

Indigenous Interiors as Narrative Spaces: Heritage Interiors as Storytellers of Memory in Ancient Houses in Hoi An, Vietnam

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Abstract

Indigenous interiors are not only historical artefacts; they are lived environments in which personal, familial, and collective memories are produced, embodied, and transmitted through materials, objects, rituals, light, sound, smell, and spatial practices. This paper examines the interiors of ancient houses in Hoi An, Vietnam, and asks how vernacular domestic spaces operate as a narrative medium of memory and cultural identity.

A qualitative multiple-case study was conducted in three heritage houses representing different conditions of contemporary use: continued residence, adaptive museum use, and a hybrid residence-tourism condition. Fieldwork undertaken between March and August 2024 combined measured and photographic documentation, phenomenological observations at different times of day, and eighteen semi-structured interviews with homeowners, multi-generational residents, and local heritage-related participants. Data were thematically analysed through four interrelated dimensions: material memory, sensory-emotional memory, cultural-ritual memory, and urban-community memory.

The findings show that worn timber surfaces, ancestral altars, heirloom objects, courtyard daylight, familiar sounds and smells, and recurring domestic rituals function as mnemonic devices that connect everyday life with family histories and the wider history of Hoi An. The paper proposes the concept of the “interior memoryscape” to describe this layered relationship between material fabric, embodied experiences, ritual practices, and community meanings. It argues that conservation of ancient houses of Hoi An should therefore extend beyond physical fabric to protect the sensory, ritual, and lived conditions through which heritage interiors continue to tell stories.

Keywords: Heritage interiors, ancient house, Hoi An ancient town, place-memory, socio-cultural process, phenomenological observation, memorialization, Indigenous Interiors

Introduction

The ancient town of Hoi An is widely recognised for the continuity of its historic urban fabric, timber architecture, trading-house typologies, and multicultural influences. Yet the heritage value of its ancient houses does not reside only in façades, structural systems, or

stylistic features. Their interiors remain places of everyday occupations, worship, family remembrance, commercial adaptations, and encounters with visitors. They therefore offer an important setting in which to examine how heritage is lived and remembered through interior spaces.

Research on interiors has shown that space can be understood as a narrative medium rather than as a neutral container. Ganoe (1999) argues that interior environments can be interpreted through narrative structures because people make meanings through relationships among objects, events, movements, and personal experiences. Hollis (2010) similarly draws attention to the fragmented and changing nature of historic interiors, while Salen (2016) demonstrates how memories of homes are reconstructed through sensory and spatial experiences. These perspectives are particularly relevant to vernacular heritage, where meaning is continually renewed through use rather than preserved only as static material evidence.

In Hoi An, the interior is also shaped by the history of the town as a regional trading port and by long-term Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese cultural interactions. Previous research has documented the commercial and spatial characteristics of the ancient houses of Hoi An and the ways in which heritage buildings are adapted for contemporary tourism (Thi Bich Van & Singyabuth, 2023; Thi Bich Van, 2024). Studies of passive design also show how courtyards, openings, timber structures, and natural ventilation contribute to the environmental performance and spatial experience of vernacular houses (Luu & Dinh, 2015). However, less attention has been given to how these material and environmental characteristics interact with memories, rituals, sensory experiences, and storytelling within the interiors.

This paper addresses that gap by examining ancient-house interiors as narrative spaces. Its central research question is: How do the material, sensory, ritual, and everyday spatial practices of the ancient houses of Hoi An produce and transmit memory? The paper therefore treats heritage interiors as living socio-cultural processes. Rather than assuming that memories are simply contained in old objects, it examines how memories are repeatedly activated through the interactions with material traces, sensory perceptions, domestic rituals, personal narratives, and changing patterns of use.

The study has three objectives as follows.

- (1) To identify interior elements and practices that act as carriers of memory;
- (2) To unearth how residents and users experience and interpret these elements; and
- (3) To develop an analytical model—the interior memoryscape—that can support a more experience-sensitive approach to heritage conservation.

Theoretical Framework

This paper develops a theoretical framework structured around three interconnected pillars: architectural memory, narrative space and vernacular interior and interior memory. These pillars are not considered as distinct strands but they are interwoven to form a conceptual foundation to understand the interiors of the ancient houses of Hoi An as a narrative system, whereby, on personal and collective memories, they are going to be inscribed, re-enacted and transformed over time.

The first pillar is the architectural memory, as articulated by Berghout (2025), who argues that the architectural materials, and the buildings themselves, serve as a record of memory, which is expressed through the patina, marks of use, as well as the modulation of light over time. The three forms of architectural memory—material memory, embodied memory, and interpreted memory—are clearly evident in the ancient houses of Hoi An, the material surfaces, the timber frames, and the floors all bear visible evidence of flooding, humidity, and the everyday practices.

