

Conceptual Metaphors in the Construal of Architecture–Nature Relationships in English and Vietnamese Architectural Project Descriptions: A Contrastive Study

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates how conceptual metaphor contributes to the construal of architecture–nature relationships in English and Vietnamese architectural project descriptions. The corpus comprises 20 residential project descriptions: ten English texts (4,397 tokens) and ten Vietnamese texts (6,215 tokens). Rather than preselecting a source domain, the study delimits ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATIONSHIP as the target-domain scope, identifies metaphor-related language following the principles of MIPVU, and only subsequently assigns source domains and mapping structures. Following two full-corpus audit passes and the conservative exclusion of boundary cases with competing literal or spatial readings, 39 metaphorical relation expressions were retained: 19 in the English subcorpus and 20 in the Vietnamese subcorpus, corresponding to 4.32 and 3.22 expressions per 1,000 tokens, respectively. Four observed source-family patterns emerged: PHYSICAL INTEGRATION/CONNECTION/TRANSFER, PERSON/SOCIAL RELATION, BODY/LIVING ENTITY, and PHYSICAL FORMATION/SHAPING. In the sampled data, English is relatively balanced between social-relational and physical-integration construals, whereas Vietnamese relies more heavily on boundary removal, weaving, mixing, contact, and transfer. The findings suggest a shared broad orientation in which architecture and nature are construed as entities capable of interaction and integration, alongside differences in how this relationship is linguistically profiled. Because the corpus is small and non-parallel and coding was conducted by a single researcher, numerical differences are interpreted descriptively only.

KEYWORDS: conceptual metaphor; architecture and nature; architectural discourse; MIPVU; contrastive analysis; English; Vietnamese.

I. INTRODUCTION

Within Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphor is regarded not merely as a rhetorical device but also as a cognitive mechanism through which one domain of experience is understood and structured in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). From this perspective, metaphorical expressions in texts do more than enhance imagery; they may also reveal how writers organize and interpret relationships that are not directly observable.

Architectural discourse provides a particularly suitable context in which to examine this function. Architects and writers must translate three-dimensional form, spatial organization, sensory experience, and relationships between buildings and their contexts into linear language. Caballero (2006, 2013) shows that metaphor is an important resource in architectural discourse: it contributes to the conceptualization of built space and helps professionals communicate, evaluate, and reconstruct architectural knowledge.

In residential project descriptions, the relationship between buildings and nature is a prominent theme. Vegetation, gardens, terrain, forests, water, sky, light, wind, climate, and landscape appear not only as physical components of projects but also in relations of dialogue, companionship, blending, interweaving, boundary removal, or movement from the outside into the interior life of a building. Such expressions raise the question of whether a relatively abstract design relationship—the relationship between the built environment and the natural environment—is structured through more concrete domains of experience.

In the data examined, English expressions include “rooms invite forest, water and sky,” “architecture walks hand in hand with the terrain,” “dialogue between the home and the horizon,” and “dissolving the boundary between dwelling and nature.” Vietnamese expressions include “cây xanh đan xen vào kiến trúc” [vegetation interweaves with the architecture], “thiên nhiên được hòa quyện vào không gian sống” [nature is blended into the living space], “xóa nhòa ranh giới nội thất – ngoại thất” [blur the boundary between interior and exterior], “mở lòng với thiên nhiên” [open itself to nature], and “trái tim sinh thái của dự án” [the ecological heart of the project]. These cases suggest that the same broad target, ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATIONSHIP, can be structured through multiple source domains.

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The present study therefore adopts a target-oriented approach. Rather than specifying a source domain in advance and searching for corresponding manifestations, the analysis is restricted to metaphor-related expressions that directly contribute to the construal of architecture–nature relationships; source families, source subdomains, and mappings are assigned only subsequently. This procedure is intended to reduce the risk of forcing the data into predetermined models and is consistent with a corpus-based contrastive research design.

The study addresses three research questions:

- (1) What metaphorical expressions are used to construe architecture–nature relationships in English and Vietnamese architectural project descriptions?
- (2) What source domains and mapping structures are used to conceptualize architecture–nature relationships in the two subcorpora?
- (3) What similarities and differences can be observed between the two subcorpora in linguistic realization, source-domain profiles, and the distribution of metaphorical relation expressions?

