To Find a Seat: Tracing the Ideoscape of Seats in the Pathars' Lifeworld in Penang

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Abstract

This article examines the roles taken by seats in the buildings that form the lifeworld of Pathars—traditional Tamil goldsmiths—as an ideoscape following their migration to Penang during the British colonial period in the 19th century. This study used a phenomenological ethnography method to bring Pathars' lived experiences with their physical environment to the forefront, highlighting the subjectiveness of architecture that shapes their lifeworld. The ideoscape of seats is analysed in themes to examine the power and politics of seats in the Pathars' lifeworlds, including present-day migrant workers. To find a seat *is a metaphor that elicits discussion on Pathars' existential lives and highlights how this community has attempted to negotiate its way as agents of change or to bring the agency to their position in creating spatial norms in place amidst the state reifying its enclaves with essentialised notions of ethnic identity, following the formation of nation-states.*

Keywords: seat, ideoscape, place, space, interiority

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Introduction

Seats as places function as spatial fields that range from intimate to communal scales within Pathars' buildings. What does the seat represent, what realms does it pertain to, and what realms has it opened? The unit of analysis in this study examines the marked change in Pathars' conceptualisations of and engagement with object culture within their buildings, as well as the ensuing *turn to the material*, through the deconstruction of the seat into its social context. A chair is ultimately a mere object, but a seat, in Pathars' lifeworld, reveals interiority in the way people have understood design as users in intimate interior settings. This, in turn, enables us to understand Pathars' culture and informs us on how the community interprets and thinks about seats in its daily lives.

Raman and Zakaria (2022), in discussing Pathars—traditional Tamil goldsmiths in Malaysia—highlight the need to address these goldsmiths' migration and subsequent resettlement as a continuation of the Vishwakarma cultural heritage during the British colonial period. Present-day Pathars in Penang operate from shophouses in and around George Town. Their community temple, Arulmigu Kamatchi Amman Devasthanam, located on Jalan Dato' Keramat, Penang, provides entry into the unique cultural world of this sub-ethnic community of the local Indian diaspora community. These shophouses and the community temple help bracket Pathars' lifeworlds within a framework that can be studied empirically.

This study analyses and narrates the ideoscape of seats in Pathars' lifeworlds in three broad themes that can provide meaning to its function as a place: reward of the vernacular, posture of religiosity, and markers of modernism. This study subsequently discusses the seat's authority and the power it bestows by association alone. It attempts to discover the existential essence of seats from where spatiality unfolds in Pathars' buildings, simultaneously highlighting its interiority, i.e., "a condition of feeling-inward" (Teston, 2020, p. 66) amongst the users. An ideoscape of seats can offer a unique way to understand how this community has inherited, translated, and transformed its cultural identity in the present day in its continuity and interiority, surpassing architectural forms or facades.

Buildings as Lifeworld: Ideoscapes of Seats, Objects, and Everyday Experiences

During the early stages of Western colonisation, Penang and the surrounding region saw booming trade that drew various people to the island. The early Indians who came from different regions of the Indian subcontinent into Penang were predominately Tamils, who

were primarily merchants, traders, and money lenders, according to Ahmad (2015), citing the summarised official museum pamphlet of the Penang State Museum Board. The transnational movement of various forms of trade, coupled with community wealth into the Indian enclaves in Penang, called for a recontextualisation of these enclaves into different frameworks. The Indian diaspora's migration compels us to address the disjuncture between economy, culture, and politics. Appadurai (1996) proposed a framework for exploring such disjuncture by examining the relationship among five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes. Ideoscapes are chains of images, but they are often politically charged and associated with state ideologies and counter-ideologies of movements that aim to control the state (Appadurai, 1996).

While ideoscapes comprise chains of ideas, terms, and images, including "freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation and the master term democracy" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 36), ideoscapes' fluidity is complicated, considering the dynamics of the Indian diaspora that continuously bring new meanings into it in different parts of the world. Therefore, in Pathars' lifeworld in Penang, the term ideoscape can explain the nebulous articulation of the circumstances in which cultural dynamics occur and highlight various cultural materials that traverse national boundaries to emphasise disjunctures that often appear among migrating diasporic groups. The suffix *-scape* indicates that ideoscape is not an objectively given relations, but rather a "deeply perspectival" construct, shaped by "historical, linguistic, and political situatedness" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33) of the diasporic community, like Pathars, whose experiences are situated in the intimate encounters in their buildings. The notion of *seat* as a chain of images and ideas is an ideoscape that highlights the subjectivities of interiority present in the Pathars' lifeworld. But what is a seat, really? How does it link to ideoscape in Pathars' buildings?

