

THE VILLAGE AND THE OVAL HOUSE: EXPLORING THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF PELUNGA VILLAGE AT KASKI, NEPAL

Archana Bade Shrestha*

Department of Architecture, Khwopa Engineering College, Bhaktapur, Nepal

Abstract

Pelunga is beautiful village located in Kaski district, Gandaki Province, Nepal. To a significant aspect, vernacular architecture of Pelunga village at Kaski district attains sustainability through the use of natural material (stone, mud and thatch) and by taking the pleasant, moderate local environment into account. The distinctive shape of the dwelling unit is a special feature that has satisfied every practical necessity of the community. The settlement is slowly changing to the RCC structure and the vernacular buildings are in verge of demolition. This paper addresses to document the vernacular architecture of Pelunga Village. The research emphasizes the qualitative study, socioeconomic evaluation, settlement planning, dwelling complex, and primarily focuses on planning, use of locally available material and construction technology of a typical oval house of the village.

Keywords: Vernacular architecture, Oval house, Brahmin community, Dwelling unit, Pelunga settlement, Kaski district, Hill architecture

1. Introduction

Pelunga is a settlement in Rupa Gaunpalika, Thumki, ward number 2 in the Kaski district of Gandaki province, Nepal. It is around 30 kilometers from Pokhara and approximately 3 kilometers from the Rupakot resort of Rupagaunpalika, which is accessible by vehicle in recent days. The village has beautiful vernacular architecture of Brahmin/Chettri homes and is also known as Bahun Gaun. It is flanked by villages such as Majhkot, which has a majority of Magars, Sirkutan, which has a plurality of Brahmins, and Thumki, which has a majority of Dalits. The scattered settlement is located in the terrain oriented to the south, with gorgeous oval-shaped vernacular buildings. A civilization based on subsistence farming and animal husbandry has a strong sense of community within the Brahmin Community. The oval house (ghumaune ghar) is a major attraction of the village.

The location is remote and unaffected by tourism.

Locals are not aware of a location's charm and vernacular architecture. The in-migration and out-migration can be seen in today's youth which has direct impact on the community of Pelunga as well. People begin to feel less as a part of the community, and at the same time, contemporary conveniences are having a negative impact on the preservation of village's vernacular homes. People have also begun and are planning to remove vernacular oval buildings and replace them with RCC rectangular houses. If this trend continues, the next generation will be unable to appreciate the tangible and intangible qualities of culture, tradition, and vernacular architecture of the community. Additionally, the knowledge about the construction practices will slowly be forgotten. Hence, the need to document this knowledge of traditional construction practices is evident.

2. Literature Review

Vernacular architecture is the architecture designed by the local people to meet the utilitarian aspects of occupants with respect to climate, locally available material, geography, culture and tradition of respective community.

According to Oliver (1997), "Vernacular architecture

*Corresponding author: Archana Bade Shrestha
Department of Architecture, Khwopa Engineering College, Bhaktapur, Nepal
Email: shrestha.archana@khec.edu.np
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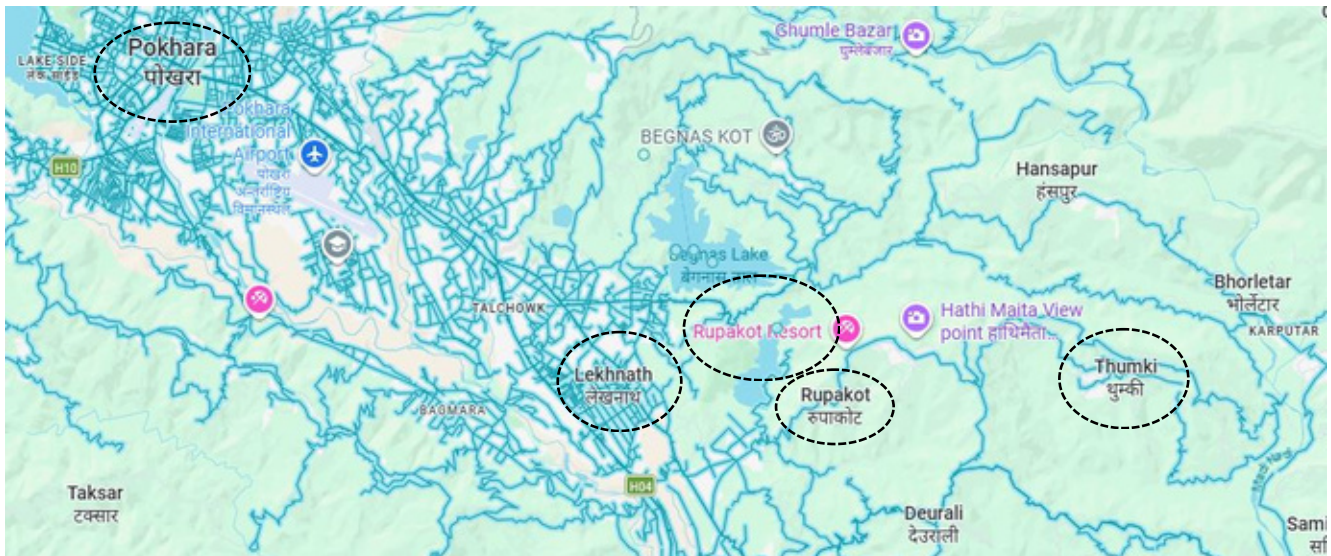


