

Dwelling and Ornament: An Ontological Inquiry into the Genius Loci of Naxi Architecture in Yulong

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Abstract: As essential elements of the Lijiang Ancient Town World Heritage Site, the Naxi people's traditional architecture and decorative arts have long drawn considerable interest from the fields of architecture, anthropology, and folklore studies. Interpreting the symbolic meanings, aesthetic qualities, and historical-cultural purposes of decorative motifs has been the main focus of previous research. The significant importance of these decorations—that is, how they transcend surface representation to become essential expressions of the Naxi people's dwelling within the particular context of Yulong Snow Mountain—has not yet been thoroughly explored, despite the fact that these studies have produced significant results. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger's ontological philosophy—specifically, his central theoretical framework of “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” and “Geviert: Earth, Sky, Divinities, Mortals”—is introduced in this paper in order to fill this research gap. In addition to the “Genius Loci” theory of architectural phenomenologist Christian Norberg-Schulz, it develops a research methodology that combines architectural analysis and philosophical contemplation. The Naxi people's architectural ornamentation is the material crystallization and spatial manifestation of the “Geviert” at architectural junctures rather than a merely cultural symbol or an aesthetic element that was added later. It functions as a microcosmic representation of the four interconnected relationships that exist in the real world between earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. This paper explores the various ways ornamentation responds to the “Earth,” conforms to the “Sky,” connects with the “Divinities,” and unites with “Mortals” through phenomenological descriptions and philosophical interpretations of particular case studies. Thus, it makes the case that ornamentation is fundamentally ontological—a spatial practice and tangible representation of the Naxi people's way of “Being-in-the-world.” The goal of this research is to provide a philosophical interpretive framework for regional architectural heritage, going beyond conventional functional-symbolic dualistic analysis. Additionally, it offers different theoretical viewpoints and useful strategies for modern architecture and design to achieve “Poetic Dwelling” and re-establish a connection with the physical world.

Keywords: Architectural Ornamentation, Naxi Ethnic Minority, Dwelling, Genius Loci, Ontology

1. Introduction

Yulong Naxi Autonomous County and the environs of Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, are home to the majority of the Naxi people, an ethnic minority in southwest China. The Dongba religion is at the heart of their rich cultural legacy, which has produced unique philosophical ideas, a distinctive writing system, and artistic traditions. In addition to being a wise adaptation to the local climate and geography, Naxi traditional architecture, especially the residential structures of Lijiang Ancient Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, also acts as a physical manifestation of their ethnic culture. Among these, architectural ornamentation has a function in the structure that goes well beyond simple aesthetics. They eloquently embody the Naxi people's cosmology of peaceful coexistence between “humans, nature, and the divine” by naturally fusing practical functionality, cultural symbolism, and spatial narrative. These ornamental components are what turn ordinary living areas into spiritually charged and significant “places,” offering a wealth of cultural and material material for examining their core from an ontological and philosophical standpoint.

However, most of the research that has already been done has treated decorative elements as historical artifacts or cultural representations by approaching them from semiotics, cultural anthropology, or architectural conservation. As demonstrated by Zhu Liangwen's (1988) classification of Lijiang residential structural types and Yang Fuquan's (2006) analysis of the Dongba symbol system, these

studies place a strong emphasis on interpreting their patterns, themes, craftsmanship, and symbolic meanings. Even though these studies help us better understand the cultural core of Naxi architecture, they don't answer a more important question: Why is decoration an essential part of the Naxi people's way of dwelling in this country rather than just a symbol attached to buildings?

This inquiry stems from an analysis of the objectifying mentality that permeates conventional architectural research. Ornament loses its fundamental link to human existential experience and a place's spirit when it is viewed as a measurable, classifiable object. According to Norwegian architectural theorist Norberg-Schulz (1980), a location's "Genius Loci"—an overall atmosphere created by the interplay of human culture and nature—is what makes it unique. Furthermore, from an ontological standpoint, Heidegger (1971) emphasizes that "Dwelling" is humanity's primary mode of existence in the world, with architecture serving as the medium through which this dwelling occurs. According to this perspective, ornamentation is the tangible manifestation of the quadruple unity of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals—the crucial node through which a location's spirit emerges—and goes beyond simple form or symbolism.