To answer these queries, the researcher draws attention to Henry David Thoreau's 1845 work *Walden*, which, at its simplest, is Thoreau's existentialism quest, examining modernisation and the empty distractions and demeaning labour that accompanies it (Thoreau, 2017). The urgency of Thoreau's work was fuelled by the sense that he was helping define what it meant to be an individual American citizen, morally and spiritually (Thoreau, 2017). Thoreau put forth the following rhetoric: "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?" (Stein, 1971, p. 481). While *sedes* and *seat* cognates with the Sanskrit *asana*, a generic designation for any yoga posture, Thoreau

used *sit* as a rubric in his writings in Walden, as well as in words, metaphors and allegories like *site*, *chair*, *squat*, *nest*, and *point d'appui* (Stein, 1971; Thoreau, 2017). Here, we can see how seat translates into a series of concepts, or *images*, capturing different ideas about interacting with objects and inhabiting space using our body schema. In his personal writings, Thoreau mentions about finding "a place that is pure and a seat that is restful" (Furui, 2016, p. 39). Thoreau's phenomenological experience of his inhabitation in place hints to us that seat is an idea that can point us toward our intertwining with our socio-cultural physical surroundings, shaped by the manner and intent of inhabitation.

Thoreau's Walden is his situated critical discourse with modernisation that documents the *communication revolution* that took place while he lived at Walden Pond (Furui, 2016). Thoreau's dialogues resemble Heidegger's phenomenology of existentialism—the grandeur of being and orientation to place. However, it needs to be anchored to the tangible idea of objects, the primacy of everyday experience and the overall phenomenological experience of place that sufficiently address the subjectivities that comes from bodily experience relevant to interior discourse. In explaining these factors through the lens of interiority, Teston (2020) noted that while interiority can be experienced inside buildings, the *interior-feeling place* is predominantly determined by atmospheres and is only partially supported by architectural forms. Various factors can influence the interior-feeling place, like psychology, atmosphere, form, programme, or a combination of all (Teston, 2020). Subsequently, Teston (2020) discussed interiority as an interior-feeling place within a building, listing phenomenology as one of the primary schools of thought, comprising approaches to comprehending the nature of things. However, the application of phenomenology has also somehow taken a regressive approach in architecture, framing a quasi-religious necessity or otherworldly, universal human wholeness without specifying the context of the experience itself (Baird, 2018; Roth, 2018).

Historians such as Norwood (2018) and Davis (2018) also rejected this essentialising ethics that tends to form around architectural thinking. Bedford (2018) urged scholars to rethink the politics of phenomenology in architecture when and where design assessments function as cultural critiques, rather than as expositions of philosophical arguments. These critiques need to function via a specific historical critique, e.g., labour condition, the habitation of buildings, and bodily stress or discomfort brought on by different environmental factors. Therefore, phenomenology must analyse *spaces of agonism*

to uncover the "worldhood of the world, its contingency, and thus the process of hegemony within it" (Bedford, 2018, p. 185) to understand embodied experience. The ideoscape of seat that the researcher proposes then functions as a rubric to the subjectivities of relational identities in the phenomenology of place that can uncover inhabitation patterns, cultural memory, nostalgia, and politics that govern the everyday experience in architecture, all of which point to users' embodied experience. While our bodily schema is analogous to the world, it also serves as a backdrop against which things and projects emerge. Ahmed (2007) compels scholars to reconsider how we position ourselves in considering the prevailing orientation in phenomenology by first orienting ourselves toward disorientation experiences. Similarly, Norwood (2018) also said that one must pay close attention to experience without treating it like a depiction of a perfect, idealised consciousness. As such, within a contextual lifeworld, human identities not only are relational, but also exist in fragments, always in the process of being collected, nuanced and detailed, and hold non-reductional descriptions of experience. When utilised this way, phenomenology can be a useful tool in the study of places to uncover what lies at the limits of historical archives to articulate "the diagrams of those who have been silenced" (Norwood, 2018, p. 21).

Phenomenology of Place

Places are spatial fields that range from intimate to regional scale to include environmental situations that invoke a wide range of actions, experiences, and memories (Seamon, 2018a). Since phenomenology is a philosophical approach that starts with everyday human experience, it is well suited for tackling many of the concerns and issues that surface while researching the place. According to the phenomenology of place, people's experiences of a place are an interwoven, typically unobserved phenomenon that cannot be separated from its physical surroundings (Casey, 2009; Janz, 2017; Malpas, 2018; Seamon, 2018a; Seamon, 2018b; Stefanovic, 2008). Place consequently provides a mechanism to accurately describe the lifeworlds that designate the foci of human meaning, intentions, and behaviour in phenomenology (Casey, 2009; Relph, 1976; Malpas, 2018). According to Seamon (2020), as lived experience, place attachment is a complex, multivalent phenomenon that can vary individually, socially, culturally, environmentally, temporally, and historically. Buildings, carrying out the function of places, sustain human behaviours, meanings, and experiences (Seamon, 2017). Hence the phenomenological analysis of their roles stands to reason. Subsequently, the lifeworld is a person or group's everyday world that is taken for granted, normally unnoticed, and thus hidden as a phenomenon (Finlay, 2011; Seamon, 1979; Toombs, 2001; van Manen, 1990).