Figure 1: Location map of Thumki

comprises the dwellings and all other buildings of the people related to environmental context and available resources. They are customarily owner or community built using traditional construction technology.” According to ICOMOS Charter for Built Vernacular Heritage (ICOMOS, 1999) the built vernacular heritage is important; it is the fundamental expression of the culture of a community of its relationship with its territory and, at the same time, the expression of the world’s cultural diversity. “Vernacular architecture is a demonstration of identity and sustainability; it is the “mirror” of nations that reflects place, time, and culture. Architecture that was built by people to people; it has developed sustainably through time and modified itself through trial and error to fulfill society’s needs in harmony with the ambient environment.” (Salman, 2018).

With the great variation of topography and natural environment and an equally large number of diverse ethnicity, rural vernacular architecture of Nepal can be as varied. However, on the basis of major construction material in use, we may divide Nepal into three broad vernacular architectural divisions eg. the Terai, middle Hills and high Mountains (Tiwari et al., 2004). According to Dr. John Tyman’s “cultures in context series Nepal” part three, “life in the midlands,” Brahman homes are usually two stories tall and have historically been round or oval in shape (Tyman, 1986–1996).

They are composed of stone and have an exterior and interior clay plaster coating. Because they don’t have a long ridge line, round homes are supposed to leak less than rectangular ones. They are also stronger, warmer, and less prone to wind damage, although they can’t easily fit contemporary furnishings.

On the word of Gerrard Toffin’s “Ecology and Anthropology in Traditional Dwelling,” the relationship between ethnic group and place of habitation is quite ambiguous (Toffin, 1994). He explains “It is true that diverse populations share the same form of settlement and that different styles of domestic architecture are frequently found within the same ethnic group, but symbolic and cultural values also serve as potent indicators of identity”. Therefore, both their ethnicity and the ecological region influence architecture of the building. For example, the oval house in the Pokhara region may belong to Gurung, Brahmin, Chettri, Rai and Limbu.

The documentation of vernacular settlement and buildings of mountain, hill and terai region has been carried out by the team of architects led by Prof. Dr. Mohan Moorti Pant. According to their study of Bhujung (Gurung Community) (Pant et al., 2022) of Lamjung district of Nepal and Gurjakhani (Chhantyal community) (Pant et al., 2025) of Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality, the dwellings units in the settlement are oriented as per the orientation of terrain. However, with that buildings follow the traditional, functional and cultural norms of people residing there.

3. Research Methodology

For the first time I explored Pelunga village in the year 2076 B.S as a part of study in vernacular architecture of B. Architecture with students of 6th semester and consecutively the visit was followed in the year 2078, 2079 and 2080. Upon our second visit, we discovered that alterations had been made to the traditional buildings and that new construction were in line. Subsequently, concept of documenting the local architecture emerged. Reviews

of the literature from numerous books and papers were completed. The current investigation was guided by a number of past studies conducted by other academics. The next step to research was the site visits at various stages of the investigation. The study was done with in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys with local residents of Pelunga village and local authorities like ward office. In addition to visual observation, measurements of dwellings were taken as part of the documentation process. The detail measurement of oldest typical oval house of the village was taken for in-depth study. Drone survey was conducted in the site. Lastly mapping and documentation were carried out

4. History of Settlement

Brahmins are typically, classified as Khas Brahmins, Newar Brahmins, and Terai-based Brahmins. Bahun-Chhetris are among the leading majority of the Nepali population who are also called Brahmins or Kshetris/Kshetriyas Niraula, 2023. According to the 2021 Nepal census, 3,292,373 people (11.29%) of the population of Nepal are Bahun (Hill Brahmins) and the frequency of Bahun is 26.9% in Kaski district and 26.8% prevailing in Rupagaunpalika.

According to the local people the history of Pelunga dates back to more than 100 years. The settlement had only few houses in early nascent stage with a 10 to 15-minute walking distance from one house to another. Later people from Humla, Jumla migrated to the village. In grandfather's period the village was considered as Sugam (convenient) village because the distance between house and working

field is very less and resource of water is near by their house which makes easier to do their daily activities.

