

Interiority of Aग्रaharam: Traditional Houses in Temple Towns of India

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Abstract

The article aims to provide a multisensory reading within the multiple scales of spaces in the traditional settlement of agraharam. This multisensory reading generates layers of interiority that exist across temples, streets, and houses. Agraharam is the traditional house of the Brahmin (priest) community found in temple towns of South India. This house responds to religious beliefs, tradition, and local climatic conditions and displays a balance of sensory experiences which enrich the overall living experience. In this article, interiority is referred to as the characteristic of being 'inward,' where memories and practices of a specific community are associated with the spaces. It explores one's experiences of the various scales (the town, the street, and the house) of spaces through copious physical and sensory experiences, using Pallasmaa's description of the phenomenological approach to identify the multisensory experience of the human body in space.

Keywords: agraharam, phenomenology, sensory experiences, Indian temple towns, interiority

Introduction

It is evident that the architecture of traditional cultures is also essentially connected with the tacit wisdom of the body, instead of being visually and conceptually dominated. Construction in the traditional culture is guided by the body in the same way that a bird shapes its nest by the movement of its body. (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 26)

Phenomenology emphasises human experiences, intention, and the interpretation of built spaces. This include how a space is felt; how it relates to smell and sound makes one experience the richness of space, all collectively having correlational meaning to the visual sense. Pallasmaa (2005) suggests that the three aspects, physical, sensual, and embodied, can be related to the traditional living spaces. The experiential aspects of interior spaces, the quality of spaces and cultural associations reflected in the built environment enhance the sense of belongingness. Life within the intangible boundaries defined by culture and practices identifies how experience within can relate to the interiority of the space. As stated by Teston (2020), interiority is a condition of feeling-inward and phenomenological perception matters in an ontology of interiority because architecture is firstly created for humans and experienced through human perception.

“Agraharam means ‘the front or foremost row’ implying a prestigious location. It is an exclusively Brahmin neighbourhood or settlement, found in all the southern states of India.” (Desai, 2018, p. 117). These traditional houses are inward, creating one’s own environment within it. Traditional houses in temple towns of India are lived through various generations that create multiple layers of memories and experiences. Traditional practices translate into the built environment enhancing the character associated with the community and region. Qualities of such built-form due to its inward characters can be experienced as interiority since the experiences are built upon day-to-day practices and memories and further strengthened by community living. As Tuan (1975) states, place is a centre of meaning constructed by experience, and experience constructs places at different scales of house, neighbourhood, town, and city. Similarly, in this village ,distinctiveness of house, street and temple town create its own identity as a reflection of the community’s religious inclinations and practices. Interiority can be experienced at manifolds in temple towns of India by studying their temples, streets, and individual house.

This article describes the experience of temple town, especially *agraharam*, using the phenomenological approach (Holl et al., 2006; Pallasmaa, 2005, 2011) to explore the interiority at various scales.

In this article, the inquiry is divided into three main parts. The first part explains the physical and functional formation of the village, the street, and the house. The second part identifies the elements of space making, and the latter part of the article describes multisensory experiences of the spaces based on experiential aspects. This study is the outcome of the author's first-hand experience of documentation of *agraharam* during which the limitations of being an outsider not knowing the customs and rituals became very apparent. Aspects of lifestyle, food culture, and social experiences were shared with an outsider, whereas ritual practices strictly remained private within the community.

Overview of Traditional Temple Town in India

The geographical spread of India displays a diverse range of physical and climatic conditions. The diversity found in the built forms is due to the regional, climatic, material, and cultural variations. "In traditional communities the social, economic, and religious forms of life are often well integrated. Space and location that rank high socially are also likely to have religious significance" (Tuan, 2001, p. 112). Cities, towns, and villages in India have a long-drawn historical background, amongst which a few follow their culture and rituals as defined up until today. "The city and the architectural landscape within it are formed and continually moulded by human activity" (Adams & Marlor, 2019, p. 114). Historically, cities and villages were planned as per ancient Vedic scripts, where written codes, rules and rituals informed every part of daily life.