> Phenomenologically, the lifeworld is the everyday realm of experiences, actions, and meanings typically taken for granted and thus out of sight as a phenomenon. Unless it changes in some noticeable way, we are almost always, in our typical human lives, unaware of the lifeworld, which we assume is the way that life is and must be. (Seamon, 2017, p. 245)

By reading buildings as lifeworlds, we can bracket the phenomenological account of place to understand Pathars' inhabitation of their buildings and the context of their migration into Penang. Pathars' workshops and their community temple are actually shophouse plots. But what is the ideation of the shophouse? According to the City Council of George Town (1966), the conception of the shophouse existed even in the early years after Penang was founded, where its settlement consisted of two hundred houses. While the term shophouse was used in colonial administration records of the 19th century, during the early stages of development of planning and building codes, the Straits Settlements classified seven house styles based on socioeconomic rank in the 1930s. Shophouses supplied shared housing for the working and artisan classes like the early Pathars (*Annual Report*, 1932). The following extract describes the shophouses that match the typology of the shophouses that many of the present-day Pathars inhabit. These shophouses are distinguished by their front opening, absence of courtyards, lack of daylight and ventilation in the interior spaces, and absence of back lanes in the units found in central George Town. Despite the evident disadvantages, Pathars have spatialised their space in these shophouses through their work.

> The shop-houses in most cases are built in rows, of solid construction and of two or more storeys. They are, in a large number of cases, insufficiently ventilated and, in many streets, are not provided with back lanes ... Many of these houses are divided into small cubicles in the upper storeys by the erection of temporary partitions, without regard to the entry of light and air. It is in these cubicles that the worst type of overcrowding is found, … The majority of the labouring and artisan class find a home in these cubicles or in common lodging houses. With so many of the wage earners living in such ill-ventilated an insanitary dwellings, it is not surprising that tuberculosis in urban areas is so prevalent ... (*Annual Report*, 1932, pp. 16–18)

In investigating how buildings carry out the function of places, their function as lifeworlds enables us to analyse them phenomenologically,

to discover on how buildings are used and whose agency determines the significance of such places (Donohoe, 2017).

Methods

This article is based on fieldwork and acquaintance with local Pathars in their shophouses and with people involved in their community temple activities. The 16 participants of this study are small-scale Pathars, their descendants, disenfranchised Pathars, and people who inhabit and use Pathars' buildings—shophouses and the community temple. This study utilised a phenomenological ethnography method. Phenomenological ethnography makes it possible to "discover how people construct their own cultural and political subjectivity within the context" (Gabay, 2015, p. 8). In highlighting the significant turns in phenomenological studies, Katz and Csordas (2003) say a significant body of work sought to shed light on the "native grounding" for subjects' experiences, "increasing respect for local cultures by unearthing causes that outsiders have not recognised" (p. 275). Therefore, phenomenological ethnography includes the hidden voices of participants (Li, 2020) when interpreting meaning from contexts in which ethnography might not afford equal importance. According to Li (2020), combining phenomenology and ethnography would not change the procedures for doing ethnography. Instead, it will add to the study by requiring one or two methods. The methodology for this study includes in-depth unstructured interviews assisted with photovoice, participant observation, the spatial study of Pathars' buildings, and document analysis. In reporting the findings from interviews and observation, all participants' names mentioned are pseudonyms.

In-depth interviews and photovoice

Together with the in-depth unstructured interviews, analysis of participants' photos was also integrated with photovoice. The photos were pre-selected by the participants prior to the interviews. Established by Wang and Burris (1997) with an emancipatory viewpoint in mind, photovoice employs photographs to "elicit, draw out, evoke responses from participants" (Riley & Manias, 2004, p. 400). Using the "immediacy of the visual image," participants are encouraged to openly express how they see the situation (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). Using this participative research approach, participants lead the process by visually representing and narrating their everyday experiences, memories, and intimate details of their place experience. Wang and Burris (1997) use a specific technique for the participants to discuss each photograph. This strategy is known as *SHOWeD* (Wang, 1999), which is an acronym for the questions that participants answer regarding each question: What do you see here?

What is really happening here? How does this relate to our lives? Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist? What can we do about it?