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RELATED RESEARCH

A. Conceptual Metaphor and Target-Oriented Analysis

Within CMT, a target domain may be structured through one or more source domains, while a single source domain may also structure multiple targets. Metaphor research can therefore begin with either a source or a target, depending on the research question. This study adopts a target-oriented approach: it first identifies expressions that directly structure ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATIONSHIP and then analyzes the experiential source domains recruited to understand that relationship.

This approach is particularly useful when the aim is not to demonstrate the existence of a previously established conceptual metaphor but to investigate alternative ways of conceptualizing the same discourse phenomenon. Labels such as ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATION IS SOCIAL RELATION or ARCHITECTURE–NATURE INTEGRATION IS PHYSICAL MIXING are treated here as observed mapping patterns generalized from clusters of identified expressions, rather than as categories imposed before analysis.

B. Metaphor in Architectural Discourse

Caballero (2006) examines figurative language in building reviews and shows that metaphorical language both reflects ways of conceptualizing built space and serves communicative and evaluative purposes within the genre. Caballero (2013) further demonstrates that metaphor is used and reused across different genres of architectural practice, from design reflection to discussions of completed buildings. These findings support the view that metaphor in architectural discourse is not merely stylistic ornamentation but a resource for professional cognition and communication.

Semino (2008) emphasizes that the study of metaphor in discourse needs to attend to the selection and distribution of expressions in specific contexts. This is particularly relevant to website-based project descriptions, where writers both describe architectural solutions and guide readers in imagining and evaluating relationships among buildings, users, and context.

C. MIPVU and the Separation of Linguistic Identification from Conceptual Inference

MIP, proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), and MIPVU, developed by Steen et al. (2010), provide systematic procedures for identifying metaphor-related words at the level of word use. MIPVU requires the analyst to consider a lexical unit's contextual meaning, a more basic contemporary meaning, the degree of distinctness between the two, and whether the contextual meaning can be understood through cross-domain comparison.

In the present study, MIPVU is used only at the linguistic-identification stage. Identifying a unit as metaphor-related does not automatically determine its source domain or conceptual metaphor. Only after identification is an expression analyzed in terms of its primary source family, source subdomain, target relation, and mapping. This separation is necessary to avoid inferring a conceptual metaphor directly from an isolated keyword such as connect, blend, hòa quyện [blend], or đan xen [interweave] without first examining its contextual meaning.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

A. Corpus

The corpus comprises 20 residential architectural project descriptions: ten English texts from ArchDaily and ten Vietnamese texts from Kiến trúc Việt Nam. The texts are presented by the source websites as descriptions provided by the architects. The two subcorpora are non-parallel and describe different projects; the analysis therefore compares discourse tendencies rather than translations.

The initial dataset contained 12 texts in each language. The two shortest texts in each language were excluded on the basis of length, independently of the metaphor results, in order to reduce the risk of cherry-picking. The final English subcorpus contains 4,397 tokens and the Vietnamese subcorpus 6,215 tokens; URLs, titles, and metadata strings were excluded from the token totals.

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TABLE I. SIZE OF THE TWO SUBCORPORA

Subcorpus	Number of texts	Tokens
English	10	4,397
Vietnamese	10	6,215

B. Criteria for Delimiting ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATIONSHIP

An occurrence was included in the dataset only when it met two conditions simultaneously. First, the expression had to contain at least one lexical unit that could be defensibly identified as metaphor-related following the principles of MIPVU. Second, the contextual meaning of the expression had to contribute directly to the construal of a relationship between architecture/built space and nature/landscape/site/environment or a natural element.

Merely referring to nature was not sufficient for inclusion. Cases describing literal airflow, the physical location of vegetation, physical light, or spatial relations that could be fully explained literally were excluded. Likewise, expressions that primarily structured a human–nature relationship without directly involving architecture were not included in the quantitative dataset.

C. Coding Procedure and Unit of Analysis

The procedure consisted of four steps: (i) reviewing the entire corpus to identify nature-related contexts; (ii) applying the principles of MIPVU to candidate lexical units; (iii) assigning a primary source family/subdomain and target relation; and (iv) grouping similar cases into observed mapping patterns. All 20 texts were reviewed a second time to identify missed cases and check the consistency of coding decisions.

