Reconstituting Hmong Culture and Traditions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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The experience of refugee populations, driven from their homes and into foreign lands, represents a force of globalization that is prompting both spatial and cultural transformation. For refugees, however, attempts to reconstitute and re-embed culture and traditions in new environments provide an important way to arrest cultural stress. Using Amos Rapoport’s culture-core model, this article analyzes efforts by Hmong immigrants to reterritorialize their culture and traditions in Milwaukee’s inner city. It also points out how Milwaukee’s decayed urban fabric, layered by historical cycles of progress and decline, provides an example of how landscapes may offer a “loose fit,” supporting various modes of inhabitation by different cultural groups.

Since the Hart-Celler Act took effect in 1968 the immigrant population of many cities in the United States has become increasingly diverse. The act changed the composition of the U.S. immigrant population by abolishing national-origin quotas and Asia-Pacific Triangle exclusions and by prioritizing family reunification. As a result, while former generations of immigrants were mainly of European origin, new immigrants have increasingly arrived from Asia and Latin America.

In the last two decades, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, once known for its large population of European immigrants, has attracted a diverse new group of residents. And like European immigrants of the past, these non-Europeans are being transformed through acculturation within the city’s neighborhoods. Although Milwaukee has experienced periods of prosperity and decline, its commerce, industry, and physical structure continue to provide immigrants with opportunities to begin new lives. The physical layering of this history also continues to provide an open-ended framework for acculturation.

Immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and Central and South America, who make up the current wave, now inhabit many of the city’s inner areas. Today they have not only transformed these neighborhoods as physical environments, but they have adapted their enculturated socio-spatial practices to them. One such immigrant group, the Hmong, refugees from the political order established with the formation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in 1975, is the focus of this article.

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CHANGING CULTURE AND TRADITION AMONG IMMIGRANTS

The Hmong, like many other immigrant groups, have made a transnational journey in moving from Southeast Asia to the United States. However, unlike the majority of other recent immigrants, they arrived as refugees, “unable or unwilling to return to [their] country of origin because of persecution or well-founded fear of persecution.”4 The Hmong were forcefully uprooted — “pushed” from their country of origin — and experienced “profound social and cultural displacements, loss and trauma.”5 As such, they share a number of experiences with other refugee groups in the U.S. Among these experiences were prolonged and dangerous escapes, loss of kin, and lengthy periods in refugee camps. But the Hmong stand out from other Southeast Asians in the U.S. as Rapoport has written, they may be misread by outsiders.13

In his 2005 book *Culture, Architecture and Design*, Rapoport wrote that culture is “the way of life of a people, including ideals, norms, rules and routinized behaviors . . . that are transmitted symbolically across generations through the enculturation of children and the acculturation of immigrants.”14 Enculturation is the conditioning process through which children and youth gradually gain competence in their cultural context and learn to interpret codes for action and appropriate behavior. Popular traditions and patterns of activities, internalized through enculturation, inculcate rules and codes for appropriate spatial relationships and behavior. These rules dictate proper locations and relationships of various categories of people and objects in the physical environment. Acculturation is the process through which individuals adopt and assimilate the codes governing acceptable behaviors and activities of foreign cultures. For recent immigrants, enculturated codes are no longer adequate; at the same time, codes of the new culture cannot quickly nor wholly supplant them. In this interval of adjustment, the “conceptual distance” between an immigrant and a host culture can be a very important influence on pace and degree of acculturation — as important as the social structure of immigrant culture, the size of an immigrant group, and any discrimination engaged in by the host culture.6

Rapoport has pointed out that a person’s ethnic identity is crucial to his or her ideas of appropriate activities and social and spatial relationships in the residential environment. And, in order to understand the “popular traditions” transmitted through these social and cultural constructions of space, one must look at the actions of daily life, as well as ritual actions and spiritual beliefs.7 Embedded within environments, common physical and social patterns hold cues for appropriate action, and are understood by those enculturated in those environments. But, as Rapoport has written, they may be misread by outsiders.9

Extending Rapoport’s framework to examine findings from Milwaukee’s Hmong reveals that when an immigrant group arrives in a new culture, the popular traditions, cues and actions embedded in its previous environments no longer have physical foundations. The disorientation and sense of crisis attendant on this situation may impel efforts to reterritorialize culture and traditions in the new environment. In this regard, Renee Chow has demonstrated that certain physical environments may limit such efforts toward inhabitation in a more familiar, livable way, while others may facilitate them through their “loose or ambiguous fit.”10

