

## **Sociology of Meitei Architecture: Unpacking the Interplay between Culture, Tradition, and Modernization**

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### **Abstract:**

Meitei architecture, a reflection of the community's cultural identity, stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Traditional building practices, rooted in history, mythology, and nature, face the challenges of modernization. This tension permeates various aspects of Meitei society, from language and script to festivals and customs.

Traditional Meitei architecture embodies cultural heritage and community values, symbolizing the people's deep connection to their traditional beliefs, ancestors, and cultural legacy. However, modernization and urbanization threaten to erode this cultural identity. In contrast, modernity brings opportunities for innovation and sustainability.

This study explores the complex interplay between culture, tradition, and modernization in Meitei architecture. It examines how traditional practices can be revitalized and reinterpreted to create buildings that reflect the community's cultural identity while embracing modernity's benefits. The research investigates the historical and cultural context of Meitei architecture, analysing the impact of modernization on traditional building practices. It also explores case studies of successful fusion of traditional and modern elements in architecture.

Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights into the preservation of Meitei cultural heritage through architecture, ensuring its survival for future generations. By documenting and analysing Meitei architectural traditions, this research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural preservation and sustainable development in indigenous communities. The findings of this study will inform strategies for balancing cultural continuity and modernization in Meitei society.

**Keywords:** Meitei architecture, culture, tradition, modernization, cultural heritage, sustainability

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## Introduction

The rapid urbanization and Westernization of Meitei society in Manipur, India, pose significant challenges to the preservation of traditional architectural practices and cultural heritage. Driven by globalization and economic liberalization, this transformation has led to the erosion of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity, replaced by modernist and globalized forms. The ancient city of Imphal, once characterized by sustainable and eco-friendly Yumjao (Manipuri courtyard houses), now features concrete structures and modern buildings, symbolizing the broader trends in Indian urbanization.

Imphal's transformation exemplifies the far-reaching consequences of rapid urbanization on social, cultural, and environmental fabric. Traditional communities are disrupted, cultural identities are eroded, and environmental degradation accelerates. However, by examining the impact of modernization on traditional Meitei architecture, this research aims to provide insights into preserving cultural heritage through sustainable urbanization.

This study explores the historical and cultural context of Meitei architecture, analysing the impact of modernization on traditional building practices. It investigates how traditional practices can be revitalized and reinterpreted to create buildings that reflect the community's cultural identity while embracing modernity's benefits. Key questions guiding this research include how modernization has impacted traditional Meitei architecture and cultural heritage, what strategies can be employed to revitalize and reinterpret traditional practices, and how fusion of traditional and modern elements can preserve cultural identity.

Ultimately, this study seeks to ensure the survival of Meitei cultural identity for future generations, contributing to a more inclusive and culturally diverse urban landscape. By exploring successful case studies of fusion of traditional and modern elements in architecture, this research contributes to the preservation of Meitei cultural heritage, promoting sustainable urbanization and cultural sensitivity in Manipur and beyond.

## Objectives

1. To examine how traditional Meitei architectural practices can be revitalized and reinterpreted to reflect the community's cultural identity while embracing modernity's benefits.
2. To understand the cultural context of Meitei architecture and compare the impact of modernization on traditional building practices.
3. To inform strategies for balancing cultural continuity and modernization in Meitei society.

## Review of Literature

Sociologists and anthropologists have long recognized the significance of built environments in shaping social interactions and community engagement (Jacobs, 1961; Gans, 1968; Bourdieu, 1990). Traditional architecture, with its emphasis on human-scale design and public spaces, facilitates social gatherings and community activities, thereby strengthening social bonds and neighbourhood ties (Low, 2000, p. 135). Furthermore, research has shown that traditional architecture's focus on walkability and mixed-use development contributes to increased civic participation, social cohesion, and overall quality of life (Sullivan, 2019; Talen, 2005). By prioritizing community-cantered design, traditional architecture can mitigate the effects of urban isolation and promote a sense of belonging among residents.

Similarly, Frampton (2013) notes that traditional architecture is often context-specific, responding to local conditions, climate, and topography (p. 120). Traditional building techniques demonstrate exceptional craftsmanship, preserving cultural skills (Frampton, 2013, p. 180). Moreover, traditional architecture endures, with many structures remaining relevant and functional over centuries (Frampton, 2013, p. 250).