The second pillar, narrative space, draws on Ganee's (1999) conception of interiors as narrative structures in which light, objects, and human movement together constitute a language of storytelling. Cunningham (2015) builds on this method by stressing the fact that interior research should be responsive to narratives that residents share in their objects and use of

spaces. The arrangement of ancestral altars, tea cabinets, and calligraphic panels in the background of Hoi An offers multiple storey meanings as they relate to time, family, and the supernatural. Hollis (2010) goes ahead to suggest that interiors are a memory palace, where memory is not only stored but is also constantly produced through repetitive transformations as time goes on. The multicultural nature of Hoi An which was influenced by both Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese cultures as well as by the strata of commercial adaptations, turns again into the interiors which are densely stratified into the houses of memory.

The third pillar is in regard to vernacular interior and interior memory. Vernacular interiors are understood only in the context of the socio-cultural environment of the resident community in which every object served as a cultural symbol (Jennings 1992). Salen (2016) introduces the element of the affective experience with the notion of interior memory, which emphasises the significance of light, smell, sound, and humidity in the recall of memory - the attributes that are evident in the sensory imagery of courtyards, the smell of old wood, and the sound of wooden floors by the residents of Hoi An.

These theoretical approaches align closely with contemporary heritage preservation thinking. Maia and Pinto (2020) insist that sustainable conservation should be based on the renewed understandings rooted in the community interactions, while Pinto (2020) adds that a heritage space can only be properly comprehended when the storey is narrated with proper interior and interpretive approaches. Furthering this point of view, the theory of vernacular modernism suggested by Umbach and Hupauf (2005) allows one to perceive heritage interiors as dynamic settings influenced by modernisation and tourism situations that is especially pronounced in Hoi An. More recent works by Rashdan and Ashour (2024) and Rashdan and Mhatre (2022) also confirm the idea that heritage interiors must also be seen as memory ecosystems, with traditional materials and local identity being at the centre of it.

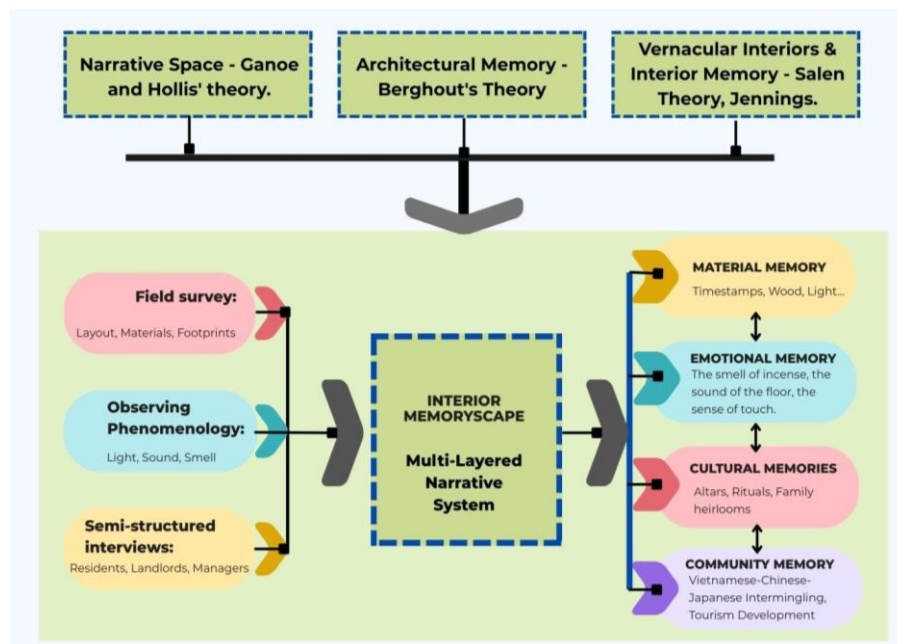


Fig. 1: Research framework of the article;
Source: Author

The research derives its theoretical foundations through the three major theoretical pillars based on the points made above:

1. Memory architecture: memories of time and experienced experience;
2. Narrative space: objects, light, daily practices as narrative structures;
3. Vernacular interior and interior memory: cultural values, symbolism and affection.

