

Diasporic Reimagining of Hanoi's Collective Housing Complexes: A Trialectical Spatial Reading of Lê Minh Hà's *Wind from the Hidden Time* and Thuận's *Chinatown*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how Hanoi's collective housing complexes (khu tập thể; hereafter collective housing complexes) are reconstructed as literary landscapes in the diasporic imagination. Drawing on Edward W. Soja's trialectics of spatiality, it analyzes Lê Minh Hà's *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (*Wind from the Hidden Time*, 2005) and Thuận's *Chinatown* (2005) as two works of overseas Vietnamese fiction that return to Hanoi through memory, displacement, and narrative reconstruction. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative design combining close reading, theoretically informed textual analysis, and comparative interpretation. The analysis is organized around three interrelated spatial dimensions. Firstspace foregrounds the material and infrastructural conditions of socialist urbanism, including architectural layouts, constrained domestic interiors, public water systems, and shared sanitation. Secondspace reveals how the collective housing complex is socially produced through institutional power, surveillance, ideological regulation, and collective norms. Thirdspace demonstrates how these urban sites are reconfigured as affective and imaginative landscapes shaped by memory, trauma, ritual, and diasporic longing. The article argues that the collective housing complex in these novels is not merely a mimetic representation of postwar Hanoi but a dynamic geo-literary formation in which materiality, ideology, and imagination intersect. By placing Vietnamese diasporic fiction in dialogue with literary geography, the study contributes to spatial approaches in Vietnamese literary studies and shows how Hanoi is reassembled beyond territorial boundaries as a remembered, contested, and emotionally charged urban landscape.

KEYWORDS: Hanoi collective housing complexes; khu tập thể; Vietnamese diasporic literature; literary geography; spatial trialectics; Lê Minh Hà; Thuận; memory

INTRODUCTION

The novel is not only a temporal art form organized by plot, duration, and narrative sequence; it is also a spatial practice that constructs worlds through landscape, location, movement, and dwelling. In literary discourse, landscape should therefore not be treated as a passive backdrop or decorative setting. It functions as a structuring category through which reality is perceived, social relations are negotiated, and memory is given form. Literary topographies do more than reproduce material environments: they encode social hierarchies, crystallize cultural values, and provide a symbolic field for the articulation of identity. From this perspective, landscape emerges as a dynamic intersection of physical space, lived experience, and imaginative projection.

The spatial turn in the humanities has made this point increasingly difficult to ignore. Studies of space, place, mapping, and landscape have shifted attention from purely historical or thematic readings toward the geographical organization of meaning (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Soja, 1996; Tally, 2011; Westphal, 2013). Within literary geography, space is not a neutral container in which narrative events occur; rather, it is produced through material arrangements, discursive formations, and affective attachments. Edward W. Soja's trialectics of spatiality is particularly useful for literary analysis because it refuses the binary division between material and imagined space. By distinguishing yet connecting Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace, Soja provides a conceptual vocabulary for analyzing how landscapes are simultaneously physical, social, and lived-imagined.

Hanoi offers a particularly productive context for such an inquiry. As a cultural and political capital, the city is a palimpsest shaped by colonial urban planning, socialist modernization, wartime evacuation, postwar reconstruction, Đổi Mới marketization, and contemporary metropolitan change. Among its most distinctive urban forms is the khu tập thể, or collective housing complex, a mid-twentieth-century residential model associated with socialist planning, work-unit allocation, public ownership, and communal living. The collective housing complex condenses architectural form, institutional ideology, and everyday intimacy. It is at once a built environment, a mechanism of social organization, and a reservoir of memory.

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In Vietnamese literary studies, Hanoi has often been read through memory, nostalgia, modernization, and urban transformation. Yet the collective housing complex remains insufficiently theorized as a landscape formation, especially in overseas Vietnamese writing. This limitation is significant because diasporic narratives approach Hanoi from a position of spatial distance. For writers who live and write outside Vietnam, Hanoi is not simply an immediately lived city; it is a remembered, mediated, and reconstructed spatial object. The collective housing complex, therefore, becomes more than a residential structure. It becomes a site through which displacement, return, loss, social history, and identity are negotiated.