The *SHOWeD* technique was applied to eight participants who agreed to share a personal photograph that captures their experience of place within Pathars' lifeworld. This technique was useful for the researcher to gain a deeper response from the participants who reflected on their place use, their personal relationship to it and other people, and how the place memory serves them in the present day. This strategy is not to count things but to draw on Pathar community's "active lore, observation, and stories" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 382).

Participant observation

The researcher observed the typical everyday activities in the shophouses and the community temple while participating in some communal activities in the temple. Participant observation is different from pure observation or pure participation (Boccagni & Schrooten, 2018). This method aims to find a balance between both *going native* and *becoming the phenomenon* (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002; Jorgensen 1989). Ready et al. (2020) highlight the advantage of participant observation, quoting Bernard (2017) "Participant observers are able to evaluate the information they receive from informants in a broader social context and keep a consistent written record of their observations" (p. 418). Participant observers also have the chance to observe the content and form of relationships in context and over a substantial amount of time (Ready et al., 2020). The data obtained from the in-depth interviews are key in driving the ethnographic stance and direction. Figure 1 shows the relevance of buildings as place and how it serves to bracket an individual or group's lived experience as a unit of analysis. The researcher carried out analysis within the unit of analysis framework by analysing the phenomenological ethnographic data to capture this community's lifeworld that can explain the behaviour and social interactions within their own locales, to establish a narrative description of the ideoscape of seats in the Pathars' lifeworld.

According to Babbie (2012), the principal object of study in social science research is the unit of analysis. Typical units of analysis include people, groups, social organisations, and social artefacts. The unit of analysis applied in this study contributes to the narrative account of the ideoscape of seats by reflecting people's actual experiences and breaking down complex phenomena into components that can be objectively investigated.
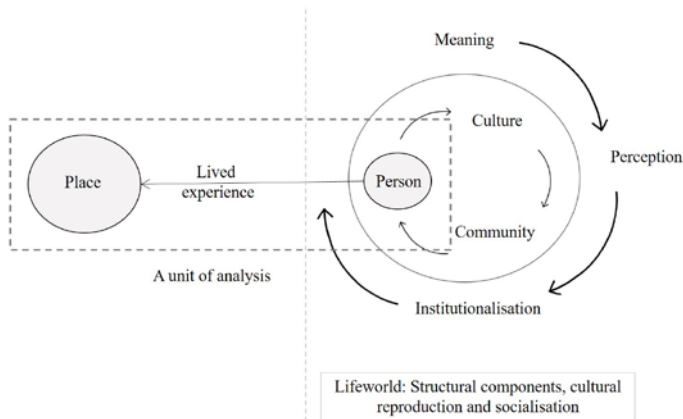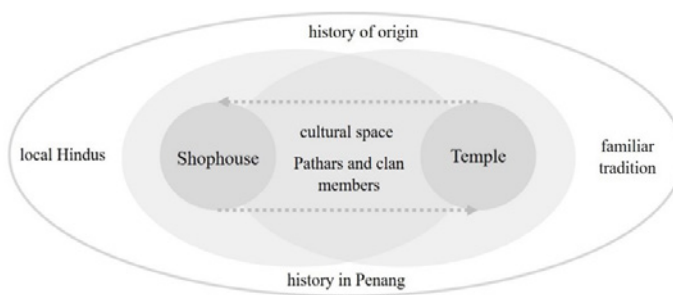
Figure 1
A unit of analysis
(Image by authors,
based on Casey, 2009;
Malpas, 1999; Relph,
1976; Simarmata,
2018)

Revealing Pathars' Lifeworld

The analysis shows that Pathars' buildings function as places that can reveal their lifeworlds. These buildings are tethered to a broader cultural world of the local Indian diaspora, including Hindus who trace their history of origin back to southern India, like Pathars themselves. The culture of origin serves as a strong memory that guides their collective wider identity, which in turn gets translated locally, merging with the local history and familiar traditions in Penang. Pathars' buildings in this study—their shophouses from which they operate their goldsmith business and their community temple—connect and gather this community, their descendants and the local Hindu community through a common cultural space.

Figure 2
Pathars' buildings
are lifeworlds
tethered to the socio-
cultural realms of the
local Indian diaspora
(Image by authors)

Perec and Sturrock (1997) describe rooms occupied by their corresponding furnishing as typologies that expose their active state only upon human inhabitation. Similarly, this study uncovers the active state of Pathars' places at an intimate scale, including furnishing, equipment, and other less permanent contents that shape the seat. Photovoice became an additional helpful technique in this study to move from the exterior realm of regular body engagement to the realm of interiority. It helped to express the subordination of

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sight to insight into voices in critical phenomenology, making the subjects' innermost feelings visible and assisting them to overcome everything external to the subjects' interior space, such as their body, preference, social customs, and prejudice. *SHOWeD*, as a photovoice technique in this study, was useful in examining the person-centred relationship between the body and space, bringing to the foreground not merely a place but "its resulting phenomenal experiences that constitute the interior" (Weinthal, 2011, p. 11). This technique became useful to contextualize interiority to Pathars themselves and to bridge a connection between participant observation by the researcher and intimate interior conditions that the participants have experienced. Out of 16 participants, the photovoice technique was applied to eight participants. Table 1 displays a sample of this strategy used with a participant.