Combined, these three pillars form the basis of the exploration of the interiors of the ancient houses in Hoi An as an interior ‘memoryscape,’ where memory is not only retained but also told, experienced in senses as well as lived through.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Hoi An has extensively addressed urban history, architectural typology, cultural exchange, conservation, and tourism. The town’s long, narrow merchant houses, timber frames, courtyards, mixed residential-commercial functions, and decorative systems are central to this literature. Historical studies also document the importance of Japanese and Chinese trading communities in the formation of the urban culture of Hoi An (Vo, 2009).

Environmental research on vernacular houses in Hoi An has highlighted passive strategies such as natural lighting, ventilation, courtyards, and climate-responsive spatial organisation (Luu & Dinh, 2015). These studies are important because the same features that support environmental comfort also shape sensory experience: changing daylight, airflow, humidity, acoustic qualities, and the perception of time within the house. Research by Nguyen Thi Bich Van and Singyabuth (2023) demonstrates how the commercial characteristics of Hoi An’s ancient houses are embedded in spatial organisation and multicultural identity. Nguyen Thi Bich Van (2024) further examines the transformation of the Hoang Hiep house into the Hoi An Folklore Museum, showing how adaptive reuse creates both opportunities and challenges for authenticity, interpretation, and tourism. At the same time, international interior scholarship offers conceptual tools for understanding narrative and memory (Ganoe, 1999; Hollis, 2010; Salen, 2016), while conservation-oriented design research shows the value of narrative, identity, and vernacular knowledge in adaptive reuse and contemporary design (Maia & Pinto, 2020; Rashdan & Mhatre, 2022; Rashdan & Ashour, 2024).

What remains insufficiently examined is the intersection of these domains: how the interiors of Hoi An’s ancient houses operate simultaneously as material settings, sensory environments, ritual spaces, and narrative systems. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative, interior-focused analysis. It does not treat memory as an abstract historical theme; instead, it examines how memory becomes observable and narratable through surfaces, objects, light, sound, smell, movement, ritual, and the accounts of people connected to the houses.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Case Selection

The study adopted a qualitative multiple-case-study design supported by phenomenological observation and narrative inquiry. Purposive sampling was used to select three ancient houses in Hoi An that represent contrasting contemporary conditions of use: Quan Thang Ancient House, Phung Hung Ancient House, and Hoang Hiep Ancient House, which now accommodates the Hoi An Folklore Museum. The three cases allow comparison among a house that retains strong domestic and ritual functions, a house operating within a hybrid heritage-tourism condition, and a former merchant residence adapted to a museum use.

Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted between March and August 2024. Three forms of evidence were combined. First, field surveys documented spatial organisation, timber structures, finishes, furniture, altars, openings, courtyards, natural-light conditions, and visible traces of use. Second, phenomenological observations were undertaken at different times of day to record changes in light and shadow, sound, smell, humidity, airflow, texture, and the bodily experience of moving through the interiors. Third, eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with homeowners, multi-generational residents, and participants connected to local heritage management and interpretation. Interviews focused on family memories, heirloom objects, ancestral rituals, sensory associations, changes in use, and the effects of tourism.

Data Analysis

Field notes, visual documentation, and interview material were coded thematically. Four analytical categories were used: (1) material memory; (2) sensory-emotional memory; (3) cultural-ritual memory; and (4) urban-community memory. These categories were developed iteratively from the theoretical framework and the recurring patterns found across the three cases. Cross-case comparison was then used to identify both shared characteristics and differences related to current use.

Scope and Limitations

The study is interpretive and is case-based. Its purpose is not statistical generalisation to all houses in Hoi An, but analytical understanding of how memory operates within selected heritage interiors. Sensory observations are context-dependent, and interview narratives represent remembered and interpreted experience rather than objective historical records. These limitations are addressed through triangulation among field documentation, repeated observation, interviews, and comparison across the three cases.

Findings and Analysis

Material Memory: Traces of Time and Material Durability

Field research of the chosen ancient houses demonstrates that the material evidence, including battered and sunken doorsteps, smooth timber surfaces in the course of extended contact, and smoke-stained ceilings is a valuable key to the interior memory. Studying the interviews, the homeowners and multi-generational residents had the opportunity to share the storeys related to particular traces and it has been proven that material memory has not its independent existence but is constantly interacting with the lived memories of humans in the space.

The traces of wear observed fall into three main groups viz.

1. Wear due to every day circulation and movement, which is visible in thresholds, central floors, stair handrails;
2. Wear derived from domestic activities, manifested in dining tables, tea cabinets, domestic derived wear, in the form of dining tables, tea cabinets, etc.
3. Clothing that is a part of ritual activities, especially intense around the altars of the ancestors, candle stands, and timber columns near the places of worship that are obscured by the smoke of incense. Such traces do not only show the time in which the object was in use, they also indicate the intensity and the nature of actions that occur in the interior.