In order to analyze relationships between the physical environment and efforts to reterritorialize culture and traditions within immigrant populations, culture and tradition must first be “disassembled” into observable manifestations (e.g., family and kinship structures, social roles and networks, status, identity, rituals and activities).11 These can then be studied, documented, and related to the physical environment. In relation to this effort, Rapoport’s “culture core” model proposes that in the process of cultural change, core elements are modified more slowly than peripheral elements.12 The cultural core is composed of those important characteristics that members use to define the group (e.g., language, religion, rituals, and family and kinship structures). Because peripheral elements change rapidly, while core elements change more slowly, a unique mixture of old and new elements may occur. Rather than hastening adaptation, cultural change may also strengthen elements of an immigrant culture, further distinguishing it from the host culture as a means to cope with cultural stress.13

HMONG EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE: CONTEXTUALIZING THE CORE

In order to study transformation and reterritorialization of culture and tradition among Hmong immigrants in Milwaukee, a brief examination of Hmong experience and culture, as well as of the physical setting of Hmong neighborhoods in Milwaukee, is necessary.
The Hmong who have resettled in the U.S. have traversed a great cultural divide. They are originally descended from the Miao people of southern China. Dispersal from southern China to other parts of Southeast Asia occurred primarily between 1800 and 1860. At this time, accounts suggest, the ruling power attempted to force the Hmong to conform to the dominant Chinese culture. The Hmong had a strong desire to maintain their ethnic identity, however, and they fled and resettled in remote highland areas of southern China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma. The high altitudes and dense forests here offered a refuge that allowed them to continue their traditional swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture.

The Hmong, who were exposed to both war and refugee-camp trauma during the years of conflict in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s, have been further challenged as refugees and immigrants. In moving from remote mountain villages to cities in the U.S., they have experienced an exceptionally great conceptual distance. Their highland lifestyle was originally disrupted because of alliances they made with governments and armies opposed to Indochina’s Communist regimes. And as their allies (notably the U.S.) pulled out of Southeast Asia in 1975, the Hmong were forced to hide in the jungles of Laos. After three years, many then fled to Thailand, where they remained in refugee camps until the late 1970s and 80s. At that time, changes in U.S. refugee policy enabled large-scale resettlement. Approximately 100,000 Hmong have now entered the U.S., most during the 1980s.

Initial resettlement policy dispersed refugees across the country to avoid concentrations that would impose burdens on local governments. Many refugees were sponsored by charitable and religious organizations that attempted to ease adaptation to life in the United States. But later, refugee-run self-help groups formed to sponsor new arrivals. Over time, the policy of diffused resettlement also gave way to family and clan reunification, and by 2000, secondary and tertiary migration had concentrated 83 percent of Hmong in three states: California (38.4 percent), Minnesota (24.7 percent), and Wisconsin (19.9 percent).

Milwaukee presents a particularly apt location to study Hmong immigrants. The 2000 Census showed that 8,430 individuals, 23.3 percent of Wisconsin’s Hmong population, lived in Milwaukee. Initially, the Hmong settled in Milwaukee’s near south and southwest sides (fig. 1). Here Hmong immigrants could access needed services such as the Lao Family Community Center. After initial settlement, however, some Hmong families entered Milwaukee’s Urban Homesteading Program and other homeownership programs on the near northwest side of the city, in the area surrounding Vliet Street, between 20th and 40th Streets. As a result, many Hmong homeowners now live on the near northwest side of the city, and Hmong-owned businesses have now opened along Vliet Street. This area, identified in Figure 1 as the Vliet Street Hmong enclave, is the setting for the present study.

In recent years, some Hmong have also purchased homes on Milwaukee’s far northwest side, in an area identified as the northwest Hmong enclave. The accompanying map of census tracts illustrates that while Hmong are dispersed across the city, there are a few areas of concentration: on the near south side, and north side in the Vliet Street Hmong enclave, and the northwest Hmong enclave (fig. 2).

