

From Cosmology to Landscape Practice: The Eco Symbolic Order of Hue Garden Houses in Vietnam

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Abstract

Hue garden houses (nhà vườn Huế) in Vietnam represent a distinctive vernacular landscape typology that integrates timber dwellings, layered vegetation, and symbolic waterscapes. This article examines how cosmological philosophy mediated through Vietnamese feng shui (phong thủy) and Nguyen dynasty cultural syncretism materializes in the spatial arrangement and garden setting practices of Hue garden houses. Using interpretive analysis of secondary literature, the study finds that the “house as center, garden as envelope” layout functions simultaneously as (i) a microclimate and subsistence strategy and (ii) a cosmogram that encodes Confucian Taoist Buddhist notions of harmony among heaven, earth, and human beings. Key garden elements such as the entrance axis, screen wall (bình phong), dry pond/basin, and rockery (hòn non bộ) articulate a miniature “mountain water universe,” while plant assemblages emphasize ecological diversity and a deliberate naturalness. The article argues that Hue garden houses should be understood as living heritage landscapes whose eco cultural logic offers transferable insights for climate responsive and culturally grounded landscape design today.

Keywords: *Hue Garden Houses, Cosmology; Feng Shui, Vernacular Landscape, Nguyen Dynasty, Ecological Design.*

Introduction

Across East Asia, traditional gardens have long served as spatial media through which communities express cosmology and moral order (Trần, Ignatieva, & Tenorio, 2023). In Vietnam, Hue garden houses emerged and flourished during the Nguyen Dynasty (1802–1945), when Hue functioned as the imperial capital and a major cultural center (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). Situated in and around the Citadel, these houses were initially associated with royal and mandarin households, but later diffused into broader urban and peri urban society (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). While previous scholarship has documented their typology, transformation, and climatic adaptability (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017; Tung & Kaffashi, 2018), fewer studies foreground how Hue garden houses translate Vietnamese cosmological thought into garden setting art. This gap matters because the garden is not a decorative appendix; rather, it is co constitutive of the dwelling’s cultural meaning and environmental performance (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Kaffashi, 2018).

This article asks: How is cosmological philosophy embodied through the garden setting art of Hue garden houses? The objectives are threefold:

1. Identify cosmological/feng shui principles embedded in Hue garden house layouts.
2. Analyze key setting techniques and symbolic landscape elements.
3. Discuss implications for contemporary sustainable landscape design.

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Materials and Methods

This study employs interpretive secondary source analysis. Core texts include peer reviewed research on Hue traditional garden houses and classical Nguyen dynasty gardens (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017; Tung & Kaffashi, 2018; Trần et al., 2023), supplemented by official heritage documentation and specialized architectural readings on Hue garden components (Thừa Thiên Huế Garden Houses Portal, 2024; Tayau Landscape, 2024).

Analytical steps:

1. *Concept extraction*: identify recurring cosmological/feng shui notions (center–periphery, mountain water duality, qi/khí flow, layered protection).
2. *Spatial matching*: relate each notion to garden layout and components.
3. *Eco cultural synthesis*: interpret how symbolic and environmental functions overlap.

Results and Discussion

“House Centered Universe”: Layout as Cosmogram

A consistent feature of Hue garden houses is a relatively central and elevated main house (nhà rường) surrounded by an enclosing garden matrix (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). This organization does two things at once.

First, it constitutes an environmental strategy: layered vegetation and water bodies buffer heat and wind in Hue's hot humid climate, producing cooler microclimates and reducing cooling demands (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018).

Second, it functions as a cosmological diagram. The center (house/ancestral altar) embodies the human lineage axis, while the garden represents the natural/cosmic envelope sustaining life. Such center–periphery ordering parallels Nguyen dynasty garden philosophy, where human habitation is positioned to harmonize with cosmic forces rather than dominate them outright (Trần et al., 2023). In this sense, each Hue garden house becomes a miniature universe in which dwelling and landscape are mutually defining.

