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Temporal-spatial Paradigms in Chinese Domestic Architecture

Monica Naso (1), Michele Bonino (2)

Abstract

As seen in Confucian traditions, Chinese thought presents a cyclical, multidimensional conceptualisation of time, deeply rooted in cosmic harmony and rituals. The Chinese house, often marginalised in historiography, embeds the complex interplay between space and time. Unlike the Western emphasis on spatial complexity, Chinese homes are spatially minimal yet richly imbued with temporal rituals. This can be observed in courtyard-centric designs and Confucian hierarchies that shape family and societal dynamics. Ritual cycles govern daily activities and intergenerational relationships, embedding a continuity that transcends physical design. This paper explores how traditional Chinese domestic architecture's temporal-spatial paradigm and historical roots in ritual systems have been reinterpreted in contemporary practices. Through three case studies of an urban apartment, a rural house, and a renovated house in a fishing village, it examines how contemporary Chinese designers reimagine domesticity. By using cyclical temporality as a primary design tool, they offer a perspective on architecture's dialogue with time and space.

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The Chinese notion of time offers an alternative perspective in understanding temporality that differs from an absolute entity.

Introduction

Architecture has long maintained a multifaceted relationship with the notion of time: challenging it with the ambition of outlasting its passage, embracing its ephemeral nature, positioning it as a layer of a pre-existing palimpsest, or dovetailing with its flow. Also, time and temporality are embedded in the nested relationships between objects, contexts, and the people who design, build, inhabit, and use spaces. These relationships are never formed in isolation; instead, they always position themselves within a condition shaped by time. As Ali Madanipour (2017) notes, in this multifaceted nexus, the dominant narrative is inherited from ancient Greek and later Western philosophy – which swings between a view of time as an independent mathematical substance that pre-exists and subsumes events (as in the thinking of Plato, Newton, and Descartes), and its conception of time as a set of relations between phenomena (following Aristotle and Leibniz). Furthermore, while the notion of *Chronos*, the measurable and linear time, defines past, present, and future as distinct moments along an inevitable trajectory, *kairos* introduces a different temporal dimension – the "opportune" moment, characterised by situational timeliness and human experience.

To this framework, the Chinese notion of time offers an alternative perspective in understanding temporality that differs from an absolute entity (Jullien, 2012). Instead, it is closely interwoven with the cosmic order, where the finite nature of human existence is accepted, and the focus lies on participating in the ongoing creative processes of the universe. Such a conceptualisation is rooted in both Taoist and Confucian philosophy, albeit with some distinctions. Taoist philosophy emphasises the inherent change embedded within time, interpreting the world as being in a constant state of transformation, with time flowing in cycles rather than progressing toward an ultimate end. On the other hand, while acknowledging circular change, Confucianism expands the cyclical view of time: it conceives time as a spiral, where forward and backwards movements coexist, contributing to a continuous process of production and reproduction.

With Confucian thought prevailing over Taoism, such a perception frames transformation as an opportunity

for enrichment, where the past informs the present, and the present shapes the future in a seamless dialogue. In this conception, temporality's enhanced, iterative nature spans generations. With its sixty-year cycles, the *Kan-Chih* traditional measurement of time reflects this worldview, aligning human life with natural rhythms, underscoring the significance of rituals in sustaining cultural continuity (Huang, 2006).
This conceptualisation also exists in a balanced co-dependence with space, implying a constant renewal and adaptation rather than the pursuit of permanence or historical linearity (Liu, 1974). Chinese architecture has traditionally faced the challenge of engaging with time not as an external, linear force but as a dynamic component of space that positions itself into a flow. This approach contrasts with the Western notion of *Chronos*, dovetailing instead with *kairos* – the opportune, humanly shaped moment – where time is not something to be feared or overcome but embraced as part of space's living, breathing continuity. While in Western conceptualisation, spatial complexity has been a privileged lens through which architecture has been understood and discussed, in the interpretation and conception of Chinese Architecture, this symbiotic space-time condition has led to less emphasis on space. In this framework, Lou notes that "compared with Western ancient architecture, a single Chinese building is much less complex in spatial features" (2007: 27), lacking attributes such as spatial complexity, spaciousness, and proportional emphasis.
Domestic space is one of the spheres that particularly accommodates this spatial non-specificity. As a foundational aspect of dwelling – whether individual or collective – the domestic space is central to human life and serves as a lens through which the intertwining of time and space in Chinese architecture can be observed. Yet, according to the notions mentioned above and the fact that space has often been a dominant criterion in historiography, it is unsurprising that the domestic house has historically been marginalised in the history of Chinese architecture. Beijing-based architect and educator Chang Yung Ho (2007: 9) highlights that "the architectural history books of modern China document civic monuments almost exclusively while neglecting buildings that matter in everyday life".