The quantitative unit of analysis was a coded metaphorical relation expression (ME): a linguistic span realizing one local mapping event concerning an architecture–nature relationship. A span could contain more than one metaphor-related word when the units jointly participated in an integrated source frame. This counting rule was applied consistently to both subcorpora.

Normalized frequency was calculated as the number of MEs divided by the total number of tokens and multiplied by 1,000. Given the small corpus and the limited number of occurrences in individual groups, no inferential statistical tests were applied; all numerical differences are interpreted descriptively.

D. Consistency Controls and Treatment of Boundary Cases

Coding was conducted by a single researcher; no second coder was available and no inter-coder agreement statistic is reported. Instead, an audit trail was maintained for each occurrence, recording the original sentence, metaphorical cue, contextual meaning, more basic meaning, source family, source subdomain, target, and mapping.

When an expression permitted competing readings and a literal or spatial interpretation could fully account for the context, the case was excluded from the quantitative count and retained in the boundary/exclusion log. For example, “It touches its site purposefully but carefully” may describe actual physical contact between a building and the ground, while “ánh sáng và tầm nhìn được dẫn sâu hơn vào bên trong” [light and views are guided deeper into the interior] may be interpreted as a perceptual-path/fictive construal. This conservative treatment was adopted to avoid inflating the results with uncertain cases.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Overall Distribution

Following two full-corpus review passes, 39 metaphorical relation expressions were retained: 19 in the English subcorpus and 20 in the Vietnamese subcorpus. Because the Vietnamese subcorpus is longer, the normalized frequency is higher in English: 4.32 versus 3.22 MEs per 1,000 tokens. Given the size of the dataset, this difference is treated only as a descriptive characteristic of the sampled texts.

TABLE II. DISTRIBUTION OF METAPHORICAL RELATION EXPRESSIONS BY SOURCE FAMILY

Source family	English	Vietnamese	Total
PHYSICAL INTEGRATION / CONNECTION / TRANSFER	9	14	23
PERSON / SOCIAL RELATION	9	3	12
BODY / LIVING ENTITY	0	2	2
PHYSICAL FORMATION / SHAPING	1	1	2

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Total MEs	19	20	39
MEs per 1,000 tokens	4.32	3.22	—

B. Architecture–Nature Relationship as a Social Relationship

The PERSON/SOCIAL RELATION group contains 12 occurrences: nine in English and three in Vietnamese. This is the clearest descriptive difference between the two subcorpora: English uses human social actions and capacities relatively frequently to profile relationships between buildings and landscape.

Example 1 – Layer House: Every room opens outward, inviting the forest, water, and sky into daily experience.

Invite has a more basic meaning associated with one person asking another participant to enter, attend, or take part. In this context, the room is endowed with agency, while the forest, water, and sky are construed as participants that can be invited into lived experience. The local mapping can therefore be described as ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATION IS SOCIAL INVITATION.

Example 2 – Layer House: The architecture walks hand in hand with the terrain.

Walk hand in hand activates a frame of human companionship. Architecture and terrain are cast as companions, profiling compatibility with the site as HUMAN COMPANIONSHIP.

Example 3 – Dyes Inlet House: ensuring a continuous dialogue between the home and the horizon.

Example 4 – Babylonia Residence: remaining in quiet dialogue with the landscape.

Dialogue occurs across several English projects and structures a spatial or visual relationship as a process of two-way communication. Other cases include architecture that “responds” to the slope, a residence that “observes” the landscape, roof lines that curve “in deference to” trees, and a study that “addresses” the eucalypts.

Example 5 – L Villa: “tầng thượng lại là sự mở lòng với thiên nhiên” [the upper floor opens itself to nature].

Example 6 – S House: “Ở đây, mưa được chào đón chứ không phải bị sợ hãi” [Here, rain is welcomed rather than feared].

Vietnamese also exhibits social-relational construals, although fewer occurrences were found in the sampled data. Mở lòng [open oneself/open one’s heart] profiles architecture as an entity adopting an open attitude toward nature; mưa được chào đón [rain is welcomed] profiles a natural phenomenon as a guest that can be positively received. In F10 House, a space is described as “mở ra một cách thân mật với tán cây” [opening intimately toward the tree canopy], whereby social intimacy structures proximity between built space and vegetation.