Dedication to rules and rituals reflected through the different spaces of the towns and within the houses provides a scope to explore the interiority through varied experiential aspects. In experiencing space, "the user has an increased input in the creation of an interior experience. They do not simply encounter a piece of architecture; instead, there is a performative engagement with it and production of experience via personal perception" (Marlor, 2021, p. 197). The experiential aspect also reflects the strong relationship between the people and their context (Rasmussen, 2000). "A great architecture that belongs to the soil within which it is sited, and which belongs to its people too. These earth-bound spaces are the footholds of the senses" (Brislin, 2012, p. 13). Based on these statements, traditional cities and houses emphasise human experience, human ergonomics, and cultural ideologies that reflect upon its built form. In these houses, daily rituals are closely associated with the village's temple and the spaces inside the house. The notion of space within a space is explored in these traditional houses.

Each traditional town and its house form has unique visual, experiential, and embodied expressions with associated meanings and intentions to the traditional way of life. The temple towns of south India are unique in their formation. The temple is the central nucleus around which the streets are formed in gridiron or concentric patterns, with the row of linear houses is placed along the street, leading to the temple. In India, some key ancient temples have become the faith of a larger population, subsequently emerging into pilgrimage sites, such as Madurai, Tiruchirapalli, Chiadambaram, Kumbakonam, and many more. Temple as a centre of faith remained an integral idea in developing towns and villages throughout history. For centuries, many small and big towns and villages continued these partial physical formations. This article presents a case study of Konnerirajapuram village, located near Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu, South India, to explore interiority as tangible and intangible aspects through phenomenology of its built environment.

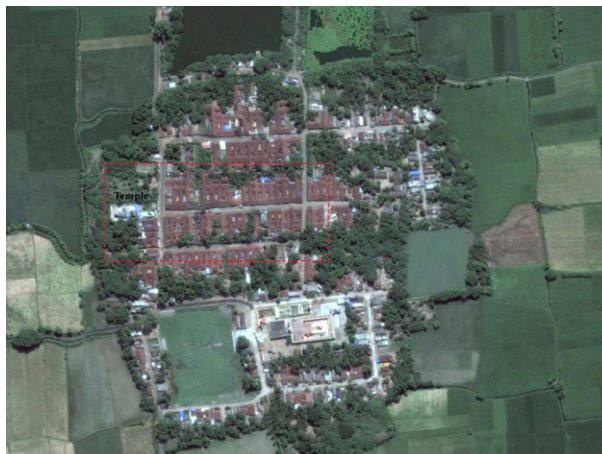


Figure 1
The view of
Konnerirajapuram,
showing the streets
and the temple
(Image taken from
Google Earth)

Spatial Formation of the Village and Streets

Konnerirajapuram Village has two main temples that bind the entire village together. The temple of Lord Shiva is known as Uma Maheshwara Temple and the other one belongs to Lord Vishnu. The first degree of interiority as an intangible aspect could be identified in the relationship between the village and the temple. The village is a community that worships the clan temple. Residents who reside in the village and those who migrated elsewhere come back to perform yearly rituals at the clan temple. Few milestone events of life, such as birth, engagement, and sometimes marriage, are performed in the clan temple. Such celebrations mark the first level of intangible interiority, where faith and allegiance are dedicated to the village temple and eventually extend to the community to create memories.

The streets do not strictly follow the formation rule around the temple in this village. Only one street known as *Nadutharu* (middle street) leads towards the temple and the rest are laid in a gridiron pattern. The majority of houses in these streets are inhabited by Brahmins—the priest community. The street is 250 meters long with one intersection and houses with 7–8 metres varying width. It creates a distinct visual image with the temple as focus, with the houses on both sides of the street as the vertical planes directing that vision.



