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Extended Margins of a House: The Transitional Culture

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ABSTRACT

The learning imbibed in us through our first understanding of the space 'home' is irreplaceable. We learnt the aspects discipline, cleanliness and sharing in the most rudimentary manner which carved us into 'cultured social beings'. The deep associations of culture and architecture are realized through a materialistic setting through an act of everyday life, in this context a dynamic space undergoing changes from time to time. Spaces and usage of materials are dictated by their tradition, forming an architectural language. In response to time, this has formed an adaptive culture, thus has undergone the process of transformation. Specific locations in a house weigh less importance than the others, one such not so appreciated space is the 'threshold'. It sits at the entrance or takes its place, yet isn't as important as the house. Transitions, interactions, circulations and exchanges happen in this indefinite yet definite space. The idea of boundary, psychological or physiological, that the threshold extends transforms from the fact that this space connects two completely contrasting life domains. There was an appalling shift from then to now. The aspects of culture through built environment have been replaced by the much fancier 'modern'. The transformed adaptive culture has lost its elements. The oblivion of these essences of tradition brings in desperate need for it to be preserved and stated to be authentic. Yet, what stands before us is an opportunity to observe the process of transformation, adaptation and appropriation as rural communities substitute traditional thresholds for modern ones. This paper weighs the position of the thresholds in Indian dwellings from a rural locale to the proliferating urban sprawl and seeks to find its identity on a social, emotional and traditional. The switch of one house form for the other implies cultural change and thins the role of a threshold as a continuum of cultural values. With the continuous paradigm shift the transitional threshold is quietly dying out!

Keywords: Thresholds, culture, transitional space, social interaction

Introduction

Man is a social animal and shares a very close relationship with the society around for his overall behavioural development. A healthy society is a result of its participant individuals. It indeed is a two-way process where individuals and society look out to one another for development and wellbeing (Green, 1968). Study of man's prehistoric past explains his associations with nature and the surroundings, which mainly comprised of his folks and life around. Nature in totality played a vital role for this splendid evolution of life on earth (Maryanski, 1992). A newly born mimics his parents and family to grow and develop. Darwinism explains that survival skills and the urge to grow have been a common trait seen across centuries. What we are today is a result of the experiences and the lessons we got during childhood. The lessons encompassed of people, culture, religion, society and relationships. Our schooling began at home around the warmth and secure atmosphere of our family. The family doesn't however restrict itself to the immediate one but extends to the relatives, friends, neighbours, animals and the immediate community in totality. This social circle allows one to grow into a refined person (Hossain & Ali, 2014). We evolved and so did our way of life i.e. from the tents and tepees to the cloud

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competing skyscrapers or the fancy cuisines vs the raw reared meat of the early man. It all changed and like they say 'change is the only constant', the constant bettering itself.

Building shelter for security was one of the primary necessities that have been a concern from the Neolithic era. The house form today has taken shape after the experiments done by millions of generations before today. The principal definition of a house has remained unchanged however typologies and the methods of application have changed. The house form is a representative of the vernacular or the folk and one of the first realisations undertaken to suffice needs. The architecture of the local has lessons to teach as Rapport (1969) advocates in his book *House, form and culture*. He suggests that the bulk of buildings vernacular to people has been neglected and only monuments and masterpieces are considered as architecture. Local dwellings have a great quality to teach us lessons of building and craft, but are stereotyped as "mud hovels or insignificant grass shacks" (p.1). The essence lies in the study of the whole environment and not a small aspect in isolation. This neglect to physicality has worsened the cultural quotient of traditional dwellings. As an implication, the worth of the practices, beliefs and traditions of the house and its inhabitants becomes less significant and so does the building vocabulary. Spaces with symbolic value are compromised in this exercise. This paper focusses on one such cultural space with a liminal quality at the threshold to a house.

Objective

This paper is an inquiry of liminal spaces such as thresholds of houses and their importance as cultural and functional spaces of the built environment. The paper is also aiming to ideate the current trends with respect to thresholds today in comparison the vernacular house.

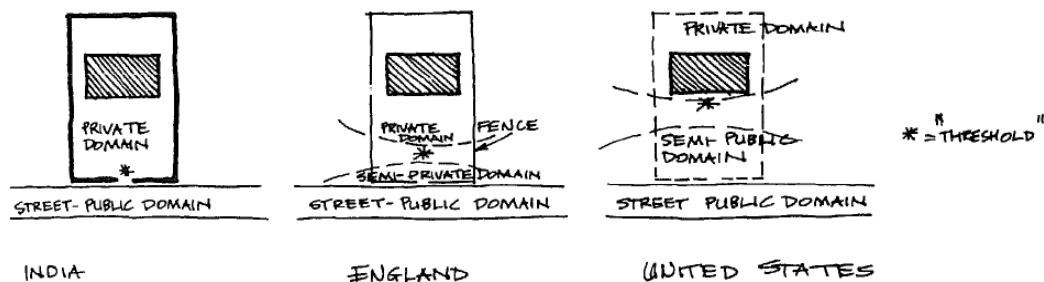
Research Question

What is the position of in-between spaces of the house form as an understanding of culture and transition?