On the other hand, few folklore also narrated two brothers who belonging to the "Subedi" community founded the Pelunga village. According to their rites, to start the settlement their nephews (sister's son) had to perform the puja in order to establish their lineage diety (Kul Devta Sthapana). Accordingly, Nephew from the Paudel community from other place came and performed rituals. Since then the settlement started. The people living there are the 6th or 7th descendants of the oldest residents.

5. Socio-economic Factor

There is a multidimensional relation between people, society and vernacular architecture. Pelunga is also a self-sufficient community which holds a ambient environment among the people and community. The way people live, work and play are determined by the geography and the environment in which they live. The social dimension of the community is studied as follows:

5.1. Ownership

The property (house and land) are owned by the occupants themselves. In present scenario, new constructions of houses are growing so the rental population is also increasing in the village. The rental households accounts for 7.1% where as in 92.3% of household occupants are the owners. Additionally, 0.6% of homes are vacant and abandoned.

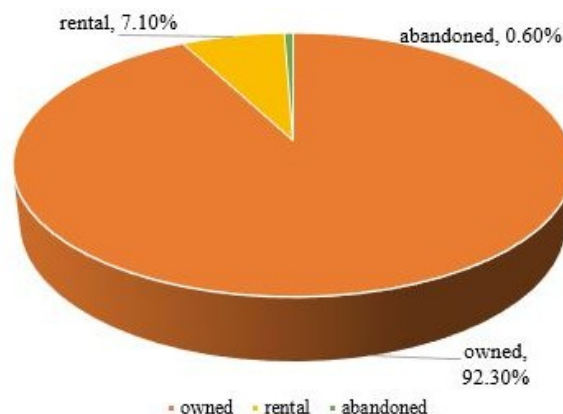


Figure 2: Ownership status

5.2. Economy

The majority of the economy of the village is based on subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry and bee keeping in few cases. People make a living by selling goat, milk of cow and buffalo in neighboring settlements. The major production of the area is wheat, maize and barley. Despite the agricultural land, people own small kitchen garden near their house for growing vegetables and fruits. The male members are incharge for taking care of cattles and female members after completing their domestic chores go to field to graze their cattle. Both male and female members are engaged in agricultural works. Villagers are normally in their houses in early morning and evening only. During day time, kids attend school. Some people are also engaged in services like teaching in the school. Also remittance is optional source of income in the village.

5.3. Family Structure

The majority of households are made up of nuclear families, which typically include four to five individuals, however there are also some homes with joint families with six to ten members and extended family consisting up to 14 members. When a family grows, either a new house is constructed or sleeping quarters known as "Dhansar" are occupied for sleeping.

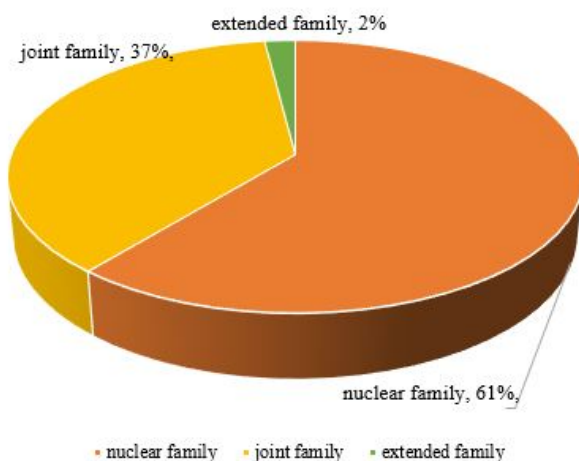


Figure 3: Family structure

5.4. Cast/Ethnicity

The village is primarily inhabited by Subedi caste however Poudel, Ojha, Sapkota and Bhusal are present in a small proportion. The Brahmin ethnic group makes up more over 80% of the population, followed by the Chettri and magars National Statistics Office, 2021. The Subedi caste is split into Brahmin and Chettri groups. According to villagers when a man from a Subedi caste marries a girl from chettri caste, they are considered into chettri ethnic group Dahal, 2003.

5.5. Migration

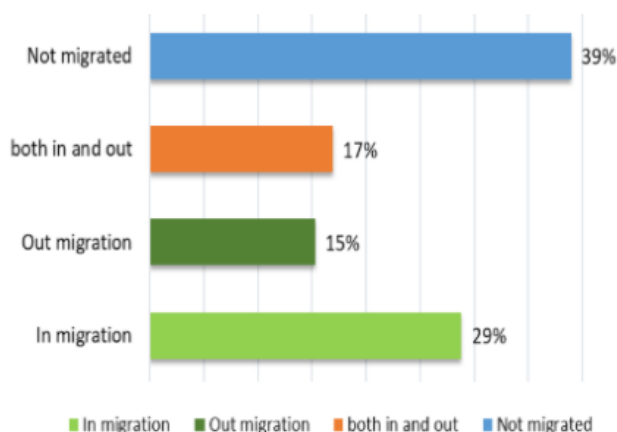


Figure 4: Migration

The scenario depicts that in 61% of the household the family members have moved to different cities in Nepal (Pokhara, Kathmandu) and occasionally abroad (Malaysia, Qatar) to pursue their education or careers. This has led to a situation where the age group residing in the community is

grandparents and grandchildren. The survey indicates that the majority of age range of the village's residents is 45 to 55. In 39% of household the family members have not migrated outside village.