Figure 2
The street view illustrating the rows of *agraharam* on both sides of the streets (Photograph by author)

The street acts as a communal space for the residents. The families in the streets are mostly distantly related, and thus they come together for festivities as one large family where the street becomes a congregation space for celebration. Few ceremonies remain only at street level that establishes the inward character of each street. Collective temple festivals, processions with chariots, and social functions are held in the street, where all the houses participate, and the street becomes one ample space for celebration.

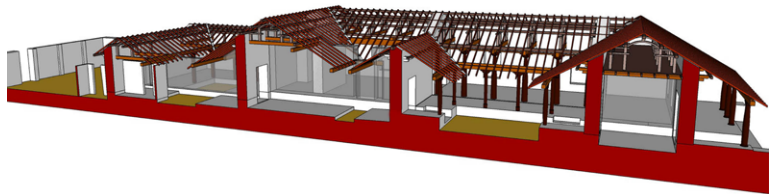
The eaves of each house have hooks to tie a piece of fabric that covers the street during festivities. This covering further gives a sense of being one space with the order of columns and plinths creating new territory. The second degree of interiority can be experienced at the street level where one senses belongingness; however, for outsiders, the street ends mark an invisible preconceived boundary.

Spatial Formation of Individual House: *Agraharam*

Agraharam, as the name suggests, consists of the rows of houses laid out in the shape of a garland around a temple. These houses belong to the Brahmin (priest) community, whose life revolves around the ideology and tradition of the main temple. The houses

in Konnerirajapuram are built on rectangular plots having sizes of 8 by 30/45/52 metres. The footprints of the built area may or may not cover the entire plot.

Figure 3
Sectional view
of *agraharam*
illustrating the spatial
organisation of open,
semi-open, and
closed spaces
(Image by
Rohan Sutariya)



The *agraharam* is characterised as deep houses, placed alongside each other with shared walls, with a series of courtyards, a pitched roof with an acute angle, orthogonal spaces, and a series of columns as its striking architectural feature. For each house, the sequence and sizes of the spaces are carefully followed (Figure 4). The corner houses have different widths but follow a similar sequence of spaces and functions.

Figure 4
Plan and section of
agraharam showing
three main sections
(Image by
Himani Shingala and
students of IIDEA,
Indus University)



Before delving into the experiential aspect of *agraharam* to explore interiority, it is necessary to elaborate on the sequence and functions related to each space. To identify the spaces, the following description refers to the native terms from various references (Desai, 2018; Dulcie & Maran, 2018; Fuller & Narsimha, 2010; Kumar, 2006; Rajeev, n.d.). The entire *agraharam* can be divided into three main sections: the *mudhal kattu* (receiving section), the *irandham kattu* (living section), and the *moonam kattu* (service section), which will be described in the following sub sections.

Mudhal kattu: Receiving section

The *mudhal kattu* as the receiving section consists of *thinnai* (plinth) and *rezhi* (passageway). The street edge of each *agraharam* has a semi-open space covering the entire front edge of the house, which is known as *thinnai*—a place for interaction on the street. This front edge is divided into two functional spaces; one is the high plinth with a series of columns called *thinnai*, and the other is a series of steps leading to the entrance of the house called *therukaradu*. *Thinnai* is constantly used by visitors, neighbours, and residents to sit and interact. Traditionally the plinth was used as a sleeping space at night by the house owner and male guests. In some cases, *thinnai* showcases two plinths; the higher plinth is reserved for the house owner, and the lower plinth can be occupied by villagers or farmworkers.



Figure 5
Residents
interacting at *thinnai*
(Photograph
by Radhika Amin)

The angle of the roof makes an enclosure that protects the plinth from heavy rain and sun. The series of columns and angle of the roof support further enhance the character of the interiority of *thinnai*. It is a space that opens on the street, but the width of the platform, series of columns, and low eaves of the roof makes one feel part of the *agraharam*. At this point, where people pause for interaction, *thinnai* becomes a threshold between the outside and the inside.

