Asia’s Diversity & Asia’s Dwellings: 
A Geographer’s Perspective

Ronald G. Knapp*

Abstract: This paper explores some of the essential geographic elements relating to Asia that make it difficult generalizing about the continent as well as a challenge to map Asia’s vernacular architectural patterns. While generalizing about ‘time’ and ‘space’ are both important, one must guard against comparing housing patterns in relatively small countries with those of larger ones and suggesting a timelessness and homogeneity of building forms within Asia. Insufficient data sources further frustrate any effort to employ maps as analytical tools of analysis.

Old dwellings in Asia are not the product of a motionless traditional culture in which values were stagnant and techniques static, yet the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional’ are unfortunately loaded with ambiguities of agelessness, monotony, and permanence rather than...
revealing that ‘traditions’ are recreated and remodeled as time passes and as building structures are brought from one place to another. Spurred by accelerated economic development that has come on the heals of decades of neglect, warfare, and political upheaval, much of Asia’s inherited past has been vanishing rapidly. Yet, the nature of this crisis of a loss of heritage alarms some but certainly not all, and varies from country to country in the attention given to it. Market reforms, political squabbling, conflicting visions of planners, fluid property markets, poorly enforced or absent policies, indifferent public attitudes, as well as inertia and neglect continue to corrode the accumulated built heritage and frustrate efforts of those who wish to further enhance heritage preservation efforts. 

While this paper calls for increasing the use of maps when writing about Asia’s vernacular architecture in order to raise questions, kindle insights, and stimulate thinking about the analytical power of graphic representation of information, it recognizes inherent difficulties in the mapping enterprise.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Geographic Approaches, Historic Preservation, Maps, Mapping

Spread across more than thirty percent of the Earth’s land area with three-fifths of the world’s population, ‘Asia’ provides a roomy umbrella to cover any subject. Within Asia are some of the most sparsely populated regions found on the globe as well as many of the world’s most populous urban and rural areas. Superlatives—longest, oldest, highest, lowest, richest, poorest, most, least—come easy when describing the full range of Asia’s historical, cultural, and natural features. As Lewis and Wigen have demonstrated so well in *The Myth of Continents*, ‘of all the so-called continents, Asia is not only the largest but also the most fantastically diversified, a vast region whose only commonalities—whether human or physical—are so general as to be trivial’ (1997: 37). Indeed, it is a rare generalization that can be used to characterize Asia, and perhaps it is best
not even to probe for any internal and fundamental cohesion beyond that which comes from propinquity and a conventional acceptance of ‘Asia’ as a loose-fitting organizational rubric. Mapping any physical or cultural feature in Asia is a daunting task.

As a geographer, let me explore some essential geographic elements of Asia and the countries that comprise Asia. The nature of many of these elements contributes to the difficulty of mapping them while, at the same time, underscoring the need to attempt to map them. Among the most salient facts are the scale and extraordinary diversity of India and China, both historically and today as well as the inherent fallacy in comparing—explicitly or implicitly—a country such as China or India with, say, Japan, Korea, Laos, or Singapore, indeed any Asian country. China and India are comparable to multifarious Europe in terms of their orders of magnitude and complexity than to any other single Asian or European country. Indeed, within China or India regional patterns are at least as distinctive and sharp as those within Europe, such as, for example, when comparing Russia or Germany with Italy or France (Figure 1).

In terms of population, moreover, India’s largest state Uttar Pradesh has a population that exceeds 166,000,000 while four other Indian states have populations over 75,000,000. Eight Chinese provinces have more than 50,000,000 people. The Punjab province in Pakistan has approximately 80,000,000 people of the country’s total population of 145,000,000. Indonesia’s 225,000,000, Japan’s 127,000,000, and the two Korea’s 70,000,000 mark them among the world’s largest nations. By comparison, Russia has a population of 147,000,000, Germany 83,000,000, and France, United Kingdom, and Italy each have only about 58,000,000 people.

While contemporary political units—countries—in Asia are rarely coterminous with cultural patterns, except in the broadest sense, and some political boundaries of countries are ambiguous and in reality contested, they nonetheless remain a felicitous method of organizing information even though one must guard against any inference that ‘Indian’ houses, for example, are found on one side of
a boundary while ‘Pakistani’ houses are across the line, or that there is such an object as ‘a Chinese house’ or ‘an Indian house.’ Countries only provide a simple and convenient—however flawed—spatial vocabulary for accessing information and setting up preliminary vehicles for making comparisons across time and space. Yet, it is true—as can be demonstrated with Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and others—that determined efforts are being made in these countries today to forge countrywide identities by ‘constructing’ national cultural patterns—including housing—that sometimes differ little from those found in adjacent areas of neighboring countries.