5.6. Rituals and Festivals

Early in the morning, Villagers worship Tulsi which is mandatorily found in the east direction in the frontyard of every household. The main ceremony in the community is Kul Devta puja which is celebrated at the end of Falgun. On this day the elderly people of the community hold the idol of main goddess (kul devta) and takes to the Kul Devta Mandir with all ritual and procession. On this day people refrain from eating salt. Kul Devta puja is typically held annually but since few years it is done every three or five years, depending on the community's shared understanding. Each household takes turns being in charge of puja. Majority of population celebrate Dashain and Tihar and other major festival other being Janai Purnima, Maghe Sankranti, etc.

6. Settlement Pattern

There are 40–50 rectangular homes and 14 "Ghumaune Ghar," which are dispersed across the population pattern, in the designated area for research of Pelunga Village. The Chhetri family is the next largest ethnic group, after the Brahmins. The residences are situated toward the southeast, following the sloping topography. The landform at lower level, which can be reached on foot in about fifteen minutes, is a home to the grazing and agricultural land, while the residential sections are situated at its higher level. The farmland is a valley with hills all around it.

6.1. Street Network

The major entrance to the village is via the black-topped road (Virchowk Mohariya Road), which is located at the highest point in the settlement. In the current situation, the settlement is separated into four halves by four parallel vehicle roads that run along the east-west axis as in Figure 6. The pedestrian walkways (goreto bato), which run along a north-south axis, are one meter wide and link to the vehicular lanes at different points. Although a mid-level automobile road currently splits the settlement into its upper (northern) and lower (southern) sections, the hamlet can only be reached by pedestrian pathways.

6.2. Orientation of Houses

The houses in the village are oriented southward in accordance with the land's slope. The residential complexes are located perpendicular to the pedestrian path which provides a sense of privacy to the household. Based on their shapes, the two types of vernacular dwellings can be found in the area. The two types of houses are rectangular and oval.



Figure 5: North view of village

6.3. Social Spaces

The 'Chautara' at the entrance point of village is the meeting spot for the residents every evening. which is at top of village near main road. The Durga temple located at the top of the village marks the entrance of the village. Every dwelling unit has a frontyard (Agan) that is able to host mini feasts and get together on its own. The community meeting is held in Thumki's "Shree Shibalaya Secondary School."

7. Residential Complex

The houses are accessed by narrow road (Goreto bato). The premises of dwelling units are accessed by main gate (Tagaro). Each house consists of open space or frontyard in front of house called Aagan with Tulsi plant at east direction. Aagan also consists up space for tap and dishwashing. Premises consists of cattle shed, storage for firewood, dhansar, bari, and toilet which is separated from main house. Cattle shed (especially goat) is attached to oval house and may be provided separate from house and a separate shed for cows and buffalos is provided. Dhansar is a 2 storey of rectangular shaped where topography allows lower ground floor for cattle shed and ground floor for sleeping accommodation and for storage for grains). The prominent unit is the oval house in the settlement.

8. Oval House (Ghumaune Ghar)

8.1. Ground Floor

The entrance to the house is patent by the main door (Mul Dhoka) at south which is passed from the semicovered space (Pidhi). Pidhi is front portion of house with raised plinth, resting on wooden post (Kham) and with thatch (Khar) as a roofing material. This place is zoned as a space to receive guests and functions as a discussion space among family members and villagers. The another small secondary door from Pidhi leads to the animal barn (a shelter for goat). In the Pidhi we can see a small bench and a straw mat (Gundri) for resting and sleeping purpose as well. Also a provision of Jato- grindstone is facilitated in Pidhi for grinding lentils and grain.

The main door (Mul Dhoka) leads to open hall/room which is used for kitchen, living and sleeping purpose. Though the partition walls do not divide the space, the flooring can be seen in different levels raised to mark the space according to its use. The floor is divided into various space like Vancha (for cooking), Gagreto (for resting water vessels), Shinkawa (for sleeping), Majheri (gathering). Ground floor consists of small opening in the form of hole in the wall just above cooking space which acts as an exhaust for kitchen. Besides, ground floor consists of one small window in the south wall near Shinkhawa. A small wooden stair (Leshnu) leads to first floor. The storage space is managed by hanging things in nails nailed to the wooden post or wall. The kitchen utensils and equipments are stored