The passageway between the entrance and the interior of the *agraharam* is known as *rezhi*. *Rezhi* is a transitional space; however, in a few houses, grain storage opens into it. The spaces right at the entrance to the house allow the farmworkers to enter and fill the grain storage but at the same time restrict their entry beyond the receiving areas of the house. The size of the room can accommodate a sleeping cot for one person. The *rezhi* marks the second spatial boundary of *agraharam* after *thinnai*. It is an in-between enclosed space accessed from *thinnai* on one side and *tavaram* on the other.

Tavaram is a part of the interior courtyard, and *thinnai* becomes the transition from the street. Thus, in this space, one experiences being part of the interior as well as the exterior. Here one can only get a glimpse of the living spaces inside.

Spaces from *thinnai* to *rezhi* are considered as *mudhal kattu*, the receiving quarters. As a receiving section, the spaces give an introduction to life inside *agraharam*. Sitting on the plinth near the entrance, talking to neighbours, lighting oil lamps on the small shelves on either side of the entrance door are all integral parts of their lives supported by physical spaces.

Irاندham kattu: Living section

As one passes through *rezhi*, the large space opens up in the front. This space is an amalgamation of multiple functions, consisting of *murram* (courtyard), *tavaram* (semi-open space), *koodam* (semi-open space), and *nadai arai* (enclosed room). *Murram* (courtyard) enhances the character of the entire living quarter. This open space is lower than the semi-open spaces on its three sides and shares a neighbouring house's common wall on the fourth side. The courtyard brings sunlight and ventilation to the adjoining spaces providing thermal comfort, and this exhibits multiplicity through its functions. It becomes a part of the movement from the entrance to the backyard with minimum undulations on the floor. The leaning roof towards the courtyard and the high wall of the adjacent *agraharam* enhances the inward character of the house.



Figure 6
View of *murram*,
the courtyard
(Photograph
by Radhika Amin)

Tavaram is a semi open space that connects *murram* (courtyard) and another large semi-open space called *koodam*. *Tavaram* is mainly used for circulation. The level difference of about 450–500 mm between

the surrounding semi-open space and the courtyard creates a plinth condition to use *tavaram* as a sitting space. It is a familiar gesture seen in residents and visitors to use *tavaram* as a seat accessed from the courtyard. A series of columns, low eaves, leaning roof, and exposed roof members towards the courtyard provide a unique experience while in motion through this interior space. The level difference defines a clear boundary between open and semi-open spaces.



Figure 7
Tavaram and *koodam*, the side-by-side semi open spaces in *agraharam* (Photograph by Radhika Amin)

Koodam is another semi-open space in the living quarter that is wider than *tavaram*. This space accommodates the prayer area in one of the alcoves, a sitting area, and a swing. It is the house's main space for multipurpose activities such as entertaining guests, sleeping at night, performing daily prayers, gathering, etc. The roof gains maximum height over this space; thus, the attic space is accommodated above, which eliminates the experience of the inclined roof. In some houses, the attic space is removed, exposing the wooden truss supporting the roof. This space feels the richness of the carved wood and rich oxide flooring depicting wealth and tradition.

Nadai arai is a multifunctional enclosed room; it is traditionally used as a treasury, a sleeping area, and a storage for grains and textiles. The use of this room depends on the requirements of the residents. Currently, this space is used as a dedicated bedroom in many houses. This space is enclosed with one entry and two windows overlooking the street. The windows open into the *thinnai* space. One feels entirely enclosed by four walls as the windows are rarely open.

Moonam kattu: Service section

The *moonam kattu* is the service section of *agraharam* that consists of several functions: *samyal arai* (kitchen), *thotanadai* (passageway with semi-open space), *kollai pakkam* (courtyard with semi-open space),

and *kottul* (backyard). *Samyal arai* or the kitchen is an enclosed space with a small courtyard placed on one edge that acts as a chimney and a light well. It accommodates essential storage areas and is accessible from *koodam* and back courtyard, creating a thoroughfare. The fascinating spatial character here is the courtyard that brings a unique light quality inside the dark space. The courtyard's floor is sunken and is used for washing the utensils. A thin silver light penetrating through the courtyard, light through glass tiles from the roof, leaning roof structure towards the courtyard, and the visible structural wooden members are a few experiential qualities that are unique to kitchens of the *agraharam*.



