

Collective Domestic: Theorizing the Intermediate Commons

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This paper introduces research from a special topics seminar that explores the incorporation of collective intermediate space (also referred to as gray space and the intermediate commons), as a possible alternative to the isolated condition of most housing design arrangements in North America. Gray space is most easily understood as the transitional intermediate space prior to entering or after exiting a domestic space to the public domain. These spaces often blur the line between public and private space; inside and outside; formal and informal; are truly multi-functional and can be defined by the end user.

One of the primary objectives of this course is to understand the historic and vernacular foundations of housing and architecture's relationship to public space and the commons through its various conditions and to grasp how this relationship has changed across various contexts over time. This research aims to have the following impact. (1) To visually analyze and assess spatial challenges and opportunities within three vernacular types. This analysis evaluates the social and material qualities of space provided within the domestic type, and the clarity of its connection to the intermediate commons. (2) To examine the local context of these types and how architecture has had a role in cultivating the shared cultural identity and community of the place. (3) To expand upon the use of visual research and visual communication to tell a cohesive narrative of place.

In short, the intermediate commons can be understood as spatial, architectural, and tactile, but must also be recognized as a space for social innovation and radical openness. Collective Domestic: Theorizing the Intermediate Commons asserts that the sequestered and heteronormative condition of current developer-driven housing trends can be countered through the proper activation of gray space in housing.

INTRODUCTION

Present-day urban design and city planning follow parameters set forth by neoliberal ideals of global financial capitalism that are subordinate to the mandate of generating capital.¹ This set of parameters often includes but is not limited to: identical street patterns, mono-functional and easily manageable systems, and large-scale urban development driven by capital gains and not by the quality of public (and private) space.² Neoliberal policy has also led to the commodification and reification of housing.³ This paper introduces research from a special topics seminar that explores the incorporation of collective intermediate space (also referred to as gray space and the intermediate commons), as a possible alternative to the isolated condition of most housing design arrangements in North America. Gray space is most easily understood as the transitional intermediate space before entering or after exiting a domestic space to the public domain. Some generic types of gray space are narrow alleyways and secondary streets, informal shops and street markets, terraces, steps (porches or stoops), gardens, thresholds, and in some cases hallways and corridors. These spaces often blur the line between public and private space; inside and outside; formal and informal; are truly multi-functional and can be defined by the end user.

It is important to note that the mostly transitional and non-programmatic space of the intermediate commons goes directly against the neoliberal agenda of housing as a commodity and not as a basic human right. To quote Robert Fishman (2018), "Central to neoliberalism is the assertion that housing is a commodity like any other, and that the capitalist market, if freed from regulation, can provide this commodity more efficiently than any government programme."⁴ The most discernible problem with this contention is that developers and the like are not in any way incentivized to provide adequate socio-material common spaces in addition to providing decent living conditions. To their benefit, many architects have and continue to intervene in matters around quality low-cost and affordable housing, and many have landed on a common solution: low-rise, high-density housing with ample access to non-programmatic social gray space instead of the isolated social conditions within mid-to-high-rise towers-in-the-park. Examples of this can be traced in history from the Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda

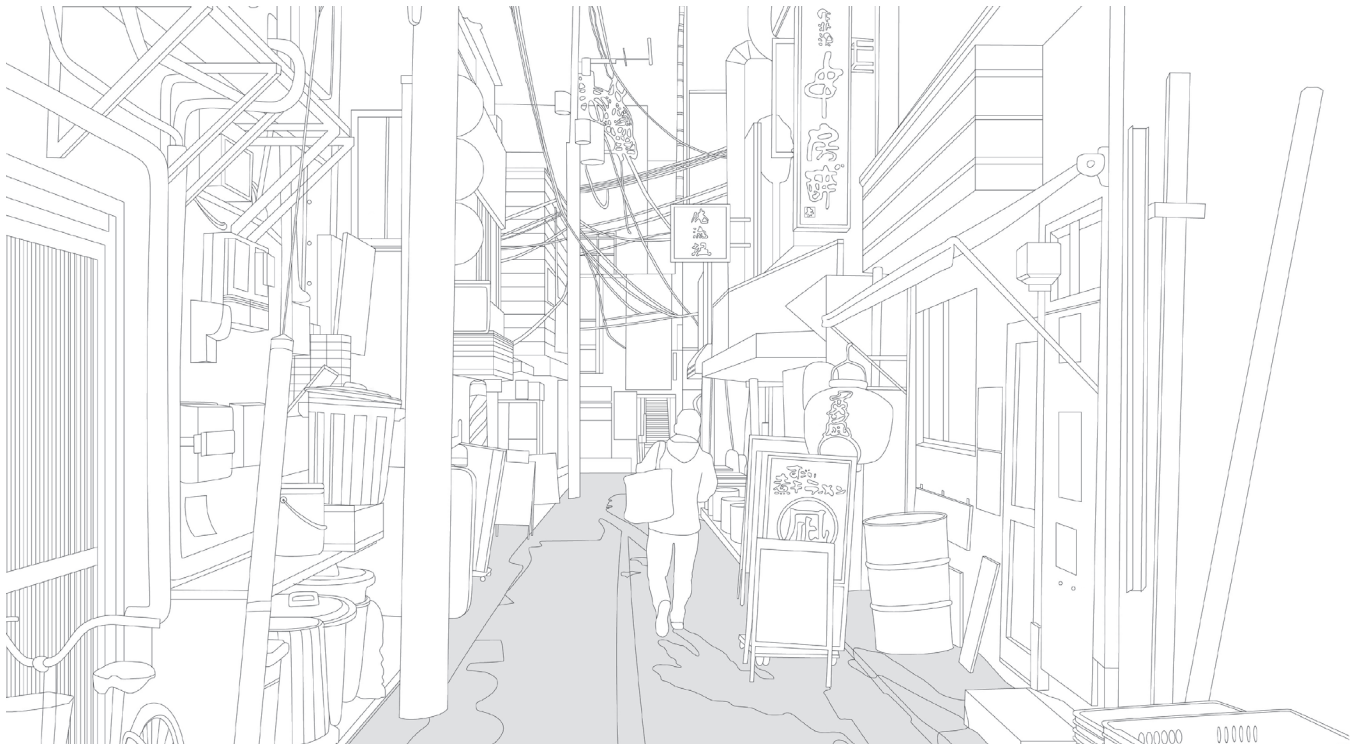


Figure 1. *Ephemeral drawing of a roji in Tokyo.* Drawing by Melissa Farrell and Isaiah Sigala.

(PREVI)⁵ from the 1970s to the more recent New Orleans-based Office of Jonathan Tate's (OJT) "fitting solution" to the problem of the single-family "starter home" in their "Saint Thomas and Ninth" project in New Orleans.⁶ This paper keeps in mind these existing practical solutions to the large problem of providing quality public space in housing while advocating for a more urbanistic approach rather than a block-by-block strategy. The case studies reviewed in this paper can be seen as precursors to the aforementioned housing projects but look a step further at vernacular gray space typologies that are embedded directly into the urban fabric, and affect the urban form of the city. Ultimately, the ambition of the research is to reinforce in architects and developers the value of incorporating the intermediate commons by tracing its value and use through vernacular typologies across the globe.

TRACING DISCOURSE AROUND THE INTERMEDIATE COMMONS

Over time, the city has become overdetermined and as a result, is losing its capacity to engage in a meaningful way with its citizens. In other words, the messiness of a city is paramount to a lively and authentic urban experience.⁷ The intermediate commons or gray space of a city is the space that most naturally lends itself to serendipitous social interaction. Messiness found in the intermediate commons actively disrupts the rigidity of the urban grid and allows the city to grow organically and informally to encourage moments of delight and discovery.