Table 1
A sample excerpt of photovoice analysis

Scenario: Both researcher and the participant refer to a photograph the participant had selected prior to the interview, which best explains connection to his memory of life in shophouse, or community related activities elsewhere.	
Participant 1: K	**Embodiment factors**
Researcher: "What do we see in this photo?"	
K: "Three generations in one frame! My father, me and my son. I took this photo in the temple **during the Mahalaya Amavasya**, where my father performed shradam for his parents. It is **an annual event**."	Event that is tied to programme curated out of specific place.
Researcher: "What happens there?"	
K: "We **offer gratitude** for our departed family members. It also **connects us** together, when I get to **meet other people** in the temple. I get to spend **meaningful** time with my father."	Programme and atmosphere that nurtures nostalgia. The event has deep emotional meaning for the participant and his family.
Researcher: "How does this relate to your life now? I mean, as you are no longer in the goldsmith business."	
K: "This has nothing to do with our work. Most Hindus observe this day. I **feel** it is **important** to **reflect and recall** the sacrifices of our forefathers who were goldsmiths. **We owe everything to them.**"	Culturally situated psychological remembrance of present-day activities in place, that links it to events that has happened in past.
Researcher: "Why is observing this ritual in the temple as a family is important to you?"	
K: "We **need a priest** to facilitate the ritual. It is easier to **congregate** in temple. The **facilities are prepared** here. It is much easier this way. This is important to us as a family, because now I get to introduce my son to **our way of life**. I think **networking** has also turned out to be good. I have started to take my son to a goldsmith's workshop, so that he gets **some exposure** about his **forefathers' legacy**. I'm hoping he finds it interesting enough to consider it in future."	Programme of place necessitates the need for interior furnishing; forms and objects to facilitate activities. Nostalgia and physical performance of cultural memory propels future direction within the lifeworld.

Within the interior spaces of the shophouses and the community temple, the following themes and types of seats appear to describe the ideoscape of seats in the socio-cultural space of Pathars' lifeworld.

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This thematic explanation brackets an embodied-psychological interiority of users who perceive the sensual qualities of real objects that form seats (Teston, 2020).

Table 2
Seats as ideoscape in Pathars' lifeworld

Theme	Type of Seats		Building
Reward of the vernacular	Community	Woollen rugs, plastic mats	Temple
Posture of religiosity	Ceremonial	*Puja peeta* (worship pedestal), *Kusha*-grass mat	Temple
Markers of modernism	Machined austerity	Monobloc plastic chair & custom-made workstation unit	Shophouses
		Monobloc plastic stools & folding banquet tables	Temple
	Vernacular	Pathar's floor-workstation unit, bamboo footstool	Shophouses

As Stewart (2007) says, "it's not the narrative of the object; it is the narrative of the possessor" (p. 137). Therefore, seats as ideoscape work as conduits that show how Pathars belong and connect to the past and present. As an ideoscape, the themes of seats in Pathars' lifeworld disclose how their present-day dynamics combine elements and nostalgia of the past. When consciously deployed, these seats become political instruments where users become both agents and agencies who inscribe specific social ideas into the space they enter and inhabit. When shaped by historical and socio-political situatedness, ideoscape works like a series of images that orient users to space. This orientation is deeply perspectival and anchors the physical body to the diverse and perceptive way of viewing the surrounding environment (Ahmed, 2006).

Reward of the Vernacular

Sitting on the floor to engage in any work was common in Pathars' workshops up to a generation ago. While the use of the floor-workstation unit is no longer active today, the practice of being seated on the floor is still being practised extensively in Pathars' community temple. These seats are woollen rugs and plastic mats, which can be easily cleaned and stored in the temple's minimal storage space. The frugal-vernacular seating has a long history in Indian culture and has a communal nature. Being invited to be seated on the mats and rugs is also an active invitation to join the activity happening in the place, dialectically as a member or an insider. Mats and rugs are rolled out to accommodate many of the temple's community activities, from communal worship, dining on the floor, and traditional music and dance that accompany the community cultural celebrations during major Hindu festivals, bringing people together as common equals, irrespective of their backgrounds.