Figure 8
Samyal arai: Kitchen
with courtyard
(Photograph
by author)

Thotanadai is a passageway with similar width as the entrance space *rezhi*, and it has a courtyard shared with the kitchen. This space is used for washing, cleaning, and storing. This space is not directly accessible from the kitchen. *Kollai pakkam* is the courtyard with semi-open space. This space beyond the kitchen serves as an extension to the kitchen. It is again an amalgamation of a sunken courtyard and semi-open space where the courtyard is used for drying food and vegetables. Traditional food requires intricate preparations, and every meal is prepared from fresh ingredients handpicked mostly from their backyards with spices crushed manually on the stone.

Kottul as the open backyard houses a well, a wash area, toilets and sometimes sheds for domestic animals. It is a home garden with herbs like holy basil, lemon, hibiscus, curry leaves, and trees such as drumsticks, coconut, mango, and sapota. There is a small service entry at the back, which opens into the service lane.

Elements of Space Making in Aghaharam

The amalgamation of spatial elements in *agraharam* together creates a good blend of tradition, culture, and religious inclinations. Each element contributes to the spatial quality of the built environment and enriches the notion of the spaces (Pandya, 2007). There are several main elements of space making of *agraharam*, consisting of courtyard, semi-open space, floor, columns, and roof.

Multiple courtyards become the main elements in the spatial configuration of *agraharam* that is long and orthogonal, with single or double-storey structures and shared walls. The courtyards' placement and sizes and the varied width of semi-open spaces provide unique character to each courtyard. Unlike the courtyards in hot and arid regions, most of the courtyard spaces have an evident level difference that controls natural movement to and from the courtyard to the adjacent spaces. Ample rainfall in this region could be one of the reasons for sunken courtyards. These variations treat the plinth difference as a seating space while accessing the courtyards.

The divisions of the courtyards create a play of light for a variety of functions, and each courtyard has a degree of interiority associated with it. Public to private space transitions are evident; thus, the degree of interiority increases as one moves from outside to interior spaces. The courtyard in the living quarter, though enclosed, still embodies the feeling of a welcoming space, whereas the service section courtyard is felt more private. Interiority is an experience with the notion of space within a space.

The entire *agraharam* is an amalgamation of varied semi open-spaces with limited enclosed spaces. Larger semi-open spaces are separated by a row of columns, creating a set of adjacent semi-open spaces. These spaces also define the movement through the house, and the pause is sometimes attained via floor variations. Semi-open space at the receiving quarter is dedicated to interaction. At the living quarter, it accommodates movement and interaction, while at the service quarters, it serves as space to facilitate daily chores. With minimal anthropometric dimensions, one feels interiority in these semi-open spaces characterised by low eaves and row of columns.

Floors in *agraharam* are modulated with variations in levels. These variations define the character of each space and create subspaces. The notion of floors is unique in *agraharam*, as the floor is not just a horizontal plain or defining a movement, but it is an integral part

of residents' lifestyle. There is minimal furniture on the floors, and it is widely used to sit, cook, sleep, and place household things. As the floor is used for most of the activities, the touch of the floor is evident, further enduring the tacit feel of the oxide flooring.

Columns are significant structural supports in *agraharam* as most of the spaces in *agraharam* are semi-open spaces opening towards the courtyard. The row of columns creates a rhythm, defines movement, and establishes the space. The aged circular wooden columns with minimal carving give a unique character to *agraharam*. In the central living quarters, the row of one column is bigger, carved, polished, and protected from direct sunlight, whereas the columns near the courtyard have minimal carving and are weathered. Variation in sizes, carving, and finishes on columns define the importance of space. The row of columns in *thinnai* and a series of such *thinnai* adds rhythm to the streets.