The most widely understood notion of gray space can be found in *Collage City* (1978), where Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter offer an alternative model to the modern city by positing, "...the physics and politics of Rome provide perhaps the most graphic example of collusive fields and interstitial debris."⁸ Rowe and Koetter's provocation invert the current relationship of building to public urban space as they position the interstitial debris not as a liability, but as a generator for quality urban social experiences. The duo builds upon Gian Battista Nolli's *Map of Rome* (1748) in which the public and civic spaces (often located within buildings) are represented as a void in the same way as streets, squares, and courts. This idea is in contrast with the conventional aerial figure-ground which shows masses on a background of void that are inaccessible from the street; the pair argue that is an incomplete view of Rome because they leave out the gray spaces or the fields that are not clearly defined by interior and exterior boundary lines.⁹ In summary, the grey space of Rome (not clearly solid or void) has a great ability to stitch disparate parts of the city together, is truly multi-functional and mixed-use, and creates its own informal structure over that of a rigid urban grid.

Observing beyond Rome and the Western context, this research looks to the Global South and largely to post-colonial cities in East Asia, South Asia, and North Africa as vernacular conditions of high-density, but relatively low-rise living. While understanding the differences between each of these contexts, the research finds common ground through the prevalence of the intermediate commons in the urban fabric.

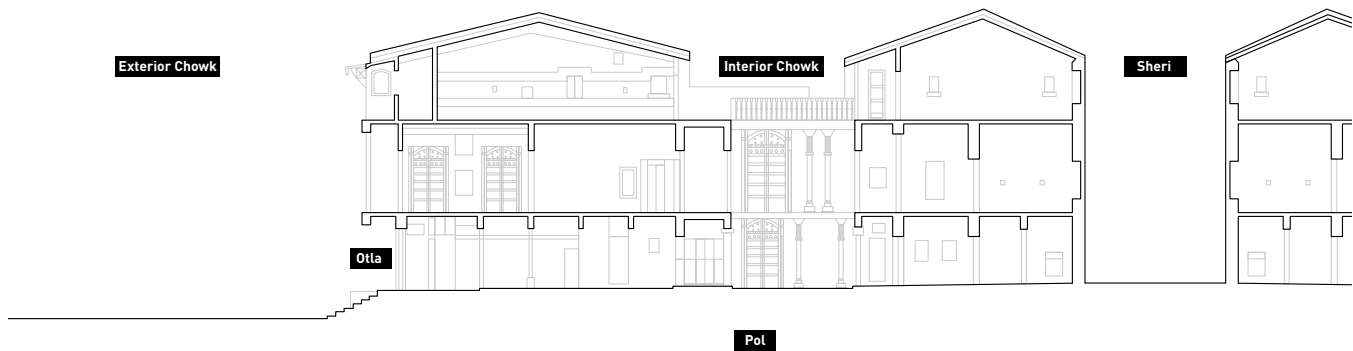


Figure 2. Section through a typical pol; from the chowk to the sheri. Drawing by Bhumika Shirole.

Quoting Manish Chalana and Jeffrey Hou in their edited volume, “Messy Urbanism: Understanding the “Other” Cities of Asia” (2016), “... any attempt to represent the vast and diverse contexts in the Asian continent is likely to fall short of addressing the existing, messy reality. Nevertheless, the diverse yet persistent patterns of messiness, along with the shared colonial experiences among many Asian nations and similar trajectories of industrialization and urban development, do provide a common ground for collective explorations and reflections.”¹⁰ The intention here is to gather a series of urban strategies to deal with the need to densify while maintaining a semblance of a humanistic and collective lived experience.

Gray space is also conceptually tied to Edward Soja’s concept of *Thirdspace*. *Thirdspace* is particularly interesting to this research because it conceptualizes gray space (using markets as one example of the intermediate commons) not through its physical or material characteristics (*Firstspace*) or its economic contribution or value (*Secondspace*) but through its value as a social space, or the lived space (*Thirdspace*).¹¹ Soja’s *Thirdspace* borrows heavily from Homi K. Bhabha’s “Third Space Theory” and bell hooks’ thinking about the margin. The former focuses more on the concept of the colonized mindset, which speaks to the hybridization of the many cultures intertwined in the culture of a post-colonial place, and the effect that has on personal identity, and the latter is focused on the margin, “(as a) space of radical openness... a profound edge.”¹² This avenue is important to the course as it provides a structural framework for students to begin to grasp the impact of the intermediate commons beyond spatial terms, and into larger conceptual socio-political dialogues about the various degrees of space, from the real to the conceived, and the actual.