The 32 participant households in this study provide a broad cross-section of the Hmong cultural group. Three primary characteristics were used to select these households: 1) household heads needed to be Hmong immigrants who entered the U.S. in 1975 or later; 2) households needed to be of low-to-moderate income, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s income guidelines for Milwaukee County; and 3) households needed to live in owner-occupied housing.

Rapoport’s definition of “core elements” was further used to frame and bound the analysis of study data. By applying his definition of “core elements” to the literature on the Hmong as an ethnic minority, in their homeland, as refugees, and as immigrants, three cultural characteristics emerged to provide an analytical foundation from which to observe expressions of traditional Hmong culture: 1) settlement, 2) family and kinship, and 3) religion.

**Settlement.** Traditionally, Hmong villages were located in remote jungles on the highest mountains in Laos. Hmong
wanted to live near clansmen with whom certain ritual ties were shared; but, because of exogamous marriage customs, they also wanted to live near people who were of other clans. Thus, though villages varied in size from six to ten households (sometimes expanding to a hundred households during the war), they were usually composed of more than one clan. The village headman, who dealt with government officials, was chosen and supported by village household heads. Villages existed more for protection than for social or economic purposes.

Family and Kinship. From birth to death, Hmong have traditionally been enmeshed in a web of kinship connections. Almost never acting independently, Hmong lived within layered relationships of kin. The clans (xeem), with their origins recorded in orally transmitted Hmong creation myths, united Hmong social, political and religious behavior. The presence of a number of kinship terms also indicates the great importance of these roles and relationships.

The term kwvtij, used by Hmong to describe relationships to blood relatives, also refers to the members of a man’s paternal lineage. Close physical proximity to kwvtij was important for mutual support and because traditions such as New Year (harvest) celebrations and specific rituals of death and burial distinguish between insiders and outsiders.

The extended-family household, tsev, was the primary social and economic unit; tsev neeg was the term by which members of a household referred to themselves. While the term may have been loosely applied to the physical environment of the home, it most strongly connected members emotionally and spiritually, even with ancestral spirits after death.

Tsev neeg maintains its order through respect for age. The symbols of the tsev neeg, the ancestral altar and ashes from the hearth, were brought along to maintain spiritual connections each time a Hmong household moved. It was through the tsev neeg that many familial and spiritual traditions, particularly concerning ancestors and appeasing spirits, were passed from generation to generation.

Religion. A third determinant of Hmong cultural life has been their religious beliefs. The Hmong who arrived in the U.S. were “a people steeped in animistic ritual, bounded by good and evil spirits to a way of life filled with the magical and mystical.” They had three identifiable, interwoven components in their traditional religious practice: animism, ancestor worship, and geomancy. Hmong animism viewed supernatural beings as involved in every aspect of life, most critically birth, death and sickness. Shamans (txiv neeb) could see and communicate with the spirit world, and thus were consulted in the event of illness or misfortune. Traditionally, Hmong also believed that specific spirits inhabited the structure and spaces of a house. On a special altar, the spirit of wealth protected all household members. Additionally, the Hmong practiced a form of geomancy (known as loojmen) when siting villages, houses, and the graves of ancestors. Strict criteria existed for following loojmen principles, for the placation of ancestor and other spirits to ensure the welfare of village and household inhabitants.

These Hmong settlement patterns, kinship and family structures, and religious beliefs are specific characteristics of traditional Hmong culture, and they helped distinguish Hmong from the many other ethnic groups in Laos. The preceding descriptions provide the foundation for the following consideration of Hmong immigrants and their relationship to the physical environment in Milwaukee.

RECONSTITUTING HMONG CULTURE AND TRADITIONS IN ONE MILWAUKEE HMONG ENCLAVE

The Hmong who have purchased homes in the area identified as the Vliet Street Hmong enclave have chosen to inhabit what Dell Upton might consider a landscape of decay. This neighborhood was one of Milwaukee’s ethnically homogeneous German enclaves in the early 1900s, but by 1990 it had become an integral component of Milwaukee’s “blighted Inner Core.”