This article addresses that gap by examining two novels by overseas Vietnamese authors: Lê Minh Hà's *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (*Wind from the Hidden Time*, 2005) and Thuận's *Chinatown* (2005). Both texts engage with Hanoi's collective housing complexes as central landscape formations, but they do so through different narrative strategies and affective registers. In Lê Minh Hà's novel, the collective housing complex appears as a dense landscape of everyday life in which individual memory intersects with wartime evacuation, postwar hardship, and communal belief. In Thuận's *Chinatown*, by contrast, the apartment is reconstructed through absence, fragmentation, and recursive interior monologue. The novel's Paris metro setting becomes a suspended frame through which the narrator's memory moves across Hanoi, Leningrad, and France, turning the collective housing complex into a fractured mnemonic field.

The study is guided by three research questions. First, how do the two novels represent the material and infrastructural landscape of Hanoi's collective housing complexes? Second, how do these spaces encode institutional power, social regulation, and collective norms? Third, how are the complexes transformed through memory, trauma, affect, and diasporic imagination? In answering these questions, the article argues that the collective housing complex in overseas Vietnamese fiction is not a mimetic reproduction of urban reality but a spatially productive literary formation. It is a geo-literary site where material conditions, ideological structures, and imaginative reconstruction continuously interact.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews relevant scholarship in literary geography, spatial theory, and Vietnamese diasporic writing, with particular attention to Soja's spatial trialectics. The methodology section then explains the qualitative research design, textual corpus, analytical procedure, and criteria of interpretive rigor. The main analysis is organized into three sections corresponding to Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. The conclusion summarizes the findings and clarifies the article's contribution to literary geography, Vietnamese literary studies, and urban cultural analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Literary geography, space, place, and landscape

Within literary geography, the categories of space, place, and landscape are conceptually distinct yet closely interrelated. Space is often understood as an abstract, relational, or measurable extension, whereas place refers to a more experiential and value-laden form of human encounter with the environment. Elden (2009) describes place as the more experienced and lived form of environmental encounter, while space tends to suggest a more abstract or imposed view. Tuan (1977) similarly emphasizes that place is a concretion of value, produced through attachment, perception, and embodied experience. In literary terms, this distinction matters because narrative does not merely locate events in space; it transforms space into meaningful place through character, memory, symbol, and affect.

The literary significance of place has long been recognized. Welty (1970) argues that narrative is inseparable from the local and the ordinary conditions of everyday life. More recent work in literary geography has expanded this insight by distinguishing between real-world geographical locations and textual spaces constructed within literary works (Piatti et al., 2009). Rao (2017) further emphasizes that space and place in literature are unstable, contested, and continuously negotiated. These approaches show that literary landscapes are not static reflections of empirical geography. They are textual constructions through which material reality, cultural memory, and narrative imagination interact.

Landscape, in this context, is especially important because it mediates between physical environment and cultural representation. Historically, the term referred to a tract of land, but modern landscape studies understand it as a cultural, symbolic, and ideological formation. As Liu (2019) notes, landscape studies have moved through several phases: early attention to material cultural landscapes, phenomenological interest in lived perception, critical analysis of power and representation, and more recent interdisciplinary engagement with memory, justice, and identity. For literary studies, this history suggests that landscape should be read as both environment and interpretation: a field of material presence, social meaning, and symbolic projection.

Soja's trialectics of spatiality

Edward W. Soja's trialectics of spatiality provides the principal analytical framework for this article. Building on Lefebvre's (1974/1991) triadic understanding of perceived, conceived, and lived space, Soja (1996) develops a model that moves beyond the binary opposition between real and imagined, objective and subjective, or material and mental. Firstspace refers to the material, empirical, and mappable dimension of spatiality: the built environment, physical geography, architectural form, and sensory conditions of place. Secondspace refers to the conceived and represented dimension of space: planning discourse, ideology, social

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order, institutional power, and symbolic regulation. Thirdspace refers to the lived, real-and-imagined realm in which material and conceived spaces are reworked through memory, desire, resistance, trauma, and affect.