Therefore, by contrasting Norberg-Schulz's phenomenological theory of architecture with Heidegger's ontology, this paper seeks to reinterpret the ontological significance of architectural ornamentation in Yulong Naxi culture. We will investigate how ornamentation contributes to the structure of the Naxi people's "being-in-the-world" through its forms, materials, craftsmanship, and placement. In what ways does it serve as a "thing" that evokes and maintains the fundamental connections among earth, sky, divinities, and mortals? Through this investigation, the study aims to provide intellectual resources for modern architectural and design practices to rediscover the meaning of dwelling, in addition to exploring philosophical avenues for analyzing regional architectural heritage.

2. From Dwelling to Genius Loci—An Ontological Approach to Architectural Decoration

"The essence of building is to let dwelling happen," Heidegger writes in his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking". According to this definition, "building" refers to an ontological "letting-dwell" rather than just the actual act of construction. To put it another way, good architecture should allow people to "be-in-the-world" by living there^[1]. Heidegger uses the Geviert, the Fourfold—Sky, Earth, Divinities, and Mortals—to further explain the structure of dwelling. The four components of this structure are not separate but rather mirrored and dependent upon one another in a cohesive "play of reflections." The ability of an object to contain these four dimensions within itself is what gives it its "thingness," making it a location where the world is created. For instance, a bridge carries wind, rain, and sunlight (Sky) in addition to connecting two shores (Earth). In addition to having religious or historical significance (Divinities), it may develop into a location for social interaction and festivities (Mortals). Therefore, from an ontological standpoint, architectural ornamentation should be understood as a "thing" that is essential to this gathering rather than as a simple formal addition. It makes dwelling possible by bringing the fourfold whole into the everyday experience of humans through its materials, form, craftsmanship, and placement.

Heidegger left behind his existential philosophy, which Norberg-Schulz developed into a useful instrument for examining location and architecture. In "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture," he made the clear argument that "place" is an integrated environment with a distinct atmosphere or character rather than just a physical location. This atmosphere—known as "Genius Loci"—represents a distinct sense of place created by extended contact between the natural world and man-made locations. According to Norberg-Schulz, the role of architecture is to capture and encapsulate this spirit in order to facilitate human identification and orientation^[2]. His theory gives Heidegger's fourfold whole a spatial and architectural dimension. For example, "Earth" can be understood as particular topography, materials, and climate; "Sky" as light, weather, and temporality; "Divinities" as religion, ritual, and mysticism; and "Mortals" as community, memory, and everyday life. In this context, architectural ornamentation turns into the secret to a location's soul. These components, which are frequently located at key junctures within a structure, concisely convey the structure and meaning of the site.

A new theoretical framework is developed by synthesizing the theoretical underpinnings of the two previously mentioned approaches: architectural ornamentation is a concentrated practice that both serves as the medium for reading and experiencing "Genius Loci" and materializes and manifests the "Geviert" at architectural nodes. According to this viewpoint, ornamentation is now an integral part of spatiality rather than something that is subservient to it. It is the very process by which architecture realizes itself

as a place for dwelling, not just an expression of it. In particular, the decorative components of traditional Naxi architecture—material, form, symbol, and craftsmanship—all react to different Geviert dimensions, creating a world of place that is both recognizable and spiritually meaningful.

3. The Expression of the “Geviert” in Yulong's Naxi Ethnic Group's Architectural Ornamentation

Representative traditional architectural decorations from Yulong Naxi Autonomous County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province, were chosen for analysis based on Heidegger's “Geviert” theoretical framework. This study specifically illustrates how these decorations serve as gathering practices, allowing the four dimensions—Earth, Sky, Divinities, and Mortals—to materialize and manifest and collectively create the Naxi people's distinctive “Genius Loci” through a combination of phenomenological description and philosophical interpretation.