Most of the houses in the area are “single-family detached frame cottages and double-decker two-family flats” constructed between 1888 and 1910. Built on long, narrow
blocks, divided into long, narrow lots, most sit on parcels which were 120 feet deep, with 30 to 40 feet of street frontage. By the early 1990s, with some dilapidated buildings giving way to vacant lots and others still offering the possibility of renovation, the neighborhood was ripe for transformation (fig. 3). Some Hmong immigrants saw an opportunity to house their large and extended families in this physical fabric of decay. Between the early 1990s and 2001, when this study was conducted, the Hmong population in the Vliet Street enclave increased substantially, allowing the Hmong there to reconstitute their culture and traditions in this “new world” of Milwaukee.

Hmong socio-spatial practices in the Vliet Street enclave clearly show the presence of a “reinterpreted” culture core. This has not involved a replication of the Hmong culture in Laos; among other changes, there have been substitutions and modifications to the kinship structure and reinterpretation of established socio-spatial patterns and traditions. Comparisons with study data from households in Milwaukee’s northwest Hmong enclave also suggest the Hmong in Milwaukee are not a monolithic group. Study findings do indicate, however, that Hmong who choose to buy houses and remain in the Vliet Street enclave do so because it offers a place to re-create, as far as possible, the enculturated order by which Hmong have traditionally understood their place relative to others, to the spirit world, and to the physical environment.

The study participants living in the Vliet Street enclave further indicated that they specifically chose to live in an area with concentrations of persons of their own cultural group. This is not unique to Hmong in Milwaukee, or to Hmong in general. Cultural and ethnic enclaves abound in cities in the U.S. Enclaves provide immigrants with a retreat, a place of comfort, and a place where they can access needed resources. Rapoport has argued that discord or avoidance can result from fine-grained social heterogeneity; people prefer to retreat to secure places — in this case, an enclave of some number of blocks that “belong” to the Hmong. For this group of Hmong, however, the desire to live around other Hmong also stems from the fact that they only trust other Hmong to ensure their safety and survival, an attitude resulting from their experiences during wartime and as refugees.

Another benefit of the enclave is that, as in other areas with large Hmong concentrations, Hmong residents can easily read nonverbal cues and act appropriately. Study participants said they trusted that, because they understood their culture and customs, other Hmong would unconditionally accept them when they lived side by side. They are aware that non-Hmong might perceive some practices associated with Hmong traditional worship as immoral or even criminal. Unlike those outside the culture, for example, Hmong do not criticize the size of other Hmong households or wonder at the fact that two nuclear families might live together in the same household. Also, Hmong do not pass judgment on those Hmong men who continue the traditional practice of polygyny. Hmong feel that in neighborhoods with high concentrations of other Hmong, they are free to be themselves and live the way they want to. According to one practicing polygynist:

*It doesn’t really matter where I live so long as the people around are Hmong. . . . I wanted to live in this area because many Hmong have bought the houses here. . . . This is a good place to live because this whole block of houses is owned by Hmong. That makes me feel like I belong here. People don’t care who lives with me. They accept me.*
Thus it is that Hmong find that living adjacent to other Hmong reduces the possibility of conflict and provides a retreat where they can engage in activities that are distinctly of their own culture. When this refuge is not available, problems can develop. In particular, nearly all Hmong have had contentious encounters with African Americans in their present or previous neighborhoods. One mother of seven explained:

I did not like the neighbors here because where we lived before there were many African Americans. They made us feel unwelcome because they tried to beat us up. We were afraid to go outside. . . . We felt unsafe. . . . The African Americans have hurt us. . . . There are fewer African Americans living here now but because I still remember their violence from the past, I do not want to live near them.

More than 50 percent of Hmong study participants suggested that African Americans discriminate against or target Hmong specifically for vandalism, theft, and in a few cases, violent personal crime. Another Hmong study participant described this sense of being targeted:

There were many blacks there then. They threw rocks at our car. We were afraid. They did not make us feel safe. . . . They kept destroying our property. They did it because we were Hmong. . . . Now it feels much better because there are fewer blacks here and more Hmong, so the neighborhood feels much safer.

As a result of such experiences, many of the study participants said they limited interactions with African Americans in the neighborhood. While Hmong and African Americans are the two largest populations in the Vliet Street enclave, some Hmong also said they had conflicts with other non-Hmong neighbors. These usually have resulted from the practice of traditional Hmong religion, noise, and parking congestion during Hmong gatherings, or noise created by Hmong children.