For literary analysis, this model is valuable because literary landscapes rarely operate in a single register. A room may be an architectural unit, a social space of control, and a mnemonic site of loss at the same time. A gate may be a physical object, an emblem of institutional authority, and an affective threshold between belonging and exclusion. A collective housing complex may be an urban form, a socialist social apparatus, and a remembered homeland. This concern with spatialized power also resonates with Foucault's account of heterotopic sites as spaces in which multiple, sometimes incompatible social functions and codes are brought together (Foucault, 1984/2008). Soja's trialectics therefore allows the analysis to move beyond description of setting toward a more comprehensive understanding of how literary space is produced.

In this article, Firstspace is used to analyze the material and sensory representation of the collective housing complex: building blocks, courtyards, rooftops, apartments, corridors, water pumps, toilets, drainage systems, furniture, partitions, and pests. Secondspace is used to examine how these spaces are shaped by socialist urban planning, work-unit allocation, institutional surveillance, collective norms, and ideological expectations. Thirdspace is used to interpret how the same spaces are reconfigured through memory, ritual, trauma, affective repetition, and diasporic consciousness. The framework is not applied mechanically. Rather, the three dimensions are treated as overlapping and mutually constitutive, because the novels themselves repeatedly show that material life, social regulation, and imagination are inseparable.

Vietnamese diasporic literature and the underexplored landscape of the collective housing complex

Scholarship on overseas Vietnamese literature has often emphasized migration, language, memory, identity, gender, and intercultural negotiation. These approaches have generated important insights into how Vietnamese writers outside Vietnam articulate displacement and belonging. However, the spatial organization of diasporic memory, especially the literary reconstruction of Hanoi's collective housing complexes, has received less systematic attention. Existing studies of Thuận's *Chinatown*, for example, have tended to focus on postcolonial ambivalence and stream-of-consciousness narration rather than on the apartment complex as a geo-literary landscape (Tuồng & Thảo, 2018). Research on Lê Minh Hà has likewise emphasized memory, female experience, and the author's relation to Hanoi. Trần Tịnh Vy (2022), for instance, reads Lê Minh Hà's *Phố vẫn gió* through eco-critical questions of nature, urbanity, and identity, showing how the city becomes an active narrative presence. Yet this scholarship has not systematically theorized the collective housing complex as a spatial formation in which material infrastructure, socialist social ordering, and diasporic memory intersect.

This gap is particularly important because diasporic writing is inherently trans-spatial. It is shaped by movement across borders, temporal distance from the homeland, and the reconstruction of place through memory. In such writing, Hanoi is not simply the empirical city located in northern Vietnam. It becomes a mobile, fractured, and affectively charged spatial formation. The collective housing complex is central to this process because it condenses multiple histories: socialist planning, wartime hardship, bureaucratic allocation, collective intimacy, surveillance, domestic improvisation, and postwar memory. By foregrounding this form as a literary landscape, the present article shifts attention from language and theme alone to the spatial structures through which diasporic consciousness is produced.

The analytical contribution of this study is therefore twofold. First, it extends Soja's spatial trialectics to the study of Vietnamese diasporic fiction, demonstrating how the model can illuminate the multidimensional production of literary landscape. Second, it repositions the collective housing complex (khu tập thể) as a critical urban form within Vietnamese literary geography. Rather than treating it as a nostalgic setting or sociological detail, the article reads it as a complex geo-literary formation in which materiality, ideology, memory, and affect intersect.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in close textual reading, theoretically informed interpretation, and comparative analysis. Qualitative literary inquiry is appropriate because the article does not seek to measure frequency or establish statistical patterns. Instead, it aims to interpret how meaning is produced through narrative form, spatial imagery, descriptive detail, metaphor, repetition, and intertextual association. In this respect, the study follows the interpretive logic of qualitative research, where analysis proceeds through careful engagement with textual evidence, contextual understanding, and reflexive theoretical framing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The textual corpus consists of two purposively selected novels: Lê Minh Hà's *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* (*Wind from the Hidden Time*, 2005) and Thuận's *Chinatown* (2005). These works were selected because both are written by overseas Vietnamese authors, both return to Hanoi through memory and displacement, and both place the collective housing complex at the center of their spatial imagination. The two novels also offer a useful contrast. Lê Minh Hà's narrative emphasizes everyday texture, communal memory, and the sedimentation of historical experience, whereas Thuận's novel foregrounds fragmentation, repetition, absence, and diasporic dislocation. This contrast allows the study to identify both shared spatial concerns and distinctive narrative strategies.

