

Urban Vernacular Transitions: Contesting Commercial Space Through Everyday Practices in Bangkok's Privately-Owned Public Spaces

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Abstract

This paper explores the transition of vernacular architecture from rural traditions to urban adaptations, expanding the discussion toward what may be termed the “urban vernacular.” While rural vernacular has long been associated with natural materials, collective labour, and the continuity of cultural wisdom, the urban vernacular emerges in contexts marked by industrialised construction, consumer culture, and the negotiation of everyday life in rapidly growing cities. Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) in Bangkok are introduced as illustrative cases through which these dynamics can be observed. Although designed as commercial interiors, malls and their semi-public areas are tactically re-appropriated by diverse groups: students transform food courts into study zones, elderly visitors establish routines of repeated occupation, and youth communities adapt mirrored walls for dance practice. Such activities reveal how POPS, despite their regulated and privately managed frameworks, provide informal third places that foster social interaction, comfort, and adaptability. The study employed non-participant observation and photographic documentation across selected malls, focusing on patterns of use that extend beyond consumption. These observations highlight how POPS serve as a lens to interpret broader processes of vernacular transition. The paper argues that urban vernacular heritage lies less in the preservation of form than in the recognition of lived practices that sustain cultural meaning. By framing POPS as an example rather than an endpoint, the research underscores the resilience of improvisation, collectivity, and cultural continuity within contemporary urban conditions. While these spaces demonstrate vernacular resilience through everyday improvisation, the analysis also exposes their precarity, a condition shaped by surveillance, selective tolerance, and corporate governance that renders user autonomy contingent and unstable. This tension between resilience and precarity defines the contested terrain of urban vernacular practices within Bangkok's privately-owned public spaces.

Keywords

Urban vernacular; Everyday urbanism; Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS); Urban adaptation; Informality; Bangkok

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Problem Statement

Vernacular architecture historically has been associated with rural contexts, emphasising ethnic identity, environmental adaptation, and artisanal wisdom. Seminal works by Rapoport (1969) and Oliver (1997) established foundational perspectives that celebrated vernacular dwellings as collective responses to local climate, materials, and traditions. These foundational studies, while shaping the field, inherently embedded a rural bias, limiting the conceptualization of the vernacular to static traditions, often detached from the complex realities of contemporary urban life.

This narrow framing poses two critical problems. First, it overlooks the rapid transformations brought about by migration, consumerism, and urban informality (AlSayyad, 2004; Roy, 2005). Second, it underestimates the agency of marginalised groups and subcultures who actively reshape urban spaces through everyday practices (Porter, 2011). Without addressing these dimensions, vernacular architecture risks being reduced to nostalgic imagery, irrelevant to the contested landscapes of twenty-first century cities. Bangkok exemplifies this challenge: historic shophouses and markets coexist with adaptive reuse projects and Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) in shopping malls and community malls, where users tactically appropriate interiors as workplaces, social arenas, and meeting points. Such practices demonstrate that urban vernacular architecture is not an artefact of continuity, but a process of spatial negotiation embedded in everyday life.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to reconceptualise urban vernacular architecture by reframing it as a process rather than a typology. It advances an expanded definition through five objectives:

1. To trace the evolution of vernacular architecture from rural to urban contexts and identify the cultural, social, and economic forces driving this shift.
2. To analyse the contributions of subcultures and marginalised communities to urban vernacular practices.
3. To examine the opportunities and challenges associated with the shift from natural to industrial and recycled materials.
4. To investigate adaptive reuse as a recognition of urban vernacular heritage in sustaining cultural identity.
5. To explore how informality, resilience, and liveability intersect in the making of vernacular urbanism.

1.3 Methodology and Case Selection

The conceptual arguments of this paper are grounded in cases closely associated with the author's practice and teaching. The first set includes practice-based projects directly led by the author in Bangkok, such as Khlong Bangluang, Banglamphu's New World Department Store, and Pak Khlong Talad. These projects exemplify adaptive reuse and placemaking, enabling longitudinal observation of community agency and everyday adaptation. The second set draws on graduate theses supervised within the MA and PhD programme in Vernacular Architecture and Built Environment at Silpakorn University, including works by Boonthanom (2017), Wisetsakdee (2018), Skulchockchai (2020), and Kachonrith (2021). While each thesis represents an independent scholarly contribution, together they form a coherent intellectual track on urban vernacular practices, spanning subcultural adaptation, informal markets, and material improvisation. This dual foundation, practice and

supervision, constitutes both empirical grounding and theoretical scaffolding for the reconceptualisation advanced in this study.

In addition, systematic non-participant observation was undertaken to examine how privately managed interiors in Bangkok's shopping malls are tactically reappropriated by diverse groups of users. Field sites were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) popularity among varied urban populations, including students, office workers, the elderly, and tourists; (2) availability of freely accessible semi-public areas such as food courts, atriums, and seating zones; and (3) evidence of non-consumptive social use beyond commercial transactions. The study purposively selected four privately-owned public spaces located within major shopping complexes in Bangkok, representing diverse urban contexts and user profiles. These include: (1) a suburban family-oriented mall situated in a moderately dense residential district, served by multiple modes of public transport and frequented by users across socio-economic groups; (2) an upscale commercial centre in the city's central business district, adjacent to a university and office zone, where luxury retail and everyday functions coexist; (3) a suburban lifestyle complex designed to accommodate contemporary urban living, featuring jogging tracks, pet-friendly areas, and an integrated public park; and (4) a riverside mixed-use development on the Thonburi side which is on the opposite side of the Chao Phraya River—the main river flowing through Thailand and central Bangkok, historically separating the Bangkok and Thonburi sides of the city—combining high-end retail with open spaces that remain accessible to general visitors. Data collection was carried out by the author's team through repeated observation sessions conducted in 2025 from morning to evening hours (11:00-20:00) across both weekdays and weekends. Observations were supported by photographic documentation of spatial behaviours, user interactions, and micro-adaptations within these interiors. All sites and users were anonymised and research protocols were approved by the Silpakorn University Research Ethics Committee under Exemption Review (REC 68.0424-073-3527 / COE 68.0425-043, 25 April 2025). Non-consumptive social use was defined through direct observation of users who occupied the seating or semi-public areas for extended periods without engaging in any commercial transaction. The key behavioral indicators included: (1) continuous occupancy exceeding approximately ninety minutes without a purchase; (2) the use of personal items such as books, newspapers, or mobile devices for individual leisure; (3) consumption of food or beverages brought from outside the premises; and (4) passive resting behaviors such as sleeping or laying one's head on a table. These metrics were recorded to identify how visitors appropriated privately-owned public spaces for informal, everyday activities detached from consumption.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach, drawing primarily on an extensive literature review and non-participatory observation. The methodological framework is informed by established approaches in architectural and urban research that emphasise theory-driven analysis, everyday spatial practices, and visual interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Groat & Wang, 2013). Field observations and photographic documentation were used as analytical tools to examine urban vernacular environments as lived and practiced spaces, following traditions in observational urban studies and visual methodologies (Rose, 2016; Whyte, 1980). The interpretation of vernacular architecture is situated within cultural and socio-spatial theoretical perspectives, particularly those that understand vernacular forms as adaptive responses to social, economic, and urban conditions rather than static traditions (Oliver, 2006; Rapoport, 1969). The study employed non-participant observation and photographic documentation as primary methods of data collection. These approaches were selected to identify and interpret everyday spatial practices within Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) rather than to capture user perception or policy intent. Observation enabled the recording of spontaneous behaviours and spatial adaptations without influencing the scene, while photographic documentation provided

visual evidence of material, temporal, and behavioural patterns. Data were analysed qualitatively through an interpretive process that identified recurring spatial and behavioural themes. Field notes and photographs were reviewed and coded around three interrelated dimensions: spatial configuration, duration of use, and behavioural adaptation. The analysis involved iterative comparison between field observations and conceptual constructs on publicness, vernacular adaptation, and commoning, using visual materials as analytical tools to reveal how users negotiated comfort and visibility in semi-public settings.