Both Krier and Frampton acknowledge traditional architecture's role in shaping regional identity. Krier emphasizes the importance of community design in traditional architecture, while Frampton highlights its contextual and cultural significance.

Globalization and Westernization have significantly impacted traditional building practices, leading to the homogenization of architectural styles and the erosion of cultural identity (Sassen, 1991, p. 120). Modern architecture, driven by global capital and technological advancements, has supplanted traditional building methods, resulting in the loss of cultural heritage.

Sassen (1991) argues that globalization has created "global cities" characterized by standardized architectural forms, displacing local traditions (p. 130). Similarly, the ubiquity of modern architecture has led to the "McDonaldization" of built environments, where cultural specificity is sacrificed for efficiency and profit.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary research and primary data collection. Secondary sources include historical texts, academic literature on Meitei architecture, culture, and history, and existing studies on cultural preservation and sustainable development. Primary data collection involves participant observation in Meitei communities, engaging with local architects, artisans, and residents to gain nuanced insights into traditional building practices, cultural significance, and modernization challenges. Through immersive fieldwork, traditional architectural elements, cultural rituals, and daily life are documented and analysed, providing an in-depth understanding of the complex interplay between culture, tradition, and modernization in Meitei architecture.

## **The Traditional Meitei Yumjao**

The Yumjao house, a traditional Manipuri dwelling, is a single-unit structure with a gable-end roof, strategically positioned in the centre of the plot, known as Yumpham. Adhering to ancient customs, the house faces east, with the entrance always located on the eastern side, a deliberate design choice that reflects the cultural significance of orientation in Manipuri architecture.

The floor plan is divided into four equal parts, with the entrance leading to a semi-outdoor space called Mangon. This versatile area serves multiple purposes, including seating for family members and guests, temporary storage for harvested grains, and a workspace for handloom weaving, a traditional craft that holds great cultural significance in Manipuri society.

Upon entering the house, a narrow corridor connects various rooms, each designated for specific family members. The internal spaces are arranged according to traditional guidelines, with careful consideration given to the placement

of furniture and amenities. For instance, beds are consistently placed on the northern side of bedrooms, while the central part of the house is reserved for family dining, fostering a sense of community and togetherness.

The kitchen, known as Chakhum Ka, and the family deity area, known as Sanamahi Ka, occupy corner rooms, reflecting the importance of food preparation and spiritual practice in Manipuri daily life. Separate structures outside the main house store livestock and seasonal grains, demonstrating a practical understanding of storage and resource management.

The traditional Manipuri house plan allocates specific spaces for various activities and family members, including Naktha, the women's handloom area, Mangol, the veranda or waiting room, Phamen, the elders' resting place, Ningol Ka, the daughter's room, Lukhum Ka or Piba Ka, the son's room, Leimarel Ka, the mother's room, Phamen Ka, the father's room, Chakhum Ka, the kitchen, and Sanamahi, the family deity. Additionally, grain storage, Kot, is typically located behind the house, showcasing a thoughtful approach to organization and logistics.

Earlier to adopting modern architecture, the Yumjao house has adapted to changing societal needs, incorporating alternative styles that have become more popular. These modified houses are classified into three types based on formal patterns: I-shaped, L-shaped, and U-shaped houses. These designs aim to address functional issues associated with traditional Yumjao houses, such as:

1. Improving privacy through separate living quarters
2. Enhancing circulation and movement within the house
3. Increasing storage capacity
4. Providing additional living spaces

The I-shaped house features a linear layout, with rooms arranged in a straight line. This design optimizes space usage and simplifies circulation.

The L-shaped house consists of two wings, forming an L-shaped configuration. This design provides additional living spaces and improves privacy.