Sympathetic interactions between people and the physical environment generate interiority, "a perceived condition rather than space within a building" (Teston, 2020, p. 69). As a reward of the vernacular, the communal nature of the seat demonstrates the migrant Hindu community's ingenuity in good and bad times, celebrating life and finding meaning in the community in difficult times. The function of mats and rugs is amplified by the importance of the associated events where temporary space gets created in the temple, marking deep memories for the local community. In creating temporary environments during cultural celebrations, the community collectively generates positive excitement and stimulates strong remembrance and recollection of common traditions that are reimagined and renegotiated locally.

Posture of Religiosity

Seats also have ceremonial use in Pathars' community temple. Such seats function in aligning the users' posture to a religious stance. For example, a *kusha*-grass mat is used in privacy by the officiating priest of the temple for his personal worship. Commonly referred to as *kusha* (*Desmostachya bipinnata*), this grass is specifically used for sacred purposes as seats during rituals and consecration of deities in both Vedic and Buddhist traditions (Sheshadri, 2013; Green, 2007). The daily ritual use of a *kusha*-grass mat by the officiating priest in his personal practice is necessary for him to align himself to his duty in this temple. While he is also employed in the temple like other workers, like the manager, the positionality of the priest, which requires him to perform main worship rites and rituals, demands him to maintain a specific lifestyle.

There are many iconographic representations of ceremonial seats in Pathars' community temple, which play crucial roles in religious worship ceremonies and are useful to convey an explicit message to temple visitors on how to orient themselves upon encountering these ceremonial seats. The *puja peeta* (worship pedestal) with a removable ornate brass backrest is used in ceremonial worship, whereas the congregation is seated in front of the deity. It indicates the event's religiosity and the sacredness of the momentary threshold created between the assembled devotees and the deity seated on a decorated *puja peeta*. The seat of the deity is a sacred pedestal that transforms the communal space in the temple into a congregational worship space for all. The human perception of the religious space is created when users can make sensual and sensory connections between material objects that form these ceremonial seats and the contextual space that anchors them in place. The posture of religiosity is an interiority that can be transitory in the nature of the interaction between people

and the atmosphere that has been created. It can possibly be intense in an individual yet indeterminate. This subjectivity that people impart gives meaning to interiority (Teston, 2020).

Figure 3
The deity is seated on a *puja peeta*, on an elevated level, while the priest and devotees sit on the floor on a mat in front of the deity (Photograph by authors)

Markers of Modernism

The seat in Pathars' lifeworld has shown a lot of flexibility and adaptability as an object. It reacts to its environment, including more powerful political forces at work. The generic chairs used by Pathars in Penang are characterised by machine aesthetics and functionality. They are mass-made, cost-effective commodities produced in response to a call for self-sufficiency and equal society. The chair is always there in Pathars' lifeworld, but not explicitly. Despite its modesty, the chair transcends its plain function to serve as a metaphor for the agents and agencies implied in Pathars' buildings. The elevated seat in Pathar's workshop evolved to become a symbol and frequently a measure of westernisation and subsequent advancement of life in the city. The oldest Pathar in this study, Bala, 80 years old and a third-generation goldsmith, said during the interview:

> In the past, when I started my training, all of us sat down on the floor in the pattarai (workshop) and did our work. We did not have tables and chairs then. Children these days, would not want that and are unable to sit long hours on floor. Therefore, we've shifted to tables and chairs.

However, the desks and chairs that form Pathars' workstations in Penang today are not ergonomically designed. They may lead to the development of different kinds of musculoskeletal disorders. These workstation ensembles are generic desks made by local carpenters, retrofitted with fluorescent light tubes. Every Pathar in this study has made some personal alteration to his workstation according to his preference, comfort, and, most importantly, available resources. These haphazardly personalised workstations promote unnecessary physical efforts, which can affect productivity over time. The static position sustained by these goldsmiths, sitting at awkward positions

on the stacked chairs or footstools, increases stress on the body. It is no surprise that common symptoms many goldsmiths report are back, neck, and shoulder discomfort and pain. Prolonged exposure to harsh light has also resulted in migraines and headaches for some. While several studies have investigated occupational hazards and musculoskeletal disorders that affect traditional goldsmiths in India (Ghosh et al., 2010; Jukariya & Singh, 2018; Moitra et al., 2015), they only studied the semi-confined workstations, which were prevalent in the past, and no longer in use in Penang today. However, not much has changed in the present time, with only two last-remaining small scales, Pathar enterprise in Penang Island. Most of the establishments in Little India are medium-sized enterprises that operate at a larger scale, employing migrant goldsmiths in their stores and factories, many located in the industrial area in Perai.

Coping with the physical pain and the pressing need to engage in physical labour may have led to behavioural changes in some goldsmiths who consume alcohol to numb the bodily discomfort and cope with the punishingly long hours at work, confined to these workstations in an almost static position. The issue of goldsmiths consuming alcohol on the job was highlighted by Sai, who feels the present-day migrant-Indian goldsmiths employed in factories in Malaysia are not trustworthy. He says:

> Then, there are problems with workers who return waste debris mixed with adulterated metals. Perhaps they want to collect the gold debris for themselves. Even with CCTV monitoring in workshops, we are unsuccessful in deterring these acts. It is very hard to monitor the workers…. Many of them drink on the job and show up to work drunk!