This methodological design aligns with the paper's conceptual orientation, which interprets the urban vernacular as observable practices embedded in lived environments. While methods such as interviews or mapping could have provided additional perspectives, they were not adopted to maintain consistency in the observational lens. The approach, though limited in accessing subjective meanings or managerial intentions, allows for a careful and non-intrusive reading of spatial behaviour, highlighting contextual nuance rather than the interpretive depth attainable through participatory methods. The method also carries inherent limitations: observations were confined to specific time periods and settings, offering a situational rather than longitudinal perspective; and the absence of participant interaction restricts insights into users' motivations, values, or managerial decision-making. These limitations are recognised as characteristic of qualitative observation, which seeks to capture situational authenticity and the subtle dynamics of everyday adaptation within its contextual boundaries.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

The article is organised into six sections. Section 2 reviews key literature, beginning with classical definitions and progressing to contemporary debates on informality, heritage, and subcultural practices. Section 3 identifies three conceptual shifts: ethnicity to subculture, natural to industrial materials, and monumental to ordinary heritage, that underpin the reframing of the vernacular. Section 4 presents POPS in Bangkok as an illustrative case of how lived practices re-vernacularise formal spaces. Section 5 develops the discussion, positioning the urban vernacular as a negotiation between formal strategies and everyday tactics. Section 6 concludes by summarising contributions and proposing directions for future research on urban vernacular heritage and practice.

1.5 Significance of the Study

By addressing the rural bias of vernacular studies, this paper contributes to architectural and urban scholarship with three main insights. First, it demonstrates that vernacular practices persist in urban contexts through adaptation, resilience, and negotiation. Second, it shows how practice-based projects and supervised theses form an intellectual lineage that bridges teaching, research, and community engagement. Third, it demonstrates, using the POPS case, that vernacularity can be actively produced within corporate, commodified interiors. Collectively, these contributions argue for a more inclusive framework that recognises urban vernacular architecture as a vital dimension of cultural heritage, social identity, and urban resilience.

1.6 Reflexive Positioning

This paper is informed not only by theoretical inquiry but also by the author's sustained engagement with vernacular design pedagogy and participatory urban practices. Reflections derived from over a decade of teaching and supervising graduate research in vernacular architecture, together with the author's involvement

in creative placemaking initiatives between 2016 and 2025, provide a reflexive foundation for the conceptual discussion. In addition to secondary literature, the study incorporates primary observation of Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) in Bangkok. These observations focused on patterns of spatial use, user behaviour, and the negotiation between consumption and informal occupation within semi-public environments. The data were collected through non-participatory observation and photographic documentation, aiming to capture everyday spatial practices without intervention or preconception. The experiential and field-based observations are incorporated as contextual insights that inform the interpretation of “urban vernacular” within Bangkok’s contemporary urban landscape. They serve to illustrate how theoretical perspectives on vernacularity correspond with the everyday realities observed in semi-public spaces. In this sense, practice-based knowledge and empirical observation operate in dialogue with the conceptual framework, strengthening its relevance to lived urban conditions while maintaining analytical distance and methodological transparency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical Definitions of Vernacular Architecture

The early scholarship on vernacular architecture established a strong association with rural traditions, ethnic identity, and continuity of local wisdom. Rapoport (1969) highlighted the socio-cultural determinants of form, arguing that dwellings are shaped less by aesthetics than by cultural patterns and ways of life. Oliver (1997), in his encyclopaedic surveys, positioned vernacular architecture as a universal category, emerging from local responses to climate, resources, and tradition. While Oliver (1997) did acknowledge that vernacular practices exist in urban contexts, his emphasis remained primarily on rural and ethnic settings, which shaped the dominant framing of the field. As a result, vernacular architecture often has been understood as the embodiment of collective identity rooted in continuity, rather than as a dynamic process that also unfolds within cities.

2.2 Shifting towards Urban Contexts

Later contributions addressed the urban condition, focusing on informality, hybridity, and adaptation. AlSayyad (2004) reframed informality not as an exception but as a central logic of urbanisation, suggesting that cities are continually produced through informal practices. Roy (2005) further advanced this perspective, conceptualising informality as an organising logic that shapes governance and urban development in the Global South. Porter (2011) argued that marginalised groups contribute significantly to the spatial production of cities, yet their practices remain undervalued within mainstream urban planning discourse. These perspectives expand the scope of vernacular studies from the rural periphery to the contested spaces of contemporary cities, where negotiation and resilience are central forces.

2.3 Vernacular Heritage and Adaptive Reuse

The discourse on heritage also has evolved, moving from monumental architecture to the recognition of ordinary, everyday spaces. Carmona (2003) examined the governance and management of public space, highlighting tensions between regulation and lived practice. Zukin (2010) critiqued the commodification of authenticity, showing how market logics transform cultural heritage into consumable images. Within this debate, adaptive reuse has emerged as a key strategy for recognising urban vernacular heritage. By reactivating

abandoned or underused structures, adaptive reuse connects cultural identity with contemporary urban needs, allowing the vernacular to persist not as static form but as living process. Tovivich (2025) observes similar dynamics in Bangkok’s New World Mall in the Banglamphu neighbourhood, while Tovivich (2021) and Tovivich et al. (2021) illustrate through the revival of Khlong Bangluang how ordinary heritage can be re-embedded in community life (Figures 1 and 2).

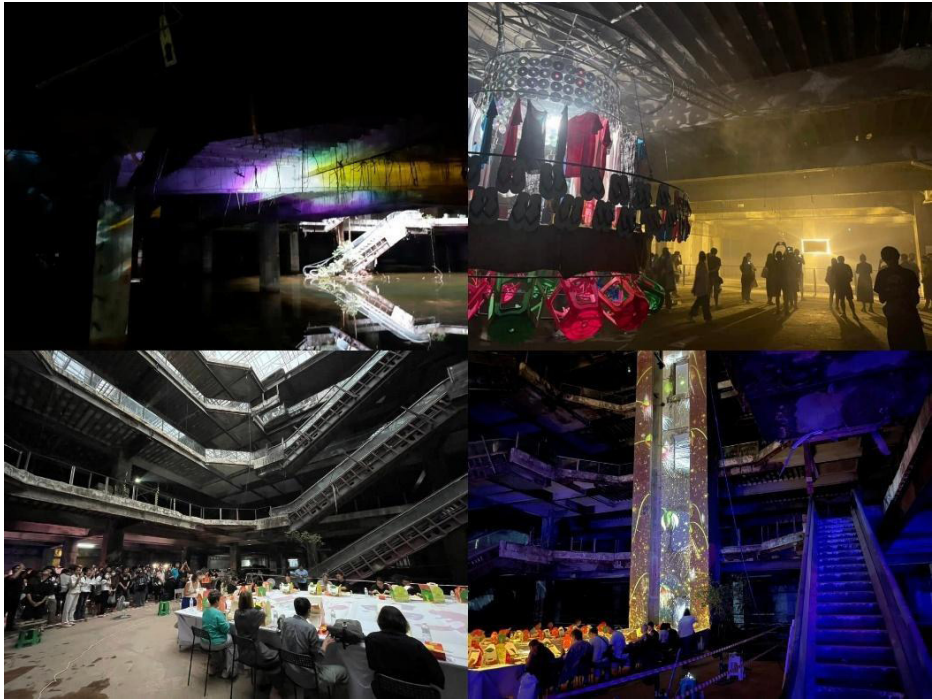


Figure 1. Creative projects organised by the author at the abandoned New World Mall in the Banglamphu neighbourhood, conducted in 2020, 2022, and 2025. **Source:** Supitcha Tovivich



