



Lexicon of the Lost: Documenting indigenous Sindhi Architectural Terms through University Heritage Buildings

Uzma Arisar¹, Abdul Wahid Aresar², Dr. Sumera Imran³, Dr. Zahid Ullah⁴

1. Lecturer in Architecture and Planning Department, SABS University of Arts, Design & Heritages, Jamshoro Email: uzma.arisar@sabsu.edu.pl
2. Government of Sindh, Hyderabad, Sindh. Email: wahidarisar@gamil.com
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Women Sub Campus, University of Malakand
4. Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSI). Institute for Training and Development ITD Amherst, MA. (Corresponding Author), Email: zahidullah0333@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the role of indigenous Sindhi architectural elements i.e. Othaaq, Chounra, and Angan in shaping spatial design, social interaction and lived experiences within heritage university buildings. This research also examines the current level of awareness and documentation of Sindhi architectural terminology among elders, architects and university students. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through interviews with three key participant groups: elders as custodians of oral tradition, architects as interpreters of built form and university students as primary users of heritage academic spaces. Findings reveal that these indigenous elements remain physically present in university architecture but are variably understood across generations. The Othaaq functions as a transitional social space supporting informal interaction, the Chounra provides elevated seating that enhances observation and gathering, while the Angan serves as a central courtyard facilitating environmental comfort and communal engagement. Collectively, these elements significantly contribute to both climatic adaptation and social cohesion within educational environments. However, the study depicts a declining level of awareness and inadequate documentation of Sindhi architectural terminology, particularly among students and within formal academic curricula. Elders retain rich cultural knowledge through oral tradition, whereas architects demonstrate partial academic understanding. This gap indicates a gradual disconnect between lived architectural heritage and its formal representation. The study concludes that Othaaq, Chounra and Angan are not only architectural features but also cultural systems embedded in Sindh's built environment. It recommends systematic documentation, curriculum integration and awareness initiatives to preserve and revitalize indigenous architectural knowledge for future generations.

Keywords: Sindhi Architecture, Othaaq, Chounra, Angan, Social Interaction, Cultural Heritage, Indigenous Knowledge

Introduction

The rapid pace of modernization and urban development in Sindh has led to significant transformations in both the built environment and the linguistic practices associated with it. Indigenous architectural vocabulary, once central to everyday life is now steadily declining (Jaffar, H. 2020). Terms such as othaak, chounra, and angan, which historically described key

spatial and social elements of traditional Sindhi homes, are becoming increasingly unfamiliar to younger generations. This shift reflects not only a change in language use but also a deeper loss of cultural knowledge embedded within architectural spaces. Language and architecture are deeply intertwined as expressions of cultural identity and collective memory (Malik et al., 2022). In many traditional societies, architectural spaces are not merely physical structures but are embedded with meanings, practices and linguistic expressions that reflect social organization, values and ways of life (Nasir, K. 2021). In Sindh, a province rich in cultural heritage, indigenous architectural terms such as othaak i.e. a communal sitting space, chounra i.e. a raised platform, and angan i.e. courtyard have historically played a vital role in shaping both the built environment and everyday social interactions. However, with the urban expansion and changing lifestyles, these terms are gradually disappearing from common usage, particularly among younger generations (Qazi, S. 2019). The decline in indigenous vocabulary is not simply a linguistic issue; it represents a broader erosion of cultural knowledge and identity. As traditional architectural forms are replaced by modern designs, the associated terminology loses its relevance and, eventually, its place in collective memory. The loss of such vocabulary weakens the connection between people and their cultural heritage, creating a gap in intergenerational knowledge transmission. Despite growing interest in heritage conservation, limited scholarly attention has been given to unraveling indigenous architectural lexicons within the context of contemporary educational institutions (Rahman, F. 2020). Universities, especially those with heritage buildings, offer a unique and underexplored setting for this investigation. These spaces function as living archives where traditional architectural elements coexist with modern academic environments. They provide an opportunity to examine how indigenous terms are remembered, used, or forgotten by different groups, including elders, architects and students (Rashid, H. 2023). Based on perspectives from Sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology, this study aims to document and analyze the fading indigenous Sindhi architectural vocabulary and explore its relationship with physical spaces and cultural identity (Shah, N. 2022).

This study contributes to the preservation of endangered linguistic heritage by creating a link between language, architecture and cultural continuity (Wazir, M. 2021). The rationale for this study lies in the urgent need to document and preserve this disappearing lexical heritage. Language serves as a repository of cultural meanings and when specific terms vanish, the concepts, practices and identities they represent are also at risk of being forgotten. In the case of Sindh, the decline of indigenous architectural terminology signals a weakening connection between communities and their traditional ways of living. This research is therefore needed to address a critical gap at the intersection of language, culture and architecture (Sindh Cultural Department. 2018). This study contributes to safeguarding cultural heritage and supports the transmission of cultural knowledge to future generations.