Pathar's workstation has always been the spatial root of the goldsmith in sustaining a physical centre. In 1888, when Bala's grandfather started his trade in Penang, all goldsmiths in Penang worked for prolonged hours, seated on the floor in semi-confined workstations, arranged side by side inside the shophouse. These shophouses were collectively called *pattarai* (workshop) in Tamil, which eventually led to the nomenclature Pathar being used commonly in Malaysia. Pathars' community temple, Arulmigu Kamatchi Amman Devasthanam, is the only Vishwakarma community temple in Malaysia. Located on the corner lot of the row of colonial shophouses on Jalan Dato' Keramat, this temple reflects the capitalist language that underpins the activities in Penang, where the cityscape is "dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the previous period of modernism" (Jameson, 1991, p. 16). As this temple is built on two

adjacent shophouse lots, its placement on site comes naturally with all of the limitations of the apparent lack of space to accommodate the full function of a community temple. However, the temple trustees have ingeniously used the back alley as an informal space to accommodate gatherings. When a large congregation is hosted in the temple, the back alley transforms into a communal seating and dining area.

While all chairs can be possible seats, not all seats are chairs. Not being offered a seat inside the shophouse but being stationed on the corridor shows the discriminatory reasons against many migrant workers who work in mid-size goldsmith establishments in Little India, Penang. Strolling along Lebuh Pasar, in Little India, Penang, one can see the goldsmith's workstation placed at the entrance of some of the stores. Many hereditary Pathars who view this as mere promotion-stunt also acknowledge the reality faced by small-medium scale goldsmiths who are pushed to the brink of survival. As expressed by Krishna, a third-generation Pathar who was forced out of his family trade:

> These are just gimmicking to attract people to buy from these shops. These guys [referring to the goldsmiths employed to work in these shops] are exploited by our local jewellery shop owners, to run their own business. They do not do any craftsmanship.
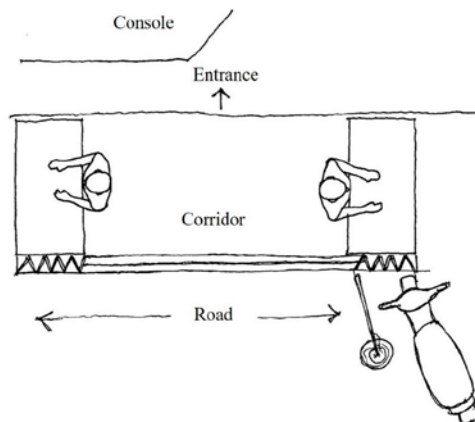

Figure 4
Present-day migrant Pathars seated in workstations on shophouse corridors in Little India, Penang (Image by authors)

Rooted in power and privilege, such discrimination exists alongside the re-emergence of Little India as a tourist offering by the state where this enclave now belongs to the insiders who own the buildings and business operations, and outsiders are restricted to the spaces of Little India. The name Little India was coined in the 1990s through a

government-backed exercise that benchmarked this neighbourhood from Singapore's Indian enclave, also named Little India. Little India is a commercial zone, more accurately, an ethnically demarcated zone that functions commercially and culturally, supported by local government and tourism authority as an ethnic offering. The tourism authority has a role in maintaining the colonial rationale and further reinforcing the notion by creating a physical and visual separation of this zone from its neighbouring streetscape by orchestrating tourist visits. The Penang Global Tourism (n.d.) on its webpage narrates Little India under the banner *Experience Penang 2020* as follows:

> It's easy to think that you've stepped into an Indian movie while sauntering down the streets in Little India, a vibrant Indian enclave in George Town. There's Indian music blaring from loudspeakers, colourful sarees and kurtas on display, savoury aromas wafting in the air and Tamil speaking merchants and crowds in every nook and cranny! (para. 1)

This memory, created by the state, obscures a more precise recollection of actual particular *Indian-ness* in Penang, their architecture, morphology, and socio-cultural composition. Yeoh and Lau (1995) aptly call this "cultural amnesia" where "people are no longer personally or intimately acquainted with their own cultural roots" and that makes it easier for the state to "impose a particular version of the cultural past" (p. 55). This generic remembrance that displaces histories of people in place merely resurrects essentialised images that slowly replace "lived culture with ideological expressions" (Yeoh & Lau, 1995, p. 54). This *cultural amnesia* can further exaggerate the effects of disjunctures in the spaces of migrating groups. As such, efforts that Pathars have undertaken to arbitrate the idea of seats in their communal and private domains can assist the diasporic community in regaining their cultural memory while reinventing it for the future generation.