The Vliet Street enclave identified as a desirable place to live contains several Hmong subclans that have reconstituted themselves through secondary and tertiary migration (e.g., Vang, Xiong). In fact, nearly two-thirds of the study participants had moved from their place of initial resettlement to Milwaukee to reconstruct kinship ties. A 36-year-old father of five (an advisor to clan elders) noted, “The house was abandoned and boarded up. That represented an opportunity to look into. Often these houses sell for very little because someone just wants to get rid of them.”

However, because most Hmong came with few resources, homeownership was not a possibility when they first arrived. Further, as seen above, the reunion of clans and subclans took time. In due course, however, younger clan members acting as advisors to Hmong elders (the traditional clan leaders), recognized that Milwaukee’s inner-city neighborhoods offered opportunities for the creation of cultural and family security and growth.31 Indicative of this, one 35-year-old father of five (an advisor to clan elders) noted, “The house was abandoned and boarded up. That represented an opportunity to look in to. Often these houses sell for very little because someone just wants to get rid of them.”

What the Hmong realized was that these inner-city neighborhoods had many rundown and vacant buildings, which the Hmong could use as places to reestablish themselves and re-create their close-knit kinship structure. With the assistance of the city’s community development office and the Landmark Housing Corporation, Hmong have been able to purchase rundown houses, like the one shown in Figure 3, and make them habitable. Typical have been the views of one 38-year-old mother of seven: “There was opportunity in this part of Milwaukee, the opportunity to own a house. Also the houses around here are much bigger than in other parts of Milwaukee.”

The importance of close physical proximity to relatives, noted above, has a number of benefits for the Hmong. It allows easy resource sharing, assistance with daily tasks, shared childcare, and provision of comfortable surroundings. Close relatives form the primary social contacts for nearly all Hmong in the study group. One 32-year-old father of six provided the information represented in the accompanying map showing the distribution of his relatives (Fig. 4). He
described his choice to move from Milwaukee’s south side to the near northwest side to live by more relatives:

I wanted to live here because my uncle lives on one side and [when I bought my house] my brother bought the house on the other side of me. Also, most of my relatives were here, and I am related to most people [40 households in eight blocks] in the neighborhood.

Figure 4 suggests the density of kin that many Hmong have been able to accomplish by buying a house in the Vliet Street enclave.

Homeownership in such enclaves also allows Hmong to improve household well-being by providing a sense of belonging and permanent connection in a safe and comfortable environment. This sense of belonging is a complex mosaic of social connections and physical relationships. For Hmong, life near a concentration of people related to them (the kwvtij) is inextricably linked to the need to have control over that place. In Syracuse, New York, K.L. Monzel noted that Hmong feel attachment to a group of people larger than their nuclear family.

A Hmong person’s home or place of belonging is where his/her parents or kwvtij [several generations of male cousins] live. All males descended from one male ancestor belong to the same kwvtij, forming the strongest social bond of the Hmong. In practice, the kwvtij would only include two or three generations of men who felt particularly close to each other and chose to reside and work together. The kwvtij provides for the containment of souls within the family. Hmong believe that at death one of a person’s [three] souls is reincarnated in another descendant of the kwvtij. Because of this recycling of souls within the family, it is important to give birth within a house belonging to the kwvtij so the familial house spirit will protect the child and the [reincarnated] soul that will be called into its body a few days after birth.

Not all reasons for Hmong attachment to the kwvtij are culture specific, however. Hmong feel attachment to the kwvtij in some of the same ways that Americans often feel attachment to the physical aspects of a place. Monzel found in Syracuse that members of a kwvtij often lived in houses closely clustered in the same neighborhood. In discussing homeownership,
Hmong participants in the Milwaukee study emphasized their feelings of belonging not only to their extended family and kwvtij, but also, by association, to the physical location (city and neighborhood) where these relatives have clustered. Two brothers, who live one block from each other, talk about family ties, belonging and staying in Milwaukee:

When I first moved to Milwaukee, I began to feel it was a place I belonged because my brothers and their families are all here now. . . . Milwaukee is a place where I will stay permanently. Us four brothers came together to live here. . . . Family ties will cause me not to move even when I have the opportunity to move. (42-year-old head of extended-family household, older brother)

I felt that owning a house would make me feel like I belonged in Milwaukee, because Milwaukee is where my family is [parents and brothers]. We all decided we would come here to live. Because family is here, it is where I belong and so it is important to own property, a house. (36-year-old father of four, younger brother)