3.1 Responding to “Earth”: Materials, Terrestriality, and Craftsmanship

The faithful use of regional materials and the craftsmanship's ability to adjust to the terrain are the first examples of how the Naxi architectural decoration responds to the “earth.” As an example, consider the commonplace suspended fish-shaped brackets found in the homes of Dayan Ancient Town in Lijiang and the nearby villages. The majority of the wood used to make these parts is readily available locally, such as fir and spruce^[3]. In addition to their exceptional workability and resistance to rot, these woods' inherent grain and color gradually show the effects of years of use, enabling the ornamentation to “grow” with the structure in its natural setting. The fish-tail shape of the hanging fish, which is usually placed at the intersection of the eaves boards on a gable roof, serves purposes beyond aesthetics. With its elongated shape that facilitates rainwater drainage and lessens erosion of the wooden framework, it is a structural response to the windy and rainy climate of the area^[4]. More importantly, during production, artisans purposefully avoid hiding wood knots, grain patterns, or processing marks so that materials can show themselves naturally. This reverence for material essence embodies Heidegger's concept of “earth” unfolding itself^[1]. In this instance, the earth manifests as a bearer and protector because architectural ornamentation does not overpower the material; rather, it permits the material to be material.

3.2 Conforming to “Sky”: Form, Metaphor, and Cosmology

The dimension of “Sky” appears in Naxi architectural ornamentation as a reaction to time and natural forces, as well as a symbolic depiction of the natural universe. The roof ridge tiles, referred to as “tile cats,” are just as symbolic of fire triumphing over water as the suspended fish ornaments. These ceramic cats are usually placed at the center ridge and gaze off into space with wide eyes. According to the Naxi, they serve to protect the house, ward off evil spirits, and devour all disasters^[5]. The roof cat represents the Naxi people's spatial reaction to the capricious celestial phenomena of fate and fortune from an ontological standpoint. People are given a spiritual anchor for navigating the universe by turning supernatural threats into a “thing” that can be seen and even subdued. In the meantime, eaves decorations and courtyard designs also show alignment with the “Sky.” In addition to offering places to relax for everyday activities, the large verandas in the three-hall, one-screen-wall courtyard are designed to attract sunlight and offer protection from the rain, creating an active resonance with the natural cycles of light, shadow, and weather beneath the sky^[3]. In this case, decoration serves as a conduit between the microcosm of the home and the macrocosm of the universe, enabling the dimension of “Sky” to materially enter the daily dwelling.

3.3 Connecting “Divinities”: Symbols, Rituals, and Sacredness

The Dongba cultural symbol system and the construction of ritual spaces are the main ways that the Naxi architectural ornamentation embodies the “Divinities” dimension. The lintels, beams, and shrines in the residential area that surrounds the grandmother's room are especially ornate. Visual symbols from Dongba scriptures, frogs as fertility and wisdom symbols, and white cranes as longevity and auspiciousness are common motifs^[5]. In the Dongba cosmology, these symbols are more than just beautiful patterns; they are tangible representations of the divine world that act as visual channels for connecting people with sacred energies. Furthermore, life-cycle rites and seasonal ceremonies are frequently closely associated with elements like mugwort and azalea branches hanging above door lintels or particular carved patterns near hearths. Architectural decorations become essential elements of sacred spaces when they are activated by ritual performance at specific times. As the sacred focal point of the

home, the hearth, for example, is surrounded by decorations in the shape of fish or lotuses. These decorations serve as gathering places for people and spirits during ceremonies like fire lighting or ancestral worship^[3]. Decoration serves as a reminder to “mortals” of their reliance on ancestors and deities, anchoring the secular space within the sacred order.

3.4 Uniting “Mortals”: Craftsmanship, Memory, and Community

Humans are ultimately responsible for the creation and maintenance of all ornamentation, which in turn influences cultural identity and human communality. The individual craftsmanship and physical practices of artisans are the first to exhibit the human dimension ingrained in ornamentation. Every painted stroke and hand-carved notch is evidence of the artist's creative labor and their limited lifespan as they contributed to the creation of the world^[6]. Second, decoration reinforces collective identity by acting as a conduit for cultural memory. In addition to visually preserving regional customs, motifs such as the cloud-head pattern that have been handed down through the generations also convey the Naxi people's collective historical memory and aesthetic consensus on a deeper level. Lastly, some decorative areas directly promote social interaction and gathering. With their cozy proportions and elaborate woodwork, exquisite balustrades and veranda seating platforms encourage people to stay and chat, fostering social life within the family and the community. In this instance, decoration stops being a passive item and instead turns into an active tool for building community ties, allowing “Mortals” secular lives to take place in communal areas.