The roof of the *agraharam* plays a vital role in establishing the humane scale of the spaces that contributes to the identity of *agraharam*. The roof profile is visible from the street and all the courtyards of the house. The higher ridge passes through the larger areas of the house, and it is covered by an attic space, so the volume is not perceived. The lower eaves provide a sense of enclosures such that it defines the edges of the interior spaces, contributing to the sense of interiority. The low height at eaves allows easy reach of the wooden members and the roof tiles. The heaviness of wood and the texture of roof tiles can be felt by touching them.

Experiential Aspects of Araharam

In the unique functional formation of *agraharam*, the sequence of spaces and elements of space making establishes a physical architectural identity. In addition, the multisensory experiences of *agraharam* demonstrate intangible identity that is performativity and rooted in its cultural processes and climatic conditions. "Place is a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place is known not only through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience, which resist objectification" (Tuan, 1975, p. 158). Houses that lived through decades create multiple layers of memories that establish association and meaning to their spaces, thus performing various degrees of interiority within the house.

Gibson (1966) classified perceptual system as an orienting system, which is the basis of all the others such as the auditory system, the haptic system, the taste-smell system, and the visual system. Our

senses can be classified as an orienting system that synchronises with one another. One's vision leads hands to touch, vision, smell, and taste enhance food craving; watching performances keep both the eyes and ears in sync. This part of the study explores various experiential aspects of the house that enhances belongingness and creates memories of the place in one's mind.

Vision centric approach

From every *agraharam* street, the temple is always in focus, and the idol is the centre point. "The dominance of the eye and the suppression of the other senses tends to push us into detachment, isolation and exteriority" (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 19). The concept of ocularcentrism is debatable in the case of a temple town as it rejects the other senses over the visual approach. Visual paradigm is a prevailing aspect of temple town planning in South India. The village streets generate a vision-centric interpretation leading to ocularcentric paradigms that dominates the vision and power. Here, the paradigm enriches the unique sense of the order of structure, spaces, openings, and leaning roofs. However, the dominance of vision as a sense does not reject the other senses, but instead, the other haptic senses and sensory experiences enhance one's experiences of being in the space.



Figure 9
Linear movement
through the house
(Photograph
by Radhika Amin)

Traditionally women of the houses make geometric designs known as *kolam* in front of the main entrance every morning and evening. The presence of *kolam* in front of each house enhances the sense of culture. Thus, the street does not give an ocularcentric formation but rather, the social, cultural, and material qualities enhance one's

experience through various senses. The aspect of interiority hence becomes intangible when it is about faith and relation to the clan temple or the village street, but also tangible with physical and experiential characteristics.

The *agraharam* is a linear house type that creates various movements through its form. The linear movement through a series of courtyards connecting entry to the backyard is the most dominant. This movement continues the vision centric approach at the household scale; however, the focus leads to open space, unlike the street where the temple is a focus.

The significance of shadows

“Deep shadows and darkness are essential because they dim the sharpness of vision, make depth and distance ambiguous and invite unconscious peripheral vision and tactile fantasy” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 46). This notion can be realized within various spaces of an *agraharam*. While the spaces are dark, regulated light through the courtyards, openings and glass roofs let the diffused daylight into the spaces. There are multiple courtyards as light sources illuminating the dark spaces. The enclosed sleeping areas have comparatively less light coming in through one or two openings, whereas the semi-open spaces get indirect light through the courtyard. The function of the service courtyards is mainly to dry cloths, utensils, edibles, and perform other household activities. Here, direct bright sunlight is helpful to eliminate pests and unwanted odour from the ingredients. Plants and trees grow under direct sunlight in the service courtyard.



Figure 10
Play of light through
the courtyards
(Photograph
by Radhika Amin)

“The human eye is most perfectly tuned for twilight rather than bright daylight” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 46). The light condition throughout the house is regulated over the spaces, enhancing its function. The kitchen has a minimum required light entering through the light well and transparent roof tiles. A low roofline at the edge of semi-open spaces in living areas controls direct light, whereas a little higher roofline in the semi-open areas of the service section provides direct light appropriate to the task. Quality of light varies in semi-open spaces, which are used for multiple functions; part of the space gets direct light during some part of the day and is diffused during other times. This play of light provides a character to the spaces being private or public. The entire house has wonderfully modulated light and shadow spaces.