Figure 2. Creative projects organised by the author at Khlong Bangluang community between 2014 and 2019 (above), and the current view of the community in 2025 (below). **Source:** Supitcha Tovivich

2.4 Everyday Urbanism and Publicness

Theories of everyday life have further contributed to understanding urban vernacular practices. Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the spatial triad conceptualises space as simultaneously perceived, conceived, and lived, emphasising the role of lived experience in spatial production. de Certeau's (1984) discussion of "tactics" offers a way to interpret how ordinary people appropriate and subvert formal structures in their daily use of the city. These ideas resonate with contemporary debates on publicness, particularly in contexts such as Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS). Scholars including Kayden (2000), Low et al. (2005), and Nemeth (2009), have developed frameworks for evaluating publicness in semi-private urban environments, considering accessibility, inclusivity, and control. In Bangkok, observations of POPS in shopping malls and community malls illustrate how users tactically reconfigure semi-public interiors, such as food courts, seating areas, and open halls, into temporary workplaces, study areas, or social meeting points. These practices underscore the relevance of everyday urbanism in framing the urban vernacular as a lived and contested process.

2.5 Vernacularity, Urban Commons, and the Negotiation of POPS

Recent debates on urban commons and privately-owned public spaces (POPS) offer valuable frameworks for understanding how spatial negotiation unfolds within contemporary cities. The concept of the urban commons challenges the binary between public and private ownership, emphasising collective rights to appropriate, share, and reproduce space through everyday social practices (Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2016). Within this discourse, commons are not fixed entities but continuously produced through acts of use, care, and participation. In parallel, the literature on POPS highlights the contradictions of privately managed spaces that nevertheless function as everyday arenas of public life (Kayden, 2000; de Magalhaes, 2010; Nemeth, 2009; Varna & Tiesdell, 2010). These studies reveal how access, management, and surveillance shape the degree of "publicness" within corporate environments. By situating the notion of urban vernacular between these two paradigms, this study interprets vernacular practices as micro-acts of communing, or informal, adaptive behaviours that momentarily reclaim inclusivity and collective agency within regulated, privately controlled spaces. This theoretical alignment allows the discussion to frame POPS not merely as sites of consumption or control, but as contested commons where users continuously negotiate visibility, comfort, and belonging in the city.

3. Conceptual Shifts in Vernacular Architecture

Vernacular architecture, once confined to the study of rural settlements and ethnic traditions, has undergone a profound conceptual transformation in response to the dynamics of modern urban life. To articulate these evolving dimensions, this section identifies key shifts that redefine the theoretical scope of vernacularity within the urban condition. The conceptual foundation of this discussion draws upon Chatri Prakitchonphan's (2018) proposition that the study of vernacular architecture must progress beyond its conventional rural orientation. Prakitchonphan (2018) delineates three trajectories of disciplinary transition: from the rural to the urban context; from ethnicity to the diverse cultural collectives of the city; and from natural to industrial materials shaped by modern production systems. These trajectories establish a critical framework for reconsidering vernacular architecture as a dynamic process of adaptation rather than a fixed stylistic or typological category. Building upon this foundation, the present study extends the argument by examining how such shifts materialise in contemporary urban environments—through subcultural identities, the use of industrial and recycled materials,

and the reinterpretation of ordinary urban settings as living heritage. In doing so, it situates the discourse of vernacular architecture within the broader social, material, and cultural transformations of the modern city.

3.1 From Ethnicity to Subculture

Earlier definitions of vernacular architecture were closely tied to ethnic identity and rural traditions. Rapoport (1969) emphasised that built form is determined by cultural patterns and ways of life, while Oliver (1997) identified vernacular as a global phenomenon emerging from collective wisdom. Yet, as cities expanded, the ethnic framing of the vernacular became less adequate to explain the diverse practices shaping urban environments. AlSayyad (2004) argued that informality and hybridity define much of the contemporary city and Roy (2005) conceptualised informality as an organising logic rather than an exception. Within this reframing, subcultures and marginalised groups emerge as key agents of the urban vernacular. Street vendors, migrant communities, and creative workers contribute to the production of everyday urban spaces, even when their practices remain undervalued in formal planning (Porter, 2011). Case studies in Bangkok demonstrate this vividly: research on Yaowarat's street economy (Skulchockchai, 2020) and Banglamphu's itinerant vendors (Kachonrith, 2021) shows how ordinary groups shape spatial identity through adaptation and appropriation (Figures 3 and 4). These examples mark a shift from an ethnicity-based definition of the vernacular towards one centred on subcultural practices and urban agency.