As cracks and fissures in the postpolitical, homogenous landscapes of contemporary cities, messiness presents opportunities for a new epistemology of city and city making; a mode of contestation, collaboration, and composition; and as a site for rethinking and untangling the difficult tasks of democracy, justice, and resilience.— Jeffrey Hou and Manish Chalana, *Messy Urbanism*

A LIVING ARCHIVE

After broadly framing the discussion around the intermediate commons through an economic and socio-political lens, students in the special topics seminar embark upon a research project that explores the intermediate commons, and how it interfaces with domestic space across several contexts. It should be noted that coming from North America, it is difficult to locate and access spatial data to input into Geographic Information Systems (GIS) processing software. We start the semester with a lofty goal of accessing governmental databases with spatial data to help visualize these esoteric spaces but quickly find that due to matters of national security and defense that these files are not as readily available in non-Western contexts as they are here in North America. This pitfall leads to the realization that to capture the essence of these spaces, we needed to think beyond traditional means of analysis and drawing to capture the messiness and temporality of the true on-the-ground conditions. The question then becomes, how might we represent spaces that are elusive and intentionally evasive and obscure? The seminar evolves to invent novel ways of drawing and analyzing types of spaces that are inherently difficult to represent, and this portion of the paper will elaborate on the methodologies of analysis and representation that are developed through the seminar with the students. The collective work of the students is affectionately known as the “living archive” of drawings and representations of the intermediate commons (Figure 4).

It’s true that the messiness of many of the case studies is an authentic and true-to-form experience of their host cities, and that we should be careful not to manufacture messiness into a context that has no relation to it morphologically. Rem Koolhaas’ idea of the “staging of uncertainty” in “What Ever Happened to Urbanism?” (1994), paints a clear picture of how to incorporate ideas of messiness into the contemporary city.¹³ It requires a careful framing of mixed spatial and programmatic adjacencies and a choreography of intended and organized orders with an informal system. To capture the vernacular activity of the case studies, the language of representation must be different from the traditional or conventional means of presenting information.