Today, as in the past, a majority of Asia’s people continues to live in simple dwellings that—while they may not be ‘old dwellings’—are largely rural and the product of building practices and forms rooted in the past (Knapp 2003). Many are nondescript, seemingly unexceptional, and ordinary in that they are built of materials such

![Figure 1. Comparison of the Areas of China, France, Germany, and Japan.](image-url)
as friable earth and perishable plants. Some however are sturdy, large, and exquisite—houses with immense and well-proportioned timber members as well as delicate ornamented detail work in stone, wood, and clay. Many common Asian dwellings indeed are rather transitory, in that they the residents must expend substantial time and resources at maintaining the roof, walls, and floors from the onslaught of natural forces. As structures, each dwelling gives evidence of the myriad ways in which available local building materials and techniques of artisanship may be employed to compose and give shape to both internal and external spaces. Throughout Asia, house construction traditionally was more than a series of technical tasks but, as homes, were cultural artifacts that resonate conscious and subconscious decisions made by families in terms of how living space and workspace for men and women as well as for the young and the old are interrelated.

It is unfortunate that some continue to describe rural dwellings in Asia and elsewhere as ‘primitive’—clearly a pejorative term whether intended or not—since, in fact, most represent quite practical and even sophisticated building traditions. Bernard Rudofsky referred to common dwellings as ‘architecture without architects’ and Paul Oliver termed dwellings ‘shelter’, but clearly people’s dwellings represent more than a mere structure enclosing space, more than a straightforward haven from unwanted natural forces. Strong local or regional idioms characterize dwelling forms to the degree that many authors view them as ‘vernacular architecture’, common forms whose variations are as diverse as vernacular languages and other aspects of everyday culture. Dwellings are among the most lasting of all cultural artifacts even though the materials themselves may decay or disintegrate. Throughout Asia, indeed in much of the world, generation after generation occupy the same dwelling, however modified, at a particular site that reveals a remarkable responsiveness to changing needs via the on-going accommodation of even very simple inherited structures.

For some areas of Asia, such as Bangladesh and Myanmar, it is
possible only to present a general survey of housing types, construction techniques, and social context. For India, China, Indonesia, Japan, and Korea, on the other hand, richer and more detailed studies are possible because the accumulated knowledge of construction principles and techniques, regional patterns, as well as exterior and interior ornamentation. However, the nature of such information does not always lend itself to presentation in a full range of modes: text, table, photograph, drawing, or map, among the most prominent means of representing information. Moreover, scholars utilize the primary tools of their own professions in portraying information that concerns them. Some admire one researcher’s felicity with words in describing homes, another is in awe of a photographer who is able to capture the ‘life’ of a common house, while another marvels at the clarity of skillful perspective drawings. Few ever think of employing cartographic representations—mapping—of the material culture they are documenting. Fewer still utilize the full range of tools available to illustrate their subject matter.

Housing forms, of course, can be and are approached from a number of perspectives and themes: environmental adaptations, common vernacular types and regional examples, characteristic layouts, regular spatial patterns, conventional structural components, frequently used building materials, specific house-building rituals, important socio-cultural elements that include domestic routines, social organization, and ritual spaces, as well as the use of characteristic ornamentation and symbols. Moreover, it is possible to examine the degree to which traditional housing patterns have been altered because of economic prosperity, urbanization, war, national housing policies, and technological innovation, among other agents of change. The resilience of traditional housing patterns is also noteworthy as one looks at historic preservation and the ways in which architects and planners rethink and reinvent the past to meet contemporary needs. No single researcher ever attempts to cover all of these topics even as s/he recognizes the complexity and roundedness of the subject.
Viewing old dwellings across Asia from a variety of perspectives clearly tells us that ‘determinism’ of any sort offers no roadmap to understanding why housing forms are as they are. There are indeed a host of complex environmental and cultural factors whose interaction gives them shape. Understanding dwellings demands not only the insights of different disciplinary perspectives but also clear consideration of historical and spatial factors. Time and place are significant imperatives, and, indeed, whether looking at housing patterns in a relatively small country or a large one, one must guard against suggesting a timelessness and homogeneity of forms.