Expanding on these dual functions reveals that the Hue garden house is best interpreted not as a “house with a garden,” but as a single, integrated spatial organism. The elevation of the main house, typically achieved by raising the timber structure on a slightly higher earthen platform and/or by placing it deeper within the plot, intensifies its role as the orienting core of the property. This physical prominence also aligns with a socio ritual hierarchy: the main house is where ancestral worship occurs, where family authority is symbolically concentrated, and where significant ceremonial events unfold. Thus, spatial centrality maps directly onto cultural centrality. In practical terms, the raised floor improves ventilation beneath the structure, mitigates flooding during seasonal rains, and creates a thermal buffer between ground moisture and interior living spaces. Yet these functional benefits are inseparable from meaning: the house stands as a “stable peak” within the domestic landscape, a fixed reference point around which the rest of life is organized (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). The garden matrix that encloses the house is likewise multi layered in both ecological and symbolic senses. Environmental research emphasizes how dense planting and the strategic presence of ponds, basins, or small canals moderate temperature and humidity in Hue's climate, producing a cooler and more comfortable microclimate for everyday habitation (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018). What is significant here is that such climatic performance is achieved not through isolated devices but through an orchestrated gradient: tall trees filter sunlight and reduce solar gain; mid level fruit trees and shrubs slow wind and retain moisture; ground level planting prevents heat re radiation from bare soil. Water bodies, even when small, function as thermal reservoirs and humidity stabilizers. The result is a domestic “climate skin” that wraps the house, allowing it to breathe and remain habitable through harsh summer heat. However, to stop at the climatic reading would underestimate the cultural logic of Hue gardens. Their enclosing role also performs a cosmological function, in which nature is not external scenery but an active participant in shaping human life. Within a center periphery cosmogram, the house mediates the human sphere – especially kinship continuity – while the garden embodies the surrounding field of cosmic vitality that sustains that sphere. Hue garden houses thus instantiate a relational ontology: human flourishing is possible only when the family's core is properly situated within a balanced ecological envelope. This is consistent with broader Nguyen dynasty garden thought, where architectural placement is carefully calibrated to “co reside” with natural forces, rather than to impose upon them (Trần et al., 2023). Notably, the center–

periphery scheme in Hue is neither rigid nor purely geometric. The house occupies the center in the sense of being the principal orientation node, yet the garden is not an evenly distributed ring. Instead, horticultural density varies by direction and function. Areas toward the front may be more open to allow ceremonial space and controlled visibility, while lateral and rear zones are often more densely planted to provide privacy, shade, and wind protection. This asymmetric pattern suggests a “living cosmogram” rather than a static diagram: the universe inscribed in the plot is adaptive, responding to topography, family needs, and seasonal rhythms. That adaptability is itself part of the cosmological ethic, since harmony is conceived as dynamic balance rather than fixed symmetry.

The mutual definition of dwelling and landscape becomes clearer when considering household routines. The garden’s ecological productivity fruit, vegetables, herbs, medicinal plants feeds directly into culinary and ritual practices centered in the main house. Conversely, rites performed in the main house (ancestral anniversaries, seasonal offerings) often include garden produce and are timed to agricultural cycles in the plot. Spatially, this creates a loop of meaning: the house enacts lineage, the garden sustains life, and life cycles return to lineage through ritual. The cosmogram is therefore not only visual or structural but enacted through everyday practice. Another layer of interpretation concerns the experiential choreography of the center. Approaching the main house typically involves passing through green corridors and shaded paths, which gradually narrow perception, filter light, and slow bodily movement. By the time one reaches the central courtyard and threshold, the sensory shift from lush enclosure to architectural clarity heightens awareness of arrival at a sacred social core. This sequential experience reinforces the cosmological narrative: one moves from the generative multiplicity of nature toward the concentrated order of human dwelling, without ever encountering a sharp rupture between the two. Instead, the transition is softened by plant layers and water reflections that continue into the forecourt, reminding visitors that the center exists within rather than outside the living world (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). Taken together, these observations show that Hue garden houses embody a sophisticated coupling of environmental intelligence and cosmological imagination. The hierarchy of center and envelope is simultaneously a thermal strategy and a worldview made inhabitable. The house, as the locus of ancestry and authority, provides cultural stability; the garden, as ecological and symbolic surround, provides vitality and continuity. Their relationship models a domesticated universe: not a universe reduced to ornament, but one organized so that human life can proceed with comfort, dignity, and moral resonance. In this modeling, the Hue garden house becomes more than heritage; it is a working theory of how to live well within climate and cosmos, articulated through spatial form (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018; Trần et al., 2023).