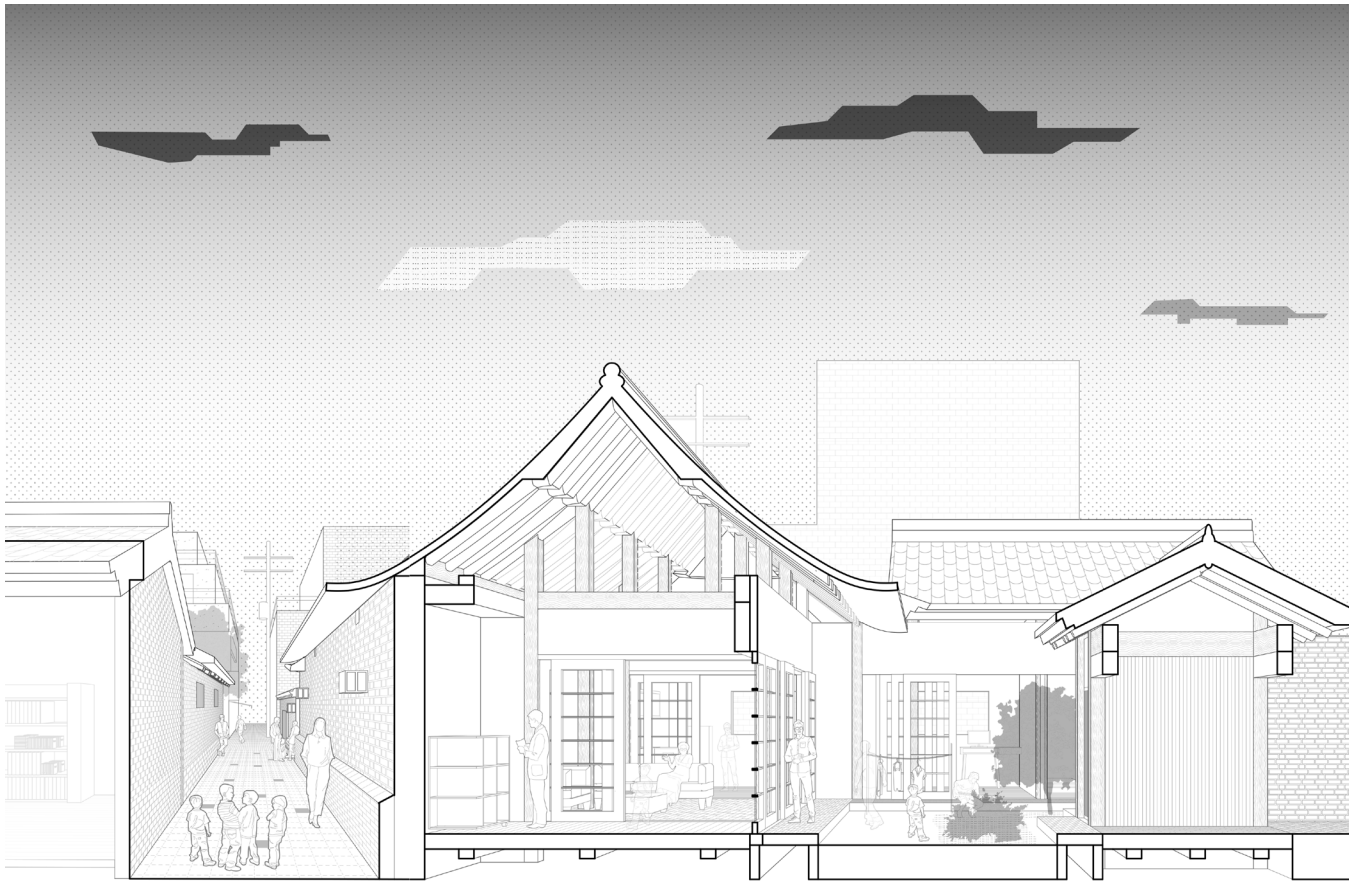


Figure 3. *Speculative collage section through the golmok and hanok in Seoul.* Drawing by Elliott Moreau.

The living archive is the result of the collective visual research done by the students. Visual research is research through drawing and making. The objective of the coursework is twofold. To teach students to research in the conventional sense through reading, writing, and archival research, but to also teach students to research through visual communication. To construct the living archive, students start by researching and finding primary formal source material for each case study. This usually comes in the form of scholarly journal articles and books by cultural anthropologists, social scientists, and at times architects and designers. This material would give accounts of each case study in terms of its historiography and formal characteristics. Due to the lack of spatial data, to define the imperial qualities, students triangulate between drawings found from formal sources, Google Earth aerial and street views, and ethnographic and first-hand anecdotal research. Ethnographic accounts are usually found in primary sources from cultural anthropologists, and at times included less formal sources such as watching videos online of people on the ground and other types of nonformal interview formats. Students then take drawings found through archival research, digitize them, and three-dimensionalize them to create further visual content to tell a cohesive narrative of the place they are studying. The triangulation method is useful in that they “collage” elements found from multiple sources into one visual document.

To quote Chalana and Hou, “Messy places are not easily decipherable and can be challenging to study, because of their complex socio-spatial patterning; their temporal, ephemeral, and tactile qualities; and their locational and use characteristics.” Yet this multiplicity is the ambition of this research. Primarily, we use collage as a conceptual way of working as well as a procedural way of working. By using the triangulation method to collage different formats of information into a three-dimensional model, new forms of representation emerge. Specifically, two students began with the collaging of a series of photographs onto a model of a typical roji in Tokyo to create a line drawing of what it may be like to occupy a roji with all its ephemera, interstitial debris, and mess (Figure 1). This form of drawing pulls from the ubiquitous use of time-lapse photography to capture these kinds of indeterminate spaces, but collages all of the information into one complete and clear form. Another type of drawing is developed by using the “kitbashing” technique. Kitbashing is the technique of accessing spatial data (such as shapefiles) and combining them to create a virtual landscape that is made up of real parts.¹⁴ This technique is typically used in creating fictional landscapes for video games but is appropriated here to create virtual manifestations of real places to get the full effect of a place. One last example of the forms of representation developed through the course is another use of collage. In this case, a student stitches