Figure 11
Significance
of shadows
(Photograph
by author)

Acoustic intimacy

“Sight isolates, whereas sound incorporates; vision is directional, whereas sound is omni-directional. The sense of sight implies exteriority but sound creates an experiment of interiority” (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 49). Sound has different ways to create the spatial experience. “Sound itself can evoke spatial impressions. The reverberations of thunder are voluminous; the squeaking of chalk on slate is “pinched” and thin. Low musical tones are voluminous whereas those of high pitch seem thin and penetrating” (Tuan, 2001, p. 15). Tuan further describes that other senses expand and enrich visual space. Thus sound enlarges one’s spatial awareness to include areas behind the head that cannot be seen. More critically, sound dramatises spatial experience (Tuan, 2001). Soundless space feels calm and lifeless despite the visible flow of activity in it.

The sound emerges in various forms in the domestic situation of *agraharam*. Beginning from outside and eventually inside, the various sounds create a myriad of experiences. A loud call of a street vendor travels through the spaces and reaches the central space where women are busy cooking or are in the courtyard with other house chores. Washing and cleaning sounds remain in the back courtyards. The sound of breaking coconut shells is familiar in all houses. Backyards have trees and vegetation that support part of each family's daily food requirement. The bird nests on these trees and their chirping become an integral sound of the house. The house's main space that comprises the courtyard and semi-open spaces provides the possibility of a multiplicity of sounds. The sound of rain falling in the courtyard, the sound of small prayer bells in the morning, the chatter, and TV or music system gives a collective memory of the place.



Figure 12
Backyard plantations
(Photograph
by author)

"Hearing structures articulates the experience and understanding of space" (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 49). The community in this village have proficiency in classical music and dance. The sound of Carnatic music with a balance of vocals to instruments further caters to the enriching multi-sensorial experience of the internal space. The music recital with certain low and high pitch variations further enhances the experience of traversing through *agraharam*. Different times of the day are devoted to different activities and the activities have associated sounds. From hectic mornings to quieter afternoons, busy evenings, and quiet nights, one can establish memories through sounds.

Scent of the spaces

"A particular smell makes us unknowingly re-enter a space completely forgotten by the retinal memory; the nostrils awaken a forgotten image and we are enticed to enter a vivid daydream" (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 54). Everyone associates a particular scent with specific spaces. The scents are identified by various means such as a particular food aroma, growth of vegetation, fruits, and flowers, the smell of water on earth, and other materials. As the temple is the primary centre of the villages, the scent of sandalwood, vegetable oil, and flowers remains in and around the street. The morning ritual of each family to put sandalwood on an individual's forehead eventually releases the scent in the house. Women of every house sprinkles water in front of the house to even out the mud road before making the *kolam*. The process releases the scent of 'petrichor' (scent of water on earth).



Figure 13
View from *thinnai*
during rainy day
(Photograph
by author)

The coconut and other spice smells are sensed in the kitchen areas of individual houses. The seasoned wood also has a scent that is felt throughout the house. When a back courtyard is used to dry food or grains, the temporary smell changes and further augments of the atmosphere. Fusions of all these smells create a lasting memory of the village and the house.