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The analysis was conducted in four stages. First, the texts were read closely to identify passages in which collective housing complexes, apartments, courtyards, corridors, rooftops, gates, domestic objects, infrastructures, and related urban details were represented. Second, these passages were grouped according to their dominant spatial function: material environment, social-ideological ordering, or lived-imagined memory. Third, the grouped passages were interpreted through Soja's concepts of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. Fourth, the findings from the two novels were compared to clarify convergences and divergences in their representations of Hanoi. This procedure is informed by thematic analysis in the broad qualitative sense of identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterned meanings across textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while remaining grounded in the methods of literary close reading.

To strengthen analytic rigor, the study applies three criteria. First, interpretive claims are anchored in specific textual evidence, including quoted passages and page references. Second, the theoretical framework is used consistently but flexibly, avoiding the reduction of the texts to predetermined categories. Third, the comparative design enables cross-textual validation: an interpretation is considered stronger when it explains both the shared function of the collective housing complex and the different aesthetic strategies through which each novel constructs that space. Because the study analyzes published literary texts and does not involve human participants, formal research ethics approval is not applicable. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of Vietnamese titles and quoted passages are provided for the purposes of this article.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Firstspace: Material and infrastructural foundations of socialist urbanism

Soja defines Firstspace as the empirical and mappable dimension of spatiality. It privileges materiality, built form, and the observable relations between human occupancy and physical environment. In literary geography, Firstspace corresponds to the concrete landscape as it is perceived, inhabited, and sensorially encountered. In the two novels analyzed here, the Firstspace of Hanoi's collective housing complex is reconstructed through architectural layout, domestic interiors, technical infrastructure, and sensory detail. Yet because both texts are written from diasporic positions, the material landscape is never simply immediate. It is filtered through distance, memory, and retrospective perception.

In Lê Minh Hà's *Wind from the Hidden Time*, the collective housing complex first appears as an architectural expression of socialist urban planning. The complex is composed of multi-storey buildings, open courtyards, a kindergarten, and a flower garden designed to support communal life. The narrator describes "three multi-story buildings separated by spacious courtyards and flower gardens as large as a park corner," while the larger rooms at the end of each floor were intended for cultural activities such as reading or table tennis (Lê, 2005, pp. 19–20). This spatial arrangement reveals the utopian aspirations of socialist planning: residential architecture was expected not only to house individuals but also to cultivate collective identity, shared activity, and the moral formation of the socialist subject.

The architectural coherence of the complex is reinforced by its functional design. Communal rooms, courtyards, and rooftops extend domestic life beyond the private apartment. The rooftop, in particular, becomes a multifunctional space: children play there, adults gather, and residents use it for practical activities such as drying agricultural products. Such details show that Firstspace is not limited to static architecture. It includes the everyday appropriation of built space. Residents transform designed structures into flexible environments that respond to scarcity, density, and social need.

At the same time, the novels expose the limits of the socialist architectural ideal. The collective housing complex may have been imagined as an orderly and communal environment, but its interiors are marked by constraint, improvisation, and material scarcity. In Thuận's *Chinatown*, living space is frequently reduced to numerical measurement: "the eighteen-square-meter apartment on La Thành dike" and "a fifteen-square-meter apartment right at the gate of my parents' collective housing complex" (Thuận, 2005, pp. 37, 211). These references abstract domestic life into cramped units of area. The repeated measurements also suggest the diasporic narrator's retrospective mode of perception: the apartment is remembered not through expansive dwelling but through a compressed spatial imprint.