**Tradition and Asia’s Realities**

Old dwellings are not the product of a motionless traditional culture in which values were stagnant and techniques were static, yet the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional’ are loaded with the ambiguities of agelessness, monotony, and permanence. In considering these ambiguities, Yi-fu Tuan asks, ‘When we say of a building that it is traditional, do we intend approval or, on the contrary, criticism? Why is it that the word ‘traditional’ can evoke, on the one hand, a feeling of the real and the authentic and hence some quality to be desired, but, on the other hand, a sense of limitation—of a deficiency in boldness and originality?’ (1989, 27). While ‘traditional’ suggests something that is age-old, customary, perhaps even unchanging, in fact the notion of ‘tradition’ is rooted in the literal meaning of ‘that which is handed down,’ in itself clearly a dynamic process however the pace.

The term ‘tradition’ indeed is not inherently an antonym for ‘unchanging’ and ‘modern’, as ‘traditions’ are recreated and remodeled as time passes and as building structures are brought from one place to another. Orally and experientially, family members, villagers, and artisans pass on essential elements of building form and building techniques, as traditions. While these notions concerning
the transmitting of tradition over time and in the present are widely accepted, in fact, there is little concrete and specific evidence of ‘the nature, kinds and extent of oral transmission—or indeed any other form of transmission’ (Oliver 1989: 62). Amos Rapoport builds on these ideas by declaring, ‘Tradition can be seen as a positive or a negative concept, the latter being more common. It can also be neutral. This is the position I adopt. Also, tradition does not need to be rejected or embraced in toto; it is possible to admire traditional artifacts while rejecting the tradition that produced them...’ (1989, 81). Over time, indeed, some aspects of a tradition may disappear while other aspects persist, revealing a dynamic that results from the practical experiences of people and accumulates as a treasure house of know-how.

No single or simple explanation is sufficient to tell us how a traditional dwelling space was conceptualized or a traditional building was structured. Any dwelling, like any building, protects those inside from the vagaries of weather—heat and cold, rain and snow, humidity, and wind—yet ‘sheltering’ is only one of the factors contributing to house form. Every dwelling is constructed within a broader environmental context-climate, that is, the long-term conditions of weather, as well as soils, rock, and vegetation—that is understood to some degree by the pragmatic peoples who inhabit an area. Without a doubt, people build dwellings in order to provide some level of physical comfort—a habitable internal microclimate—within a particular milieu. While similar environmental contexts may provide a common set of natural materials needed to build a structure, local residents throughout the world, however, differ in the building materials they choose and how they employ tools in creating their structures. Through trial and error, building practices evolve that meet the needs of the people involved. Since features of the physical environment are often reasonably well mapped throughout the world, it is reasonable to state hypotheses and seek correlations relating housing and environmental conditions through employing comparative maps.
The broad sweep of Asia includes continental climate with long, severe winters and relatively short but hot summers, during which only modest precipitation falls, as well as hot and dry climates and hot and wet ones in which marine influences dominate. Strong dry winds during winter and dust storms in spring pummel much of the East Asia for more than six months each year, while in South Asia the seasonally shifting monsoon brings torrential summer rainfall. Dwellings throughout the realms of Asia reflect these harsh climatic realities and give evidence of significant environmental adaptation. Local builders have met environmental challenges by constructing a range of structures that show an awareness of natural conditions and which help mitigate the extremes of weather. In struggling with a seemingly relentless cold and dry climate, Tibetans have created a variety of reasonably comfortable structures that incorporate thick stone and mud walls to form a box-like dwelling with fenestration arranged to take advantage of warm winter sun and to withhold cold winter winds. Animals stabled inside on the lower floor contribute warmth when it is most needed. The cave dwellings and houses with thick adobe walls in China and in areas of Inner Asia represent a significant dwelling type—earth-sheltered housing—that is remarkably warm in winter and cool in summer, a suitable adaptation in regions of striking seasonal temperature extremes.

Throughout East, South, and Southeast Asia, there is attentiveness to prevailing winds in order to catch a needed breeze. As elsewhere in the world, illiterate villagers in Asia often understand the recurrence of the sun’s passage across the sky over the course of a year, and in many areas build their dwellings to capture a dependable source of heat in winter or to evade it in summer with the planting of deciduous trees, the shaping of eaves overhangs, and the manipulation of gross as well as minor architectural features. Awareness of the regularity of sun and steady winds helps guide decisions relating to the siting of the dwelling, the placement of windows and doors, and the form of enclosed courtyards. The elevation
of dwellings above the ground in many areas of eastern and south-eastern Asia, including China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, helps create a favorable microclimate with reduced levels of humidity and increased levels of comfort. In addition to enhancing air circulation, which helps to mitigate high temperatures and temper high relative humidities, the raising of structures on stilts or pilings above the ground provides some protection from the intrusion of snakes, insects, and animals as well as safety from cascading water gushing through a settlement during periods of heavy rain. Compatibility with general climatic patterns in order to provide comfort and protection from the adversity of weather should not be viewed, however, as deterministic. With the kampong house in Malaysia, other considerations clearly supplement what might appear at first glance as a persuasive argument for a single determinate of house form.