In summary, Naxi architectural ornamentation uses form, material, symbolism, and craftsmanship to respond to and express each of Geviert's dimensions. Collectively, these elements transform mere physical locations into places where generations of Naxi people dwell, enabling the continuous generation and manifestation of the Genius Loci.

4. Ornament as a “Thinking of Being”

4.1 Decoration as the Embodiment of Genius Loci

Architectural ornamentation is the primary means by which Genius Loci is embodied and continuously produced in Naxi tradition, surpassing the dichotomy of form and function. This technique is accomplished through the methodical interaction of decoration with the architectural whole, the natural surroundings, and cultural activities rather than by using isolated symbols or components. Heidegger's Geviert accumulates and materializes within particular locations as a result of this interaction. Genius Loci, according to Norbert Schütz, is a dynamic, comprehensive atmosphere created by the constant interaction between the material world and human experience rather than a static entity. The main actor in this conversation is decoration in traditional Naxi architecture, which interacts with the Dongba cosmology through its symbolism (Divinities), records time through the textures and traces of its natural wood and stone (Earth), responds structurally to climate through its forms (Sky), and integrates into community life through craftsmanship and everyday use (Mortals). These dimensions are an integral part of the materiality of decoration, not just something that is superimposed. Furthermore, decoration constantly directs human movement, gaze, and experience through its precise placement within the structure and its relationship to the human body, thus perpetuating a sense of place, identity, and belonging. Therefore, the essence of Naxi architectural decoration is found in its function as a “generative medium”—it is both a product and a producer of the Genius Loci; it actively contributes to the reconstruction and continuation of an existing cultural order through everyday practice, in addition to reflecting it.

4.2 Dialogue with Existing Research Paradigms

The ontological viewpoint opposes the reduction of ornamentation to static symbols that require decoding, in contrast to the prevailing semiotic interpretive paradigm. Although the symbolic semantics of Dongba script ornamentation has been successfully deciphered by semiotic studies, a more fundamental question remains unanswered: why must these particular symbols appear in the material form of architectural decoration? According to Heidegger's ontology, a symbol's meaning arises through its interaction with human activity rather than existing before its material existence^[1]. Consider the Dongba scriptures' use of the frog as a symbol of auspiciousness. It is not just a cultural symbol when it is carved onto a grandmother's house lintel. It helps to create the experience of dwelling through its wooden texture, changing light and shadow, and regular physical interaction with users. This embodied

knowledge prompts us to examine how the materiality of ornamentation activates human perception and memory, extending beyond the textual analysis of semiotics.

Second, the functionalist paradigm in cultural anthropology frequently makes the mistake of teleological circular reasoning, even though it is excellent at categorizing ornamentation within social functional systems. This functional-formal divide is broken by the ontological viewpoint, which introduces the idea of thingness. According to Latour's actor-network theory^[7], ornamentation is an active “actant” that actively shapes social relations rather than just being a byproduct of human activity. Consider the Naxi architectural pillar that holds up the ceiling. The ontological viewpoint also shows that this enormous log actively disciplines human movement trajectories, gaze directions, and ritual postures through its material qualities, tactile qualities, and spatial relationship with the hearth, even though anthropological research accurately identifies its central role in family rituals. By doing this, it perpetuates the sacred order and social structure of the family. In this case, decoration is an active constructor rather than just a functional carrier.

Furthermore, the formalist paradigm in architectural history tends to separate ornamentation from its particular context while concentrating on categorizing styles and tracking genealogies. According to Norberg-Schulz, a place's atmosphere is what makes it what it is, and ornamentation plays a vital role in establishing this atmosphere. Ontology requires us to focus on ornamentation's “presence” as opposed to just its “representation.” Formalism, for example, concentrates on the evolution of the tail shapes and regional distribution of the suspended fish ornaments, while ontology investigates how they create shifting shadows under the unique lighting conditions of the Lijing Basin, how they make dripping sounds when it rains, and how they enhance the emotional connection between architecture and environment in the view of the far-off Yulong Snow Mountain. Formal analysis cannot fully capture these experiential dimensions, but they are fundamental to Genius Loci.