Deliberate Naturalness and Ecological Diversity

Hue gardens appear “untamed” compared to highly formalized Chinese scholar gardens or minimalist Japanese kare sansui. Yet field based studies and typology accounts emphasize that Hue gardens are carefully structured through multi layer planting and polyculture (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017).

At first glance, the Hue garden’s visual character seems to privilege spontaneity: plant groupings are dense, species boundaries blur, and paths often meander through shaded pockets rather than unfolding as straight axial vistas. This surface impression has sometimes led to the mistaken assumption that Hue gardens are merely utilitarian orchards or “leftover nature” around the house. However, closer readings in conservation and typological research show that such “wildness” is an aesthetic effect produced by deliberate spatial and horticultural decisions (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). In other words, Hue gardens are not unplanned; they are planned to look and feel natural, demonstrating an intentional design ethic that can be described as “crafted informality”. Planting typically combines tall canopy trees, fruit trees, medicinal plants, ornamentals, and shaded undergrowth, forming a vertical and functional mosaic. This assemblage supports household subsistence while sustaining humidity and shade, consistent with research on the climatic and ecological performance of Hue garden houses (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018). Ecologically, the multi layer approach creates a stable microhabitat system. Canopy trees often long lived species with broad crowns operate as climate regulators: they intercept intense summer sun, cool the ground through evapotranspiration, and shape wind patterns before air reaches the main dwelling. Beneath the canopy, fruit trees and medium height species fill the productive layer, offering seasonal yields while further thickening shade. The lowest strata herbs, vegetables, ornamentals, and naturally shaded groundcovers close the surface, preventing soil desiccation and dampening heat radiation. The result is a biodiverse domestic ecosystem with high resilience to climatic stress, especially heat and drought episodes common in Central Vietnam (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018). Importantly, Hue polyculture is not

random accumulation. Typology accounts suggest that species are selected and positioned through a mixture of inherited tradition, household preference, and tacit ecological knowledge (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). Some plants are valued for everyday subsistence (fruit, spices, vegetables), others for medicinal use, and still others for their ritual or symbolic roles. This layered selection produces a landscape where ecological productivity is interwoven with cultural meaning. The garden becomes a domestic commons that supports nourishment, healing, and moral-aesthetic cultivation simultaneously. The “functional mosaic” also encodes temporal rhythms. Each plant group is tied to seasons of flowering, fruiting, harvesting, and pruning, meaning that the garden changes character throughout the year. Such seasonality matters for two reasons. Practically, it enables staggered yields that help households remain self-sustaining across climatic cycles. Culturally, it synchronizes daily life with the natural calendar, reinforcing the Hue ethic of living “with” seasonal time rather than extracting from it. In this sense, ecological diversity is also temporal diversity, ensuring that the garden is never static but continually rebalancing itself. From an architectural standpoint, the garden’s deliberate naturalness can be read as a spatial complement to the timber house. The *nhà rường* is typically articulated with clear structural logic axes, bays, and proportional order while the planting field around it dissolves strict geometry into a soft, irregular edge. The effect is not a contrast for its own sake but a statement about harmony achieved through difference. The house represents human craft and lineage continuity; the garden represents natural abundance and fluid change. Their adjacency creates an experiential lesson in coexistence: stable form sheltered by living multiplicity (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). From a cosmological viewpoint, this “diversity as order” resonates with East Asian notions of harmonized multiplicity—the idea that flourishing emerges from balanced interactions among heterogeneous elements, not from monoculture control (Trần et al., 2023). Seen through this lens, the Hue garden’s biodiversity is not simply ecological pragmatism but a materialization of worldview. In East Asian cosmological thought, order is often conceived as relational rather than uniform: the world is healthy when different forces, species, and beings coexist in dynamic equilibrium (Trần et al., 2023). Hue polyculture maps neatly onto this principle. The garden’s ecological “interdependence” shade supporting undergrowth, undergrowth stabilizing soil, soil nourishing canopy becomes an analog for social and moral interdependence within the household. A well-kept garden thus signifies not only good stewardship but also good family order: each element thrives because it is correctly related to others. The strategy also embodies an ethics of moderation. Rather than maximizing one crop or aesthetic effect, the Hue garden prioritizes sufficiency across many needs: food, medicine, ritual offerings, shade, beauty, and privacy. Such moderation is consistent with Nguyen era garden sensibilities that sought cultivated harmony rather than spectacular domination of nature (Trần et al., 2023). The “untamed” appearance, then, is a visual trace of restraint: it avoids the overt virtuosity of sculpted parterres or rigid rock compositions, favoring instead a quiet abundance that feels inevitable rather than imposed.