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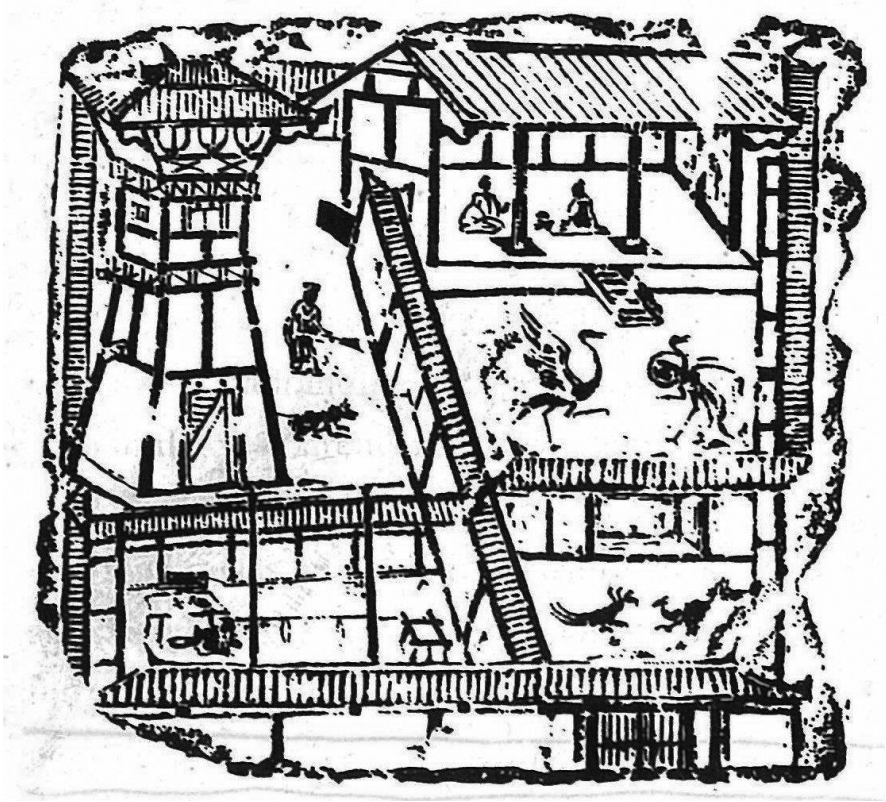

Fig. 1 - Engraving on a tomb from the Han dynasty depicting the traditional Chinese house (III BC – III AD), Chengdu (Sichuan). From Lou Q. (2008), Traditional Architectural Culture of China, Beijing, China Travel and Tourism Press.

The Space of the home and the time of rites

An engraving on a tomb from the Han dynasty, over two thousand years old, provides a valuable depiction of the traditional Chinese house. The structure is illustrated partly as an axonometric projection and partly as a plan, focusing on open spaces animated by daily life. Unlike Western homes prioritising enclosed, sheltered spaces, this engraving reveals an interplay between indoor and outdoor realms, showing only the room where the occupants are seated, entirely exposed to the elements (Fig. 1).

This ambiguity – where protective space is reduced – characterises traditional Chinese houses, where outdoor areas are the most frequented, and the courtyard is the true centre of family life. Moreover, while Western architecture has developed a variety of styles over time, Chinese architecture has remained unchanged for centuries. Based on the *damuzuo* (major carpentry) construction framework, it has developed minimal distinct spatial features. The domestic unit, standardised by repetitively applying

the elementary *jian* module framed by four pilasters, has become a universal prototype across different architectural types. In this regard, Lou (2007: 27) notes that such a framework "is neither complex in outside appearance, nor large in proportion, and this holds for both ordinary people's quadrangles and feudal emperors' palaces." Whether applied to imperial residences, religious temples, gardens, tombs, or palaces, this modular system establishes a common architectural language across scales and functions, adhering to straightforward spatial principles.