As compelling as are the varying responses to climatic conditions, it must be remembered that dwellings are more than mere refuges from the extremes of weather, havens from the changing forces of nature. The actual complexity of housing forms—in light of a more limited range of climatic patterns—arises from the fact that although dwellings may be ‘typologically similar ... they are created and sustained through independent evolution and culturally accumulated wisdom’ related to local cultural practices (Oliver 1997, xxii). Dwellings are the sites of reproduction, work, socialization, and leisure—social and economic conditions viewed over long period of time—that together animate the human relationships within the family and often those relationships that reach out beyond to the broader community. Although some Asian dwellings are mere rectangles of enclosed space with only the most elemental levels of spatial demarcation, the physical layout of many dwellings clearly reveal patterns of family relationships that include expressions of age and gender status, as well as the nature of child rearing and care of the aged. Dwellings are sometimes in continuous state of alteration in terms of meeting changing needs of a family as marriages
occur, new members are born, and others die. As the locus of a family’s production and consumption, dwellings reflect a broad range of religious and cosmological beliefs. In Myanmar even today, there are pervasive rituals associated with various stages of construction and attention to the layout of rooms that collectively express essentials of a Buddhist home. The acceptance of omnipresent nat, or spirit beings, the ongoing ceremonies to acknowledge them, as well as the installation of an altar or shrine are all part of living houses in Myanmar. What might appear to an outsider as practical and technologically rationale is sometimes transcended by socio-cultural reasons, as is seen in dwellings in Malaysia and Indonesia where multi-tiered houses reflect a cosmological spatial order rather than mere physical needs.

In the Himalayas—where abundant snow and rain are coupled with low temperatures at high altitudes—there is a confluence of environmental with practical and socio-cultural factors that together produce an interrelated environmental-cultural explanation for the house forms found throughout the quite varied high mountain region. Dwellings are humanized spaces that communicate and shape family organization as well as express the web of beliefs, values, and norms of the larger community via vehicles of ornamentation. The application of fengshui (‘wind and water’) or geomancy in China and its variants in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam reveals not only a sensitivity to recurring patterns and a high level of environmental awareness, it demonstrates the self-conscious ways in which people give shape to space. Based on an organic view of the universe, fengshui is a kind of mystical ecology that is abstruse in terms of its details but nonetheless accessible to common people. With its cosmo-magical and symbolic elements, fengshui provides a means to harmonize a family’s dwelling with its spatial and temporal reality, affording at the same time an opportunity to pursue worldly benefit and avoid misfortune (Knapp 199. 29-39). However fuzzy, fengshui enjoys an astonishingly credible place in the thinking of people throughout the Sinitic world and popularity even beyond that transcends its cultural
origins. In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese dwellings, as well as temple compounds and villages, are modeled along cosmographic principles that are rooted in ‘ethnomathematics’ and a geometry based upon quadrature, centering, and nesting (MacDougall 2003). Learning the domestic order by children is carried out through the purposeful, structured, and explicit actions of adults during day-to-day interactions. As elsewhere in many parts of Asia, specific consecrating rites continue to be carried out during site selection, the many phases of construction, and occupancy of the home to insure a harmonious and auspicious living environment. It is a daunting task to map socio-cultural elements of this sort.

Over the millennia, cultural landscapes in Asia changed relatively slowly. Generation after generation of villagers and urban residents bequeathed cultural landscapes—including simple dwellings in rural villages as well as elaborate urban residences—that were not too different from the ones they inherited and inhabited. An unhurried pace of technological change, dependence on locally available building materials, and relatively consistent rules helped maintain common ways of doing things–without any of these being static. General conservatism no doubt played an important role in the overall maintenance of housing patterns, in the process constraining innovation and thus safeguarding traditional structural forms, spatial compositions, and conventional patterns. Over the past 50 years as Asia’s population grew from some 1.5 billion to 3.5 billion, the built environment throughout Asia has suffered enormous amounts of destruction. Over the past century, few areas of Asia have been spared the devastation brought about by warfare. China and Japan, the Philippines, Korea, India and Pakistan, Cambodia and Vietnam, and more recently Afghanistan, especially, all have experienced overlapping cycles of national turbulence brought on by war with concomitant devastation of their material culture heritage, including residences. Yet, even with widespread destruction and striking changes, there is a remarkable resilience to traditional forms and a compelling need to document by every means possible—including
Mapping Asia’s Dwellings