Literature Review

Study of human settlements has been celebrated amongst anthropologists to understand its reflection of culture (Rudofsky, 1964). Certain spaces have a potential quality to explain culture explicitly. Quoting Wilbur (2013, p.6), "Between the two is the threshold, the tunnel between realms of awareness". However, house thresholds vary through regions, climates and cultures. Rapport (1969) compares the thresholds across three different geographic regions, where the reach or extent of the transition varies, refer Figure 1. The act of modernization has a direct implication on this space vocabulary and gives us a chance to reanalyze the positions as pure and culturally authentic (Nezar, 2003).

Figure 1. Approximate location of "threshold" in three cultures. (Rapport, 1969, p.80)



This paper is specific to thresholds in India to ensure uniformity in the social structure and a certain similarity in the cultural norms of the society.

Methodology

The study follows an ethnographic method, through a narrative, to form the position of house threshold in India. The paper reaches out to roots in cultural anthropology based

on personal insights and understandings of the role of thresholds. To substantiate the understanding the threshold of the vernacular house is weighed alongside the urban housing types to raise discussions. The study can be divided into two main parts. First, an exploration to the allied facets linked to a house threshold in India; second, an investigation into the sudden shift to vertical housing as a solution to mass housing requirements.

Practices of Liminality

Understanding of space and architecture is a debate over 'to be' and 'tending to be', but the perception of mind decides what is more important, in most cases the obvious. Known as the central figure of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant argued that it is the mind's abstraction that gives an expression to what we look at. He quoted "It is beyond a doubt that all our knowledge that begins with experience." Kant (1929) weighed the subject-object problem on a scale where the experience had a cause and triggered effects accordingly. Experience is far more than visual or corporeal; it is an intertwined process that takes form due to space and time. His thinking can be summed up as (1) the "pure intellectual synthesis of the understanding" and (2) the "pure figurative synthesis of the imagination" (p.29), hence both conceptual and non-conceptual. But, the abstraction (deeper meaning) remains invisible because we are blinded by what is visible. Painters, sculptors, designers, artists, architects, the entire clan of creatives strive to achieve abstraction and the onlooker is expected to understand and soak the depth of the creation. Design is a result of experiences imbibed in our body through memories, learning, understandings etc. and the ability of selective decision making gifted to mankind. Hence, architecture caters to two key aspects, one, the architect's (creator) intension and the other is viewer's perception. The embodiment of the physicality and the intellectuality together are far larger than one can imagine. Embodiment of facts, experiences, knowledge and social ties etc. evolved and merged into one entity and gave form to 'human existence' and henceforth, architecture. And so rightly said by Pallasmaa (2009, p.117) about architecture, "Buildings are not abstract, meaningless construction, or aesthetic compositions, they are extensions and shelters of our bodies, memories, identities and minds. Consequently, architecture arises from existentially true confrontations, experiences, recollections and aspirations." One specific embodied space such as a house threshold is a boundary with generations of experiences and progression to practices. A space less recognised because of a weak physical presence yet playing a substantial role in enhancing unity in the community and social ties.

Architecturally speaking, a house begins itself where the shared stretch ends, and this space could comprise of a road, a footpath, a patio of a house or even a lobby area in a high rise. Even though the owner of the house doesn't own the common space legally but he still lives through it socially. This zone is characterized as a part of the house or a semi-public space for social interactions and exchanges (Figure 2). Human mind and reflexes plays a vital role to decipher a space. The mind gets tutored from these distinct boundaries and outlines the idea of privacy; a child knows the boundaries of his/her safety; a passer-by knows the limits of his/her reach into the house; a vendor reaches out only till the threshold space. Human psychology attributes to the understanding of a space, for instance, with a small level difference a person starts to define a space, a change in colour of a tile demarcates zones, a small barbed wire creates an identity of the 'inside', a canopy over the threshold space adds volume. These spaces locate an identity on a social, emotional, traditional, psychological and climatic level. Subconsciously "creating and controlling of interpersonal boundaries of privacy", the distinction of public and private spaces, and the importance of secure living (Georgiou, 2006, p.15). All this is brought about through spaces that have no dictionary meaning yet play an important role in evolving man socially. These spaces become an unknowing medium of social interactions and are participatory in community activities.