Research Questions

1. How the indigenous architectural terms Othaaq, Chounra and Angan are embedded in the design and social interaction in heritage university buildings in Sindh?
2. What is the current level of awareness of Sindhi architectural terminology among architects, historians and university communities?

Literature Review

Indigenous Sindhi architecture represents a rich cultural system where social behavior and linguistic expression are deeply interconnected. Built environments in Sindh are shaped by local climate, available materials and cultural traditions, forming a unique architectural identity rooted

in oral knowledge systems and community practices. However, much of this knowledge remains under documented, particularly in relation to indigenous architectural vocabulary used to describe spatial forms and social spaces (Zubair, S. 2023). One of the key aspects of Sindhi architecture is the integration of culturally defined spatial terms such as Othaaq, Chounra and Angan. These spaces are not merely physical structures but represent social institutions embedded within domestic and public life (Gul, S. 2019). The Othaaq functions as a formal guest space symbolizing hospitality and respect, while the Angan serves as the central courtyard for family interaction and daily activities. Similarly, the Chounra acts as a semi open transitional space between interior and exterior environments. These spatial categories reflect a traditional system of architecture where social relationships and environmental adaptation are inseparable. Research on vernacular dwellings in Sindh explores that such spatial configurations are commonly found in indigenous housing typologies, including courtyard based and open plan structures that respond effectively to hot arid climatic conditions (Hassan, M. 2021). University heritage buildings in Sindh, many of which were constructed during colonial and early post colonial periods, still retain traces of these indigenous spatial logics. Courtyards, verandas and reception halls within these institutions reflect continuity of traditional design principles, even though their original meanings are often unrecognized by contemporary users (Bhatti, A. 2022). Studies on historic buildings in Sindh indicate that such architectural features are frequently documented as “courtyards (sehn)” and “arcaded verandahs,” yet their indigenous terminologies and cultural meanings are rarely emphasized in formal architectural literature. This highlights a significant gap between physical preservation and linguistic cultural documentation (Dar, M. A. 2020). The heritage conservation efforts in Sindh focus primarily on structural preservation, the intangible aspects of architectural knowledge such as terminology, oral traditions and cultural meanings remain largely overlooked. Architectural professionals may recognize structural elements like domes, arches, and courtyards, but often lack familiarity with indigenous terms such as Othaaq or Chounra, indicating disconnect between professional practice and local knowledge systems. Younger generations and university students demonstrate limited awareness of indigenous architectural vocabulary, despite frequent exposure to heritage buildings. This aligns with broader concerns in heritage studies that modernization often leads to the erosion of intangible cultural knowledge embedded in built environments. This study therefore contributes to preserving both the physical and linguistic dimensions of Sindhi architectural heritage (Ahmed, F. 2019).

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the decline of indigenous Sindhi architectural vocabulary within the context of university heritage buildings. The research was conducted in selected university heritage buildings in Sindh. These sites are chosen because they retain elements of traditional architecture and serve as living spaces where historical and modern practices intersect. Research involves three key groups of participants, Elders: who possess traditional knowledge and lived experience of indigenous vocabulary, Architect: who understand architectural terminology and design concepts, University students: representing the younger generation. Multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed to ensure depth of the study.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

How the indigenous architectural terms Othaaq, Chounra and Angan are embedded in the design and social interaction in heritage university buildings in Sindh?

THEME 1: OTHAAQ

Elders Responses

In traditional Sindhi society, Othaaq has always been more than a physical space; it is a cultural institution where people gather, talk, and make collective decisions. In my village life, the Othaaq was the center of social interaction, especially among elders and guests. It was usually a shaded veranda or open sitting area where people sat on mats or charpoys, discussing community matters, resolving disputes, and sharing stories. When I observe some heritage university buildings in Sindh today, I still see similar shaded corridors and verandas that reflect the spirit of Othaaq. These spaces are used by students and teachers for informal conversations, waiting and sometimes even academic discussions. The cultural essence remains the same: openness, hospitality and dialogue. However, modern usage is less structured compared to traditional Othaaq, where respect for elders and communal decision making were central. I believe that these architectural spaces preserve Sindh's oral culture and wisdom traditions. Even in educational institutions, the Othaaq like spaces continue to support social bonding and intellectual exchange, showing how deeply Sindhi architecture is rooted in human interaction and community life.