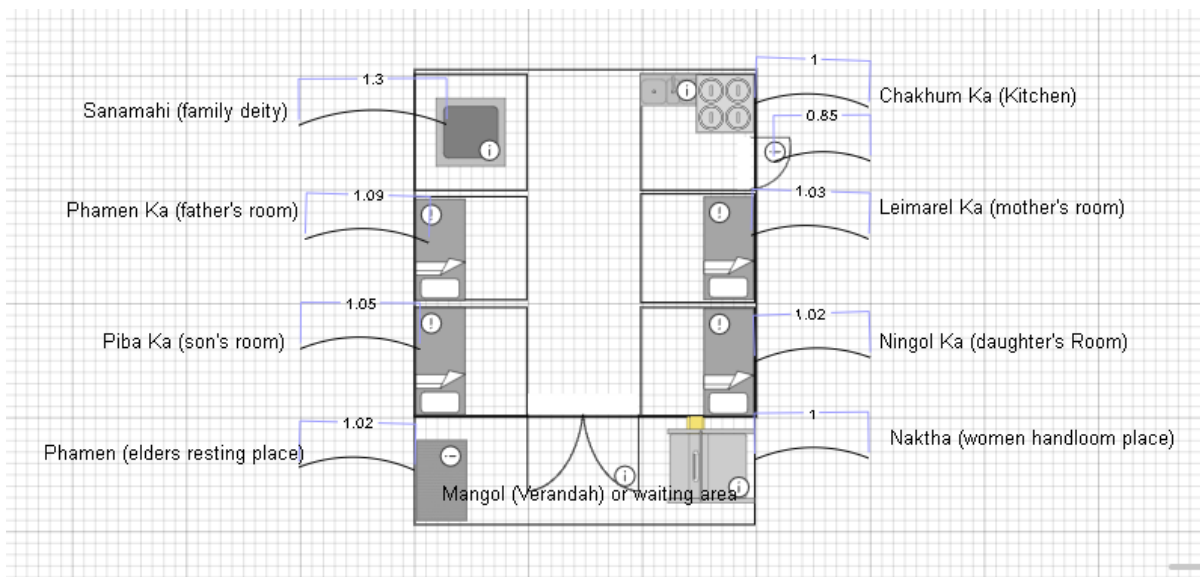
The U-shaped house features three wings, forming a U-shaped configuration. This design maximizes storage capacity and enhances circulation.

These modified house designs reflect the evolving needs of Manipuri society, balancing traditional cultural values with modern functional requirements.

The Sumang, or courtyard, remains an essential component of Manipuri architecture, serving as a ceremonial gathering space and accommodating hundreds of people during special occasions. The front courtyard remains open, allowing sunlight to flood the area during morning hours and creating a welcoming atmosphere for guests.

This traditional house design embodies the cultural heritage and values of Manipuri society, showcasing a deep understanding of spatial organization, community needs, and social harmony. By examining the Yumjao house and its adaptations, we gain insight into the rich cultural traditions and architectural principles that have shaped Manipuri society for generations.

A layout of the original Meitei Yumjao including segregation of different rooms have been shown in the below figure (Fig. 1).



*Fig. 1: layout of Traditional Meitei Yumjao*

Others such as grain storage (Kot) space, toilet, backyard space (Yenakha) are situated behind the houses.

### **Modern Housing Architecture in Manipur**

Modern architecture, as envisioned by pioneers such as Le Corbusier (1922) and Walter Gropius (1919), aimed to create functional, efficient, and standardized buildings that could be replicated universally. This movement sought to break away from traditional and ornate designs, embracing simplicity, clean lines, and minimal ornamentation (Frampton, 1980; Krier, 1979). The primary goals of modern architecture included promoting social reform, improving living conditions, and creating a sense of unity and coherence through standardized designs (Gropius, 1919). This led to the development of the International Style, characterized by open floor plans, rectangular forms, and industrial materials. As a result, modern architecture has become ubiquitous, with its uniform planning and design principles visible in cities worldwide, reflecting a desire for functionality, efficiency, and progress. Such style of architecture has been adopted by most of the Meitei populations residing inside Imphal city area.

However, it is also mentionable that those families who cannot afford or simply does not have enough space, resort to hazardous building methods that are simply illegal or unsafe. Also, Manipur falls under Earthquake Zone 5, the highest risk category in India. This means the state is prone to frequent and intense earthquakes due to its location near active faults.

Regardless, the rapid urbanization of Imphal, lack of funds or lack of effective planning, has created a perfect storm of factors that threaten to replicate the dire conditions found in Delhi's informal settlements. Illegal constructions, often lacking adherence to building codes and safety standards, are mushrooming across the city, compromising structural integrity and civic amenities. Overcrowding, exacerbated by inadequate housing supply and weak regulatory enforcement, has resulted in residents facing increased exposure to health hazards. Thus, instead of transitioning towards a city with majority of the houses adopting such modern layout, most of the buildings end up in conditions that can be termed hazardous, insecure or unsound etc.