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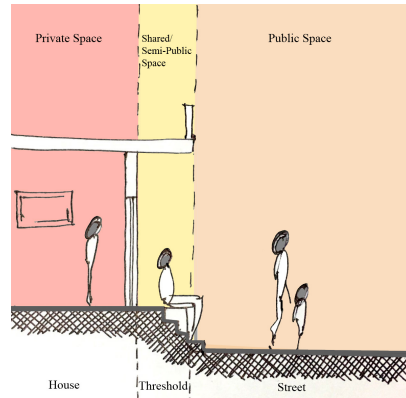


Figure 2. A Threshold as a transition

Thresholds of Traditional Housing Settlements in India

The threshold or the *Angan*, as called in the local language Hindi, is a space with paramount simplistic design considerations with a square shaped, stone covered platform with free-moving space around, in most cases, and a central aisle to the entrance doorway to the house. The *angan* being a trait of every household in the earlier times is seen as a transitional zone and is considered an important concept in the cultural study of any traditional house-form. It should be viewed in its plurality where at one level, it is an architectural solution to the problem of connecting the dwelling to the street. On another level, it is full of social meaning symbolizing welcome, auspiciousness and status.

Name/Type	State	Year of construction (approx.)	Regional name of threshold	Photo
Naalukettu	Kerala	1925	Poomugham	
Mannarkkad, F.M. (Photographer). (2010, December 13). <i>Naalukettu chunangad ottapalam</i> [digital image]. Retrieved from http://www.panoramio.com/photo/44949296				
Chettinad house	Tamil Nadu	1915	Thindai	
Raghu. (Photographer). (2010, April 09). Chettinad House [digital image]. Retrieved from http://farm5.static.flickr.com/4056/4462324568_8e3f8994a4_o.jpg				
Pol house	Ahmedabad	1750	Otla	
<i>Different uses of an Otla</i> [digital image]. Retrieved from http://www.welcometoahmedabad.com/11/sight-scenes.html				

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Name/Type	State	Year of construction (approx.)	Regional name of threshold	Photo
Bunt house, Pilikula guthu	Mangalore, Karnataka	1835	Mogasalai	
Shankari, R. (Photographer). (2015, August 09). <i>Verandah of a bunt house</i> [digital image]. Retrieved from Http://rathinasviewspace.com/2015/08/guthu-or-bunt-house-in-mangalore.htm				
Haveli	Mandawa, Rajasthan	1790	Poli	
Gallo, M. (Photographer). (2015, February 06). <i>Mandawa</i> [digital image]. Retrieved from http://doshaciendofotos.blogspot.in/2015/02/mandawa-galeria-de-arte-al-aire-libre.html				

Figure 3. Examples of traditional housing thresholds in India.

Figure 3 showcases multiple, but only a few, traditional housing thresholds in India with a similar vocabulary of transition. The similarity could be predominantly because of similar climatic conditions and possibly a comparable social structure. However, the position of the threshold is contextual with variables such as user group, community, religion, region etc. The multiple facets associated to the threshold in India are discussed for a holistic understanding

Multivalent qualities of thresholds. The extended margins such as threshold are used for various social and cultural activities which helped to inculcate a sense of religious sentiments and an aptitude towards culture and its importance. Through the architectural concept of flexibility several permanent activities of the family happen here as well as the threshold becomes a host to many types of temporary activities of the community. The permanent practices are the ones that get inherited from one generation to the other. Some practices are habituated and some are replaced by new ones yet the space is capable of taking it all.

Importance to individuals or groups. Architect Mohit Keni describes the threshold space as “differentiated from the street by its elevation and terracotta colour. It is the element of transition between the public (street) and the private (house) domains considered to be profane and sacred, respectively. It is the first point of contact of the house...Visitors are asked to remove their footwear...here before advancing into the interior of the house. It becomes a centre for informal gatherings of small groups adding life to the street” (Keni, 1994, p. 33). Bonding of the members of the family and also neighbourhood took place in the threshold space and left a permanent memory in the minds of the individuals as they grow up from infants to adults (Figure 4). Various household chores took place here like drying of grains, pickles seasonally. This brought together the women folk who developed a strong relationship by its virtue. Local hawkers would trade vegetables as seen in Figure 5, bangles, and toys on the platform. The space is also utilized for sleeping during hard summer nights which brought a lot of storytelling, singing and also listening to music. The gatherings during night helped the young ones to know more about stars, planets and other heavenly bodies in the constellation. The entire neighbourhood is witness to many a negotiations such as marriage proposals, deals involving sale-purchase of properties or conduct of any major religious event here. The men of the house gathered here during the evenings, after work, for casual discussions over a cup of tea.



