotiates the tension between universality and cultural specificity. On this account, "universal" principles are neither rejected nor assumed to be culturally neutral; they are interpreted, adjusted, and refracted through locally constituted values and activity systems.

Taken together, these conclusions imply that culturally responsive built-environment scholarship and practice require more than the commonplace assertion that "culture matters." They require conceptual mechanisms capable of translating cultural determinants into analyzable spatial terms. The dismantling-system of settings framework contributes such a mechanism by offering a structured interpretive grammar for reading, comparing, and evaluating culture-space relations.

Because the present study is conceptual rather than empirical, its conclusions should be read as propositions open to further testing and refinement. Future work may extend the framework through field-based studies, post-occupancy evaluation, and comparative research across typologies and regions. Such inquiries can probe the explanatory leverage of the dismantling chain, identify conditions under which cultural embeddedness is strengthened or weakened, and develop more robust indicators for connecting cultural variables to spatial configuration.

AI Use Declaration

This study utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools and methodologies to support various aspects of manuscript preparation. AI-based large language models, including ChatGPT-5, Scite.AI, Scopus Metadata, and Zotero Reference Manager, were employed for language refinement, content summarization, and technical writing assistance. Language refinement encompassed improvements to grammar, sentence structure, and readability, while content summarization aided in presenting findings and conclusions more concisely. Furthermore, AI-based technical writing assistance provided guidance in formulating complex descriptions more effectively. We affirm that all AI-assisted processes were critically reviewed by the authors to ensure the integrity and reliability of the results. The final decisions and interpretations presented in this article were made entirely by the authors.

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