A concern of all geographic inquiry is the question ‘where.’ As with attention to the temporal dimension or ‘when?,’ this fundamental attribute helps enlighten understanding of physical, socioeconomic, behavioral, and experiential reality in terms of distributions, patterns, and relationships across space. Since the end of the nineteenth century, geographers throughout the world have studied various aspects of what is called today ‘the built environment’ in terms of classifying rural settlement patterns, inventorying building forms and materials, as well as attempting to delineate geographic regions. Most of the early work centered on Europe with interest in North America emerging with some vigor only in the 1960s. In an important Presidential Address to the Association of American Geographers, Fred Kniffen (1965) rued the fact that settlement geography in Europe ‘occupies an active and respected place among the fields of geographic inquiry’ while in America it has ‘failed to find equally widespread acceptance.’ He clearly revealed that ‘folk housing is diagnostic of whole culture complexes’ and showed with various maps broad ‘folk housing areas’. Significantly, he underscored the need to utilize maps in order to better understand origins, adaptations, and routes of diffusion in the study of vernacular architecture. However, even after some 30 years of pioneering research on folk housing in America, Kniffen’s maps are highly generalized because of the relative scantiness of information available to him.

In the 1980s, some geographers furthered understanding of cultural landscapes by showing how to ‘read’ them. By 1982, This Remarkable Continent: An Atlas of United States and Canadian Society and Cultures was published, which is much more than an important anthology of maps and drawings. American Geographers have published many book-length monographs on many vernacular land-
scape features, including log buildings, barns, motels, gasoline stations, mobile homes, fast food restaurants, graveyards, towns, and rural landscapes broadly (Knapp 1997, 44-45). Their work has shown that ‘reading cultural landscapes’ is far more than an aesthetic exercise, and indeed has the explanatory power of clarifying the spatial nature of innovation and diffusion. Some other Geographers critiqued the empiricist focus on housing as artifacts and suggested ways to invigorate the subject matter with theoretical concerns.

A survey of successful efforts to use maps in America and Europe that accompany articles and books dealing with vernacular housing reveals a multiplicity of information displayed on them:

- Distribution of Building Types, using a variety of different typologies
- Distribution of Building Materials
- Intensity or Numerical Variation of Building Types and Building Materials
- Determination of Cultural Hearths or Source Areas
- Routes of Diffusion of Building Types and Building Materials
- Delineation of Housing Regions
- Patterns of Sequent Occupance over Time

Beyond North America and Europe, however, there have only been preliminary steps in addressing any of these subjects relating to vernacular architecture from geographic perspectives. Mapping, a central concern of geographers, has been used only in a very limited way by those studying vernacular architecture. Few seem to realize that maps are not only graphic visual statements in which observations can be recorded and displayed, they are also striking analytical devices for facilitating understanding of how reality is spatially ordered as well as suggesting patterns and relationships among diverse phenomena. *Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture* (1991), by Albert Szabo and Thomas Barfield, neither of whom is a geographer, stands essentially alone as a successful attempt to present the geographic nature of vernacular architecture.
in one area of Asia. Not only is it a remarkable compilation, documenting diverse rural and urban housing forms suffering unprecedented destruction, the book ‘aimed to raise the awareness and understanding of both international aid organizations and Afghan architects of the significance of the country’s vernacular traditions’ (Vellinga 2003, 22). Sadly, continuing warfare into the twenty-first century has brought with it continuing devastation to Afghanistan’s material culture heritage, including residences, yet the effort to fully map the country’s housing forms remains incomplete (Samizay 2003).

No other such atlas of vernacular architecture exists for any other area of Asia. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise since the number of academic specialists writing about the nature of vernacular architecture in Asia is itself actually a relatively small number. Marcel Vellinga’ (2003, 21-31) points out in a penetrating examination of the value of ‘the analytical potential of maps’ and the ‘general disregard for cartographic representation’ that maps have rarely been ‘a part of the methodological toolkit’ of those studying vernacular architecture. A review of issues spanning fourteen years of the Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review confirms Vellinga’s conclusions concerning Asia and much of the rest of the world.