Sense of touch

The skin has the ability to read the texture, weight, density, and temperature of the matter (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 56). The sense of touch becomes an instrument to comprehend the spaces and spatial elements. As described by Tuan (2001),

The skin, when it comes in contact with flattish objects, can judge approximately their shape and size. At the micro-level, roughness and smoothness are geometric properties that the skin easily recognizes. Objects are also hard or soft. Tactile perception differentiates these characteristics on spatial-geometric evidence. (p. 14)

The sense of touch is the major aspect of interiority in *agraharam*. The house is experienced continuously through various senses, including touch. The spaces and tactile elements can be felt and remembered. Touching the weathered, slender column of the outside spaces gives the sense of combating weather and other external forces applied. The heavy and bulky door, when closed, expresses its texture and weight. The mud road to the plastered plinth surfaces reflects the texture variation and feeling of entering a sophisticated space. Inside the house, various textures on floors define movement and sitting areas. The undulation on the floor of courtyards is felt on the skin; it translates the understanding of exposure to weather. The courtyard floor is comparatively rough due to its exposure to sun and rain.



Figure 14
Texture of roof tile
and weathered
wooden members
(Photograph
by author)

The traditional coloured flooring complements the richness of the space and keeps the thermal comfort intact. The smoothness is felt on the skin while walking, sitting, or sleeping. The wooden members of the house with touch give the impression the material density and weight, making it evident of becoming one of the loadbearing elements that support the roof.

The rough textures of the roof tile, similar to the street columns, display its response to the weather. Each tile is handmade, so the touch to the tile makes one feel the impressions of the makers' fingers,

displaying its uniqueness. Here, the sense of touch and vision are associated. One can almost feel and touch certain elements, whereas some eroded elements are not very inviting to touch.

Embodied Experiences of *Agraharam*

We use respective body proportions and dimensions to design associated requirements. It is essential that the particular measurements and dimensions guarantee basic fulfilment of the required spaces as lived spaces. "The essential skill of making a living in traditional culture is based on the wisdom of the body sorted in the haptic memory" (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 62). Our body remembers and reflects upon the spaces accordingly.

Architectural space is a lived space rather than just a physical space, and lived spaces always transcend geometry and measurability (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 64). As stated by Böhme (2017), traditional architecture has conceived of space from the perspective of geometry and considered the people in it as bodies. As our body adapts to its environment, the embodied sense is activated, and the body adapts to the spaces around us. The various functional spaces of *agraharam*, meeting, cooking, sorting, sleeping, are all related to the resident's basic ergonomics. The spaces are not too large and, at the same time, not so compact but just appropriate to their requirements. An activity of performing a particular task or movement is defined by the minimum required reach of areas. For instance, *thinnai* being used for sleeping by the men of the house could be used as a seat accessible from the street side. The size of *thinnai* responds to these activities. The lower eave ends make it inconvenient for someone to stand in front of *thinnai*, but it provides a full shade for a person sitting or sleeping. These characteristics are found in all the activities being performed by the resident. Each space in two and three-dimensional aspects responds to only the minimum required area of the activity.

Conclusion

The article aims to provide a multisensory reading within the multiple scales of spaces in the traditional settlement of *agraharam*. This multisensory reading generates layers of interiority that exist across temples, streets, and houses. The study explored the rich cultural rootedness of traditional house forms providing various visual and sensory experiences referring to multiple degrees of interiority.

Agraharam's traditional identity is constructed by the functional organisation responding to daily requirements, the space making

elements responding to local material and climatic condition, and the multisensory experiences. The houses are lived through many generations creating multiple memories and associations to their spaces supported. While using these spaces, people create their own realms, transient or permanent that impart a sense of belonging or privacy, thus interiority. The *agraharam* celebrates its spaces with all five sense systems at play. The expression of materials through the ageing of wooden columns and roof members, handmade clay tiled roof, and oxide flooring conveys timeless excellence. The anthropometric dimensions of various spaces are experienced by low eaves lines, sunken courtyards, and floor variations. Synchronisation of all these senses in traditional spaces enriches the experience of interiority.

This article has explored how interiority is experienced in the *agraharam* of Konnerirajapuram located in Tamil Nadu. The intertwine between the traditional house forms and cultural practices are evident in all community house types that have been resided over decades. *Agraharam* is also found in different regions of South India, responding to various regional, climatic conditions and material availability. Such difference creates varying typologies based on these local factors, which offer potential for further extending the scope of this study.

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