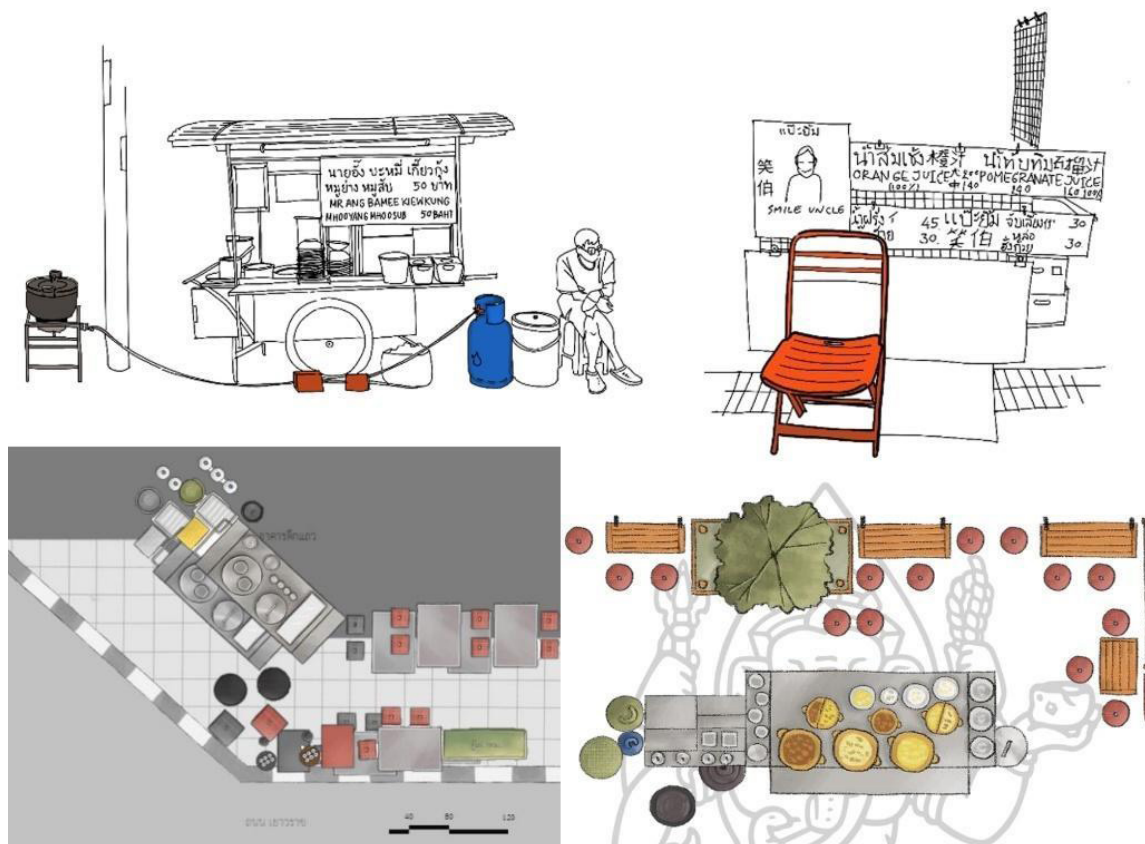


Figure 3. Case studies in Bangkok vividly illustrating Yaowarat's street economy, including street food vendors, market stalls, and informal trade. **Source:** Skulchockchai, 2020

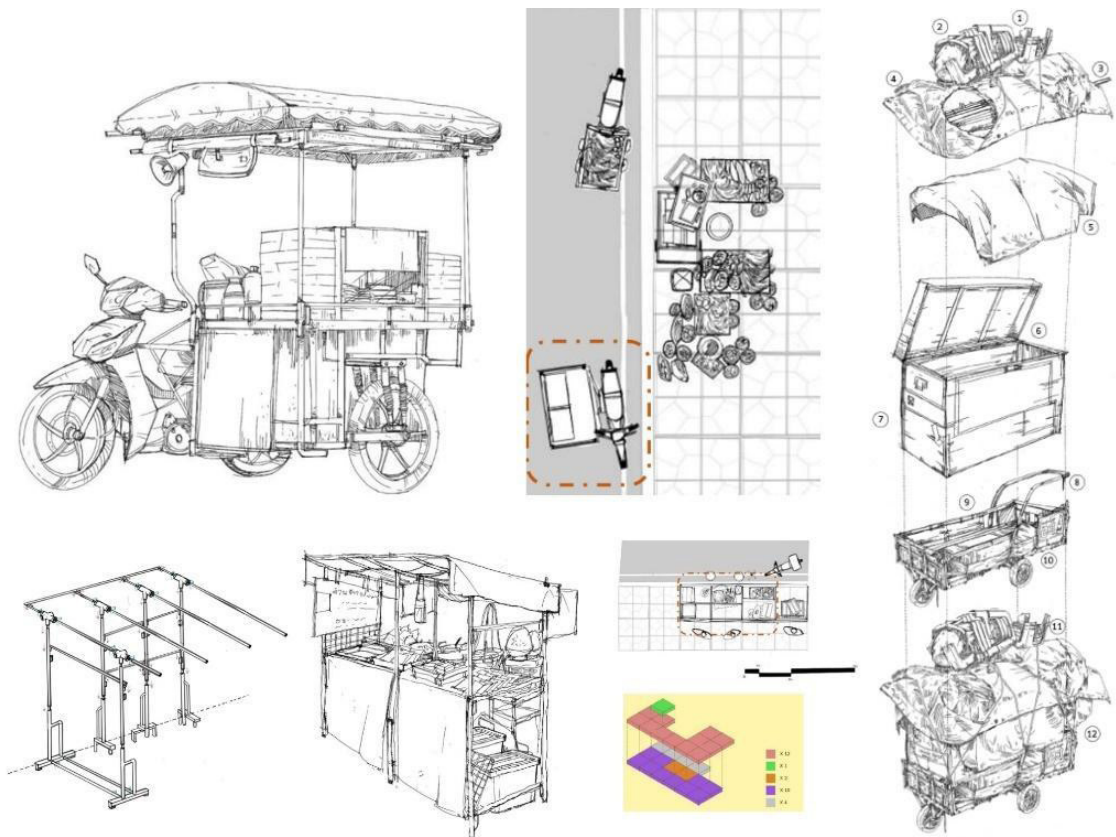


Figure 4. Banglamphu's vendors and their stalls, illustrating diverse forms of use, modification, and assemblage through adaptation and appropriation as vernacular strategies in urban street vending. **Source:** Kachonrith, 2021

3.2 From Natural to Industrial and Recycled Materials

A second shift concerns the transition from natural to industrial and recycled materials. In rural contexts, vernacular building relied on locally available materials such as timber, bamboo, or clay. In urban settings, however, affordability, availability, and speed of construction drive the adoption of industrial products: corrugated metal sheets, PVC, aluminium, and concrete blocks. These materials often carry associations with cheapness and impermanence, yet they also demonstrate resourcefulness and adaptation. Field observations in Bangkok document how vendors repurpose advertising billboards, plastic sheets, and recycled timber to create temporary stalls and shelters. Boonthanom's (2017) thesis on small-scale dwellings along Ong Ang Canal illustrates how recycled and low-cost materials are used to negotiate dense urban conditions (Figure 5). Wisetsakdee's (2018) study of scrap collectors further highlights how marginal groups transform discarded materials into new spatial practices. These cases show that material improvisation in cities is not a degradation of the vernacular but rather a continuation of its adaptive logic, reinterpreted through industrial and recycled resources (Figure 6).