The simplicity of domestic furnishing further intensifies this sense of restricted space. The narrator recalls: "Our home was simple. A wall-mounted bookshelf. A small table and two chairs in the middle of the room. A cupboard in the kitchen" (Thuận, 2005, p. 40). The sparseness of this description mirrors the sparseness of the room. Objects are listed rather than elaborated, as if the apartment has been reduced to a set of mnemonic coordinates. The limited interior is further subdivided by makeshift partitions: "the room of the three of us had to be divided in half by plywood" (Thuận, 2005, p. 85). Such partitions reveal how residents adapted inadequate space to changing family needs, but they also mark the erosion of the original architectural plan. The apartment becomes a space of improvisation in which the boundary between design and survival is continually renegotiated.

Material hardship is most sharply expressed through infrastructure. Public water pumps, weak water pressure, power outages, shared toilets, open drainage, and pests constitute a sensory geography of collective housing life. In *Wind from the Hidden Time*, the scarcity of water produces long queues and transforms an essential resource into a collective ordeal. Communal sanitation facilities become sites of physical discomfort and social exposure. The absence of water creates an overwhelming stench, and

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residents resort to improvised solutions such as stacking newspapers to cover odors (Lê, 2005, p. 236). These details are not incidental realism. They reveal how the body is entangled with infrastructure: breathing, waiting, washing, and relieving oneself become spatially regulated experiences.

The deterioration of drainage systems and the presence of lice and bedbugs further extend this material landscape. Residents respond with labor-intensive practices such as pouring boiling water into cracks and crevices to preserve minimal hygiene. Through such details, the collective housing complex appears as a built environment caught between socialist modernist aspiration and postwar material insufficiency. It is neither simply utopian nor simply degraded. Rather, it is a historically specific spatial formation in which planning, scarcity, bodily endurance, and domestic creativity coexist.

This Firstspace is crucial because it anchors the later social and imaginative meanings of the novels. The collective housing complex persists in diasporic memory because it is materially specific: its rooms are small, its corridors shared, its courtyards open, its gates guarded, its water weak, its toilets communal, and its interiors divided by improvised partitions. These physical details provide the concrete ground from which Secondspace and Thirdspace emerge. In other words, the remembered Hanoi of overseas Vietnamese fiction is not an abstract homeland but a materially textured urban landscape.

Secondspace: Spatialized power, surveillance, and social ordering

If Firstspace foregrounds material form, Secondspace emphasizes the conceived and socially produced dimensions of spatiality. For Soja, Secondspace privileges representations, planning, ideology, and the conceptual ordering of space. The collective housing complex is therefore not only a physical environment but also a social apparatus. It organizes residence, labor, moral expectation, political identity, and everyday surveillance. In *Wind from the Hidden Time* and *Chinatown*, the khu tập thể is represented as a space where institutional power and social life are deeply intertwined.

Historically, collective housing complexes were embedded in systems of work-unit allocation, rationing, and bureaucratic management. Access to housing, food, and goods was shaped by institutional position, while everyday behavior was regulated by collective norms. Lê Minh Hà's novel makes this ideological dimension visible through the reference to the "Red Corner," a space associated with Soviet socialist culture. The larger top-floor rooms were imagined as communal areas for reading, table tennis, and cultural activities; in Soviet novels, such a room would have been called the Red Corner (Lê, 2005, pp. 19–20). The detail is significant because it reveals that architecture is never ideologically neutral. Built space is expected to produce a certain kind of subject: collective, disciplined, participatory, and aligned with socialist values.