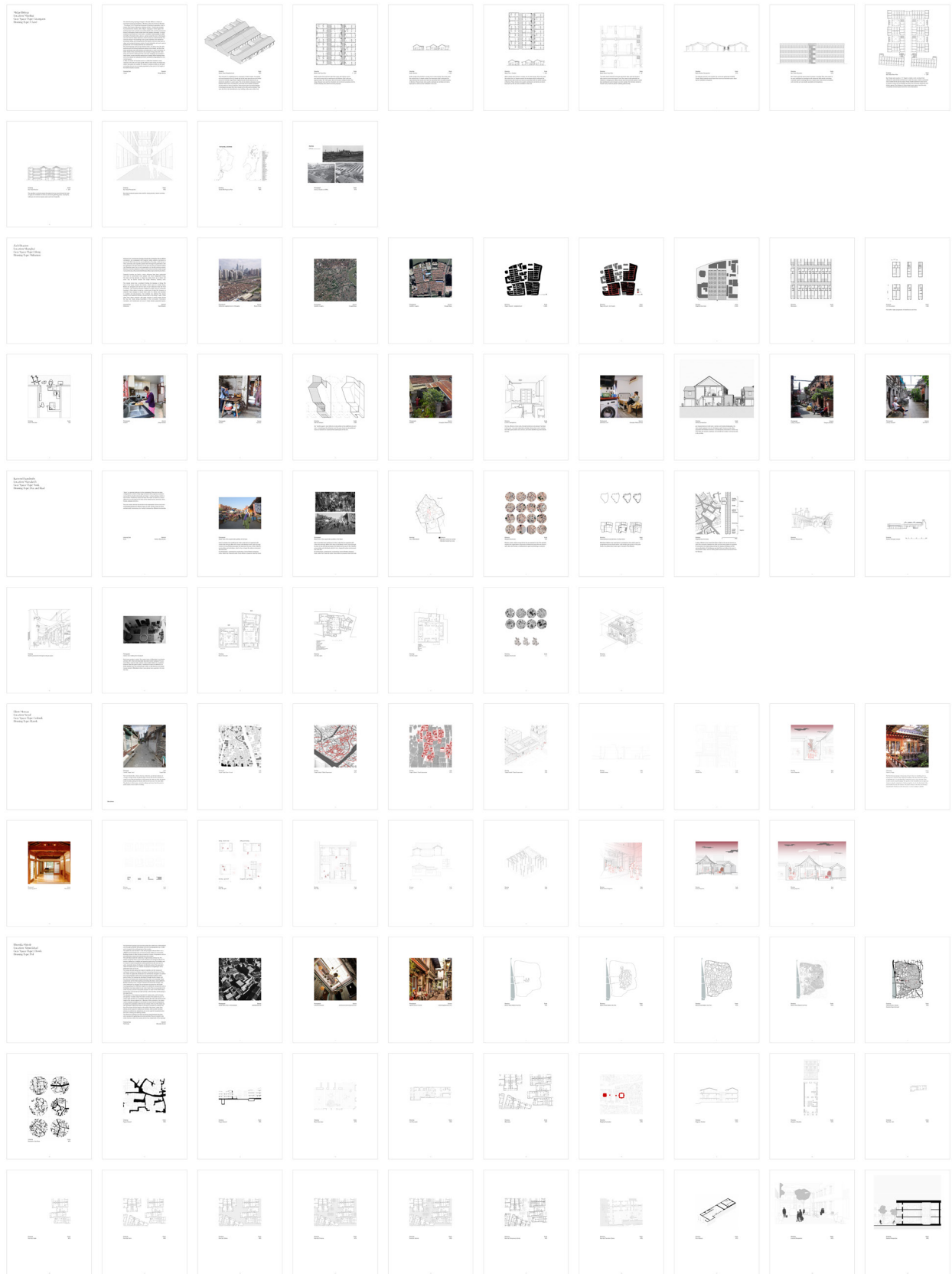


Figure 4. *A Living Archive: collective work of the seminar.* Drawings by Midge Bishop, Zachary Braaten, Kareem Elsandouby, Elliott Moreau, and Bhumika Shirole.

together two cross sections into one full perspectival section to show the domestic space adjacent to the gray space. As a primary document was not available showing this condition, the student speculates by collaging two sets of data three-dimensionally into one space that was then documented through meticulous line drawing (Figure 3). The drawing is constructed through a careful analysis of photography, and uses primary source information to construct the bounds of each space, but photography to detail the ephemeral and temporal qualities.