Architects Responses

From an architectural perspective, the Othaaq represents a transitional and semi public spatial typology deeply embedded in Sindhi vernacular design. In heritage university buildings across Sindh, this concept is visible in arcaded verandas, shaded walkways and corridors that serve both environmental and social functions. The Othaaq is climatically responsive, reducing heat exposure while allowing natural ventilation, which is essential in Sindh's hot environment. Structurally, it acts as a buffer zone between enclosed academic rooms and open courtyards, facilitating passive cooling and movement. Functionally, it encourages informal interaction among students and faculty, mirroring its traditional role as a community gathering space. The continuity of Othaaq in institutional architecture demonstrates an adaptation of indigenous spatial intelligence into formal education settings. However, in many modern renovations, this space is underutilized or visually altered, reducing its cultural meaning. From a conservation standpoint, preserving Othaaq elements is crucial for maintaining architectural identity and sustainable design practices. It is not merely a corridor but a socio-environmental device that integrates climate responsiveness with human centered spatial planning in Sindh's educational architecture.

University Students Responses

As students in heritage university buildings in Sindh, we experience spaces similar to what elders call Othaaq, even though we may not always know the term. These are the shaded corridors and verandas where students naturally gather between classes. For us, these spaces are very important because they provide comfort, especially during hot weather and create opportunities for informal discussions. We use these areas to talk about lectures, prepare group assignments and sometimes simply relax with friends. Unlike formal classrooms, the Othaaq like spaces feel more open and flexible. They allow interaction between students from different departments, which helps us learn beyond textbooks. We also notice that teachers sometimes meet students here for quick discussions, making learning more informal and friendly. However, some parts of these spaces are becoming crowded or less maintained in certain buildings. Still, we feel they are essential for student life. They connect us socially and academically, making the campus feel

alive. Even without formal instruction, these spaces teach us cooperation, communication and community values that are deeply rooted in Sindhi culture.

THEME 2: CHOUNRA

Elders Responses

The Chounra in Sindhi tradition is a raised platform that carries both functional and symbolic meaning. In earlier times, it was commonly built in courtyards or open spaces where people could sit, rest, or observe activities around them. In my experience, the Chounra was often used by elders or respected members of the community, giving them a place of visibility and honor. It was not just a structure but a sign of respect and social order. When I visit old educational buildings today, I notice raised platforms or stepped seating areas that resemble this tradition. Students often sit there during breaks, discussions, or waiting periods. The sense of openness and observation remains similar to village life, where the Chounra allowed people to see everything happening in the community space. It also provided ventilation and protection from ground heat, making it practical in Sindh's climate. I feel that although the meaning has changed, the essence of gathering and sharing space continues in universities. This shows that Sindhi architectural traditions are still alive.

Architects Responses

The Chounra can be interpreted in architectural terms as an elevated spatial element that combines seating, observation and environmental adaptation. In Sindh's heritage university buildings, this is reflected in stepped plinths, raised platforms and seating areas integrated within courtyards. Functionally, the Chounra elevates users above ground level, improving airflow and reducing heat absorption, which is essential in hot climates. Socially, it creates a semi formal gathering space where visibility and interaction are naturally encouraged. Historically, the Chounra also served as a hierarchical space, often used by elders or respected figures, which is still visible in how students or faculty occupy raised seating areas in academic courtyards. From a design perspective, it contributes to spatial layering, offering variation between ground level movements and elevated resting zones. However, modern institutional renovations often overlook or flatten these raised elements, reducing their functional and cultural significance. Preserving Chounra inspired features can enhance both usability and heritage continuity. It represents an early form of climatic design that aligns with contemporary sustainable architecture principles.

University Students Responses

In our university campus in Sindh, we often sit on raised steps, platforms, or courtyard edges that resemble what elders call Chounra. We may not know the traditional name, but we experience its use every day. These spaces are very useful for students because they provide a comfortable place to sit outside classrooms. We use them for group discussions, waiting for lectures and sometimes for relaxing during breaks. Sitting on these raised areas also helps us observe campus activities, which makes the environment feel active and connected. Many students prefer these spaces over crowded benches because they are open and airy. During cooler times of the day, we gather there to study or talk. It feels like a natural meeting point for everyone. We also notice that teachers sometimes stand nearby and interact informally with students, which make communication easier. However, some of these spaces are not well maintained in certain buildings. Still, they remain important in our daily student life. These

Chounra like areas help us feel connected to each other and to the cultural design of our campus.