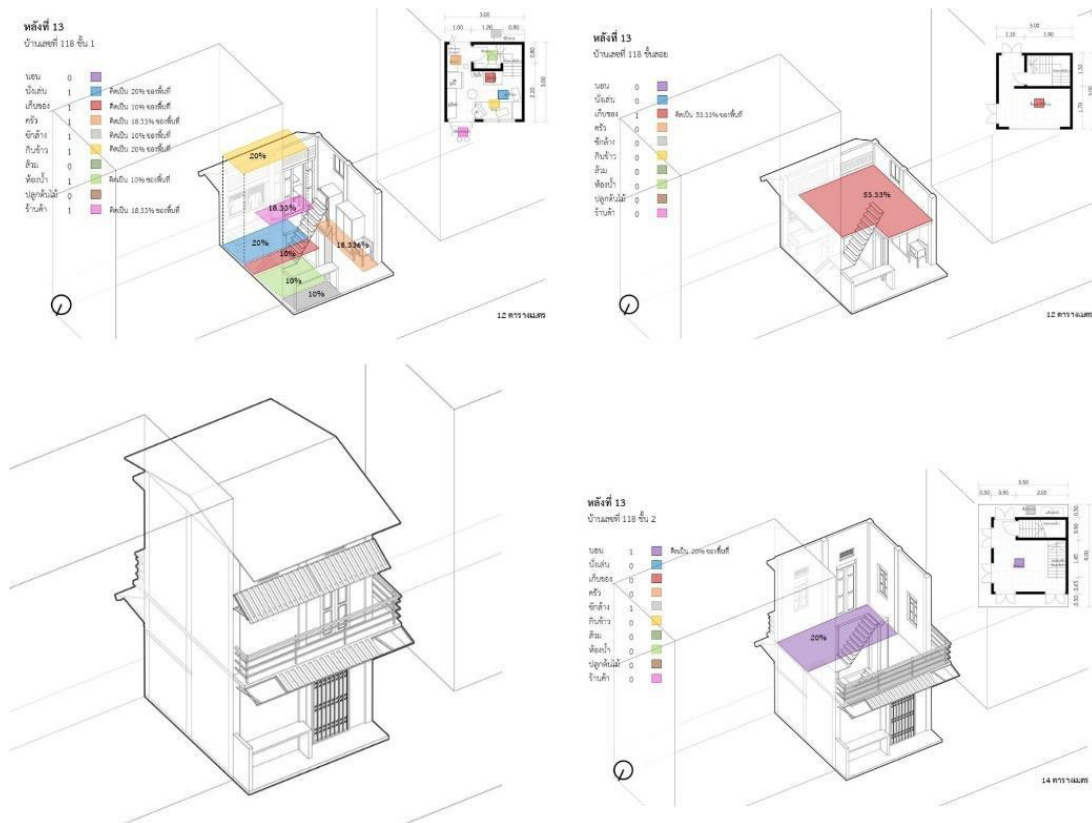


Figure 5. Small-scale dwellings along Ong Ang Canal, illustrating the use of recycled and low-cost materials to negotiate dense urban conditions. **Source:** Boonthanom, 2017

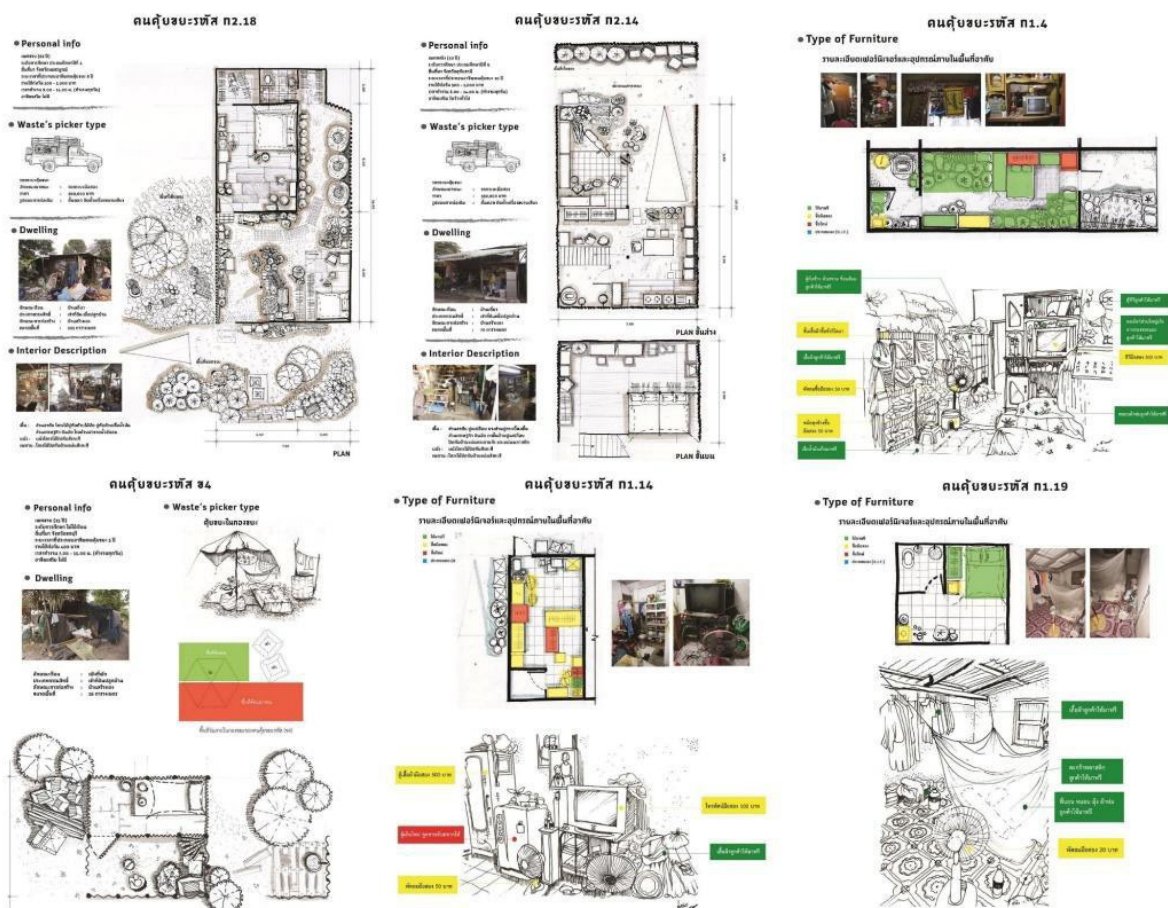


Figure 6. Scrap collectors and their practices, demonstrating how marginal groups transform discarded materials into new spatial practices as forms of urban vernacular resilience. **Source:** Wisetsakdee, 2018

3.3 From Monumental Heritage to Ordinary Urban Heritage

A third shift is the recognition of ordinary urban heritage alongside monumental architecture. Traditional heritage discourse privileges temples, palaces, and iconic landmarks, often overlooking everyday buildings and community spaces. Carmona (2003) and Zukin (2010) provide critical perspectives on how heritage and authenticity are shaped by governance and commodification. In Bangkok, adaptive reuse projects illustrate how ordinary spaces can embody cultural identity and social resilience. The New World Department Store in Banglamphu, once abandoned, has been reactivated as a cultural venue, creating new layers of meaning while preserving memory. At Khlong Bangluang, community-led initiatives revitalised shophouses and canalside dwellings through creative placemaking, sustaining both economic life and cultural continuity. Tovivich and Promsawat (2022) and Tovivich (2024; 2025) illustrate through the case of Pak Khlong Talad, Bangkok's flower market, that cultural heritage persists not through monumental buildings but through everyday practices of trading, decorating, and celebrating (Figure 7). These cases demonstrate that urban vernacular heritage lies not in preserving form alone but in sustaining lived practices that give meaning to space. Adaptive reuse, in this sense, is both a design strategy and a cultural negotiation that keeps the vernacular alive in rapidly changing urban contexts



Figure 7. Creative projects by the author at Pak Khlong Talad (2016–2025), showing how cultural heritage endures through everyday practices that sustain urban vernacular heritage. **Source:** Supitcha Tovivich

4. POPS in Bangkok as a Contemporary Arena of Urban Vernacular

4.1 Context of POPS in Bangkok

Bangkok provides a distinctive context in which POPS have proliferated. Since the late twentieth century, the city has witnessed the rapid rise of shopping malls and, more recently, community malls, driven by urbanisation, increasing household incomes, and the influence of global consumer culture. For many residents, these spaces offer more than opportunities for shopping; they provide shelter from Bangkok's extreme climate, safety from traffic congestion, and amenities not readily available in state-managed public spaces. This situation has been exacerbated by the chronic shortage of inclusive, well-maintained public infrastructure. As the research findings highlight, state-provided parks and civic squares remain unevenly distributed, often inaccessible to large portions of the urban population. Malls and community malls have thus become alternative "third places" where people of different backgrounds can converge without the obligations imposed in purely commercial zones.