CASE STUDIES

Three typologies out of the ten explored through the seminar will be analyzed at length in this section.¹⁵ The types are as follows: (1) Pol (housing/domestic type) and Chowk (intermediate commons/gray space type) in Ahmedabad, (2) Shikumen and Lilong in Shanghai, and (3) Chawl and Pagdandi in Mumbai. This is a non-exhaustive list and is meant to only provide specific examples that show a range of contextual conditions that the seminar examines.

Each case study is examined through the following terms: first through its history and contextual background, second regarding its material qualities, and third concerning its social impact.

Pol and Chowk

Pols have come to be ubiquitous within the walled city of Ahmedabad over the past few centuries. Ahmedabad is the 5th most populated city in India and is in the northwest part of the country, in the state of Gujarat. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the pol houses within are ornamental to achieving this prestigious status.¹⁶ The built fabric within the walled city (old city) is high-density and low-rise, outside the medieval walls is a more typical urban condition. Medieval cities such as Ahmedabad, are oftentimes classified as organic and unplanned. Though the structure of the city is not recognizable through grids, urban patterns, and the morphological grammar that we are familiar with in contemporary urban design and city planning, it can be defined by a series of spatial components, which are the focus of this study.

Throughout Ahmedabad, there are more than three-hundred Pol houses that can still be visited today. Each pol (clustered house) is located along a chowk on the front side (primary thoroughfare) and a sheri (narrow street or alley) on the rear side, and together they create the most predominant urban fabric in the old city.¹⁷ One interesting bit of linguistics is that the term, chowk, is used to describe the public common thoroughfare, and is also used to describe the interior courtyard, which is the primary public common space of the pol. The pol typology has developed through iterations over the years and features key components that make up the form. These components are the ota (seating overlooking the street, raised platform, or porch), baithak (drawing room), chowk (courtyard), parsal (family lounge), and ordo (bedrooms or storage).¹⁸ Pol houses

are resilient and are built using local organic materials, are earthquake resistant, and feature rainwater harvesting infrastructure. They are a result of organically developed rural architecture brought in by settlers and cross-pollination with similar housing typologies located in other parts of India.¹⁹

On any given day one can find children playing along the chowk outside the home, mothers watching the children and conversing on the ota, and men working and lounging on the main street of the chowk. Pols are organized as a gradient from public to private, and the public most program is closer to the chowk side.²⁰ Many houses have commercial and retail activity on the first floor that activates the chowk, and housing on the upper floors. Chowks are developed organically based on the plots occupied by pols and transform over time. Streets in Ahmedabad house activity based on the width of the street, thus the larger open streets of the chowk provide space for informal markets, vehicles, and generally more foot traffic, while smaller narrower streets are preferred by pedestrians and can be used for domestic labor such as drying and washing clothes (Figure 2).²¹ This subdivision of the use of streets creates a hierarchical difference and plays into unfortunate gender and caste hierarchies seen all over India. The chowks and public squares become the space for the patriarchy to discuss “worldly matters”, while the sheri becomes the space for women to tend to children and domestic labor.²² These issues of gender and caste have transformed over time given the UNESCO classification. Still, it’s apparent that women prefer to travel around the old city through the back-alley sheri’s as opposed to the more public chowks due to concerns of security, but also due to comfort and routine over a lifetime. Over time women have come to define the space of the sheri as their own and it has been made uniquely theirs, where they can feel free to express themselves in any way they choose, without the ever-watchful eye of the patriarchy.²³