According to the statements of Berghout (2025), material traces are certain expressions of a kind of sedimentary memory, where the history of human use is slowly marked onto material surfaces. The most evident examples of this layer of memory are in investigated cases, namely Phung Hung Ancient House: the floor in the central interior area is significantly more smooth and darker than in the auxiliary spaces, and the ceiling and column system around the altar of ancestors have dense layers of patina of smokes, which signifies the strength of the regularity of the ritual activities through the generations. These footprints do not only tell the personal story of the house but also reflects the Hoi An community life and cultural patterns.

Wooden Materials and the “Longevity of Memory”

Wood, such as ironwood (lim), kien kien, and cho chi is the most common material that defines the interiors of the old houses of Hoi An and, at the same time, creates a unique stratum of memory in time. In the field, it can be seen that ironwood generally turns dark brown after many years of oxidation and kien kien and cho chi tend to have water stain better that create what can be termed as weather maps that store the seasonal floods and the humid nature of this riverine town.



Fig. 2: Phung Hung Ancient House - Material Memory: Traces of Time in the Interior;
Source: Author

Phung Hung Ancient House, variations in tones and smoothness of wooden floors in the interior areas are quite vivid evidence of the different degrees and varieties of spatial utilisation during different periods of time. The central family area where most domestic activities and guest reception take place - appears darker, glossier, and smooth in their surface, as they are in constant contact, but the secondary space has preserved the slickness of the wood grains and the remnants of the initial finish. These contrasts do not only express uneven distributions of utilising, but also indicate how space was stratified in practical life of the traditional domesticity.

The house is eight generations old, with the present owner being the eighth-generation descendant of the merchant who constructed the house. The owner plays a role as a translator between family memory and the external interpretation, at the same time a resident and a guide to the visitors. Speaking of the interior, he often describes the wooden materials to show their anthropomorphic nature (as old, warm, breathing) and how the inhabitants infuse materials with memories of their family into the very space of the building.

These remarks perfectly present the idea of material memory as elaborated by Berghout (2025), according to which materials do not merely function as passive physical supports but actively store and transmit the past. At Hoi An, wood is a material that lives during the course of time: it turns colour during the oxidation process, alters sound due to footsteps, subtly bends with the humidity, and every change is an interpersonal record of floods, daily routines, and emotional experiences of people. In such a way, the inner world of Phung Hung Ancient House does not only retain the architectural form but there is a material memory that continues to develop within contemporary life

Courtyard Light as Moving Memory

The courtyard (*Giếng trời*) serves as an architectural feature that can be linked to the Chinese feng shui concepts as well as play a significant role in creating the visual and emotional aspect of the interior space in the three case studies discussed in Hoi An as well as in most of the ancient houses in the area. It is observed that light is present at various times of the day, which means that the courtyard is not just a source of daylight and ventilation; but it is a sort of moving memory which is cyclical in nature and constantly recreates different emotional states in the experience of space.

In the morning, the sun of the courtyard penetrates through the main space, emphasising wooden columns and beams and creating a warm and peaceful environment, which sets the rhythm of life. Noon light is brighter and more direct, creating strong shadows and lights; when

the light gets to the altar of the ancestors, it enhances the feeling of seriousness and sacredness, temporarily isolating the ritual area with non-ritual activities. The afternoon light is gentler and warmer, with an orange colouring, and puts a dull light on old wood surfaces and leaves the impression of stillness and nostalgia. In the example of Phung Hung Ancient House, the internal space does not have a typical courtyard, but the rhythm of light is still preserved as the vertical space relationships and the substitution of the natural light schemes. Light is also created by the openings in the roofs that have been substituted with parts of clay tiles with glass to allow the light to philtre slowly into the central interior area. This is a solution, which provides ventilation and creates a positive contact between the interior and the natural environment and makes light to be dynamic and constantly depends on the time of the day and seasons.

The locals are very sensitive to such minor changes in light and tend to take them as a form of time reading in their day-to-day activities. Light, then, does not only light the space, it also indicates the rhythm of life, time marching, and emotional images of inhabitants. In this view, the courtyard or, even more generally, natural light systems organisation in the interior of the ancient houses of Hoi An must not be interpreted only as technical or climatic ones. Rather, they serve as a memory clock, adding an important content of sensory memory to the inner memoryscape of this heritage city.

Emotional and Sensory Memory: Sensory Experience and the Formation of Interior Identity

The results show that the sensory interventions are central in the formation of interior memory of the ancient houses, Hoi An. These sensory dimensions do not just complete material memory but organise emotional contact between local people and their living environment, which is also an element in creating interior identity of this heritage urban environment.