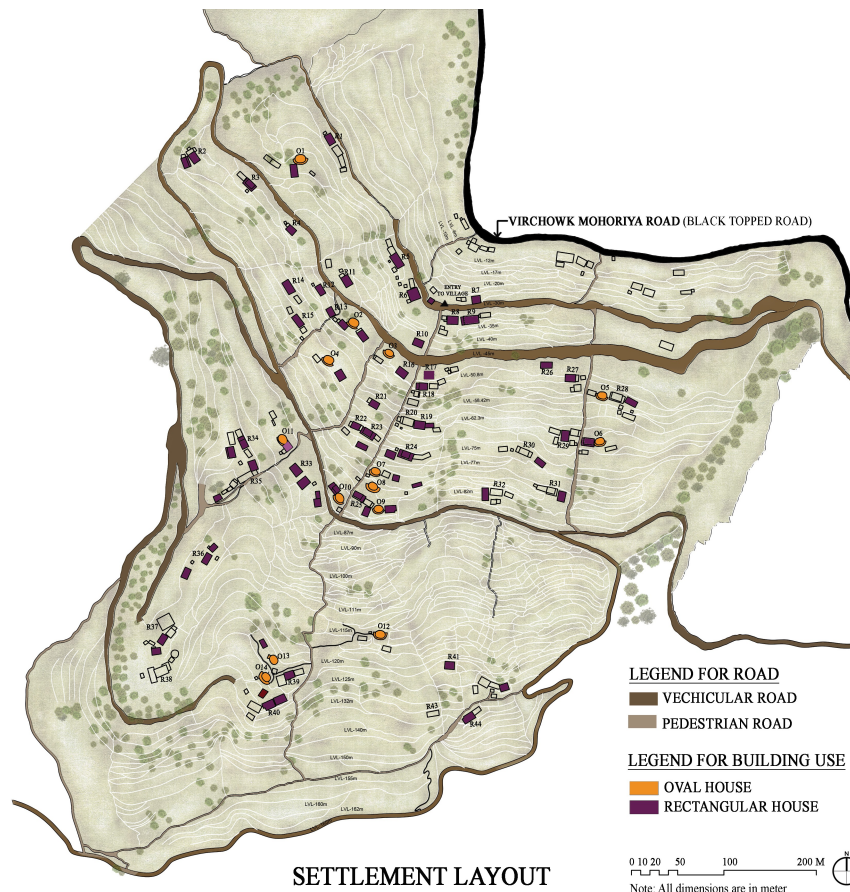


Figure 6: Settlement layout of the village

in the wooden plank above cooking space supported by wooden battens.

8.2. First Floor

A small wooden stair (Leshnu) leads to first floor which is used as a storage space of grains, maize etc. The grains are stored in Bhakari (a cylindrical large vessels prepared of mat). The first floor consists of 3 small opening in the south wall for ventilation. The roofing also consists of 2 opening in the form of void for ventilation in the rear side.

8.3. Construction Technology and Building Material

8.3.1 Foundation

The foundation material of two storied Ghumaune is mud and stone. According to the resident and folklore, the foundation goes below 0.5m to 0.6m. The central tham (wooden post) rest on a stone base. The wooden post 6 to 7 number of wooden posts supports the upper structure.

8.3.2 Wall

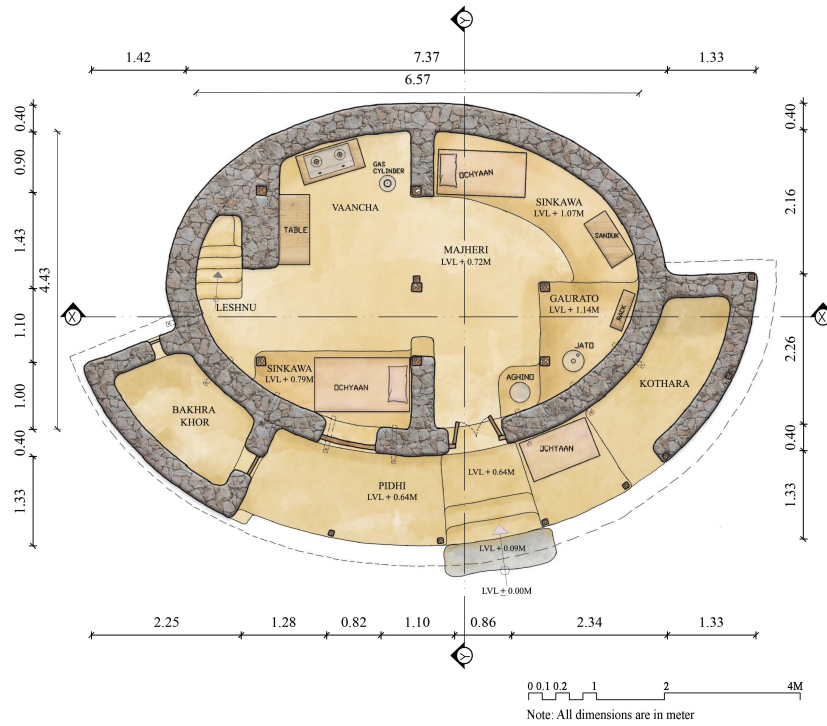
The thickness of the stone wall is 0.4 to 0.45 m. The flat stones are stacked with mud mortar. The walls are plastered with mud both internally and externally.