Nevertheless, this spatial simplicity gains meaning through another dimension: the time of rites. A twelfth-century print in Shandong Province, titled *Enjoying New Year Together*, encapsulates this bond by illustrating a family's celebration of the Chinese New Year (Fig. 2).
From sacrifices honouring Heaven and Earth to ancestral homage, the sequence of rituals also reveals details about the dwelling. It is an intimate, family setting; there is no roof, making it unclear whether the ceremony is taking place indoors or in the courtyard; no windows open onto nature, except for a decorative plant painted on a wall; ceremonial features merge with everyday tasks like meal preparation; and the

Fig. 2 - Enjoying New Year Together, a XII century print in Shandong Province. From Ronald G. Knapp, LO Kai-Yin (eds.), House Home Family. Living and being Chinese, University of Hawai'I Press/China Institute in America, Honolulu 2005.

women are positioned in separate areas in the background (Flath, 2005). The precedence of temporal ritual cyclicity over spatial dimensions in ancient times is illustrated by the fact that before the twelfth-century publication of Li Jie's treatise *Yingzao Fashi* (1103), or *Methods and Designs of Architecture* – a builders' handbook that would guide architectural practice across China for centuries – little formal information on architecture existed (Guo, 1998).

While the house retains its core role as a physical and social space, it simultaneously follows Confucian principles of cyclical-spiral temporality, traversing through time as part of this unique temporal-spatial framework.

As Ronald G. Knapp observes, "Each house is a 'living' entity in the broadest sense, as the household's daily life and cyclical rituals provide the structure for the family's identity" (2006: 3). While the house retains its core role as a physical and social space, it simultaneously follows Confucian principles of cyclical-spiral temporality, traversing through time as part of this unique temporal-spatial framework. In this sense, time, together with space, is a defining feature of a Chinese dwelling. Orientation, layout, and proportions are governed by precise rules corresponding to everyday rituals and ceremonial actions, whose cyclical repetition reflects Confucian conceptions of time. This circularity shapes the identity and layout of the dwelling and, ultimately, the house's architecture. *The Book of Rites,* one of the five Confucian classics, defines *li* (rites) as rules of moral conduct for daily life, emphasising dedication to others through behavioural and ceremonial norms, primarily grounded in respect for hierarchy (Bertan and Foccardi, 1998).

While this system is rooted in immaterial temporal cycles, it has a tangible impact on the physical space of traditional courtyard constructions like the *Siheyuan* houses. Layouts of these homes often "reveal somewhat complicated patterns of relationships that express age, gender, and generational status, as well as child-rearing and care for the aged," positioning themselves as spaces "in a continuous state of alteration" (Knapp, 2006: 6), adapting to changing needs imposed by shifts affecting its residents or the social context – be it marriage, births, deaths, collective or religious rituals, or productive and consumption activities. The base unit of the house, organised around a central courtyard, is structured to fulfil the needs of this domestic ecology: parents occupy the central building along the north-south axis; subsequent generations occupy the symmetrical wings; and household servants

are situated in the entrance wing. All inhabitants pass through the courtyard, where devotional practices are reiterated throughout the day. This universality underpins the significance of the domestic prototype: the hierarchy embedded in the ritual system permeates every aspect of life, shaping not only ideology and morality but also spatial organisation and everyday behaviours (Knapp, 1993).
Albeit rooted in the past, the principles shaping the traditional Chinese house revive today in contemporary Chinese architectural practices. In these approaches, specific patterns position the domestic unit – and the dimension of human presence that animates it – as an experimental test bed to re-establish temporal cyclicity rather than pure reflections on the composition of spatial layouts as a conscious design device. The following three case studies – an apartment in a dense mega-city, a house in a rural framework, and a renovation in a fishing village – show how, through their work and research, various architects focus on a cyclical sense of time to reshape dwellings and their relationship between physical space and an intimate understanding of domesticity.

24 Hours and 24 rooms: A house by Gary Chang
Gary Chang, a Hong Kong-based architect and founder of the Edge Design Institute, observes that "Architecture is [an ever-changing] set of conditions under which space and individuals connect. […] In the context of Hong Kong, every 'present' is fading, then vanishes without notice" (Chang, 2008: 16). The city, characterised by density and congestion, embodies a unique type of urbanisation. Dense cities maintain a complex relationship with time, featuring multiple overlapping temporalities: the city's rhythms and transformations, the collective routines of work, production, and consumption, and the intimate personal times of individual inhabitants. Especially in Hong Kong, time acquires greater significance, encapsulating historical memory and continuity. As Ackbar Abbas notes, "the sense of the temporary is very strong" and makes the city "a space of transition […] at the intersection of different times of speed" (Abbas, 2008: 4). This sense of suspension and displacement permeates the colonial city, which Abbas regards as a paradigm of the global city, where domestic space – and its associated time – seems to diminish.