Those families who have the privilege of land, funds and resources follow through with the modern architectural design that adheres towards visual satisfaction and functionality within contemporary trends. One such layout is shown in the figure given below i.e. (Fig. 2)

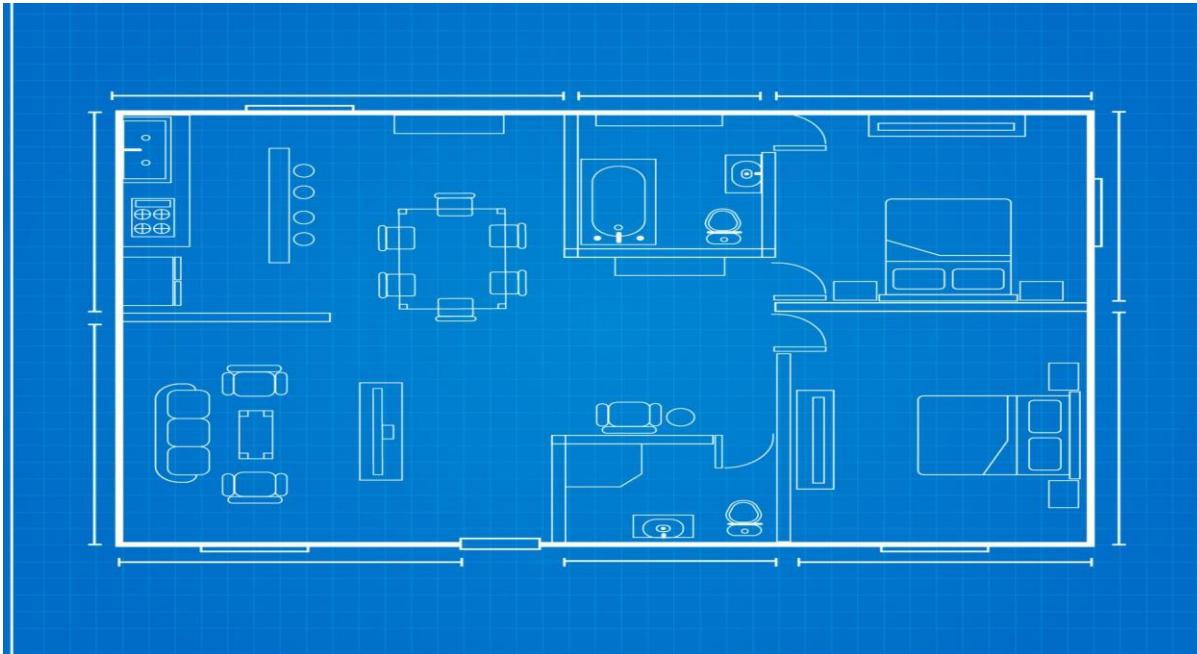


Fig.2: layout of a Modern house in Imphal East

In contrast, Traditional Meitei Yumjao feature separate spaces for specific activities and family members, including Naktha (women's handloom area), Mangol (veranda), Phamen (elders' resting place), and individual rooms for family members. In contrast, modern floor plans prioritize flexibility and functionality, with open living, dining, and kitchen areas, accompanied by private spaces like master bedrooms, guest rooms, and children's bedrooms. While traditional layouts reflect social hierarchy and cultural practices, modern designs emphasize adaptability and comfort.

#### Key Differences:

- **Separate vs. Integrated Spaces:** Traditional Meitei plans separate spaces for specific activities and family members, while modern plans integrate living, dining, and kitchen areas.
- **Hierarchical vs. Flexible Layout:** Traditional Meitei plans organize spaces according to social hierarchy and family roles, while modern plans prioritize flexibility and adaptability.
- **Functional Zones:** Modern plans define zones for specific activities (e.g., living, sleeping, cooking), whereas traditional Meitei plans blend functions within each room.

This does not imply that strictly adhering only towards traditional style of Meitei Yumjao would always be the better option. Modern housing provides advantages like improved natural light and ventilation, energy efficiency, increased accessibility, enhanced social interaction through open living spaces, and better resale value.