THEME 3: ANGAN

Elder Responses

The Angan or central courtyard has always been the heart of Sindhi traditional architecture. In my childhood home and in many village houses, the Angan was the most important space where daily life unfolded. Families gathered there for cooking, storytelling, celebrations and even decision making. It allowed air, light and life to flow through the house. When I visit old university buildings today, I immediately recognize the Angan in their central courtyards. These open spaces bring together students, teachers and visitors, just like families gathered in traditional homes. In the past, the Angan also served as a place for seasonal activities, drying crops, or hosting gatherings. In universities, it has become a place for events, meetings and informal interaction. I believe the Angan reflects the soul of Sindhi architecture because it connects people with nature and with each other. Even though buildings have become more modern, the presence of courtyards in educational institutions shows that this tradition is still alive and meaningful. It continues to support community life in an academic environment.

Architects Responses

The Angan is a central organizing principle in Sindhi vernacular architecture and remains a defining feature in many heritage university buildings. Architecturally, it functions as a climatic moderator, allowing natural light penetration, cross ventilation and temperature regulation in hot and dry environments. In institutional design, the Angan acts as a spatial nucleus that connects different academic blocks, creating visual and physical coherence across the campus. Historically rooted in domestic architecture, it has been successfully adapted into public and educational buildings. In universities, courtyards derived from the Angan concept are used for assemblies, cultural events and informal student gatherings. From a design analysis perspective, it supports passive sustainability principles and reduces dependence on cooling systems. However, urban expansion and modern architectural interventions sometimes reduce its openness or convert it into landscaped but less functional spaces. Preserving the Angan as an active rather than decorative element is crucial for maintaining both cultural identity and environmental performance. It represents a timeless architectural strategy that integrates human interaction with ecological responsiveness.

University Students Responses

Students, expressed the Angan in our university is one of the most important and enjoyable spaces on campus. It is the open courtyard where students from different departments come together during breaks or events. Even though we may not always use the traditional term, we feel its importance every day. The Angan gives us space to breathe, relax and interact outside the classroom environment. We often gather there for group studies, cultural programs, or just to sit and talk with friends. It feels open, peaceful and connected to nature, especially compared to closed classrooms. During events like seminars or celebrations, the Angan becomes a central place where everyone participates together. It also helps us meet new students and share ideas freely. Sometimes, teachers also interact with students in this open space, which makes communication easier and more informal. We feel that the Angan is not just a physical place but part of our student experience. It brings life to the campus and makes learning feel more social, open and connected to Sindhi cultural traditions.

What is the current level of awareness of Sindhi architectural terminology among architects, historians and university communities?

Elders Responses

Based on my experiences, the awareness of traditional Sindhi architectural terms such as Othaaq, Chounra and Angan have decreased over time, especially among younger generations. In the past, these terms were part of everyday life. People did not need formal documentation because knowledge was passed orally from elders to children. Every household and community space reflected these concepts naturally. However, today I feel that many people, even educated ones, are not fully aware of these terms or their deeper meanings. They may still use the spaces but do not recognize their cultural names or historical importance. Among architects and historians, I believe some awareness exists, but it is limited to academic discussions rather than practical application. In university communities, students often use these spaces without knowing their traditional identity. I think this shows a gap between lived cultural heritage and formal documentation. If these terms are not properly recorded and taught, there is a risk of losing them over time. I believe that documenting this knowledge in books, research and educational curricula is necessary so that future generations understand the richness of Sindhi architectural heritage.

Architects Responses

From an architectural and professional standpoint, awareness of indigenous Sindhi architectural terminology such as Othaaq, Chounra and Angan is present but not systematically integrated into mainstream architectural practice. Many architects in Sindh are familiar with these concepts through cultural exposure, but they are rarely documented in formal architectural lexicons. Among historians, there is growing interest in documenting these spatial concepts, but comprehensive classification and standardization are still lacking. In university environments, these terms are seldom used in teaching architecture which contributes to their gradual invisibility in professional discourse. As a result, while the physical manifestations of these elements can still be observed in heritage buildings, their conceptual vocabulary is weakening. I think there is an urgent need for systematic documentation, including architectural mapping, typological classification and integration into curricula.

University Students Responses

As university students, our awareness of Sindhi architectural terms like Othaaq, Chounra and Angan is generally low. We use these spaces every day on campus, but most of us do not know their traditional names or cultural significance. For us, they are simply corridors, sitting areas, or courtyards without realizing they are part of a deeper architectural heritage. Because of this, documentation and awareness among students remain very limited. We realize that our campus environment is connected to Sindh's traditional design. We feel that if these concepts were included in textbooks and campus orientation programs, students would better understand and respect their heritage.