Fig. 3: Hoang Hiep Ancient House, now the Hoi An Museum - Sensory Memory: Light, Shadow, and Time;
Source: Author

Sound: The Rhythm of Life Embedded in Wood

Sound comes out as a colourful stratum of living memory, always attested by people as an inseparable part of interior experience of old houses. Phenomenological observations indicate that apparently transient sounds like wind in the wooden joints, creaking floors under

the feet, pryvitannye cries of the birds at dawn, dripping water in rainy days or screams of market vendors turn out to be an indicator of constant presence and life. Most residents when questioned on the most evocative sounds mentioned the creaking of wooden floors and opening and closing of wooden doors. These are not so much sounds made by material things, but indications of domestic life: movement, gathering and everyday rhythms. These types of sounds create what can be termed as dynamic memories which to Jennings (1992) is the perspective of sound as a means of re-enacting rhythms of life within the vernacular spaces. In this regard, therefore, the interior of ancient houses is not only a fixed material space, but a sound space, a space that contains the lived history of several generations.

Smell: The Scent of Age and Ritual

In addition to sound, smell is another very strong and long-lasting sense stimulator of memory. There are three distinct groups of scents that can be observed in the surveyed old houses: the dusty smell of old wooden buildings, the smell of incense in the presence of ancestral places of worship, and the smell of soil and roof tiles during the rainy season, wet and earthy.

The odour of old wood is often referred to by the residents, as the breath of the house and the preference of giving materials the personalities of the emotional memory. The smell of incense, especially, is closely connected with the family memory and ancestors. A family member of the Tran family told him that whenever he smells incense, he feels that his father is still sitting at the main hall. In this way, smell goes beyond the sense of touch to become the mode of reconstitution of the presence of loved ones, which proves the primary role of the sense of touch in the maintenance of memory of inner space and its transfer.

Light, Shadow and a Sense of Familiarity

The daily flux of light is an important factor in the construction of spatial memory amongst the residents of the old houses. The light of morning in the courtyard, the midday shadows in the paternal alter, the violet light in the afternoon, all create individual sensations of time, having a strong reference to the childhood reminiscences, family rituals, and the dark and rainy seasons.

These events assert that memory is not a place that things exist in, as claimed by Salen (2016),-but it is formed through the ways people perceive and experience their surroundings over time. Light therefore is a component of living memory, which allows people to perceive the time, seasons, and family rhythm in the interior space.

The example of Hoang Hiep Ancient House which was turned into the Hoi An Museum provides an illustrative example of this dynamic through the sensory memory of light, shadow and time. Natural light is also deliberately maintained and strategically directed, within the museum interior, and has created a continuous interaction of brightness and darkness throughout wooden surfaces, walls and artefacts, intentionally. The light shadows moving across the day, not just highlighting the structures of buildings, but causing memory of past domestic experiences, when light and shadow and changing of the atmosphere were used to read time. In this respect, light is not just a light source, but a storytelling, which maintains and evokes the sense memory in the modern environment of the ancient house.

Cultural-Ritual Memory: Interior Space as a Living Cultural Process

On top of a sensory stratum, cultural-ritual memory refers an authentic depth to the interior areas of the Wall structures of Hoi An. Interiors are transformed into living cultural processes through the daily domestic activities, cyclic family practises, the existence of the objects of heirloom quality, and the consistent spatial structure. In this process, the past does not exist as the fixed memory but is re-activated, re-enacted and negotiated in the current life and as a result of such a process, the interior space can become the continuous intersection of individual memory, family memory and collective cultural memory.



Fig. 4: Quan Thang Ancient House: Eight Generations of Continuous Residence and Ancestral Worship Cultural and Ritual Memory: The Sacred Axis of the Interior; Source: Author

Ancestral Altar: The Center of Family Memory

In all the surveyed ancient houses, the ancestral altar occupies a fixed and central position within the interior spatial structure, typically located in the main hall and oriented toward the principal entrance. This spatial arrangement reflects traditional feng shui principles and, at the same time, constitutes an explicit expression of the altar's symbolic role as the spiritual axis of the house. The dark reddish-brown wood, the even, sun-polished wood surfaces carved by time, and the smoke-stained ceiling above all, make up a sort of temporary veil, the ever-accumulating incense smoke and ritual activity, and family memory over the generations.