Perhaps, through blending traditional Meitei principles with modern architectural innovations, homes can balance cultural heritage, comfort, and functionality, ensuring a sense of continuity and belonging. This synergistic approach honours Meitei cultural traditions, promotes social cohesion, and supports sustainable urban development, ultimately enriching the lives of residents while preserving the community's rich cultural legacy.



## Cultural Heritage in Modern Meitei Design and A Proposed Solution

The traditional Meitei Yumjao floor plan, with its separate spaces for specific activities and family members, such as Naktha (women's handloom area), Mangol (veranda), Phamen (elders' resting place), and individual rooms, reflects the community's social hierarchy and cultural practices. Key elements include a proper division for sacred and profane spaces, designated areas for elders and youth, east-facing buildings, non-aligned front and back doors, avoidance of temple alignment, Phamen on the left side, separated toilets, Sanamahi space for followers, and strategically placed stairs. These elements demonstrate the significance of cultural heritage in shaping spatial organization (Rapoport, 1969). However, incorporating modern architectural principles can enhance functionality, flexibility, and sustainability. Open floor plans, for instance, facilitate social interaction and community engagement (Alexander, 1977), while sustainable materials and natural ventilation reduce environmental impact (Kaplan, 1995). Modern designs also prioritize accessibility, adaptability, and comfort, ensuring inclusivity for diverse family needs. By blending traditional values with modern approaches, Meitei society can preserve cultural continuity and identity (UNESCO, 2003) while embracing innovation. These fusion honours the community's history while addressing contemporary needs, promoting cultural resilience (Hobsbawm, 1983) and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). By incorporating sacred spaces, like Sanamahi, and respecting traditional layouts, modern designs can foster a sense of belonging and community (Oldenburg, 1989).

### Proposed Traditional Meitei-Western Fusion Architecture: Adding Yumsarol to Modern Architecture

That is, blend traditional Meitei values with modern Western architectural principles to create functional, culturally-sensitive, and sustainable buildings. Yumsarol (Layout) is believed to be the proper way of Building houses according to Meitei Tradition.

#### Design Elements:

1. Orientation: Buildings face east to maximize natural light and ventilation, exemplifying the importance of environmental sustainability (Kaplan, 1995).
2. Separate Sacred and Profane Spaces: Designate areas for spiritual practices (Sanamahi) and daily activities, reflecting the notion of "sacred space" (Eliade, 1959).
3. Elder's Zone (Phamen): Allocate a quiet, private space for elders, ideally on the left side, honouring the cultural value of intergenerational relationships (Hagestad, 1985).
4. Hierarchical Layout: Balance traditional social hierarchy with modern flexibility, addressing the tension between cultural tradition and social change (Berger, 1967).
5. Functional Zones: Define areas for living, sleeping, cooking, and recreation, reflecting the concept of "social spatialization" (Lefebvre, 1991).
6. Symbolic Entrances: Main door placement avoids perfect centre alignment, illustrating the significance of symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959).
7. Respectful Alignment: Avoid aligning doors or buildings with temples or sacred sites, demonstrating cultural sensitivity and respect for sacred spaces (Eliade, 1959).
8. Private and Public Spaces: Separate areas for family, guests, and community interactions, reflecting the idea of "public and private realms" (Habermas, 1962).

### Modern Twists:

1. Open Floor Plans: Integrate living, dining, and kitchen areas while maintaining separate zones, promoting social interaction and community engagement (Oldenburg, 1989).
2. Sustainable Materials: Use locally-sourced, eco-friendly materials, reflecting the importance of environmental sustainability.
3. Natural Ventilation: Optimize building design for cross-ventilation, reducing reliance on artificial systems.
4. Earthquake-Resistant: Incorporate seismic-resistant design principles, prioritizing safety and resilience (UN-Habitat, 2010).