Discussion

Findings of Othaaq, Chounra and Angan reveal that indigenous Sindhi architectural elements play a multi-dimensional role in shaping spatial design, social interaction and lived experiences within heritage university buildings in Sindh. These elements are not merely physical structures but represent a cultural spatial system that continues to influence how academic spaces are used and experienced. The analysis shows that Othaaq, Chounra and Angan are embedded within the

architectural layout of heritage university buildings as adaptive responses to climate, mobility and social organization. The Othaaq functions as a transitional semi-open space (verandas and corridors), the Chounra as an elevated seating and observation platform and the Angan as a central organizing courtyard. All participants recognized as environmentally responsive features that enhance ventilation, shading and thermal comfort. However, the findings also indicate that modernization and renovation practices often dilute these spaces, weakening their original aesthetic. Regarding social interaction Othaaq emerges as a space of dialogue and academic exchange beyond formal classrooms, reflecting its traditional role as a communal gathering area. Similarly, the Chounra facilitates visibility based interaction, where students and teachers engage in semi formal discussions, while the Angan acts as a central social hub. Students, in contrast, experience these spaces primarily as social and recreational zones, although they still function as critical sites for peer learning and interaction. This indicates that indigenous architecture continues to support a social learning, even when its cultural terminology is not fully recognized. Elders provide the in-depth cultural memory, linking these spaces to identity, oral traditions and collective life. Architects occupy an intermediate position, recognizing both functional and climatic value but noting limited institutional documentation and curricular integration. This fragmented awareness suggests that while the physical experience of indigenous architecture remains strong, its cultural and terminological recognition is weakening across generations. Strengthening documentation and educational inclusion is therefore essential to sustain their relevance in contemporary architectural and educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study concludes that indigenous architectural features Othaaq, Chounra and Angan are not merely structural components but culturally embedded. The Othaaq supports informal interaction the Chounra enables elevated observation and semi-formal gathering and the **Angan** functions as a central social and environmental hub. Together, they form an integrated design logic that reflects Sindh's vernacular wisdom, particularly its adaptation to climate, community life and social cohesion.

However, the study also reveals a significant gap in awareness and documentation. Elders retain rich experiential knowledge; architects possess partial technical understanding, while university students primarily engage with these spaces without recognizing their cultural terminology or historical significance. This fragmentation reveals the gradual weakening of indigenous architectural vocabulary in formal education. The cultural identity is at risk of erosion due to insufficient documentation and limited integration into academic curricula.

Therefore, the study emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive documentation and educational inclusion of Sindhi architectural terminology. Strengthening awareness through curricula and architectural practice can ensure that Othaaq, Chounra, and Angan continue to function not only as spatial elements but also as enduring symbols of Sindh's cultural and architectural heritage.

Recommendations

1. Curriculum Integration: Sindhi indigenous architectural concepts (Othaaq, Chounra and Angan) should be formally included in university curricula, especially in architecture to strengthen students' understanding of local heritage.

2. **Systematic Documentation:** A structured documentation process should be developed to record and preserve Sindhi architectural terminology through research, visual mapping, photographs and digital archives.
3. **Awareness Programs in Universities:** Universities should organize seminars, workshops and exhibitions to raise awareness among students and faculty about the cultural and functional significance of Othaaq, Chounra and Angan.
4. **Integration in Modern Design Practice:** Architectural planning and renovation should consciously reinterpret indigenous elements such as verandas (Othaaq) raised platforms (Chounra) and courtyards (Angan) to maintain cultural continuity.
5. **Community and Elder Engagement:** Elders and local communities should be actively involved in documentation and research processes to ensure authentic preservation of oral knowledge and lived experiences related to Sindhi architectural traditions.

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Heritage University Sites of Indigenous Sindhi Architectural Lexicon

The study focused on historic educational institutions in Sindh that retain visible elements of indigenous Sindhi architectural spaces such as Othaaq (guest or social interaction space) Angan (central courtyard) and Chounra (semi open veranda or platform).

1. University of Sindh

The university buildings contain large courtyards (angan) shaded corridors and semi open gathering spaces similar to chounra. Traditional spatial planning is still visible in several heritage blocks.

2. Sindh Madressatul Islam University

This historic institution preserves heritage architecture with internal courtyards, formal reception style areas resembling othaaq and colonial Sindhi blended verandas used for social interaction.

3. Sindh Agriculture University

Sindh Agriculture University demonstrate climate responsive traditional architecture with open courtyards, shaded semi open spaces and interaction areas reflecting vernacular Sindhi design traditions.