Shikumen and Lilong

Shikumen is a post-colonial townhouse typology introduced to Shanghai after British colonization in 1843. With post-colonization came the subsequent shift towards capital and profit-driven market systems.²⁴ Post-colonization also brought with it the commodification of housing. While homes in China were typically passed down through generations with the expectation that families steward homes to the next generation, the commodification of housing in Shanghai meant that no such expectation was accounted for.²⁵ Shikumen started as an adaptation of the Western sensibility of housing, having only one family per unit, but have since hybridized with the more vernacular Chinese tradition of co-living, and have been subdivided over time to accommodate more people and more diverse types of living.²⁶

The original layout has an entry courtyard that acts as a transitional buffer between the shikumen and the lilong (known as a

laneway in the West). The rear of the house contains the communal kitchen, which opens to another lilong, and is used as a shared space amongst residents (Figure 5). Blocks are arranged such that the back of each shikumen faces the front of another, creating different types of lilongs.²⁷ The rear-facing kitchens create a distinct gendered space for domestic labor. This has since shifted with evolving ideas of familial structures.²⁸

The courtyard structure lends itself to older forms of vernacular housing in China where the courtyard acted as an actual and symbolic center of daily life. However, as shikumen use is falling out of favor, the centrality of the courtyard as the predominant gray space has declined. The clearer analog to the traditional Chinese courtyard now lies with the lilong. These alley-like spaces form dense networks, with gates that can be closed at various points during the day to help create strong boundaries of the community. Lilongs are truly mixed-use and multi-functional spaces that house commerce, recreation, and maintenance all in densely populated spaces.

Chawl and Pagdandi

Chawls emerged in the late 1800s as a means of housing the growing population in Mumbai. At the time the primary export of Mumbai was textiles and as chawls housed textile workers, eighty percent of Mumbai's population lived in the chawls.²⁹ Chawls were divided by socioeconomic class, caste, religion, language, and/or home region. Predominantly the working class lived in chawls surrounding textile mills, and the area that many of these chawls occupied became known as Girangaon. These chawls were very densely populated, and as many as twenty men could live in one room, a condition made possible by the varied shifts at the textile mills.³⁰ Later, women and children joined the men in the chawls as families began moving in, and over time the chawls fostered a vibrant social and cultural identity. In 1982, the textile mill workers strike resulted in mass closures of the mills and layoffs. Without work nearby, the chawl population quickly decreased. The chawls in existence today are still used as low-cost housing and co-living, but are not as densely populated as they were at the height of the textile industry's success.³¹

The chawl type is split into two distinct styles, one is for co-living with bedrooms and communal bathrooms and kitchens, known as the bar chawls. The other contains typical housing units with kitchens and bathrooms for every unit known, and is known as the baithi chawl. The bar chawl is made up of linear bars with a pagdandi (or pedestrian path) down the center, and the baithi chawl is more of a courtyard typology with a large open air courtyard at the center of the dense housing arrangement.³² Every chawl featured very compact living areas with units being around 10 to 20 square meters, and each dwelling unit accommodated a large variety of uses including domestic labor such as laundry and cooking. These buildings were one



Figure 5. Communal mixed-use kitchen space at the intersection of a shikumen and lilong in Shanghai. Drawing by Zachary Braaten

to five stories tall, with ground floors used primarily as commercial spaces, further activating the pagdandi.

The common spaces in the buildings such as open hallways and the lanes between the chawls known as pagdandi, were utilized for socializing, sitting, eating, and domestic labor such as drying laundry and open-air cooking. The exterior common areas such as the pagdandi and courtyards became centers of social interaction and were used as playgrounds or for hosting festivals and celebrations.

CONCLUSION

In short, the intermediate commons can be understood as spatial, architectural, and tactile, but must also be recognized as a space for social innovation and radical openness. Collective Domestic: Theorizing the Intermediate Commons asserts that the sequestered and heteronormative condition of current developer-driven housing trends can be countered through the proper activation of gray space in housing.

As it stands the state of housing design in North America is trending upwards and is on the right track with the many aforementioned practices that are front-lining low-rise, high-density housing models. However, messiness, informality, and the staging of uncertainty are the missing elements in making the gray space of these housing strategies feel like unique and novel urban experiences. Messiness cannot and should not be manufactured, but it can be staged, and the groundwork can be laid for truly exceptional spaces by utilizing the intermediate commons as the stage for novel collective urban experiences.

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