Within extended families, older and younger brothers have frequently been able to purchase nearby houses and regenerate the extended-family household, albeit in a new and somewhat more autonomous form. Among study participants, several pairs of brothers had purchased side-by-side houses. Such situations have allowed Hmong immigrants to reinterpret the relationship between kin, family and household, and to relate generation to generation, generation to physical environment, and family member to family member in a variety of ways. The following statement and the accompanying images illustrate one such case (Figs. 5, 6):

Before I bought this house, I lived in my brother's house next door. When we first moved there, it was just my brother, his new wife, my mom, my other brother, and me. After my other brother and I got married and started having kids it seemed a little small [four bedrooms]. . . . We could have lived in the two downstairs units and my older brother live upstairs, but I wanted to buy this house because it was right next to my brother's house. It has always been an abandoned, vacant [burned out] house the whole time we lived there and it was in a good location for us. . . . The City gave us some trouble because they said I didn't have enough money to fix the house up [because it was burned out upstairs] but my brothers and I figured out how to do it. . . . Now I live here with my children and my other brother lives in the unit downstairs with his family, and my older brother lives in the upstairs of his house with his wife and my mom. . . . Living so close to my brothers makes it easy for my mom to go back and forth. It is easy for us to help each other out. . . . Our whole family wanted to be able to stay together, to have our children grow up together, to have a place for our mother to stay. . . . If I bought it [this house] we could all live together on this piece of land. It would make life easier, and we could all help each other out. Also, it would make it good for our mom because she could easily move back and forth between the houses and live with all of her family together in one place. We could all look out for her and she would be there to help with everybody's children. (32-year-old head of extended-family household)

Homeownership creates long-term security for Hmong, as it does for other cultures. But for the Hmong it also provides a culturally necessary social-physical and spiritual linkage. Thus, “belonging” is first to people, but also to place, because the “spirit” of the kwvtij must have a permanent place to dwell. The cohesiveness of the social unit of the household comes from its permanence in relationship to the physical place, and hence also to spiritual stability:

It is important to Hmong to own a house. Every family should own a house. If you do not own a house you are not a family. . . . It is important for a family to belong to their house. . . . It is an important Hmong value that house and family go together. A Hmong family must have a house to be a family. The family spirit, the family soul, dwells in the house [the familial house spirit of the kwvtij]. If we do not own the house, the spirit will have nowhere to stay and be happy. . . . (54-year-old, father of six)

This need to tie spirit to place through homeownership in order to achieve “belonging” is a unique product of Hmong traditional culture. But it has now been overlaid by Hmong refugee experience and the influence of mainstream American cultural norms. In Laos, prior to being uprooted as refugees, although Hmong did not own property, they had control over their physical and social environment. Therefore, the “permanence” of ownership was not necessary to the traditional Hmong sense of control. In Hmong culture, kwvtij moved from place to place to find fertile soil. But in the U.S. the need for permanence now also stems from the loss and dis-orientation so many Hmong feel as a result of their experience as refugees. It is only through feeling settled in a place that Hmong imagine they can regain what was lost when they were forced from Laos:

I have always had a strong feeling to own a house is important in order to be rooted. . . . Having a place to call home is important in making you feel like you belong here. Here we had the opportunity to buy a house and had a good job. . . . Owning a house lets you put down roots. Our lives before coming here [to the U.S.] were unpredictable and unsafe. We had not felt like we belonged anywhere for years and had nothing to call our own. (32-year-old head of extended-family household)
Figure 5. (left) Drawing illustrating organization of extended family within the “family compound,” created when brothers purchased adjacent buildings as well as adjacent vacant lots.

Figure 6. (below) Image of the family compound from the street.
Hmong know they may never return to Laos, so they try to establish themselves in the same city and neighborhood as their kwvtij, to make a place where they belong. In so doing, they allow for (indeed, perhaps require) the reconstitution of their culture and the reinterpretation of their tradition in a new time and place.