Even geographers, like myself, have not fully exploited what we fully understand to be the strength of mapped representations (Knapp, 1986, 1989, 1992, 1999, 2000, 2003). It is reasonable to ask, ‘why’ this is so and what kinds of remedies might correct it. It is certainly true that geographers and others often include what might be termed orientation maps, that is, maps whose purpose is to orient the reader to the area or region under discussion but such maps hardly exploit the power of mapping. My edited book Asia’s Old Dwellings: Tradition, Resilience, and Change (2003), with its 18 chapters by specialists in many fields, offers some sense of the opportunities as well as the challenges of mapping. While maps are found in half of the chapters, most of these maps are mere locational maps that show little more than place names mentioned in the text.
Of the three chapters written by geographers, the chapter by Allen G. Noble effectively incorporates five maps that show the ‘generalized pattern’ of distribution of housing features (floor plans, roof types, roof materials, wall material, and presence of flat roofs). For an example, see Figure 2. A pair of his maps attempts to represent relationships between ‘aspects of house design and climatic elements.’ These maps benefit from rich data sources, especially the *Census of India*, which began in 1961 to include substantial detail on India’s Diversity & Asia’s Dwellings
Figure 3. Right column, traditional Austronesian houses of the eastern region of insular Southeast Asia, which are characterized by the absence of walls. Left column, traditional Austronesian houses of the western region of insular Southeast Asia, all of which distinctly feature a tripartite differentiation of the floor, roof and wall. Source: Lee Ho Yin (2003).
the nature of surveyed residences throughout the country. Over the years, additional questions have been asked in the census that provides rich raw data for an on-going map project over time. (http://cyberjournalist.org.in/census/housing.html) To my knowledge, no data source this rich exists anywhere else in Asia. A chapter on the kampong house in Malaysia, written by architect/heritage preservation specialist Lee Ho Yin, includes three maps, one that effectively portrays the distribution of Austronesian houses in peninsular and insular Southeast Asia (Figure 3). This map, with its clear drawings linked to locations on the map, as well as an adjacent map showing

Figure 4. The distribution of pile-built dwellings in East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. Source: Ruan Xing (2003)
the expansion of Austronesian settlements over time offer effective vehicles for stimulating thought on complex issues. Ruan Xing, an architect, includes a simpler scale map showing the distribution of pile-built dwellings throughout East Asia, Southeast Asia, and nearby areas of the Pacific Region (Figure 4). It is fair to ask why more of the subject matter is not presented on maps. The answers are complex in that they reveal not only inadequacies relating to data availability, skill levels, but also the nature of maps.

**Mapping Issues**

What are some of the issues that must be considered in producing maps? In calling for increasing the use of maps, one must always be aware of the matter of scale since scale itself has the capacity not only to clarify but also to distort. The scale of a map is merely the mathematical relationship between distance shown on the map and actual distance on the ground. A majority of the maps reviewed in vernacular architecture articles and books are small scale maps, that is, maps showing a large or extensive area with only limited detail. Maps of countries, the continents, and the world are always drawn at small scales. Accuracy generally drops as the area mapped grows larger and, as a result, the scale of the map grows smaller. An example of a small scale map would be one of, say Japan, at a scale of 1:1,000,000, which expresses that ‘1 centimeter on the map equals 10 kilometers on the Earth’s surface’ (or, ‘1 inch on the map is equal to approximately 16 miles on the Earth’s surface’). Clearly, only a limited amount of information can be portrayed on such a map, and what is represented is shown only in the most general way. Large scale maps, on the other hand, typically represent small areas with considerable detail. A map at 1:100,000 would be useful for showing a county area since ‘1 centimeter equals 1 kilometer’. If both the 1:1,000,000 and 1:100,000 maps are shown at the same size, the possibility for detail increases dramatically on the larger scale map. Scale
can distort features on a map, especially on small scale maps. Moreover, many maps are simply representative sketches in that they lack a definite scale, merely representative illustrations of the reality portrayed.