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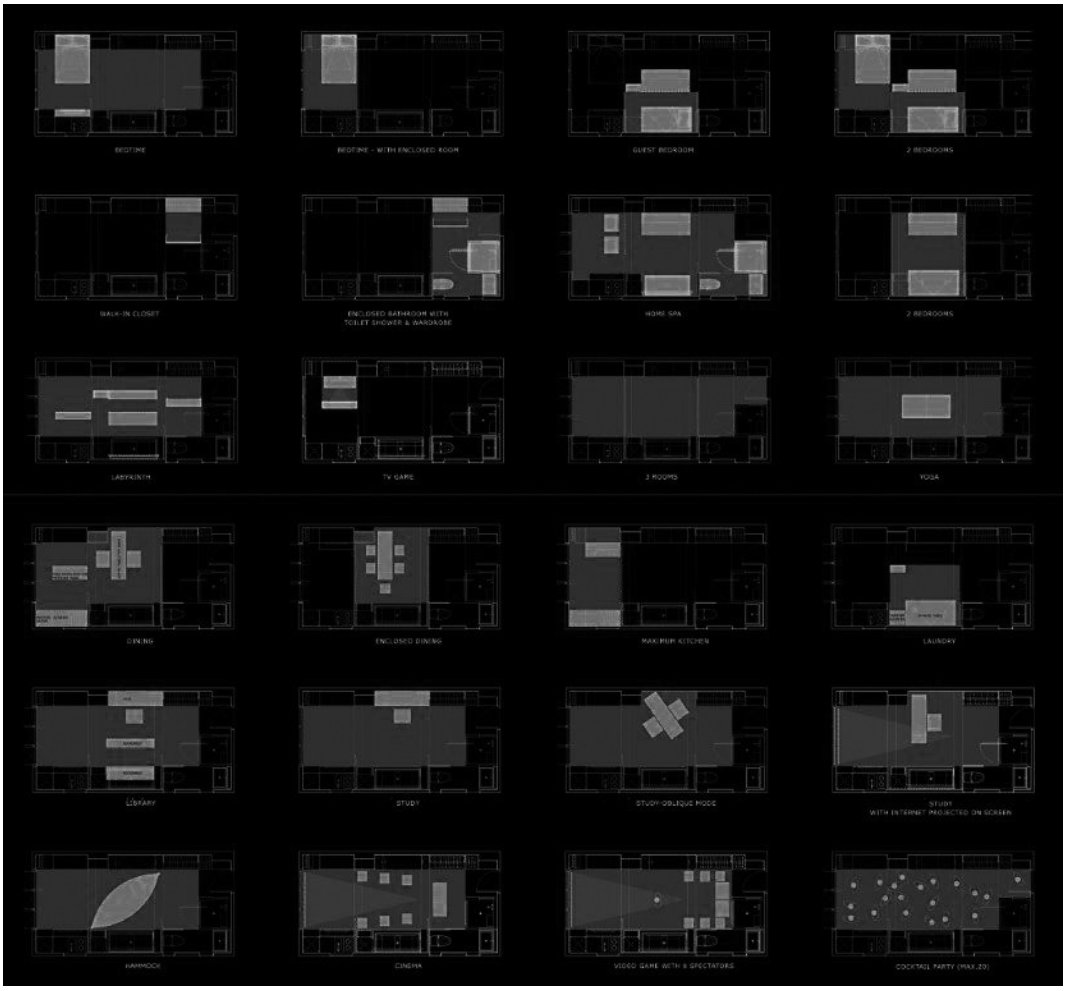

Fig. 3 - The 24 configurations of the Domestic Transformer designed by Gary Chang (2007). Photo courtesy of Edge Design Institute LtD.

While the frantic pace of transformation profoundly impacts the relationship between time and space in street life, dense public spaces, and congested transportation, domestic units often remain apart from conceptual reflection. The scarcity and high cost of space – and its evolution into a luxury commodity – exacerbate this issue: the expense and limited availability prevent homes from housing an intimate notion of domesticity rituals (Chan and Wong, 2020); however, in Gary Chang's work, domestic rituals and everyday life experiences re-emerge as rediscovery and design tools.