C. Architecture–Nature Relationship as Physical Integration

PHYSICAL INTEGRATION/CONNECTION/TRANSFER is the largest group, with 23 occurrences: nine in English and 14 in Vietnamese. This source family includes several specific source subdomains, such as boundary removal, mixing/blending, weaving, physical connection/contact, transfer/entry, anchoring, and fluid saturation.

Example 7 – Layer House: dissolving the boundary between dwelling and nature.

Example 8 – Ulster House: further dissolving boundaries between indoors and out.

In these examples, the distinction between built and natural/outdoor space is construed as a physical boundary that can dissolve. The broader mapping is ARCHITECTURE–NATURE INTEGRATION IS BOUNDARY DISSOLUTION.

Example 9 – Mac Casa: “cây xanh đan xen vào kiến trúc” [vegetation interweaves with the architecture].

Example 10 – Mac Casa: “thiên nhiên được hòa quyện vào không gian sống” [nature is blended into the living space].

Vietnamese displays several physical elaborations. Đan xen [interweave] draws on WEAVING; hòa quyện [blend] and hòa vào cảnh quan [blend into the landscape] draw on MIXING/BLENDING; and thấm đẫm thiên nhiên vào ngôi nhà [infuse the house with nature] in F10 House draws on FLUID SATURATION. These different source subdomains foreground the same broad idea: architecture and nature are not separate components but entities capable of merging into one another.

Example 11 – Tropical House 2: “kiến trúc, cây xanh và cuộc sống sinh hoạt chung được đan xen vào một hệ sinh thái sống động” [architecture, vegetation, and everyday life are interwoven into a vibrant ecosystem].

Example 12 – Tropical House 2: “thiết lập nhiều điểm tiếp xúc với thiên nhiên” [establishing multiple points of contact with nature].

Tropical House 2 combines WEAVING and CONTACT to profile the integration of architecture and vegetation. Meanwhile, expressions involving connect/reconnect in Dyes Inlet House, Trilogy House, and Mac Casa structure the relationship as a physical link between entities.

D. Nature Entering Architecture: Transfer/Entry

An important subtype of PHYSICAL INTEGRATION is TRANSFER/ENTRY. Here, natural elements or nature-as-a-whole are profiled as a FIGURE that can be moved from outside into an architectural or lived GOAL.

Example 13 – A Courtyard House: this residence brings the garden inside.

Example 14 – Layer House: Expansive glazing draws the forest and water into daily life.

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Bring and draw activate the experience of physical transfer. However, the garden, forest, and water in these sentences are not simply moved as physical objects; contextually, the expressions construe the integration of landscape into interior experience and everyday life.

Example 15 – Nam Đà House: “thiết kế mang ánh sáng ban ngày, thông gió tự nhiên và cây xanh vào sâu bên trong” [the design brings daylight, natural ventilation, and vegetation deep into the interior].

The Vietnamese case was retained with Medium confidence because some elements, such as light and air, may undergo physical movement. However, the construction “thiết kế mang ... vào sâu bên trong” [the design brings ... deep inside] assigns caused-transfer agency to the design and groups vegetation with natural resources within a single integrative construction; it was therefore retained as a local transfer construal. Similar cases with stronger literal readings in The Inner Court House and HOIKIENG19 House were excluded from the quantitative count.

E. Body/Living Entity and Physical Shaping

The remaining two source families are infrequent but analytically informative. BODY/LIVING ENTITY occurs only in the retained Vietnamese dataset, with two occurrences.

Example 16 – L Villa: “đưa hơi thở của trời mây vào sâu trong lòng công trình” [bringing the breath of the sky and clouds deep into the heart/interior of the building].

Both hơi thở [breath] and lòng công trình [the building’s heart/interior] activate a bodily frame: the building is construed as a living body with an interior, while nature possesses breath that can enter that body. This profiles the relationship differently from boundary removal or mixing by emphasizing vitality and receptivity.

Example 17 – Nam Đà House: “Một khu vườn trung tâm được giới thiệu như là trái tim sinh thái của dự án” [A central garden is presented as the ecological heart of the project].

The garden is conceptualized as a HEART—a central and essential organ of the body/building. This case suggests that a natural element is not merely located within architecture but is assigned a core organizing role.