Aside from scale itself, no other mapping convention is as prone to abuse than the drawing of boundaries in order to delineate the distribution of some feature or assemblage of features. While a political boundary may indeed represent a clear-cut demarcation with sovereignty on either side separated by ‘the line’ such is typically not the case with cultural phenomena. Rarely, if ever, are building types or ornamentation confined to one side or the other of a political boundary. Indeed, there are usually zones of transition between and among cultural features just as there are in the distribution of natural features such as plants and animals. For the most part, ‘lines’ delineating a region and indicating a separation should be viewed as ‘zones’. Just as historians and the public at large find temporal generalization useful, geographers and the public should accept spatial generalization as well, without agonizing over sharp delineations. No academic using the temporal generalization ‘Victorian era’ or ‘1960s’ could conceivably believe that one began with the birth of Victoria and ended with her death or that the ‘1960s’ began on January 1, 1960 and ended on December 31, 1969. ‘Eras’ like ‘regions’ are dynamic, with their ‘boundaries’ being rather fluid, even porous, and zonal in character. It takes a carefully made map to represent nuanced and qualified information regarding spatially referenced information. Yet, no one should dispute the fact that there is an analytic power in using the term ‘era’ to generalize ‘across time’ just as there should be using a generalized ‘region’ ‘across space’.

Furthermore, it is unfortunate, for example, that researchers sometimes only examine housing types within the boundaries of a discrete political unit, such as a country, and thus their presentation of the information suggests that the mapped elements stop at the political boundary when in fact they overlap or go beyond the boundary. Even the Szabo and Barfield atlas mentioned above deals with
the distribution of structures within a single country, and thus does not fully situate patterns found in Afghanistan within the larger region within which it is located. The recent chapter by Manu Sobti (2003) concerning Inner Asian vernacular architectures reveals the degree to which the larger region was a cultural crossroads throughout history and how enigmatic elements are found within the boundaries of contemporary countries that are shared widely within the region. Sobti shows how an examination and analysis of dwellings throughout the Inner Asian region can provide a way to track the movements of people and their cultures across this vast geographical space. As Vellinga urges, ‘Thematic maps that chart the location of architectural boundaries, both cross-culturally and at the level of individual cultures or countries, can be of great value in raising such an understanding, which is needed if the consequences of current and former processes of cultural interaction, modernization, and globalization are to be fully appreciated’ (2003, 24-25).

Maps generalize in that they are substantial reductions of a much larger and more complex reality. Map users, however, must be wary of possible omissions, inadvertent misplacements, inappropriate symbolization, and deliberate falsehoods. Just because something is shown on a map does not guarantee that it is accurate. Most maps range between being slightly informative and enormously valuable. A map, indeed the mapping process itself, is a powerful tool for displaying and summarizing information. There is even value in a map with abundant white space—indicating as it does the absence of mappable information—in that such a map clearly points to lacunae, gaps in knowledge begging for infilling. Thus, this form of concrete visualization creates mental maps that may help steer research inquiries. Mark Monmonier (1993, 4-12) identified four competencies that each educated person should develop:

- Articulacy, or fluency in oral expression
- Literacy, or fluency in reading and writing effectively
- Numeracy, or fluency with the manipulation of numbers
• Graphicacy, or fluency in the construction and interpretation of graphic models of communication, including the use of graphs, diagrams, photographs, and maps

A map may not always be worth a thousand words, but it is usually the best means of presenting information about spatially referenced phenomena. Because of oversimplification and the misleading use of symbols, maps, just as with statistics, sometimes ‘lie’—deliberately or accidentally—a fact that makers and users of maps must be aware of (Monmonier 1991). Graphicacy provides a means to visualize information, a means to reveal unexpected patterns and stimulate an understanding of relationships that complement effective writing and the use of appropriate numerical data.

As an extension of and complement to the magisterial Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World, Paul Oliver and his team at Oxford Brookes University, England have begun the compilation of the World Atlas of Vernacular Architecture. While this cartographic project promises to visualize and reveal the cross-cultural and comparative dimensions of vernacular architecture throughout the world, it will as well underscore the significant gaps in and uneven coverage of even basic information for much of the world. Scholars who focus on vernacular patterns in Asia will learn much from the approaches used and information shown in this atlas.

The vernacular building traditions of three fifths of the world’s population are indeed complex and, for much of Asia, the documenting of old dwellings is still at a very preliminary stage as is mapping. Old building stock found in Asia’s villages, towns, and cities has significantly diminished by the scythe of progress, leaving only vestigial evidence of past patterns throughout the continent. In some countries, there has been reasonable progress—however much the accumulated and regretted loss had been over time—but throughout much of Asia even basic painstaking fieldwork still needs to be carried out. There is much basic work yet to be done in the study of Asia’s old dwellings, whether in the countries where
the effort has already made significant achievements but also in those countries where the journey to understanding has only begun. The valiant efforts to document old buildings via photography and drawings must continue even as there is recognition that many of them will be lost. At the very least, photographs and drawings should be clearly identified as to date and place. Greater attention needs to be paid to the identification of structures worthy of saving because of their typicality and uniqueness. In addition to preserving individual buildings, it is important to acknowledge that dwellings are much more than isolated artifacts and thus the neighborhoods and villages in which they are found require attention as well.