Figure 8. Fabricated nature in Bangkok malls, offering safe and cool alternatives to hot or less accessible public spaces.

Source: Supitcha Tovivich

POPS in Bangkok typically manifest in atriums, food courts, open seating corners, or landscaped forecourts that developers include to attract footfall and enhance a sense of openness. Although these are conceived as value-added features within commercial projects, they have gradually been integrated into the everyday rhythms of the city. The demand for air-conditioned comfort, reliable seating, free electricity for mobile devices, and public toilets all shape the popularity of these spaces. Particularly in a city where heat, flooding, and air pollution can limit the usability of outdoor areas, POPS function as adaptive infrastructures responding to both environmental and social pressures. Their role is crucial for structurally vulnerable groups, including students, informal workers, and the elderly, who require safe, accessible, and low-cost alternatives to insufficient public

amenities (Figure 8). In this sense, POPS are not merely the by-products of commercial development; they have become critical nodes of urban vernacular practice, enabling ordinary people to weave patterns of sociability, work, and leisure within highly commodified environments.

4.2 POPS and the Question of Publicness

The central question in evaluating POPS is the degree to which they can be considered “public.” In architectural and planning scholarship, publicness has been analysed through a series of dimensions, most notably accessibility, inclusivity, and control. Kayden’s (2000) landmark study of New York City documented how developers and municipalities negotiated agreements that produced a wide variety of semi-public spaces within private buildings. Nemeth (2009) refined this discussion by offering frameworks to assess how rules, signage, surveillance, and spatial design shape or restrict the freedom of users. Low (2005) further highlighted that publicness cannot be reduced to physical access alone but also must account for cultural practices, social identity, and power relations that determine who feels welcome and who does not.

In Bangkok, these frameworks resonate but also require contextual translation. Malls are not legally obliged to provide POPS in the same way as in New York, yet competitive pressures have encouraged developers to design spaces that are accessible without immediate consumption. At the same time, rules often are implicit rather than explicit, enforced through security personnel or subtle environmental cues. Users may not always be asked to leave, but their presence is tolerated conditionally, depending on behaviour, appearance, or the time of day. These dynamics highlight the ambivalent nature of POPS; they are simultaneously open and restricted, inclusive in appearance but exclusionary in practice. Observations in Bangkok confirm this duality. On the one hand, POPS offer rare venues for study, work, or leisure without cost; on the other, they remain under surveillance, vulnerable to sudden redefinition by management. This contested status positions POPS as liminal arenas where urban vernacular practices unfold, not by invitation, but by tactical negotiation.

4.3 Everyday Appropriation of POPS

Field observations across several Bangkok malls and community malls reveal a diverse range of everyday appropriations that transform POPS into lived vernacular environments. These practices are not occasional or accidental but occur with noticeable regularity, producing recognisable rhythms of urban life that extend beyond the commercial logic of the mall.

During weekday afternoons, freelancers and informal workers frequently were observed occupying tables in food courts or shared seating areas, often remaining for several hours. With laptops, chargers, and personal devices, they established temporary workstations that made use of free seating, electricity, and air-conditioning. The food courts, originally designed to support rapid consumption and turnover, thus doubled as low-cost co-working hubs. Students similarly appropriated these spaces after school hours, forming small study groups or revising lessons together. The informality of their presence, spreading notebooks across tables, sharing snacks, or quietly rehearsing presentations, indicated that POPS provide vital alternatives for young people whose home or school environments may not offer the same flexibility (Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. Mall seating areas reappropriated as informal workspaces, used by individuals and groups beyond their intended function. **Source:** Supitcha Tovivich



Figure 10. Students appropriating mall seating for homework, group study, or extended socialising after minimal purchases. **Source:** Supitcha Tovivich

Patterns of appropriation also included more individualised and habitual uses. Elderly residents often were observed arriving alone, repeatedly returning to the same seats across multiple days in a week. Some rested quietly, some played with their phones, while others dozed off in familiar corners. Their use was notable not only for its repetition but also for the sense of tacit recognition; these users created routines in which POPS became extensions of their personal domestic spaces. In some instances, people brought their own water bottles or packed meals, consuming them discreetly in free seating zones without purchasing from mall vendors. Such practices demonstrate how individuals adapt POPS to fit their economic and social realities, subtly challenging the intended boundaries of consumption (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Elderly visitors repeatedly occupying the same seats in mall corridors, food courts, or cinema foyers, often sitting alone as part of their routine use of POPS. **Source:** Supitcha Tovivich

In certain malls, policies permitting pets opened opportunities for unplanned gatherings of dog owners. These encounters often were casual yet extended, with groups of owners standing or sitting together for thirty to sixty minutes, chatting while their dogs interacted. What began as incidental meetings frequently developed into informal communities centred on shared care for animals (Figure 12). Similarly, POPS became gathering grounds when malls hosted festivals or staged events such as celebrity meet-and-greets, dance competitions, or children's games like Beyblade tournaments. These occasions drew together groups united by common interests, sometimes leading participants to bring their own folding chairs and create improvised seating zones (Figure 13). The atmosphere of ease, families chatting, children playing, enthusiasts exchanging tips, illustrated how POPS functioned as temporary commons where new forms of sociability and interest-based communities emerged.



Figure 12. Dogs inside malls prompting spontaneous social interactions among visitors.

Source: Supitcha Tovivich

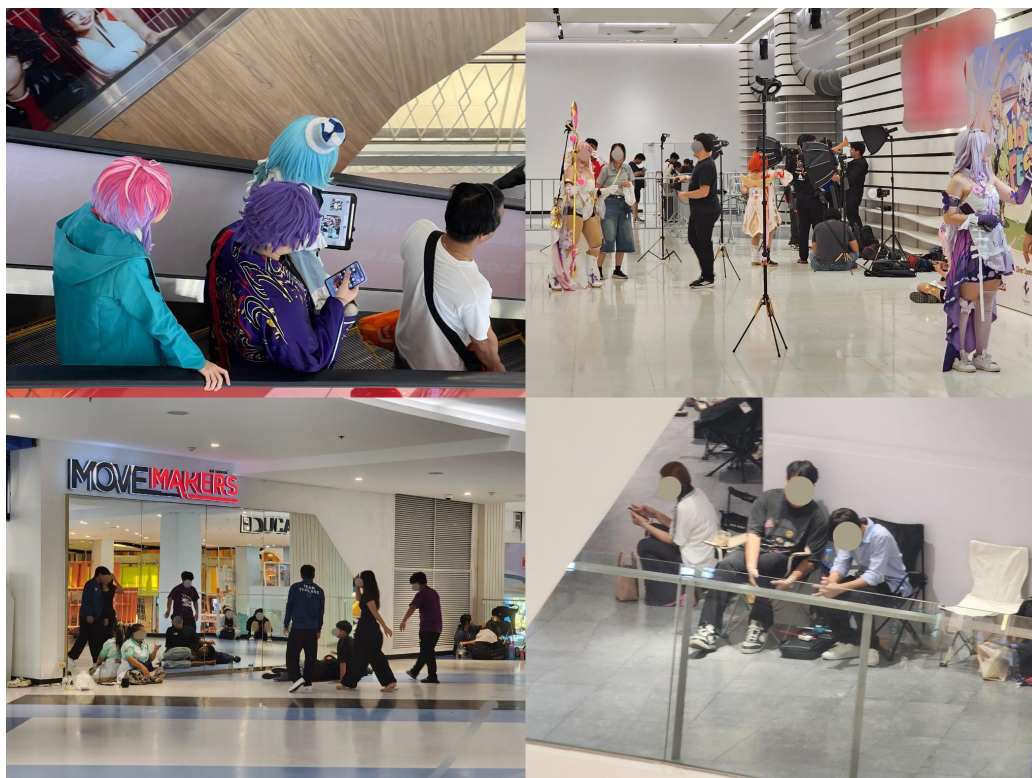


Figure 13. Festival events, improvised attractions, and mirrored walls for dance practice, illustrating how POPS become informal stages for youth activities.