For the Hmong, regrouping in Milwaukee has allowed regeneration of kinship structure, rebuilding of extended-family networks, and property ownership. This has allowed the Hmong there to find roots in a new, different, very urban place. As seen above, Hmong kinship ties have aided in the process of survival and adaptation in the United States. However, this Hmong reliance on kin and the creation of an ethnic enclave are not solely for pragmatic purposes. The Hmong also have a deep-seated need for ethnic homogeneity, which is linked to the great conceptual distance between the worldview that underpins their traditions and the worldviews typical of mainstream U.S. culture.

Identity-affirming traditions were also seen as particularly necessary by Hmong study participants, especially religious ceremonies and celebrations. Hmong religious practices differ substantially from those of the dominant culture. But in the enclave established around Vliet Street, household and shamanic practices of spirit worship are possible, where they had not been in some other places of prior resettlement. For example, when Hmong reconstitute kwvtij and extended family households, they reestablish the ancestral altar, and for the households of shaman, the shaman’s altar finds its home (Fig. 7).

Hmong who continue to practice their traditional religion (including some who consider themselves Christian) engage in two types of rituals to ensure the spiritual health of the household. First, ordinary Hmong perform rituals in their homes, intended to nourish ancestral spirits so that the spirits have the strength to guard souls of household members from the evil spirits that would otherwise appropriate their souls and cause illness and misfortune. Home rituals also are held to summon a baby’s soul after birth and at the New Year to revive the soul of the spirit who guards the front door. These ceremonies often involve animal sacrifice and gathering of large groups of relatives. Second, shamans are called when healing of the soul is required, because Hmong believe shamans can intercede in the spirit world to affect a cure. The rituals of shamans engaged in retrieving wandering souls entail entry into a trance at the sound of a gong, the use of finger bells, and the sacrifice of a pig or chickens. The soul of the animal is then substituted for that of the wandering human soul. The noise and animal sacrifice associated with these rituals have created notable conflict with non-Hmong neighbors.

I just feel more comfortable with more Hmong in the neighborhood and less Americans and African Americans, because I worry that non-Hmong people might call the police on us when the shaman is performing traditional ceremonies that involve killing chickens or pigs. Non-Hmong people might think there was something wrong with doing that as part of a ceremony. This is a really big problem for Hmong and why we should live together.

**Figure 7.** Places for Hmong traditional religious rituals — Shaman's Altar in living room with strings linking it to front door so spirits can travel from door to the altar. Family altar to the right.
The problem is indeed serious, as traditions associated with religion and spirit worship figured heavily in the ethnic identities of Hmong in Laos. It is true that some diminution of religious exclusivity has occurred; only fifteen of the thirty-two study participants (47 percent) indicated that they currently exclusively follow traditional Hmong religion and spirit worship. Nonetheless, all the study participants except one indicated that they engaged in rituals and celebrations associated with the Hmong traditional religion, because these activities ensured household health and preserved and transmitted Hmong culture to younger generations. Reliance on the traditional Hmong worldview in times of illness and misfortune, particularly by Hmong who consider themselves Christian, suggests the deep imbedding of this cultural characteristic in Hmong consciousness. Thus it is clear that Hmong revere tradition in kinship and family ties, and that they perform rituals and celebrations of their animist beliefs even in new locations as a means to reconstitute their society. Though delinked from traditional locations, these remain a way to re-create an understandable cultural order.

ENVIRONMENTS SUPPORTIVE OF RE-EMBEDDING AND RETERRITORIALIZING CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

In discussing sites where scholars might study “The Tradition of Change” in the vernacular environments, Upton urged:

We should turn our attention away from a search for the authentic, the characteristic, the enduring and the pure, and immerse ourselves in the active, the evanescent and the impure, seeking settings that are ambiguous, multiple, often contested, and examining points of contact and transformation — in the market, at the edge, in the new and the decaying.

The area around Vliet Street where the Hmong first began to purchase houses in the early 1990s is one of those places Upton points to. It provides an example of a physical setting characterized by ambiguity and decay that became a point of transformation both in its physical and cultural dimensions. In regenerating core cultural characteristics and reconstituting Hmong culture and traditions to fit the urban fabric here, the Hmong have reinterpreted their culture and traditions to ease the process of acculturation. In the inner-city neighborhoods of Milwaukee, Hmong leaders have found a decaying environment ripe with assets for regenerating Hmong society, albeit completely different in physical terms from the mountaintop villages where they began their refugee journey.