While the migrant Pathar, seated in his workstation on shophouse corridors, is entangled in the power tussle of placemaking agents of Little India, the small-scale Pathar, who owns his means of production, has more control of the use of his place and spaces. While a marked shift in the production of this traditional industry has set in, Pathars themselves, while maintaining a utilitarian approach to furniture and furnishing, are also careful of what they bring into their physical environment. Acting with agency, the Pathar places his workstation in a separate space in the shophouse, with easy access to other gold craftsmanship tasks involving machinery, giving him full control of his working environment and work schedule.

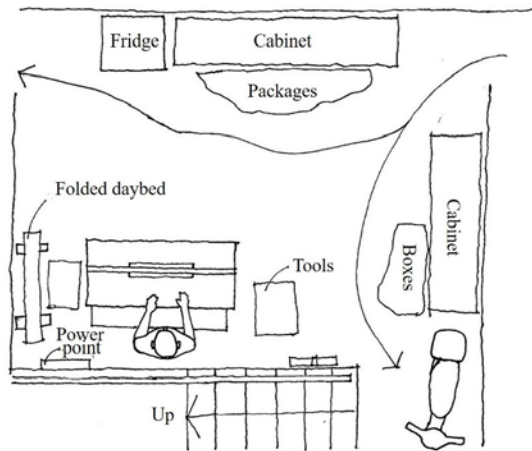*Sanjeh Kumar Raman, Safial Aqbar Zakaria*

Figure 5
Pathar's workstation
in his working space
inside his shophouse
(Image by authors)

Figure 6
The console with
monobloc plastic
chairs where acts of
exchange between
the clients and the
Pathar happen
(Photograph
by authors)

The prevalent use of monobloc plastic chairs by Pathars informs us of their continuing effort toward self-sufficiency and reinvention of tradition in their shophouses. Using the chair as an object to understand cultural history urges us to see beyond the sight of the chair as an object of utility. Clients initiate their gold ornament procurement from Pathar with the customary exchange of *tāmbūla* tray (betel leaves, areca nuts, and fruits), in which deposit payment is included. Upon agreeing to the business transaction, Pathar receives the payment, issues a formal bill, accepts half of the item in the tray, and returns the *tāmbūla* tray to the client. These intentional acts of bestowing one another the gift of relationship through the process of procurement and craftsmanship can also be seen in the relationship Pathar forges with objects of utility that facilitate him to create his workspace within the shophouse. Pathar's intentional emotional relationship to his seat, and his rationale of offering an equal seat to his client to enter into a dialectical relationship of gold-ornament procurement, is eventually about the boundaries of

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reason. It allows him to experience his workplace beyond the sight of utility objects. By transforming his relationship with his workspace, the chair, an object of utility, is transformed to the threshold of poetic engagement, allowing Pathar to redefine his space and relationship with others who enter to co-habiting his space.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the methodologies of understanding the interior, particularly through narrative. By emphasising the use of phenomenology as a method and an episteme to spot disjuncture and expose the subjectivities of migrant space interiority, this work contributes to the larger interiority discourse. The ideoscape of seats in Pathars' lifeworld offers a glimpse into the active efforts taken to define the manner of inhabitation in this community's buildings. The discussion of this study shows that viewing buildings as both places and lifeworlds is useful in exploring the multiple meanings and different experiences that users embody in their everyday routines. The discussion of themes of seats shows their power and political influence in numerous contacts that take place in the community. While some are from specific cultural programmes, others are from the Pathars' everyday working lives in Penang. Understanding interior architecture from the premise of the idea of seat that provides multiple ways of spatial exploration is also necessary within the present-day socioeconomic realities that minorities and migrant groups continue to face in Malaysia. Spatial attributes of their interiority and place experience trace use and memories of space use. Therefore, it establishes site-specific narratives and suggests that any place's interiority thrives within the narratives of its users and is intertwined with their environment, socially and politically.

Ultimately, *to find a seat* is a metaphor for finding the meaning of the human inhabitation of buildings. The innate awareness that stems from the shared culture of origin and lifeworld in Penang enables Pathars to see their belonging to one another—forming kinship, which gets translated into their everyday experience of place. The continuous chatter of routine life in a postcolonial society like Penang tends to drown our senses and lead to the separation that comes from escapism that modernity offers easily. By focusing on the intensity of their position with their seats, the Pathars work to uncover and question what it means to live authentically. The metaphor, *to find a seat*, urges us to see our interconnections with this community's life that gathers a continuation of memories, nostalgia, struggle and aspiration for the future that is in constant dynamics to emancipate its people from the chatter of modernity.

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