In the interviews, most of the homeowners stressed that interior decoration can be changed to meet the needs of the daily life, however, the altar should never be relocated. This quote helps us to understand that the altar is not just a furniture but it is a memory axis, a linkage between the dead ancestors and the life of the present. Such rituals as death anniversaries, the rituals of the Lunar New Year, family meetings constantly meet in this space and make the altar a permanent point of contact between the past and the present, the memory of the individual and the memory of the lineage.

An example is the case of Quan Thang Ancient House. Despite the fact that the house has been integrated in the tourism activities, the ancestral altar has been maintained in its original location and arrangement. The use of natural light at the main entrance and in the courtyard gently illuminates the altar at various times of the day and emphasises the dark timber surfaces as well as carved details and helps to stress the sense of solemnity and stillness. This attentive upkeep is a show that the altar is not merely a concrete relic of the heritage but also a mnemonic point which allows the house to keep the family identity in spite of the change in the use.

Heirloom Objects: Artifacts as Narrative Units

Most of the surveyed households possess heirloom objects like wooden cabinets, bronze incense burners, teapots, paper fans and wooden chests. In interviews, the words like

passed over by my grandfather, by our ancestors, a wedding gift, etc. have been repeated many times-indicating that these objects are not regarded as ordinary utensils, but as a narrative unit that transports memories and storeys through generations.

These artefacts are normally located in high-visibility areas at the main hall or the reception area where family meetings and interactions with guests occur. By doing so, heirloom objects become devices of silent storytelling which allow the younger generation to envision family history by touching the material objects. They also add to culture of the interior where every object has practical and symbolic meaning as time and memory markers. As Quan Thang Ancient House, there are a lot of heirloom objects which are kept at the exhibition place and not removed out of the original domestic situation. This curatorial method enables the visitor to feel the connexion between objects and the life family lived in the past, as opposed to being introduced to them as an object of the museum. It is with the help of this spatial continuity that the family memory is transformed into the spatial memory, and it is still being passed on in a modern setting.

Domestic Rituals: Space as a Shaper of Behavior

Domestic rituals have been developed by the spatial structure of ancient houses with verandas, central courts, reception rooms, and bedrooms in numerous generations. Actions like the daily cleaning of the ancestral altar, the placing of ceremonial offerings on special events, receiving guest in the main hall, or drinking tea in the morning under the veranda are carried out subject to similar cycles which are inherently repeated in normal life.

According to residents, such practises are usually referred to as inherited rhythms of life, as Maia and Pinto (2020) suggest that heritage can be found not only in material factors but also maintained through the lifestyles and practises of people and their representation of cultural values in space. The interior is not a passive object, rather an active agent, which influence behaviour and preserve collective memory. In Quan Thang Ancient House, the role that this house plays has been diversified to accommodate tourism, but the traditional domestic rituals are still being recreated using the spatial organisation and circulation pattern. Tourists proceed according to the axis of the veranda-main hall-court, which reflects family tradition in the past. This shows how the interior of the house in ancient times will be able to pass on lived rituals as a kind of intangible heritage whereby memory is constantly recreated through the interplay of space, objects and people.

The Relationship between House - Street - River

The interior memory in the old houses of Hui An is not isolated but rather created in a close context with the unique urban structure of the old town, where the houses, streets and the river interact as a living organism. The interior, therefore, becomes an area, which constitutes a personal family area and also acts as the surface on which urban memory is imprinted and reflected.

The memory of the Hoai River is vividly imprinted in inner experience in houses on the Bach Dang Street. Tyelling of water against the bank, odour of alluvial soil blasted into the air by the wind, or dampness suggested into timber when floods happen are some of the things that residents constantly remember paying attention to elements always put inside the house even when doors were shut, as residents expressed it. At the Phung Hung Ancient House, where the interior is directed not only to the street but also to the riverside, interior is used as a buffer of the senses: wooden floors, staircases, surfaces are still marked by humidity and the level of floods, and left long-term memory of the contact between house and river.

In comparison, the houses on Tran Phu Street are reminiscent of the trading and business past of the old town. The tunes of street vendors, pedestrian of tourists, streets, and beating of shop doors become part of interior life. This state is typical of Quan Thang Ancient House: the main hall is used as a family-living place and a reception place and an exhibition space at the same time, showing how the interior is listening and absorbing the rhythm of the street. This experience is reflected by many residents in a very, provoking phrase:

The house can hear the street, meaning the strong involvement of the interior space and the collective memory of the city.