Surviving old dwellings today, as in the past, continue to exemplify the rich traditions that helped give them shape. Social, economic, and political forces—in the guise of modernization—continue to assail traditional vernacular building forms, rendering many of them obsolete and irrelevant. Yet, many similar forces are contributing to the revitalization of inherited patterns, a subject that itself deserves being mapped. As elsewhere in the world, not surprisingly, Asians give the impression of being largely unsentimental about the loss of their old dwellings that are viewed as outmoded and uncomfortable, indeed in need of being superseded by ‘modern’ structures that are comfortable and which better meet the needs of daily life today. To some, it seems almost necessary to go through a period of accepting the loss of their accumulated cultural patrimony, viewing its annihilation as a necessary, if unfortunate, accompaniment of ‘progress.’ Throughout Asia, as in much of the world, there is a greater concern for the conservation of historical monuments and sites but, sadly, far too little anguish or nostalgia about buildings, such as dwellings and other simple structures, that are judged too ordinary, backward, and uncomfortable to preserve.

Yet, unprecedented construction booms and rapidly expanding populations in both rural and urban areas has not always been discriminating, inevitably destroying not only modest dwellings but
also historic residences. Some buildings have patiently waited restoration while many more have collapsed or been transformed by the actions of increasing numbers of residents who benefit from the low rents of old unrenovated buildings. Remodeling into fresh forms that are unfortunately disconnected with their origins has rejuvenated many more. It is somewhat paradoxical that the onslaught of modernization and globalization and the sheer destruction or removal of old dwellings together has not utterly subverted all traditional patterns and practices. Over the past quarter century, new-style housing has increased throughout Asian countries, although the beginning of the process and the speed clearly has varied from place to place. Throughout Asia today one sees hybrid dwellings, often multi-storied boxes, that are amalgamations, a melange of old elements and of ‘traditional’ fundamentals overlain with strikingly contemporary features. The use of non-traditional materials such as corrugated metal roofs instead of atap or cement pilings instead of wood appears to subvert traditional forms less than the intrusive use of Western architectural motifs like oversized windows, staircases, and colorful glazed wall tiles. The transformation of housing stock has brought about hybrid forms that have been influenced by many circumstances, including migration, media, war, commerce, as well as practical considerations such as the availability of building materials and changing fortunes of a household or community. Cheaper, and sometimes improved, materials as well changing aesthetics are stimulated by global media that forthrightly challenges traditional designs and ways of life. Common inherited houseforms that served well the needs of generations of dwellers are also undermined not only by structural changes in the composition of individual families but also the fundamental restructuring of work patterns of rural as well as urban residents. As real estate values continue to climb in peri-urban areas of Asia’s cities, it is becoming more difficult for farmers to compete with developers who are more interested in acquiring land for various purposes than considering any of the old structures on the land.
Throughout Asia one is still able to glimpse old dwellings that survive either in a complete form or only as vestigial echoes of an earlier state, as well as those that have been uprooted and replanted as museum pieces in distant places. Altogether, these sadly represent but a minute fraction of a greater number lost because of neglect, collapse, warfare, earthquake, fire, and inattention. In most of Asia’s rapidly changing cities and towns—indeed villages as well—market reforms, political squabbling, conflicting visions of planners, fluid property markets, poorly enforced or absent policies, indifferent public attitudes, as well as inertia and neglect continue to corrode the accumulated built heritage and frustrate efforts of those who wish to further enhance heritage preservation efforts.

The temporal and geographical vastness of Asia continues to mask possible interrelationships between and among cultures and civilizations. In order to advance analytical approaches, increasingly collaborative, interdisciplinary, and comparative research—involving individuals and organizations from many nations—must be encouraged. Vexing problems of nomenclature, identification, and classification continue to aggravate scholars as they encounter residual examples of traditional buildings. Beyond the difficulties of basic empirical research in documenting old dwellings via photographs and drawings and the often Herculean efforts at preserving them, imaginative scholarship must be focused on delineating cultural regions, sketching patterns of diffusion, and understanding the nature of adaptation and acculturation of material cultural within and across contemporary borders—all subjects that will benefit from being presented on maps.

References


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