Figure 4. Neighbourhood bonding at the threshold
Elishams. (Photographer). (2008, November 27). **Kharakuva ni pol** [digital image]. Retrieved <https://www.flickr.com/photos/elishams/4358729065/>

The extended space was often used by the children to play. In older times most parents had more than two to three children. It was always the responsibility of the elder ones to look after the younger siblings. The use of the space was not restricted to a single household and this activity helped children to bond together and develop a lifelong friendship. It also helped them develop leadership qualities, sense of responsibility, respect for age and last but not the least develops affection towards each other. The children played games like *chowca-baara* (Indian board game for four players), gully cricket (Figure 5), carom, trade and many others which in the process help the thinking and planning ability.

As history says it, in the villages during the times when caste system was prevalent the extended spaces were not accessible to the working and the lower class of people. It was only privy to the landlords and the *zamindaars* (landlords) who sat on the well decorated threshold and interacted with the labours and servants who either sat down or stood away from it. The lower class had a clear understanding of the boundaries they had to adhere to. The *poomukham* of a Naalukettu (Figure 3) house specifically, placed a chair at this space for the head of the family to relax during the early mornings and evenings. No other chairs would be placed at this portion, in due respect to the master of the house. Hence the visitors are forced to stand, further conversations occur at the *charupady* (inclined step) where the seating is provided (Susilo, 2007).



Figure 5. Activities at the threshold. (left) a game of cricket by youngsters Mccurry, S. (Photographer). (2012, November 12). **Blue City** [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://mechanicaldummv.com/2012/11/steve-mccurry/>. (right) Vegetable hawkers trading. Jana, S. (Photographer). (2016, March 20). *World T20 fever takes over India as kids indulge in gully cricket* [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://www.hindustantimes.com/photos/cricket/gully-cricket/photoG9rNwksBJ8cEpo4exTIT6O.html>.

In addition to this discrimination another trait was observed where a threshold of a Hindu house was much different from a Muslim one (Figure 6). Unlike the Hindu house threshold that becomes a physical extension of the house/street, the liminal space of Muslim dwellings is seldom used as an activity or interaction space. The usage not only symbolized social status but also protected their strong notion of privacy to the women of

the house, which is much essential in an Islamic community (Desai, 2007). The entire configuration of the house was designed keeping in mind the seclusion of women and to create a divide between men and women.



Figure 6. Thresholds of the houses at Sidhpur, Gujarat . Retrieved from http://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/photo-exhibition-wonder-world-of-sidhpur-s-bohra-mansions-115040200805_1.html.

Symbolic social significance. A house represents the nature and the lifestyle of the inhabitants. Rich decorated doorways and thresholds spoke of the family residing in the house, this can be established while comparing various thresholds. The threshold in Figure 2 versus the one in Figure 3, involuntarily establishes the economic stand of the family living beyond these doorways. However, the threshold is richly decorated during festivals and wedding where it becomes a part of the celebration and extension to the house.

Who are the users? The users are like-minded people of the same neighborhood who have been living together for generations and belong to the same social status coined as the 'caste' which could be based on skills or occupation of the community e.g. pol houses of Ahmedabad where each *khadki* or settlement, houses people belonging to the same social strata or are involved in the same of similar professions (Jani, 2011, p.24). The levels of comfort seen here are a result of equality in one's social stand. The new or the unknown were less welcome in this sphere that comprised of people from the same caste. This characteristic of distinction and discrimination was imbibed in the younger generations too, knowingly or unknowingly which led to permanence in this living pattern.

The Edge Condition of the 'Urban House'

The oxford dictionary defines 'Edge' as the outside limit of an object, area, or surface. In architecture, it could be a place or line of distinction with two contrasting or dissimilar conditions on either side. "The contrasts present between dissimilar spaces offer an opportunity to explore the spatial ideas expressed in the experience of liminality: threshold, transition, layering, and blurring" (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 3). In this context of the built environment of a house a threshold defines space through physiological and psychological boundaries and becomes the edge condition. This authoritative nature dictates our position in the social strata and the margins become a distinct noticeable feature in our house.