Source: Supitcha Tovivich

Taken together, these observations highlight the multiplicity of ways in which POPS are woven into everyday routines. They serve simultaneously as workplaces, classrooms, resting places, social arenas, and event commons. Importantly, these practices are shaped not by the intentions of developers but by the agency of ordinary users who repeatedly and creatively reconfigure corporate interiors into vernacular spaces.

4.4 POPS as Vernacular Appropriation

The observed practices in Bangkok's POPS exemplify how ordinary users tactically transform corporate interiors into lived vernacular environments. These practices do not merely occupy space; they appropriate and reconfigure it, revealing the resilience and creativity of everyday urban life. Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of tactics provides a critical lens. Developers and mall managers design strategies of control, through layouts, signage, security, and rules, yet users bend these strategies to suit their needs. Freelancers who transform food courts into co-working hubs, students who spread textbooks across atrium seating, and elderly residents who repeatedly claim the same seat for resting or napping all enact tactics that re-vernacularise designed interiors. Even small gestures, such as bringing food and water from outside to avoid compulsory consumption, mark everyday negotiations that subtly contest the boundaries of control.

These appropriations also illustrate Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad. POPS are "conceived" as commercial interiors, carefully designed to facilitate shopping and leisure. They are "perceived" through the material conditions of comfort, accessibility, and surveillance. Yet, they ultimately are "lived" through the everyday routines of users, habitual visits by elderly residents, improvised study sessions by students, and socialisation among pet owners. In these lived spaces, meaning emerges not from the original design but from repeated use, memory, and appropriation. When dog owners informally gather for extended conversations or when families create improvised commons during mall events, POPS become vernacular arenas of sociability, demonstrating that lived practices can outweigh design intention.

The tension between control and appropriation is central to this vernacular process. On one hand, POPS embody the exclusionary logic of privatised urbanism: surveillance cameras; security staff; and rules that can instantly reassert commercial authority. On the other hand, they provide essential infrastructures of everyday life in a city with limited accessible public space. The capacity of users to establish routines, such as elderly individuals who return to the same seat across multiple days, or enthusiasts who carry their own chairs to extend communal gatherings, demonstrates that vernacularity arises through repetition, resilience, and adaptation.

In this way, POPS highlight that the vernacular is not limited to inherited traditions or historic communities. It also is constituted in contemporary, commodified environments, where ordinary people continuously rework the conditions imposed upon them. These practices blur the boundaries between consumption and commons, revealing that even corporate-controlled interiors can be appropriated as urban vernacular spaces. At the same time, it is important to recognise that such vernacular appropriations remain fragile. Users' ability to occupy POPS is contingent on the tolerance of management and can be revoked at any moment. Events may invite temporary sociability, but they also reinforce commercial agendas. Likewise, elderly individuals or freelancers may rely on these spaces, yet their presence is always conditional and subject to exclusion. This ambivalence underscores that while POPS can be re-vernacularised through everyday tactics, they also embody the contradictions of contemporary urbanism, spaces that provide relief and sociability but within boundaries ultimately defined by private power.

4.5 Implications for Urban Vernacular Discourse

The analysis of POPS in Bangkok demonstrates that urban vernacular architecture must be understood across a wider spectrum than previously acknowledged. Traditional cases, such as the adaptive reuse of New World in Banglamphu, the community-led revitalisation of Khlong Bangluang, or the everyday cultural heritage of Pak Khlong Talad, highlight how vernacular practices are anchored in historical continuity, community memory, and cultural identity. POPS, by contrast, illustrate how vernacular processes also emerge within the hyper-commercialised interiors of shopping malls and community malls. Here, vernacularity is not inherited but actively produced through improvisation, repetition, and the negotiation of corporate boundaries.

This contrast broadens the discourse in two ways. First, it demonstrates that vernacular practices are not confined to spaces with strong historical or cultural symbolism, but also can thrive in ordinary, commodified settings where people carve out routines and communities despite structural constraints. Second, it underscores the importance of analysing degrees of publicness in contemporary urban vernacular studies. The POPS cases reveal that accessibility, inclusivity, and agency are not guaranteed, but continually negotiated between private strategies and user tactics.

Together, these insights suggest that urban vernacular should be conceived not only as a matter of heritage and preservation but also as a matter of everyday negotiation within spaces of consumption. In doing so, POPS remind us that vernacular resilience persists even in unexpected arenas, though always in precarious forms subject to surveillance and control. Recognising these dynamics is crucial for advancing a more inclusive and critical understanding of urban vernacular architecture in rapidly urbanising contexts.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to reframing vernacular architecture as a dynamic urban process by synthesising the conceptual shifts outlined in Section 3 with the empirical insights from POPS in Bangkok. Together with practice-based cases such as Khlong Bangluang, Banglamphu, and Pak Khlong Talad, POPS exemplify how vernacularity unfolds across diverse spatial arenas, from heritage conservation to commercial interiors, revealing both continuities and contradictions in the urban vernacular.

5.1 From Ethnicity to Subculture: Everyday Agency in POPS

The first conceptual shift, repositioning vernacular identity from ethnicity to subculture, finds clear expression in POPS. Rural vernacular traditions were largely defined by ethnicity and continuity, as emphasised by Rapoport (1969) and Oliver (1997). In contrast, urban vernacular practices often are shaped by subcultural groups who use space in ways unintended by its designers. In Bangkok's POPS, freelancers, students, elderly residents, pet owners, and event-based communities each exemplify how identity and belonging are performed and negotiated.

Yet these practices are not entirely celebratory. Freelancers, for instance, rely on POPS because they lack affordable alternatives, reflecting structural gaps in the provision of public co-working facilities. Elderly individuals who repeatedly return to the same seats reveal both resilience and vulnerability; their routines highlight how malls substitute for absent civic infrastructure, but also how older citizens' access to space is contingent upon corporate tolerance. Even pet owners and event-based communities, while enjoying sociability, ultimately are framed by commercial agendas that determine when and how gatherings occur. This suggests that urban vernacular practices in POPS embody both creativity and constraint, resilience and precarity.

5.2 From Natural to Industrial and Recycled Materials: Improvised Infrastructures

The second conceptual shift concerns materials and infrastructures. Rural vernacular architecture relied on natural resources, whereas urban contexts draw upon industrial and recycled materials. Bangkok's informal vendors have long demonstrated this adaptability through the use of corrugated sheets, billboards, and salvaged timber. POPS extend this improvisation into corporate interiors, albeit in less visible forms. Users bring bottled water and homemade meals into seating areas, or even carry folding chairs to create comfort in temporary communities. These acts parallel the bricolage of street vendors; both reflect resourcefulness in adapting existing resources to immediate needs.