Vietnamese-Chinese-Japanese Cultural Intersections in Interior Memory

A survey of the six houses studied shows that there is a strong variation in interior space planning as Hoi An has had a tradition of cultural interaction and exchange. Vietnamese homes are usually composed of small design focusing on family life where the main hall is used as the core of the ritual. Chinese homes have the feature of large fronts and long interior areas, which can host both residential and business. In the meantime, the houses that are informed by the Japanese customs can be traced with the help of elegant timber joinery, low-weight timber frame, and mobile spatial separation.

This hybridity in culture is very evident in the three chosen case studies. Quan Thang Ancient House demonstrates good Chinese influences in the front and business space planning, but the ancestral altar and domestic system related to the Vietnamese culture had been preserved. Phung Hung Ancient House shows that there is a delicate balance between civilised methods of construction and habitat modified to the river environment. On the contrary, Hoang Hiep Ancient House is currently becoming the Hoi An Museum Sensory Memory: Light - Shadow - Time which represents a more elegant perception of lightness and space articulation, as well as the taste of the East Asian aesthetics, mostly Japanese, the focus on emptiness, shadow and time change.

This diversity implies that interior memory in Hoi An is not a uniform phenomenon but the outcome of cumulative and integrative process of culture, which is one of the most peculiar values of the historic urban heritage area.

Transformations of Interior Memory under the Impact of Tourism

Tourism development has created powerful changes in the interior part of ancient houses. Many residents admit that there is little to be done about the renovation of the premises to facilitate a cafe, a souvenir shop, more toilets, or an electric lighting system. Such interventions are bound to change the conventional ways of life and spatial perception.

Interestingly, though, the majority of families attempt to maintain basic axes of memory, including the family altar, wooden cabinets, wood structures systems, and main space organisation. Even in Quan Thang Ancient House, which is a tourist site, the wooden structure and the altar are preserved. Phung Hung Ancient House is able to conform and adapt to tourism by reinforced structure as well as flood scars and old medicines being part of the memory. Hoang Hiep House, which serves as a museum, proactively interpret without hesitation using light and shadow, illustrates a conscious and contemplative adaptation mode.

The cases are a clear demonstration of the idea of the living heritage where the interior memory is resistant in its fundamental values, and it is flexible to adapt to the modern situations.

Heirloom Objects as Narrative Units

Wooden cabinets, tea sets, incense burners, chests, calligraphic panels, and other inherited objects are frequently interpreted through stories of ownership, inheritance, marriage, trade, and family continuity. Their narrative value depends not only on age but on the accounts attached to them. When these objects remain within familiar spatial relationships, they help younger generations and visitors connect material evidence with the lives of former occupants.

This supports Ganoë's (1999) understanding of interior meaning as relational and narrative. An object becomes meaningful through its position within a sequence of people, actions, places, and stories rather than through visual appearance alone.

Urban-Community Memory: House, Street, and River

The memory of the ancient-house interior is inseparable from Hoi An's wider urban environment. Street sounds, trading activity, pedestrian movement, seasonal rain, humidity, and the riverine setting enter the house through openings, surfaces, and everyday routines. The

interior is therefore neither fully private nor isolated; it mediates between family life and the collective rhythms of the heritage town.

The multicultural history of Hoi An also remains legible through combinations of spatial organisation, timber construction, decorative motifs, commercial functions, and ritual practices. Rather than assigning every feature to a single cultural origin, the findings suggest that interior identity has developed through long-term interaction and adaptation. This interpretation is consistent with previous research on Hoi An's commercial and multicultural interior character (Bich Van & Singyabuth, 2023).

Tourism and the Transformation of Interior Memory

Tourism introduces new requirements for circulation, display, interpretation, lighting, services, and commercial activity. These interventions can support the continued use and economic viability of heritage buildings, but they may also alter the sensory and ritual conditions through which residents experience the house. The three cases demonstrate different degrees of adaptation: continued domestic practice, hybrid residence-tourism use, and museum conversion.

The Hoang Hiep case is particularly useful because its transformation into the Hoi An Folklore Museum makes the act of interpretation explicit. As shown in earlier research, adaptive reuse can preserve and communicate heritage while simultaneously changing the relationship between domestic space, objects, and everyday life (Nguyen Thi Bich Van, 2024). The issue is therefore not whether change should be prevented, but which material, sensory, ritual, and narrative relationships are essential to retain.

The Interior Memoryscape Model

Synthesising the four analytical dimensions, the study proposes the interior memoryscape as a framework for reading heritage interiors. Seven recurring elements were identified across the cases:

- (1) Heirloom and ritual objects;
- (2) Natural light and shadow;
- (3) Timber fabric and traces of wear;
- (4) Ancestral worship and recurring domestic rituals;
- (5) Familiar sounds and smells;
- (6) Temporal markers such as ageing, patina, flood and humidity traces; and
- (7) Residents' experiences and interpretations.