The population in Indian urban areas has increased by 1 million in 2001-2011 (Census 2011). The growth rate of urban areas in the last decade was +0.3%, rural population growth rate was -5.95%. The shift from a village and agrarian life to an urban culture has had serious implications on the infrastructure and real estate. New housing types developed at a rapid pace without any consideration to the symbolic meaning of a house. The idea of threshold is merely seen as an edge condition in the newly defined house form. Housing types in urban India based on their edge condition can be categorised as follows:

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Table 1.
Edge Condition of Urban Housing Type

Edge Condition	Urban Housing Type	User Income Group	Liminal Space Uses/ Significance	Types of Social Interaction/ activities
3 shared walls	Slum	Urban Poor	-Narrow streets as liminal spaces.	-Social Interactions irrespective of the presence of threshold
2 shared walls	Row houses with/without courtyards	Low-Middle Income	-Front yard as a threshold: Tinndai, otla, chowk, courtyard for social interaction.	-Active interaction -Exchanges -Community bonding
1 shared wall	Walk ups	Low Income	-Definite liminal space. -Social Interaction, Celebrations, Exchanges	-Family and Neighborhood Space -Climatic relief
No shared walls	Independent houses, Vertical Mass Housing	Upper Middle-High Income	-No distinct liminal space due to higher need of privacy but presence of corridors - Universal characteristics without any reflection of local culture	-Restricted physical interactions through the entrance. -Visual interaction through balconies/gardens

Modern housing focuses on providing light and ventilation along with providing visuals/views to the outside. Opens spaces have shifted from streets to garden spaces and community centres. Investments have dictated the accessibility to all the facilities and made house a space for the individual who is detaching and distancing from the community and the need to survive together.

Architects, designers and anthropologists have worked around the idea of the ‘in between’ and experimented with social spaces time and again. Quoting Aldo Van Eyck here, “A house must be like a small city if it’s to be a real house, a city like a large house if it’s to be a real city” who realized this idea of a city in his solution to a now celebrated orphanage at Amsterdam. The threshold introduced at the children’s home is a unifier to two contrasting realms. The focal courtyard makes way till the heart of the building along a doorstep that flows out into the open. Aranya housing in Indore, India, on the other hand presents the threshold as an extension of the house into the street. The residents feel the ownership not just to the threshold but to the street as seen in Figure 7, the people and all the activities that associate with it.



Figure 7. Street as an extended threshold. Retrieved from <http://www.architectureindevelopment.org/project.php?id=401#!prettyPhoto>

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These minor efforts by the pro-culture enthusiasts have not made any remarkable change in perspectives of the larger masses so far but open up directions for discussions.

Discussion

The position of in-between spaces of the house has more or less become irrelevant in most cases in the society. The concept of housing is merely and solely dependent on the economic status of an individual or family or group. There are mainly 3 classes of people, the poor who continues to live in slum, one room tenements; the middle class who seeks to make use of most available space and the rich for whom it is affordable and can incorporated space according to desires. The very fact that the housing has become vertical is due to fast urbanization and influx of masses to the cities in search of employment. The requirement and necessity to house large masses in the urban sprawl has worsened the value system that back us for centuries. The transitional space has completely been replaced by a passage with no cultural significance. With this observation we can decipher that the process is long and uneven with one judgment parameter, Time. A few myths survive the test of time and but get more refined through filters of want and need. This observation widens this understanding yet cannot be considered exhaustive. The idea of *Vaastu* i.e. direction based science of house building has only become an exercise on paper where one tries to satisfy the main principles as rules. With a vast jump in technology the ancient belief, culture and traditions are fast losing their significance, more so because of the fast pace at which the modern day life is galloping. Many members of the household do not see each other for days/weeks though they are living under the same roof, merely because of the nature, timing and their distance to work place. For many, a house is just a place to retire for the night and get back on the same routine day after day. For the rich it is a status symbol they can exhibit their wealth. However this is limited to one's own family and occasionally to their friends and relatives. There are laid down mandatory statutory rules and guidelines for house building. More often the modern day builders find ways and means to flout these relations thereby cutting corners to make a large profit. The end result is the extinct of the vital space/threshold/contact spaces. The idea of threshold revolves around wants vs needs or necessity vs luxury. For most people it amounts to luxury but cannot afford the same.

The modern day architect needs to strive to create ideas to narrow down the gap which is fast getting wider and may reach a point of no return. The transition of threshold has become intangible and efforts are needed to bring it as close to a tangible as possible.

Conclusion

Design decisions of the liminal space today is based on the user's lifestyle especially their association to cultural environment, beyond the boundary. Contrastingly, privacy and security have overtaken the necessity to have anthropological spatial quality. With the onset of modernity, social interactions are forced or tugged into new spaces like parks, community centres, club houses etc. making 'house' an independent and disconnected unit. As a result, the blurred hybrid threshold weaving together two isolated practices is uprooted totally in the standardization of the housing typology. As a practitioner of architecture the aim should be to revitalize these endangered multivalent spaces before they are abandoned by us all.

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