8.3.3 Flooring

The floor height in the oval houses normally is 2.06 For the structural purpose wooden beam and rafter are used. Over the structural member bamboo splits are laid over to ease the red mud flooring. Usually, the mud floors are repainted every week or on special occasions.

8.3.4 Roofing

The roof at an inclination (approximately 35-degree slope) is the interesting element of the oval house consisting of small opening at the rear side. The structural members are the wooden ridge beam, purlins and rafters which rest over stone wall. The thatch is laid over the structural member.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



VANCHA

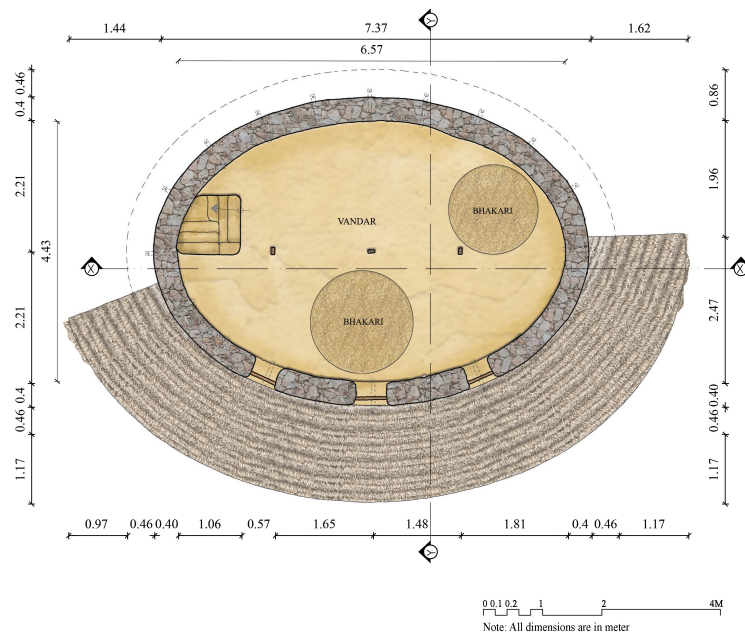


SINKAWA

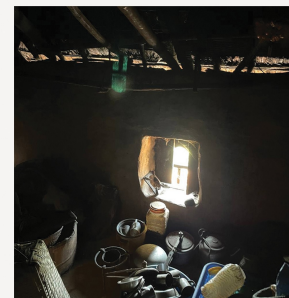


AGHINO

Figure 7: Ground floor plan



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

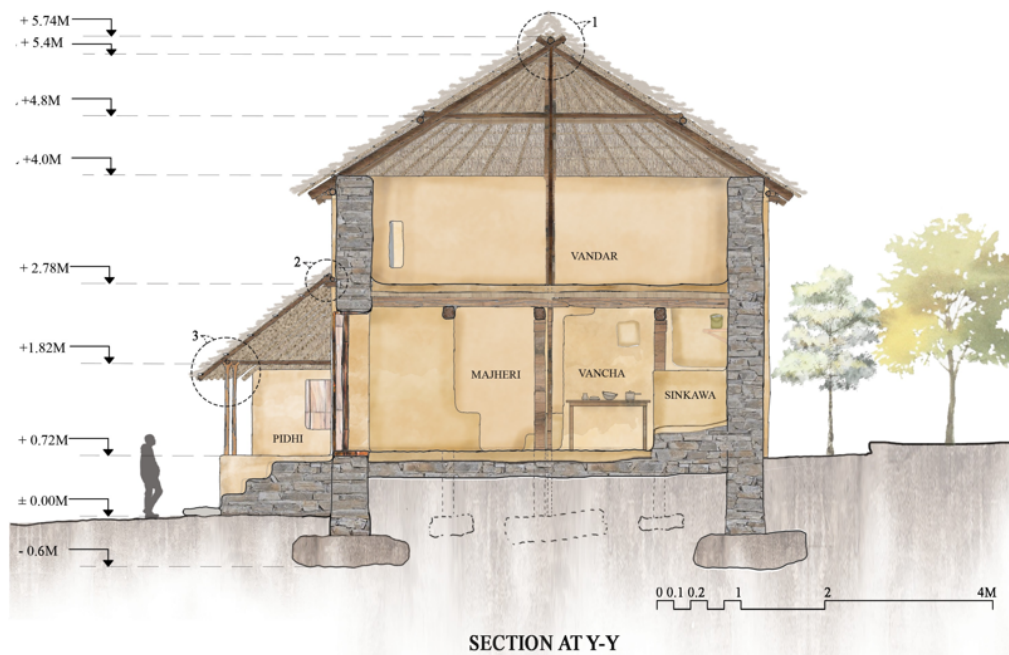


VANDAR

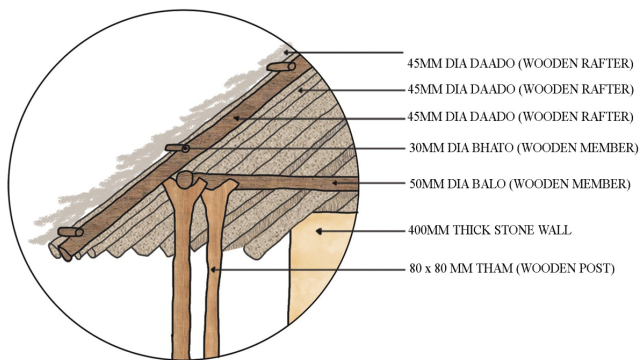


VANDAR

Figure 8: First floor plan

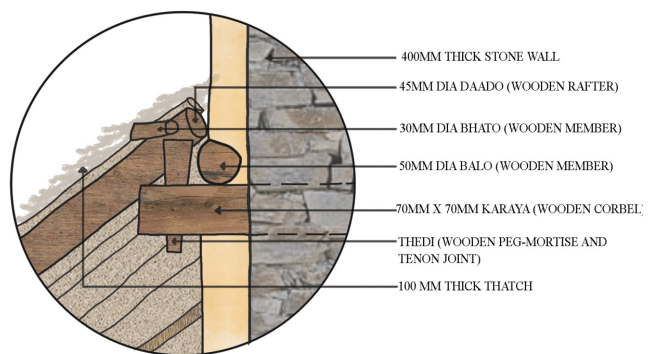


(a)



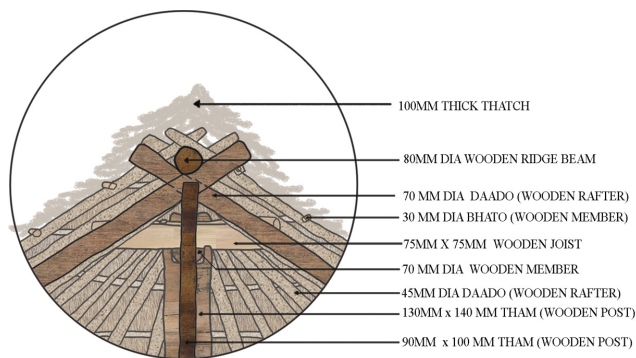
DETAIL AT 3

(b)



DETAIL AT 2

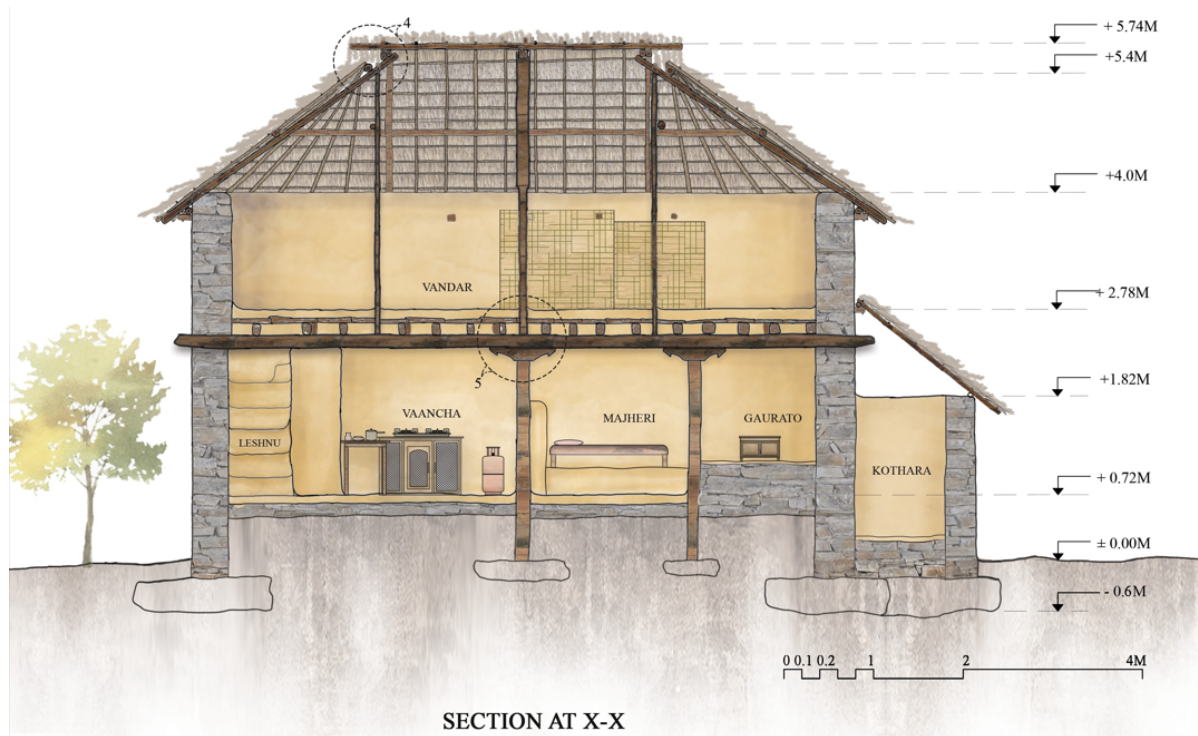
(c)