Drawing from Confucian thought, Wang Yangming (1963: 8; cited in Liu, 1974: 151) posits that "In a single day, a person experiences the entire course of history."

Gary Chang has lived in the same 32-square-meter apartment for nearly 40 years, moving there as a teenager in 1976 with his family of five, who rented out one room for additional income. Over the past decades, the apartment has been renovated five times and configured as a single-person dwelling. The latest renovation, the *Domestic Transformer* (2007), introduced the concept of creating open space in half of the apartment, an extraordinary luxury in Hong Kong. This open area is preserved through a system of sliding modules and multifunctional arrangements, allowing 24 unique configurations over 24 hours (Fig. 3).

This concept evolved from his 2003 design of the 250 sqm *Suitcase House at the Commune* by the Great Wall, Beijing, where functions are hidden beneath the floor and accessed by opening or closing 50-floor panels, allowing for endless spatial configurations or leaving the house as a purely open space. The Suitcase House reflects the principles of "Change, Choice, Co-existence, and Connectivity," central to Chang's studio, which guided the development of the *Domestic Transformer*.
Here, domesticity is defined through its uses and rituals. Daily routines shape domestic life, driven by adaptations required to inhabit the space and resonate with the urban practices familiar in Chinese cities: explaining the design of his apartment, Chang emphasises that "urbanistically, high-density development often implies efficiency and convenience." He draws inspiration from the essentials of the traditional Chinese home: a void animated by rituals. Chang reinterprets the concept of partitioning in traditional homes with multiple movable screens, a tool that "separates, defines and organises space, taking the form of walls, partitions, windows, doors, or furniture [and] transforms the initial sheer volume into a rich complex of sub-spaces" (Dou, 2018: 35).
Gary Chang's project transcends the spatial dimension of a residential unit. It is an expanded reflection on domesticity and the living space in dense cities. Here, the house and the city create new, reciprocal exchanges in space optimisation and cyclical transformation over time. In this context, Chang's work reclaims domestic space, time, and rituals within the indeterminate, suspended spaces of the megacity, presenting a model of flexibility, transformation, and recurring daily rituals, as a microcosm of a complete life.

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A House for All Seasons: A project by Urban Rural Framework

The rapid pace of urbanisation in China has redefined the relationship between the city and the countryside – a space often overlooked in major urban narratives yet essential from both spatial and social perspectives. Rural Urban Framework (RUF), a research and design collective founded by Joshua Bolchover and John Lin, based at the University of Hong Kong, tries to tackle these challenges. As John Lin notes, "Within this scenario of potentially extreme changes to the social and built landscape, the architect is wholly absent.– What can an architect do in a context where architecture is deemed unnecessary?"[1] In response, Lin and his research group have explored strategies to enable incremental urbanisation. Their approach focuses on flexible stratification, superimposition, and replacement as alternative methods to China's frantic growth model. It has profoundly impacted rural areas, driving mass migration of rural residents to urban centres. This migratory flow has transformed the countryside-city relationship from self-reliance to dependency, with rural regions increasingly reliant on urban economies. Consequently, villages have often lost skilled labour as younger, more experienced workers pursue better opportunities in cities.

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As the designers observe, without traditional artisans and community-based construction practices, new rural homes increasingly rely on village contractors. This shift has resulted in standardising rural buildings, typically built with concrete, brick, and tile structures. Previously crafted with locally sourced materials, they are now assembled using materials compatible with standardised, non-professional construction methods (Williams, 2012). Shijia Village, located in Shaanxi Province near Xi'an, is a consolidated rural community, though not immune to changes brought on by urbanisation. Many residents have migrated to cities, and much of its land has been affected by the relentless spread of urban areas. In Shijia, RUF has designed a "contemporary prototype" of a vernacular courtyard house based on the village's pre-existing grid, with 30x10m parcels. The prototype mediates between traditional techniques (clay construction) and serial production systems (concrete and bricks), aiming to reconnect various spatial and

1 - Rural Urban Framework, https://www.chinese-architects.com/ja/rural-urban-framework-hong-kong/project/a-house-for-all-seasons [Accessed 24 June 2025].