4.3 Contemporary Revelation and Reflections

At the level of architectural practice, architecture loses what Heidegger called the gathering power of “things” when digital design prioritizes parameterizing visual appearances, standardized materials replace regional ones, and decorative elements are reduced to mere facade textures. Structures detach themselves from the cosmic, human, and spiritual aspects of a given location by becoming collections of generic spaces and free facades^[8]. The Naxi people, on the other hand, believe that the purpose of decoration is inextricably linked to its material qualities, symbolic meaning, and artistry. Authentic local design must restore the whole relationship between “material-structure-meaning-experience” rather than staying at the level of formal imitation or symbolic appropriation. Consider Wang Shu's tile-wall technique used in the design of the Ningbo Museum. It not only recycled local materials but also turned the walls into vessels for local sentiment and temporal memory through the hand-laying and decision-making of craftsmen on the spot^[9]. This is an example of an effort to use modern technology to restore aggregation.

The integrity of physical objects is frequently the focus of contemporary heritage conservation techniques, which ignore the processual character of ornamentation as an aggregation technique. Smith, a British heritage scholar, notes that authoritative heritage discourse frequently “museumifies” heritage, cutting off its dynamic link to modern life^[10]. However, it is precisely this continuous use, repair, and reinterpretation that gives Naxi architectural decoration its vitality: roof cats acquire new meaning during rituals, and wood carvings in the Dongba script shine when touched. Effective conservation should therefore adopt a process-oriented paradigm, giving support for the continuation of ritual practices, the transmission of traditional artisan systems, and the development of new mechanisms for community participation as top priority. This suggests that the socio-technical networks that make decorative artifacts “things” are the objects of conservation rather than just the artifacts themselves^[6].

Local knowledge is at risk of homogenization and fragmentation due to the combined effects of globalization and digitalization. We have a vital tool to fight against instrumental rationality's colonization of the lifeworld: the holistic worldview represented in Naxi architectural ornamentation^[11]. We rediscover knowledge forms that are marginalized by contemporary architectural discourse, such as contextual wisdom, embodied knowledge, and tacit knowledge, by investigating how ornamentation mediates the tangible experience of human-environment interaction. This not only brings back the philosophical depth of architecture but also creates a platform for intercultural discussion: ornamentation is still an essential tool for facilitating “dwelling” in a variety of traditions, albeit in different ways.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study conducts a thorough philosophical interpretation of the architectural ornamentation of the Naxi people in Yulong by using the theoretical lenses of Norberg-Schulz's architectural phenomenology and Heidegger's ontology. It displays the ontological importance that goes beyond appearances of form and function. The results show that the core of Naxi architectural ornamentation is the tangible expression of the Naxi people's basic way of life—their dwelling in the Yulong landscape—rather than just an extraneous aesthetic symbol or isolated cultural representation. Through its choice of materials, formal construction, symbolic systems, and transmission of craftsmanship, ornamentation specifically serves as an aggregator of the “Geviert,” converting the spirit of an abstract place into a tangible, knowable, and experiential reality. This change is not static; rather, it develops as a dynamic web of connections that are constantly created via routine use, ceremonial activities, and engagement with the natural world. “Making is thinking,” as Ingold puts it. Decoration is an embodied knowledge practice in Naxi culture that continuously reframes the conversation between tradition and the modern, as well as between people and their surroundings.

This study offers new ontological and phenomenological avenues for interpreting regional architectural heritage, going beyond the research paradigms of traditional semiotics, functionalism, and formalism. In order to create a sense of place identity, it seeks to enhance knowledge of Naxi architectural culture and uncover the universal philosophical significance of architectural ornamentation in uniting Earth, Sky, Divinities, and Mortals. Furthermore, it looks for a design philosophy that returns to material authenticity, craftsmanship inheritance, and experiential wholeness against the backdrop of globalization, which is characterized by the rise of “placeless” architecture. By focusing on the living transmission of artisan systems, ritual practices, and community participation, it promotes a shift in cultural heritage preservation from merely physical conservation to process-oriented safeguarding that preserves its dwelling essence. Although the study focuses on Naxi customs, its theoretical framework can be applied to the study of other local architectural traditions, examining the various cultural connections between ornamentation and dwellings. Essentially, the wisdom represented in Naxi architectural ornamentation—the peaceful coexistence of “Earth, Sky, Divinities, Mortals”—is more than just a relic from the past. It calls for a deeper, more comprehensive architectural culture and conservation practice that prioritizes the human experience of dwelling and provides insightful information about how future architecture can return to Poetic Dwelling.

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