The logic of social homogenization is equally important. *Wind from the Hidden Time* notes that the entire collective housing complex has the same house number, "like all other house numbers" (Lê, 2005, p. 19). The repetition of sameness expresses the spatial grammar of collectivism: individual distinction is minimized, and residents are folded into a shared institutional identity. Yet the text also reveals the fragility of this homogeneity. A few families live according to a different rhythm, forming "a proud minority" that nevertheless must "find ways to hide themselves" (Lê, 2005, p. 20). The collective housing complex thus produces both conformity and concealment. Difference persists, but it must negotiate visibility under the pressure of communal norms.

This pressure is reinforced by the spatial organization of surveillance. Gates, guards, corridors, and neighbors become mechanisms through which movement and identity are observed. In *Wind from the Hidden Time*, the gate is described as a massive iron structure whose small wings open freely while the large wings remain locked, "like all gates associated with places of power" (Lê, 2005, p. 11). The gate is physically functional, but it is also symbolic: it marks the boundary between access and exclusion, ordinary residence and institutional authority. In *Chinatown*, the apartment guard extends this logic of surveillance into the everyday. Without leaving his fifteen-square-meter apartment, he knows "everyone's face, name, and background" (Thuận, 2005, p. 211). The guard's knowledge transforms the collective housing complex into a micro-regime of observation.

Chinatown also shows how this localized surveillance connects to broader political histories. The narrator's relationship with Thuy, a man of Chinese descent, unfolds against the background of Sino-Vietnamese tension and the suspicion directed toward Chinese-Vietnamese identities. Local authorities, neighborhood organizations, and institutional actors monitor individuals whose backgrounds are considered sensitive. Information circulates between social organizations and state structures, shaping life chances and emotional relationships. In this context, the collective housing complex is not merely a neighborhood. It is an interface between private life and political classification.

The social effects of surveillance are evident in the narrator's behavioral strategies. She learns to ignore intrusive questions, change the subject, pretend not to hear, and even lie when necessary (Thuận, 2005, p. 216). These practices should not be read simply as moral weakness or personal evasiveness. They are forms of negotiated agency within a normatively regulated environment. The individual survives by managing visibility, withholding information, and adapting speech to social pressure. Such strategies reveal how power operates not only through formal prohibition but also through everyday interaction, gossip, expectation, and watchfulness.

Secondspace therefore reveals the collective housing complex as a social landscape structured by ideology and institutional power. The same courtyards and corridors that support communal intimacy also enable surveillance. The same shared facilities that

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produce solidarity also expose residents to scrutiny. The same architecture that promises collective life also normalizes sameness and disciplines difference. In overseas Vietnamese writing, this social landscape is critically re-examined from a distance. The diasporic perspective makes visible the tensions that may have been naturalized in everyday life: the contradictions between community and control, belonging and exposure, intimacy and regulation.

Thirdspace: Affective memory, trauma, and imaginative reconfiguration

Thirdspace is the most dynamic dimension of Soja's model because it refuses to separate the real from the imagined. It is the lived, real-and-imagined realm in which material places and conceived spaces are reworked through affect, memory, desire, trauma, and symbolic transformation. In literary geography, Thirdspace allows imagination to be treated not as an escape from reality but as a mode of spatial production. A remembered room, a mythologized tree, or an obsessively repeated domestic object can produce space as powerfully as architecture or planning.

In *Wind from the Hidden Time*, the collective housing complex is expanded through a spiritual and mythologized geography. The old banyan tree at Nha Bo, located near the entrance to Ngan's housing complex, becomes a sacred site through collective memory. The tree is associated with the tragic story of an abandoned infant who died at its roots. Over time, the community transforms this scene of trauma into a place of ritual presence. People come to pray, pregnant women light incense before childbirth, and vendors make offerings before opening their stalls (Lê, 2005, p. 18). Through such practices, an ordinary urban element becomes a vernacular sacred landscape.

This transformation is central to the novel's Thirdspace. The banyan tree retains a material location, but its meaning exceeds empirical description. It becomes a site where suffering, memory, protection, and communal belief converge. Importantly, this spiritual space is not formally institutionalized. It emerges from everyday ritual, rumor, fear, and hope. The community reclaims trauma by converting it into myth, and the collective housing complex becomes part of a broader affective geography. The urban landscape is no longer only socialist architecture or institutional space; it is also a field of ghosts, offerings, and protective imagination.