Fig. 4 - The courtyard system of A House for All Seasons, designed by Rural Urban Framework (2012). Photo courtesy of Rural Urban Framework.

temporal dimensions lost amid urbanisation and to foster what RUF describes as "a lifestyle in transition." The project *A House for All Seasons* was developed in 2012 after a participatory research effort involving students and village residents, designed to create "a portrait of the modern Chinese village house." In the project, the courtyard emerges as the central element around which the rhythm of social life and community relationships revolve. As the core feature of traditional Chinese domestic architecture, the courtyard is the focal point of the prototype, which is organised around four patios bordered by a brick screen that runs along all four sides of the lot. These patios create a flexible distribution system under a single roof, establishing intimate connections with the main spaces and functions of the house: the kitchen, bathroom, living room, and bedrooms (Fig. 4).

From a construction perspective, the prototype seeks to integrate standardisation requirements with traditional materials and techniques. The simple concrete structure of columns and roof echoes the straightforward design of traditional courtyard houses. Besides the patio system, the roof is a crucial feature that establishes the relationship between the building and the seasonal rhythm of rural life in this transitioning village. The roof is a living, multifunctional element directly connected with nature and a view across the countryside. Its terraced design incorporates spaces that reflect the community's cyclical uses and vernacular rituals, tied to the rhythm of the seasons: a rainwater collection and storage system for spring, food drying areas for winter preservation, and spaces

The roof is a living, multifunctional element directly connected with nature and a view across the countryside.

Urban transformations in China provoke reflections on generational time, where older generations coexist with younger ones and harmonise diverse life needs.

Beijiao Village, a small coastal settlement on the southeast end of the Huangqi Peninsula in Fujian Province, offers a unique context that sharply contrasts with the rapid urban transformations of China's megacities.

for dining and relaxation in spring and summer. Daily cycles are also integrated into the house's operation: a biogas recovery system utilises waste from the household's pigs to supply energy for cooking, while a heat recovery system from the stove warms the bedrooms before venting outside.

A House for All Seasons embeds a duality. On the one hand, it acts as a time machine, reconnecting rural rituals and vernacular practices of a pre-urban lifestyle to the present by "a-temporalizing" them, linking them to the current realities of modernisation, urbanisation, and standardisation. On the other, it is a tool that seeks to rebuild the community's self-reliance through flexible, straightforward spatial design, enabling the community to reclaim its rhythms and activities, connecting with local materials and techniques.

The Captain's House: An inter-generational dwelling by Vector Architects

Urban transformations in China also provoke reflections on generational time, where older generations coexist with younger ones and harmonise diverse life needs. According to Juhani Pallasmaa (2024, p. 22), Vector Architects' *Captain's House* project in Fujian Province weaves a "presence and perspective of Time" into architecture, balancing what exists and the new, both in terms of "before and after" and in materiality and heritage. It strikes an equilibrium between tradition (communal, familial, and constructive) and the need to innovate to meet new demands. Here, time is not perceived through the lens of historical patina but rather as an ongoing process embedded in family life. The renovation addresses neither heritage protection nor preservation of valuable historical elements (the house was only twenty years old when the project began); instead, it focuses on securing the structure for continued use across generations and rethinking spaces for functionality (Beaumont, 2017; Schittich, 2019).

Beijiao Village, a small coastal settlement on the southeast end of the Huangqi Peninsula in Fujian Province, offers a unique context that sharply contrasts with the rapid urban transformations of China's megacities. Overlooking the East China Sea, the village has managed to sustain a steady rhythm deeply root-

ed in tradition, avoiding both the frenetic pace of urban centres and the widespread abandonment typical of many rural areas. Within this distinctive context, the Beijing-based studio Vector Architects renovated in 2017 a family house belonging to a ship captain. The existing building deteriorated due to the oceanic climate and frequent water leakage. Consequently, the renovation prioritised structural integrity by adding a 12-cm concrete layer over the original brick walls, providing a durable protective coat. This new shell fortified the structure and allowed the reconfiguration of the building's two floors to accommodate the family's evolving needs (Fig. 5). The service areas were moved to the interior of the lot, freeing up the ocean-facing spaces. Openings of varying shapes were carved along this side, framing views of the surrounding landscape and drawing natural light into primary spaces such as the kitchen, living room, and bedroom. This unique arrangement transforms simple windows into a "wood furniture system," creating intimate spaces where "the window is no longer just an opening. It also serves as a mediated space situated between nature and the interior". [2]

The relationship with time, deeply familial and communal, finds its ultimate expression in the building's second-floor extension, a space enclosed by translucent glass brick walls and a cast concrete barrel vault. This double-height room is multifunctional, serving as a family chapel (the captain's family is Christian), a guest reception space, and occasionally as a gym or activity room (Fig. 6).