However, these practices also underscore inequities. Bringing food from outside is not simply an act of convenience but often a necessity for those unable to afford repeated purchases. The sight of people discreetly consuming their own meals in malls reveals both the inclusivity and the limitations of POPS; they enable access but also produce discomfort and surveillance. What appears as everyday ingenuity must therefore be read critically, as evidence of both urban resilience and systemic neglect in the provision of inclusive public amenities.

5.3 From Monumental to Ordinary Heritage: Extending Vernacular to Semi-public Interiors

The third conceptual shift highlights how the notion of heritage expands from monuments to the ordinary. In Bangkok, community-led initiatives at Khlong Bangluang or the cultural continuity of Pak Khlong Talad illustrate how vernacular heritage is sustained through practices rooted in history and place. POPS, in contrast, have no inherited symbolism. Their significance lies in the ways users repeatedly inscribe meaning through routine occupation, turning consumption-driven interiors into vernacular commons.

Yet here again, caution is necessary. Unlike community heritage spaces, POPS offer little long-term security. Management can remove users, alter layouts, or restrict access at any moment. While the repeated presence of the same elderly residents or student groups produces a form of everyday heritage, this heritage is fragile and precarious, constantly at risk of erasure. POPS therefore demonstrate that vernacular heritage in contemporary cities may emerge in unexpected settings, but also that its survival depends on conditions far more volatile than in traditional communities.

5.4 Negotiation Between Strategies and Tactics

The negotiation between formal strategies and everyday tactics emerges as a unifying theme across both heritage and POPS. In adaptive reuse projects, strategies of conservation often are contested by community use. In informal markets, strategies of regulation are reworked by vendor improvisation and in POPS, strategies of commerce are bent by users who seek study areas, rest, or sociability. De Certeau's (1984) notion of tactics helps interpret these everyday manoeuvres, while Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad underscores how lived practices reconfigure conceived and perceived space. Still, these negotiations are far from equal. Users of POPS operate under the constant shadow of surveillance, security intervention, and corporate authority. Their presence is tolerated only so long as it does not disrupt commercial aims. Unlike community-led placemaking in Banglamphu or Khlong Bangluang, POPS offer little opportunity for users to shape design outcomes. The vernacular here is tactical but temporary, adaptive yet insecure.

5.5 Implications for Urban Vernacular Theory

The juxtaposition of heritage sites and POPS in Bangkok suggests that urban vernacular practices operate across multiple conditions of urban life, rather than in a single "arena." These conditions include:

- heritage contexts, where adaptive reuse revives abandoned structures;
- informal economies, where resourcefulness and improvisation sustain livelihoods; and
- semi-public interiors, where commercial spaces are tactically repurposed by ordinary users.

Framing urban vernacular in this way avoids romanticising either traditional communities or contemporary malls. It acknowledges instead that vernacular practices exist within structures of inequality, negotiation, and power. The ingenuity of freelancers, students, or elderly residents in POPS should not obscure the vulnerabilities they face, including reliance on corporate tolerance, exclusion through subtle surveillance, and the absence of truly inclusive civic alternatives. Thus, the contribution of POPS to vernacular theory lies not only in showing how appropriation generates new cultural practices, but also in revealing the fragility and contested nature of such practices. Urban vernacular architecture, therefore, must be understood as a spectrum of adaptive processes that are resilient yet precarious, inclusive yet conditional, creative yet constrained by structural inequalities.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reconceptualised vernacular architecture by shifting attention from rural traditions to the contested realities of the contemporary city. Through a synthesis of existing scholarship and empirical observations, three conceptual shifts were identified: from ethnicity to subculture as the dominant frame of identity; from natural to industrial and recycled materials in construction; and from monumental heritage to ordinary urban heritage sustained through adaptive reuse. These shifts collectively reframe urban vernacular architecture as a process of negotiation, improvisation, and lived practice rather than as a static typology.

The case of Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) in Bangkok has been used to illustrate how these theoretical arguments unfold in everyday urban environments. POPS demonstrate how freelancers, students, elderly residents, pet owners, and event-based communities tactically appropriate corporate interiors to serve as workplaces, classrooms, resting areas, and social commons. Such practices exemplify how vernacularity emerges not only in heritage markets or historic neighbourhoods but also in hyper-commercialised interiors, where ordinary users adapt and reconfigure space to meet social and cultural needs. By extending the study of vernacular architecture into these semi-public domains, this paper highlights the breadth of urban vernacular practices across Bangkok, from community-led revitalisations at Khlong Bangluang, Banglamphu, and Pak Khlong Talad to the everyday negotiations observed in POPS.

At the same time, the study recognises the fragility of these appropriations. POPS remain subject to surveillance, managerial discretion, and the overarching imperatives of consumption. The sociability of dog-owner gatherings, the study routines of students, or the resting practices of elderly individuals all are contingent on corporate tolerance and can be curtailed without warning. Unlike heritage projects where communities may exert long-term influence, POPS offer little security or collective agency. Their vernacular character therefore is both creative and precarious. It provides inclusivity and resilience while exposing the inequalities of urban provision. The significance of these findings lies in positioning urban vernacular architecture as a spectrum of practices that range from heritage conservation to contemporary commercial interiors. This spectrum demonstrates that vernacularity persists wherever people adapt, negotiate, and reimagine their surroundings, but it also cautions against romanticising these practices without recognising their vulnerabilities.

Beyond these empirical insights, the study also contributes conceptually by situating urban vernacular practices within the intersecting discourses of the urban commons and Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS). It argues

that the everyday negotiations observed in Bangkok's malls exemplify micro-acts of commoning as temporary reclaiming of collective agency within corporately managed environments. Such acts reveal how publicness can persist through informal cooperation and adaptive use, even under conditions of regulation and surveillance. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates that careful non-participant observation and photographic documentation can disclose these subtle negotiations, offering evidence of how social relations and spatial behaviours constitute lived expressions of vernacularity. With stronger theoretical integration around the notions of the urban commons and privately-owned public spaces, this study contributes more substantially to ongoing debates on vernacularity in transitions, highlighting how negotiation, adaptability, and shared agency continue to shape the contemporary urban condition.

Future research could expand in two directions. First, comparative studies across other Asian cities could examine how POPS and similar semi-public interiors operate under different socio-political regimes, testing the universality and limits of Bangkok's case. Second, further inquiry could focus on the intersections between digital culture and urban vernacular practices, particularly how online communities organise or reinforce offline appropriations of space. Both directions would deepen the understanding of how urban vernacular practices continue to evolve under conditions of rapid urbanisation, consumerism, and globalisation.

In sum, this study argues that urban vernacular architecture must be conceived not merely as the preservation of traditions but as the lived negotiation of space across multiple arenas of the city. Recognising both the resilience and precarity of these practices is essential for developing a more inclusive and critical framework for architectural and urban scholarship.

Disclosure Statement on use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, ChatGPT was used improve readability and language. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Human Subjects

All sites and users were anonymised and research protocols were approved by the Silpakorn University Research Ethics Committee under Exemption Review (REC 68.0424-073-3527 / COE 68.0425-043, 25 April 2025).

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