Even if Milwaukee’s near northwest neighborhoods had suffered decades of neglect and disinvestment, they still presented favorable conditions for the Hmong. Many in Milwaukee saw the abandoned and boarded-up duplexes originally built to house German immigrants between 1888 and 1910 and the vacant lots resulting from demolition of decayed or burnt-out houses as eyesores. But the characteristics of these buildings fit with the more flexible kinship and household structures typical of the Hmong (FIG. 8). The price and availability of the buildings also meshed with the socioeconomic conditions that most Hmong clans faced. By taking advantage of the opportunity presented by conditions resulting from decades of Milwaukee’s layered physical history, the Hmong have been able to create a more supportive environment to ease the effects of rapid cultural change. Ultimately, this change can be tied to globalization. As Jacobs wrote, “Globalization is marked by a peculiar set of transformations, many of which are explicitly spatial.”

![Figure 8. Large two-and-one-half-story duplexes built for German Immigrants between 1888 and 1910, rehabilitated by Hmong immigrants in the 1990s.](image)
example of Hmong refugees presented here demonstrates one such instance of transformation. It also reveals dimensions of cultural adaptation and change and of dynamic traditions which have been re-embedded in a new context as a means, in a sense, to arrest cultural stress.

In 1983 Rapoport proposed the use of the construct of a culture core as a means for architects to design environments “which modulate [cultural] stress by modulating rates of [cultural] change, thus providing time for creative synthesis of cultures to occur . . . to discover what would be supportive environments in any given case.”40 In 2005 he addressed similar issues in design, writing, “designs need to respond to ‘culture,’ i.e., be culture specific.”41 However, this landscape of decay in Milwaukee’s inner city suggests a slightly different precedent for designers. This is what Chow has called “the loose or ambiguous fit,” and Rapoport has labeled “open-ended design.”42

The example of the Hmong experience in Milwaukee suggests that rather than designing supportive environments anew for groups experiencing rapid culture change in the current age of globalization, we should look at what exists in the physical fabric of history and decay. The example suggests that the physical environment need not be designed as highly culture specific, but rather should offer a loose fit that provides cues for multiple modes of inhabitation. Taking this track, designers and planners might embrace decaying environments as places of opportunity. Because of their layering of historical cycles of progress and decline, these environments present a framework that can be supportive for many cultural groups, in part because of their lack of specificity.

The example of refugees presented here, for whom Rapoport indicates supportive environments are particularly critical, demonstrates that some of these environments already exist.43 That Hmong immigrants have chosen to purchase houses and live in the Vliet Street enclave suggests that the physical characteristics of that environment offer Hmong households an environment supportive of the re-embedding and reterritorializing their culture and traditions.

REFERENCE NOTES

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9. Rapoport, “Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design.”
11. “Conceptual distance” literally means the measure of separation between the general ideas or understandings of, in this case, two different cultures. Rapoport applies the term to describe differences in the way cultural groups organize and relate to the physical and social environment. A. Rapoport, “Nomadism as a Man-Environment System,” Environment and Behavior, Vol.10 No.2 (1978), pp.215–46; and Rapoport, “Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design.”
12. The term “popular traditions” is used by Peter Marcuse to categorize traditions that stem from common people and which are associated with “tradition” in traditional environments. He distinguishes these from “traditions of power.” P. Marcuse, “Tradition in a Global City?” Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review, Vol.17 No.2 (2006), pp.7–18.
15. A. Rapoport, Culture, Architecture and Design.


21. Hmong comprise 0.92 percent of Milwaukee County’s population.


30. Rapoport, “Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design.”

31. The Milwaukee process is not unique. Other examples of places in which clan leaders have reconstituted kinship groups include the Blue Ridge Mountains around Morganton, North Carolina; Sacramento, California; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Hmong resettlement has proven more successful in places like rural Morganton, North Carolina, where characteristics of the environment provide support for a reconstituted set of traditions. See E. Sheehan, “‘Greens’ Hmong Gardens, Farms and Land Ownership in America: Constructing Environment and Identity in the Carolinas,” Lao Study Review 1, Global Lao Net (1997), accessed March 23, 2004, at http://www.global.lao.net/laostudy/garden.htm.


37. Rapoport, “Development, Culture Change and Supportive Design.”


All photos and drawings are by the author unless otherwise noted.