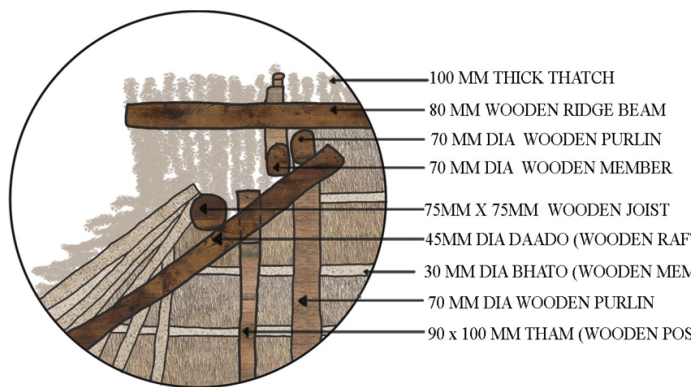
DETAIL AT 1

(d)

Figure 9: Section at Y-Y: (a) Overall section, (b) Detail at 1, (c) Detail at 2, and (d) Detail at 3

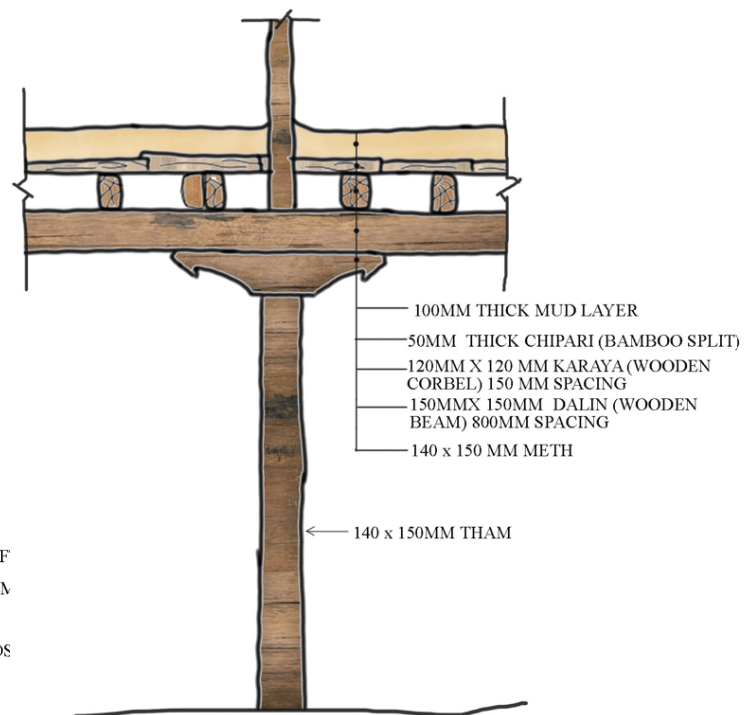


(a)



DETAIL AT 4

(b)



DETAIL AT 5

(c)

Figure 10: Section at X-X: (a) Overall section, (b) Detail at 1, and (c) Detail at 2

8.4. Facade

The form of the house strongly stand out as a distinctive feature in architecture of village. The minimalistic red mud plastered façade adds beauty to the building. The raised plinth, semi covered Pidhi and elegant thatch roof governs the beauty of the building. The 3 rows of simple wooden windows at first floor add beauty to the house.

9. Conclusion

The vernacular architecture of Pelunga village is shaped in accordance to geography, topography, site, climate of hilly region that address the orientation and oval form of house. The spaces in the building follow the utilitarian design with societal need like daily life style and tradition, economic activities and cultural norms. The use of local building materials and construction technology with the involvement of local manpower are sustainable practices in the village. The vernacular building house not only meets functional aspect but is very thermally comfortable

In recent time, since young generation has started migrating we can see the knowledge has not been transferred to next generation. People do not find skilled manpower to repair and build the traditional houses making it imperative to document vernacular architecture is very important.

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