Thuận's *Chinatown* constructs Thirdspace differently. Here, the collective housing complex appears not as communal myth but as recursive memory. The eighteen-square-meter apartment on La Thành Street returns repeatedly in the narrator's stream of consciousness. It is recalled through a sequence of objects: the wall-mounted bookshelf, the small table, two chairs, and the kitchen cupboard, all made by Thuy (Thuận, 2005, p. 37). These details operate as mnemonic anchors. They do not reconstruct the apartment as a complete realist setting; rather, they return as fragments charged with emotional intensity.

The apartment is inseparable from love, suffocation, loss, and the anticipation of separation. The narrator's memory repeatedly circles back to the room because it condenses the most intimate and painful dimensions of her life with Thuy. Domestic space becomes affective space. The phrase "eighteen-square-meter apartment" is not merely a spatial measurement; it is a container of emotional memory. Its smallness is both physical and psychological, marking the compression of desire, family life, and historical constraint.

The same apartment also becomes a landscape of childhood trauma and familial division. The narrator recalls being made to eat with her mother in the morning and her father in the evening, receiving half a cup of rice from each and eating alone (Thuận, 2005, p. 84). The act of eating, normally associated with family cohesion, becomes a ritual of separation. Spatial division is further emphasized through duplicated domestic objects: one bed for the father, one bed for the mother; two mosquito nets; two backs turned until morning (Thuận, 2005, p. 63). The apartment is therefore divided not only by plywood partitions but also by emotional estrangement. Thirdspace here is traumatic: the home is lived as proximity without intimacy.

The narrative structure of *Chinatown* intensifies this spatial fragmentation. The novel unfolds during a two-hour stoppage in the Paris metro, but the narrator's mind moves repeatedly across Hanoi, Leningrad, and Paris. This suspended temporal frame produces a kaleidoscopic geography in which place names do not stabilize identity but reveal its instability. Hanoi is not recovered as a unified homeland. It appears as a sequence of rooms, streets, absences, bureaucratic encounters, and emotional residues. The collective housing complex becomes simultaneously a real past location and a mental landscape that cannot be fully returned to.

Comparing the two novels clarifies the range of Thirdspace in diasporic Vietnamese fiction. Lê Minh Hà's novel mythologizes urban memory through communal ritual and spiritual imagination. Thuận's novel fragments domestic memory through repetition, dislocation, and interior monologue. Yet both works show that diasporic Hanoi is produced through affective return rather than physical presence. The collective housing complex becomes a site where material traces and social histories are reassembled through longing, trauma, and narrative form. Thirdspace therefore completes but also transforms the other two dimensions: the remembered apartment is still material, and the recalled surveillance is still social, but both are reworked through imagination.

DISCUSSION

The Collective Housing Complex as a Geo-Literary Formation

The three spatial dimensions analyzed above show that Hanoi's collective housing complex functions as a geo-literary formation rather than a conventional setting. As Firstspace, it is materially grounded in socialist urbanism, postwar scarcity, and infrastructural insufficiency. As Secondspace, it is socially produced through ideology, surveillance, institutional classification, and collective norms. As Thirdspace, it becomes an affective and imaginative landscape shaped by memory, ritual, trauma, and displacement. These dimensions do not exist separately. They overlap in every significant representation of the khu tập thể.

This overlap is visible in the smallest spatial details. A communal room is at once an architectural feature, an ideological projection of collective culture, and a memory of unrealized utopian aspiration. A gate is a physical object, a symbol of institutional power, and an affective threshold. An eighteen-square-meter apartment is a measurable room, a socially constrained domestic unit, and a traumatic container of love and loss. A banyan tree is a material urban element, a communal site of practice, and a mythologized landscape of collective memory. The novels therefore demonstrate the interpretive value of Soja's trialectics: literary space is produced through the simultaneous interaction of materiality, social ordering, and imagination.