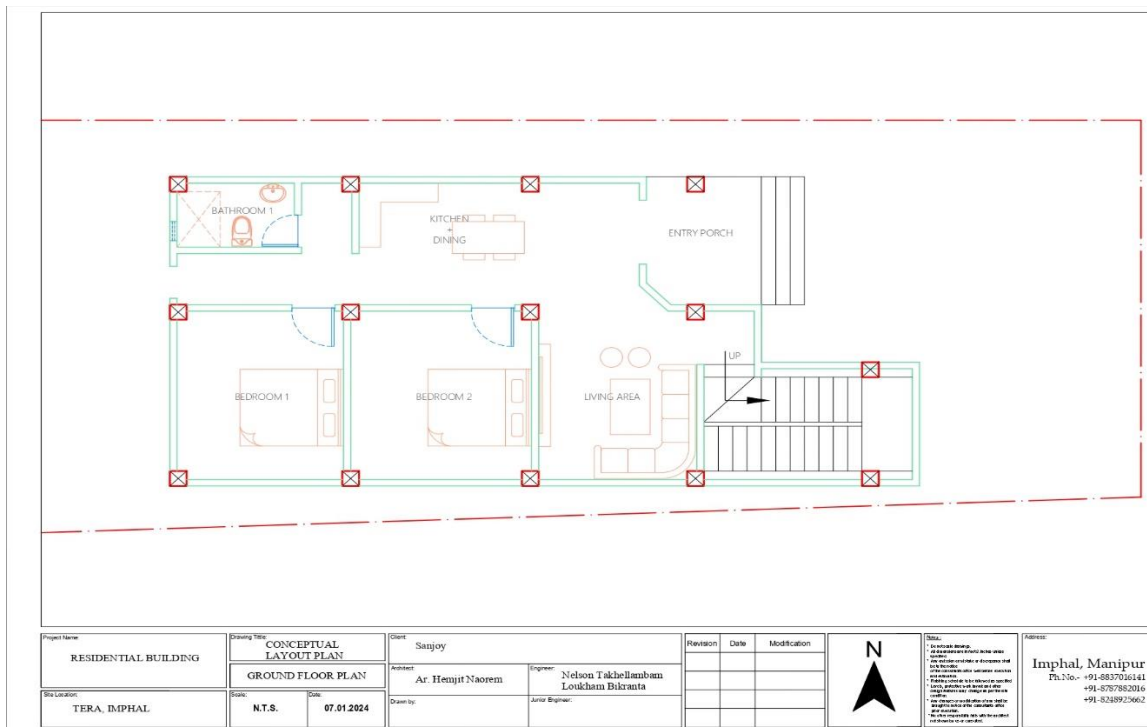


Fig.3: layout of a Modern house in Imphal west and following proper Yumsarol

The floor plan layout in figure 3 blends traditional Meitei values with modern Western architectural principles. The east-facing orientation aligns with Meitei tradition, ushering in positive energy and natural light. Careful consideration has been given to door placement, ensuring the back door doesn't align with the front door, and avoiding direct alignment with any temple or sacred structure. Additional traditional elements include a dedicated space for Sanamahi, segregation of toilets from the entrance, and strategically placed stairs outside the main door's enclosure. Furthermore, the main door's offset placement avoids perfect centrality, adhering to Meitei architectural customs. By incorporating these timeless principles, this floor plan honours Meitei cultural traditions, fostering a sense of community, respect, and spiritual connection.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, the traditional Meitei Yumjao house design embodies the cultural heritage and values of Manipuri society, reflecting a deep understanding of spatial organization, community needs, and social harmony. However, modernization and urbanization have led to the erosion of traditional architectural practices and cultural identity. To preserve Meitei cultural heritage, it is essential to blend traditional values with modern architectural innovations, creating buildings that reflect the community's cultural identity while embracing modernity's benefits.

The proposed traditional Meitei-Western fusion architecture incorporates sacred spaces, respects traditional layouts, and prioritizes sustainability, accessibility, and comfort. By adopting this synergistic approach, Meitei society can preserve cultural continuity and identity while addressing contemporary needs and promoting social cohesion.

Importantly, this approach does not necessitate that everyone should be rich enough to adhere to such building methods. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and community engagement in the building design process, regardless of economic constraints. By incorporating traditional principles and modern innovations, buildings can be designed to be functional, sustainable, and culturally resonant, without being prohibitively expensive.

Moreover, this approach is accessible to all, regardless of economic means, ensuring that every member of the Meitei community can participate in preserving their cultural heritage through building design.

Ultimately, this approach aims to create buildings that not only reflect the community's cultural identity but also promote social cohesion, sustainability, and cultural resilience, regardless of economic means. By embracing this fusion architecture, Meitei society can ensure the survival of their cultural heritage for future generations, contributing to a more inclusive and culturally diverse urban landscape

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