Another notable dimension is the garden’s role in buffering socio-environmental uncertainty. Multi-species plots protect households from the risks of single crop failure, pest outbreaks, or market volatility, while the embedded knowledge of which plants tolerate floods, droughts, or salty winds reflects localized adaptation built over generations (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). This resilience aligns with the cosmological aim of sustaining life through balanced relations with the environment. It is a philosophy of survival expressed through planting ecology, demonstrating that landscape aesthetics in Hue are inseparable from a long practice of environmental negotiation. In sum, Hue garden naturalness is a designed condition, and ecological diversity is its organizing principle. Together they produce a garden type that is simultaneously productive, climatic, and symbolic. The apparent informality does not negate order; it redefines order as polyphonic and adaptive. By foregrounding heterogeneity and layered interdependence, Hue gardens exemplify how vernacular landscape can integrate cosmological thinking with ecological intelligence, offering a counter model to modern tendencies toward simplified greenery or purely ornamental planting schemes (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018; Trần et al., 2023).

Entrance Axis, Screen Wall, and the Ethics of Mediation

A typical sequence begins at the gate, moving along a planted path toward the main yard. The axis is gently mediated, rarely allowing a direct, unbroken sightline into the house (Tayau Landscape, 2024). This is both practical (privacy, wind filtration) and symbolic.

In spatial terms, the entrance axis of a Hue garden house is best understood as a choreographed threshold rather than a purely functional circulation line. Unlike modern suburban plots that often favor immediate visual access from street to façade, Hue garden houses adopt a strategy of gradual reveal. Paths are typically flanked by low hedges, flowering shrubs, or slender vertical trees that create a

perceptual filter, slowing down bodily movement and encouraging a shift in sensory register as one approaches the dwelling (Tayau Landscape, 2024). The garden thus operates as an intermediate domain that prepares visitors to enter the moral–ritual core of the household. This articulation of approach aligns with wider Vietnamese vernacular patterns in which domestic space is not abruptly entered but “negotiated” through successive layers of landscape and enclosure.

Functionally, the mediated axis produces several environmental and social benefits. The planted corridor provides shading during approach and reduces dust and glare, but more importantly it tempers microclimatic exposure by breaking wind speed and redirecting airflow before it reaches the main house. In Hue’s hot humid setting, where harsh seasonal winds and heavy rains are common, such filtration is part of the logic of climatic comfort embedded in Hue garden typologies (Tayau Landscape, 2024). Socially, the lack of a direct sightline preserves familial privacy and sustains a cultural preference for controlled visibility: outsiders may be welcomed into the plot, yet the domestic core is not immediately surrendered to the gaze. This balance between openness and reserve is a recurring ethical principle in Hue’s urban culture, where etiquette often values discretion and indirectness over overt display.

At the front yard stands the screen wall (*bình phong*), a hallmark of Hue garden houses. Heritage accounts describe it as a feng shui device that modulates *khí* (*qi*), blocks “sharp” incoming energies, and stages a respectful threshold before the dwelling (Thừa Thiên Huế Garden Houses Portal, 2024; Tayau Landscape, 2024).