The diasporic dimension further complicates this spatial production. For both Lê Minh Hà and Thuận, Hanoi is reconstructed from elsewhere. This distance does not weaken the city's presence; rather, it intensifies its mnemonic and affective charge. The collective housing complex is no longer a place of immediate dwelling but a spatial imprint that survives through narrative return. Diasporic writing transforms the city into a mobile geography, one that can be carried, repeated, reassembled, and contested across national borders. In this sense, Hanoi exceeds its physical boundaries. It becomes a literary space produced through displacement.

The article's findings also suggest that the collective housing complex (khu tập thể) deserves greater attention in Vietnamese urban and literary studies. It is not only a historical housing type or a nostalgic object of urban memory. It is a condensed archive of socialist modernity, collective life, gendered domestic experience, bureaucratic power, and postwar affect. Reading it as a literary landscape makes it possible to connect urban history with narrative form, and to understand how the everyday spaces of Hanoi are transformed into sites of cultural memory in diasporic fiction.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the representation of Hanoi's collective housing complexes in Lê Minh Hà's *Wind from the Hidden Time* and Thuận's *Chinatown* through Edward W. Soja's trialectics of spatiality. The analysis demonstrates that the collective housing complex is not a simple architectural setting but a multilayered geo-literary formation. Its meanings are produced through the interaction of material structure, social regulation, and imaginative reconstruction.

First, the study has shown that the collective housing complex operates as a Firstspace grounded in the empirical realities of socialist urbanism. Its building blocks, courtyards, rooftops, apartments, water systems, sanitation facilities, and improvised interiors reveal both the aspirations and constraints of postwar Hanoi. In diasporic writing, however, this physical landscape is remembered from a distance. It becomes stable enough to anchor memory but fragmented enough to reveal the limits of return.

Second, the analysis has demonstrated that the collective housing complex functions as a Secondspace shaped by ideology and institutional power. Collective living, work-unit allocation, surveillance, political classification, and normative expectation transform the residential environment into a social apparatus. The novels expose the tensions within this apparatus: community coexists with scrutiny, solidarity with regulation, and conformity with concealed difference.

Third, the article has argued that the collective housing complex becomes a Thirdspace of affective memory and diasporic imagination. In Lê Minh Hà's novel, ordinary urban sites are transformed into spiritual landscapes through ritual and communal belief. In Thuận's *Chinatown*, domestic space becomes a fragmented mnemonic field marked by love, loss, familial rupture, and displacement. Across both works, Hanoi is reconstructed not by direct physical return but by the recursive labor of memory and narrative.

By bringing Vietnamese diasporic fiction into dialogue with literary geography, this article contributes to three areas of scholarship. It extends the application of Soja's spatial trialectics to Vietnamese literary studies; it foregrounds the khu tập thể as a significant urban and cultural form; and it clarifies how overseas Vietnamese writing reconfigures Hanoi as a remembered, contested, and affectively charged landscape. Ultimately, the collective housing complex in these novels reveals how place persists beyond territorial boundaries. It survives as material trace, social memory, and imaginative return.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The article focuses on two novels and therefore does not claim to represent the full diversity of overseas Vietnamese writing about Hanoi. Future research could expand the corpus to include other diasporic authors, other Vietnamese urban forms, or comparative cases from post-socialist cities. Further studies might also combine literary analysis with archival research on collective housing, oral histories of former residents, or visual culture related to Hanoi's khu tập thể. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how urban memory travels across genres, media, and communities.

Diasporic Reimagining of Hanoi's Collective Housing Complexes: A Trialectical Spatial Reading of Lê Minh Hà's *Wind from the Hidden Time* and Thuận's *Chinatown*

Ethics Statement

This study analyzes published literary texts only and does not involve human participants, personal data, interviews, experiments, or fieldwork. Formal ethics approval and participant consent were therefore not required.

Primary Texts

Lê, Minh Hà. (2005). *Gió từ thời khuất mặt* [Wind from the Hidden Time]. Writers' Association Publishing House.

Thuận. (2005). *Chinatown*. Danang Publishing House.

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