It has also hosted small local events and exhibitions, offering a gathering space for village residents and supporting both domestic and community use. This almost spiritual, timeless space encapsulates private family rituals and collective village gatherings, blending generational continuity with the communal rhythms of village life. It embodies an extended relationship with time – not merely the cycles of days or seasons but spanning across generations – aligning with the traditional Kan-Chih calendar's sixty-year cycles, which deeply reflect on time's generational cadence. This architectural and conceptual intervention reveals a relationship with time, transcending immediate needs, engaging with life's ebb and flow and the continuity of family and community needs.

2 - Renovation of the Captain's House, https://www.vectorarchitects.com/en/projects/30 [Accessed 24 June 2025].

Fig. 5 - The Captain's House, designed by Vector Architects (2017). Photo courtesy of Vector Architects.

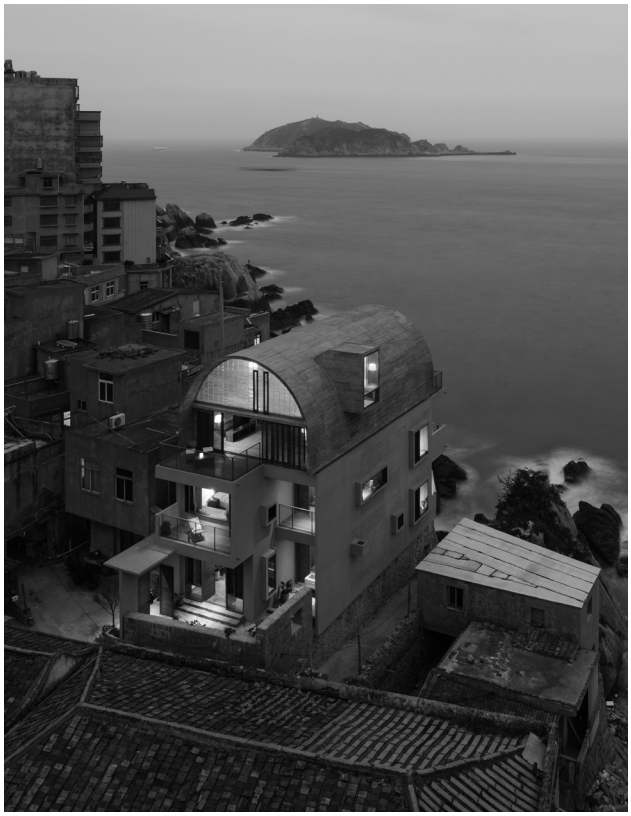

Fig. 6 - The multi-functional concrete vault on the top floor of The Captain's House, designed by Vector Architects (2017). Photo courtesy of Vector Architects.

Conclusion

The case studies examined articulate novel spatio-temporal configurations by respectively engaging with the recurrence of daily, seasonal, and generational cycles. Contemporary Chinese architecture reveals a distinctive capacity to reframe the concept of time, recuperating a non-linear, cyclical, and comprehensive understanding that reestablishes connections between spatial practices, ritualised behaviour, and the intimate domain of domestic life across multiple scales and socio-cultural contexts. This temporal paradigm resists a strictly chronological or sequential logic, proposing instead a dynamic and relational model of time – one shaped by continual transformation, situated experience, and embodied memory. This conception aligns with the ancient notion of Kairos – a qualitative temporality defined by the opportune moment – underscoring how architectural space may accommodate rhythms and rituals that elude standardised timeframes. Moreover, it resonates with the Chinese concept of Yüchou, which, as Liu (1974) elucidates, fuses the characters for space (Yü) and time (Chou) to express a cosmological worldview in which spiritual and material realms are interwoven. This perspective foregrounds a multidimensional temporality, wherein past, present, and future are not discrete entities but are integrated into a continuous and unified flow. In doing so, these projects demonstrate how architecture can act as a medium through which time is spatialized, experienced, and critically reimagined, enabling new forms of temporal engagement and cultural continuity.

Contemporary Chinese architecture reveals a distinctive capacity to reframe the concept of time, recuperating a non-linear, understanding that reestablishes connections between spatial practices, ritualised behaviour, and the intimate domain of domestic life.

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