Placed at a precise distance from the main house, the screen wall is typically the first architectural element encountered after passing through garden space. Its position is neither arbitrary nor decorative. In feng shui reasoning, a straight, unobstructed path from gate to house is thought to allow *khí* to rush in too forcefully, destabilizing the equilibrium of the household. The screen wall interrupts this “fast flow,” encouraging *khí* to slow, circulate, and settle (Thừa Thiên Huế Garden Houses Portal, 2024; Tayau Landscape, 2024). This cosmological rationale is matched by sensory effect: the wall stops the visitor, compels a slight change of direction, and marks a shift from the garden’s generative abundance to the house’s ordered rituality.

Material and form further deepen its mediating role. Screen walls may appear as masonry panels, carved stone, or occasionally dense vegetal masses, but across variants they are consistently treated as a dignified surface that requires “reading” rather than bypassing. Their ornamentation, when present, often employs restrained motifs stylized flora, auspicious animals, or neutral geometric patterns which emphasize moral order and family well being more than spectacle. The wall is thus a symbolic guardian: it protects the household not only from environmental intrusion but from social and spiritual disorder. It represents a domesticated boundary where cosmology is rendered into a tangible everyday safeguard.

This mediation reflects a moral aesthetic stance common in Hue culture: restraint, layered approach, and avoidance of blunt exposure a lived translation of cosmological balance into daily spatial experience.

What is crucial here is that mediation is not merely an add on feature; it is an ethical aesthetic principle that structures how space should be inhabited. Hue is historically shaped by courtly and scholarly values, where comportment, speech, and even the arrangement of domestic grounds favor subtlety and controlled expression. The entrance axis and screen wall embody this ethos physically. They teach an approach to domestic life in which things are revealed in sequence, authority is acknowledged by distance and layering, and harmony is achieved through modulation rather than direct force.

From a cosmological standpoint, these entrance devices model how humans should relate to the larger world. The household is not sealed off from its surroundings, but engaged through filters that ensure balance. Visitors, winds, light, and *khí* may enter, yet they do so through calibrated thresholds. This approach makes the Hue garden house a microcosm of the broader worldview described earlier: one in which flourishing depends on careful negotiation between openness and protection, movement and stillness, nature and human order. The entrance axis and screen wall are therefore not just spatial techniques; they are moral instruments that convert cosmological philosophy into lived, bodily routine (Thừa Thiên Huế Garden Houses Portal, 2024; Tayau Landscape, 2024).

Dry Basin and Rockery: Miniaturizing “Mountain–Water”

Immediately after or near the screen wall, many houses place a dry basin/pond (*bể cạn*) paired with a rockery (*hòn non bộ*) (Tayau Landscape, 2024). Peer reviewed comparisons of Nguyen dynasty

gardens note that Vietnamese classical gardens adapted Chinese mountain water motifs to local climate and cultural taste, emphasizing symbolic readability within compact domestic scales (Trần et al., 2023).

The spatial proximity of basin and rockery to the entrance zone is significant. As transitional elements between the outer garden and the inner domestic core, they form a first “cosmic tableau” encountered once the visitor passes the screen wall. In Hue garden houses, the bể cạn is often shallow, rectangular or softly curvilinear, sometimes holding water seasonally rather than permanently, while the hòn non bộ rises as a textured, vertical counterpoint. This configuration creates a condensed landscape scene in miniature, compressing the scale of rivers, ponds, and mountain ranges into a didactic focal point that is readable at the domestic threshold. Such miniaturization is consistent with Nguyen dynasty garden practice, where landscape artistry prioritized the legibility of symbolic scenes within restrained spatial dimensions (Trần et al., 2023).

In Hue garden houses, this pairing encodes the cosmological duality of sơn–thủy:

Mountain = stability, moral backbone, ancestral rootedness.

Water = vitality, circulation, prosperity.