These elements do not operate independently. A timber floor, for example, is simultaneously material fabric, an acoustic surface, a trace of movement, and a trigger for remembered domestic routines. Likewise, an altar is an object, a spatial focus, a ritual setting, and a link between individual, family, and collective memory. The value of the model lies in making these relationships visible for both research and conservation practice.

Discussion

From Material Heritage to Lived Interior Heritage

The findings show that the heritage value of Hoi An's ancient-house interiors cannot be adequately understood through material authenticity alone. Physical fabric is fundamental, but memory is produced through the interaction of fabric with sensory experience, repeated practice, and personal interpretation. This reinforces the need to treat the interior as a lived heritage environment rather than as a collection of preserved objects.

Narrative as an Analytical Tool

The narrative-space perspective helps explain why apparently ordinary features—worn floors, a familiar sound, a tea cabinet, or a changing beam of daylight—can become culturally significant. Their value emerges through relationships and stories. Ganoe's (1999) narrative

approach is therefore useful beyond design interpretation: it provides a way to connect spatial evidence with the accounts of inhabitants and users.

Implications for Conservation

The interior memoryscape suggests four complementary conservation concerns. Material conservation should protect timber structures, surfaces, courtyards, openings, and significant furnishings. Sensory conservation should consider daylight patterns, ventilation, acoustic character, material tactility, and characteristic smells where these remain part of lived use. Ritual conservation should support the continuity of ancestral worship, inherited objects, and domestic practices. Community conservation should maintain the possibility of meaningful local use and participation rather than allowing heritage interiors to become detached from the people who give them meaning.

This does not imply freezing houses in an earlier historical state. Narrative-based adaptive reuse can accommodate change when new interventions remain legible, proportionate, and respectful of significant spatial relationships and cultural practices (Maia & Pinto, 2020). Vernacular principles may also inform contemporary adaptation without reducing heritage to stylistic imitation (Rashdan & Mhatre, 2022; Rashdan & Ashour, 2024).

Contribution of the Study

The paper contributes to interior and heritage studies in three ways. First, it brings narrative and memory theories into direct dialogue with the vernacular interiors of Hoi An. Second, it demonstrates that sensory conditions and recurring practices are analytically important alongside material fabric. Third, it offers the interior memoryscape as a transferable framework that can be tested in other living-heritage contexts where domestic interiors are being transformed by tourism, adaptive reuse, or environmental change.

Conclusion

This study examined three ancient houses in Hoi An and conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews to investigate how memory is formed, preserved, and re-enacted within lived interior space. Adopting a phenomenological approach supported by field observation and on-site documentation of materials, rituals, and everyday habitation practices, the research identified four analytically distinct yet interconnected forms of interior memory: material memory, sensory-emotional memory, cultural-ritual memory, and urban-community memory. Together, these dimensions constitute an integrated system through which material conditions and human experience continuously interact to produce meaningful lived space.

The findings demonstrate that the interior architecture of Hoi An's ancient houses functions not merely as a physical setting but as an active medium of memory production. Wooden surfaces bearing traces of long-term use, the modulation of daylight through courtyards, the scent of incense, the acoustic qualities of timber floors, and ritual practices associated with ancestral worship collectively form what this study conceptualises as an interior memoryscape. In this sense, interior space operates as a site where memory is continually generated, activated, and transmitted across generations, resonating with Berghout's (2025) notion of architectural memory as a dynamic and processual phenomenon.

The research further highlights that interior memory is not static but is constantly shaped by everyday practices, social interaction, environmental change, and economic transformation. Accordingly, heritage conservation should be understood as a living process that extends beyond material preservation to include the safeguarding of sensory environments, ritual continuity, and community-based patterns of use.

Moreover, the study underscores the relevance of memory as a guiding principle for both conservation policy and interior design practice. Recognising architecture as a repository of lived experience enables design and preservation strategies that are more responsive to historical continuity, cultural identity, and the emotional attachments of residents, particularly in contexts affected by tourism development and climatic vulnerability.

Finally, this article advances architectural memory theory in three principal ways: first, by clarifying how memory operates within vernacular interior environments; second, by demonstrating that memory emerges not only through material fabric but also through embodied sensory experience and routine practice; and third, by proposing the interior memoryscape as a transferable analytical framework for future research and heritage management. In doing so, the study affirms that sustaining interior memory is essential to maintaining the cultural foundations upon which community identity and long-term urban sustainability depend.

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Disclosure Statement

The author declares that this research does not have any possible conflict of interest.

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