These meanings operate simultaneously at several levels. At the level of feng shui, the rockery functions as a “protective anchor,” giving the property a stable geomantic “backing” even when the broader terrain is flat. Water, whether held in a basin or suggested through its dry form, signals flow and renewal, preventing the household’s vital energies from becoming stagnant. At the level of everyday worldview, sơn–thủy embodies a moral ecology: an ideal life must balance firmness and flexibility, endurance and adaptation. The household, therefore, is not only sheltered by mountains and nourished by water in literal terms; it is also called to cultivate “mountain like” integrity and “water like” vitality in social conduct.

Material choices in these features further reinforce their symbolic work. Rockeries in Hue are often built from locally available stone with porous or weathered textures, producing a sense of age and natural endurance. They may be composed to suggest peaks, caves, or layered cliffs, echoing the aesthetics of Vietnamese classical gardens that favor narrative suggestion over strict realism (Trần et al., 2023). The basin, in turn, is frequently edged with stone or brick in understated geometries, allowing the water surface or its absence to act as a contemplative void. Even when dry, the basin retains symbolic potency: it holds the idea of water, emphasizing that flow is not only a material condition but a cosmological principle. In this way, the pairing works through both presence and signification, aligning with an East Asian aesthetic of expressing fullness through emptiness and meaning through restraint (Trần et al., 2023). Rather than mere ornament, the rockery and basin operate as a didactic landscape—a small world that teaches how life should be ordered: firm yet flowing, grounded yet renewing (Trần et al., 2023; Tayau Landscape, 2024). This didactic dimension is amplified by the placement of these elements along visual lines from the main house. From inside the nhà rường, the forecourt scene provides a framed view in which the household’s moral and cosmological ideals are continually rehearsed through daily sight. The miniature mountain water scene thus becomes a constant reminder that domestic life is nested within a larger order of balanced forces. It is also a space of aesthetic play and reflection: family members may pause near the basin, observe shifting light on stone surfaces, or engage in small acts of maintenance that double as contemplative practice. The features therefore sustain both symbolic education and sensory experience, fusing cosmology with habit. Finally, compared with Chinese scholar gardens where rockeries and ponds may form complex labyrinthine compositions, Hue garden houses tend to keep the sơn–thủy pair direct and accessible, reflecting a vernacular adaptation of classical motifs. The miniature scene is not meant to overwhelm with virtuosity, but to sit quietly at the threshold, readable to household members across generations. This clarity supports the cultural emphasis on “everyday cosmology”: philosophical order is not remote or elite but domesticated into humble, repeatable forms (Trần et al., 2023; Tayau Landscape, 2024).

Garden Setting as a Living Heritage Practice

Studies on conservation and transformation highlight that Hue garden houses are living, adaptive landscapes, not frozen museum objects (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). Their cosmological order persists through practice: pruning, replanting, re setting stones, maintaining water features, and ritual use of garden spaces.

This “living” character is crucial for understanding how cosmology survives in Hue garden houses. The order described in prior sections center envelope layout, biodiversity, mediated thresholds, and

sơn thủy symbolism does not remain intact through form alone. It is continually reactivated through household labor and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Gardens, by nature, are temporal systems. Trees grow, shade patterns shift, water features silt up, and paths erode. Without care, the carefully crafted naturalness of Hue gardens would not merely look different; it would lose its ecological performance and symbolic coherence. Regular maintenance is therefore the means by which cosmological balance is kept “true” in an ever changing environment.

At a practical level, conservation studies show that residents adapt planting patterns in response to household needs, climate, and urban pressures, introducing new species or rearranging old ones while trying to preserve core spatial logics (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). This adaptive stewardship illustrates that heritage is not synonymous with immobility. Instead, Hue garden houses exemplify a vernacular conservation ethic in which continuity is achieved through thoughtful change. A fruit tree may replace an aging ornamental, or a medicinal bed may shrink as labor capacity declines, yet the multi layer mosaic principle persists. Such adjustments are not departures from tradition but part of tradition's normal ecological rhythm. The same applies to constructed features such as rockeries, basins, and screen walls. Stones are reset when subsidence occurs; basins are cleaned or re lined; ornamental scenes are simplified or renewed. These are not “repairs” in a narrow technical sense; they are acts of re inscribing meaning into space. Each maintenance gesture affirms that the domestic universe is a shared responsibility, sustained by hands on engagement rather than passive appreciation. Ritual practice further anchors the garden's living heritage status. Many Hue households use garden elements for seasonal offerings, ancestral commemorations, or everyday acts of reverence placing flowers from the garden on the altar, harvesting symbolic fruits for festivals, or cleaning entrance spaces before major rites (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). In these moments, the garden is not background scenery but an active ritual partner. It produces objects and settings through which lineage continuity is performed. The cosmological order of the plot is thus enacted not only in design but in ceremonial time. Thus, cosmology here is not abstract doctrine but ongoing environmental and cultural labor a form of everyday heritage production that keeps the “micro universe” functional and meaningful. This perspective helps explain why Hue garden houses are especially vulnerable under urban transformation. When gardens are subdivided, paved, or abandoned, it is not only a physical loss of trees and water bodies but a disruption of the practice cycles that sustain cosmological meaning. Conversely, conservation initiatives that focus solely on preserving architectural shells without supporting resident stewardship risk producing landscaped “simulacra” that look traditional but no longer live traditionally. The scholarship on transformation underscores that maintaining Hue garden houses as heritage requires protecting both their spatial form and the social ecological practices that animate them (Nguyen & Tran, 2014; Tung & Tran, 2017). In short, Hue garden houses endure as cosmological landscapes because they are worked landscapes. Their universe is kept in balance by pruning shears, watering routines, stone resetting, and ritual calendars. Recognizing this living heritage dimension reframes conservation not as freezing a historical artifact, but as sustaining a dynamic relationship among people, plants, water, and meaning across time.

Implications for Contemporary Landscape Design

Hue garden houses offer a compact yet robust set of design lessons for contemporary landscape practice in tropical and subtropical contexts. Their relevance lies not in replicating historical forms, but in translating underlying eco cultural logics into new programs and urban conditions. Three principles are particularly transferable.

First, Hue gardens demonstrate center envelope synergy, where architecture and vegetation perform as a single thermo ecological system rather than separate layers of “building” and “greenscape.” The main house is positioned to benefit from a surrounding matrix of shade trees, mid story edibles, ground cover, and water features, which collectively buffer heat, filter wind, and stabilize humidity. Contemporary projects especially low rise housing, schools, and community facilities can reinterpret this strategy by designing planted envelopes as primary climate infrastructure, reducing dependence on mechanical cooling and strengthening outdoor comfort (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018).

Second, Hue garden houses foreground **biodiverse domestic landscapes**. Their multi layer polyculture integrates fruit trees, medicinal plants, ornamentals, and seasonal crops, yielding both ecological resilience and livelihood value. In today's cities, where green areas are often simplified into lawns or single species plantings, Hue's mosaic model suggests an alternative that improves microclimate performance, supports small scale food or medicinal production, and increases habitat diversity. Such landscapes can be embedded in courtyards, street verges, or shared housing gardens,

enhancing environmental function while remaining socially legible and maintainable (Tung & Kaffashi, 2018).

Third, Hue gardens illustrate **symbolic ecology**: elements like mediated thresholds, screen walls, and sơn-thủy miniatures are not aesthetic “extras,” but cultural devices that organize perception, behavior, and meaning. Contemporary sustainability agendas frequently overlook this symbolic layer, risking placeless green design. Hue shows that culturally embedded forms can align with environmental goals, enriching identity and stewardship rather than competing with performance criteria (Trần et al., 2023; Thùa Thiên Hué Garden Houses Portal, 2024).

Together, these principles advocate a climate responsive landscape urbanism grounded in biodiversity, cultural memory, and integrated spatial systems.

Conclusion

The garden setting art of Hue garden houses mediates cosmological philosophy through a house centered layout, deliberate ecological diversity, and symbolic landscape components such as the screen wall, dry basin, and rockery. These features simultaneously sustain household microclimates and materialize Confucian Taoist Buddhist ideals of harmony between humans and the cosmos. Understanding Hue garden houses as living eco cultural cosmograms strengthens arguments for their conservation and offers design lessons for contemporary Vietnamese and wider tropical Asian landscape practice.

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