PHYSICAL FORMATION/SHAPING occurs once in each subcorpus. In Babylonia Residence, “the landscape that shaped it” structures the influence of landscape on design as an act of material shaping. In The Inner Court House, “biểu hiện kiến trúc ... được định hình bởi vật liệu, khí hậu và logic xây dựng” [the architectural expression ... is shaped by materials, climate, and construction logic] uses shaping to profile the influence of climate on architectural expression. These cases show that the relationship is not unidirectional from architecture to nature; nature can also be assigned causal agency in shaping architecture.

F. Contrast between the Two Subcorpora

At a broad level, the two subcorpora share a common orientation: architecture–nature relationships are conceptualized primarily in terms of proximity, interaction, and integration rather than confrontation. No prominent group in the corpus profiles nature as an adversary to be conquered by architecture.

The elaborations, however, differ. In the English subcorpus, PERSON/SOCIAL RELATION and PHYSICAL INTEGRATION each account for nine occurrences. Sources such as invitation, companionship, dialogue, deference, response, and observation assign social or perceptual agency to architecture and landscape. In Vietnamese, PHYSICAL INTEGRATION accounts for 14 of 20 occurrences, with boundary removal, weaving, mixing, fluid saturation, contact, and transfer particularly prominent.

This does not mean that English “personifies” while Vietnamese “materializes” according to any broad linguistic rule. The corpus is small and non-parallel, and the results are affected by authorial style, individual projects, publication source, and genre selection. The findings are better interpreted as differences in preferred source-domain profiling within the sampled texts.

A further contrastive contribution concerns granularity. The two languages may share a schematic mapping such as ARCHITECTURE–NATURE RELATION IS PHYSICAL INTEGRATION while realizing it through different source subdomains: English dissolve/bring/draw/connect/blend and Vietnamese xóa nhòa [blur/erase], đan xen [interweave], hòa quyện [blend], thấm đẫm [infuse/saturate], mang [bring], and tiếp xúc [contact]. Comparing only broad conceptual-metaphor labels may therefore obscure meaningful differences in lexical realization and image-schematic profiling.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how conceptual metaphor construes architecture–nature relationships in 20 English and Vietnamese residential architectural project descriptions. Unlike a source-oriented study, the present analysis first delimited the target domain, identified metaphor-related language following the principles of MIPVU, and only then established primary source domains and observed mapping patterns.

With respect to the first research question, 39 metaphorical relation expressions were retained after two audit passes: 19 in English and 20 in Vietnamese. The expressions include choices such as dialogue, invite, walk hand in hand, dissolve, draw, connect, and blend in English, and xóa nhòa [blur/erase], đan xen [interweave], hòa quyện [blend], thấm đẫm [infuse/saturate], mở lòng [open oneself], chào đón [welcome], trái tim [heart], and mang...vào [bring...into] in Vietnamese.

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With respect to the second research question, four source-family patterns were observed: PHYSICAL INTEGRATION/CONNECTION/TRANSFER, PERSON/SOCIAL RELATION, BODY/LIVING ENTITY, and PHYSICAL FORMATION/SHAPING. Physical integration is the largest group across the corpus, while social-relational construal is particularly prominent in the English sample.

With respect to the third research question, the two subcorpora share a schematic orientation: architecture and nature are profiled as entities capable of interaction, proximity, penetration, and integration. The difference lies in source-domain elaboration: the English sample is balanced between social relation and physical integration, whereas the Vietnamese sample concentrates more strongly on physical integration and additionally exhibits noteworthy bodily/living-entity elaborations.

The figures 19–20 and 4.32–3.22 per 1,000 tokens are not used to generalize about English and Vietnamese as languages. The corpus is small, non-parallel, restricted to residential projects, and coded by a single researcher. Boundary cases were conservatively excluded and an audit trail was maintained to facilitate the re-examination of coding decisions.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates a suitable procedure for target-oriented metaphor research in architectural discourse: target-domain delimitation → MIPVU-based identification → source-domain assignment → mapping abstraction → contrastive analysis. This approach can be extended in doctoral research to other target domains, such as architectural experience, professional identity, spatial organization, or sustainability, without preselecting source metaphors.

STATEMENT ON CODING LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH INTEGRITY

The selection of the 20 texts was determined independently of the results of the present study. Coding was conducted by a single researcher; no second coder was involved and no inter-coder agreement statistic is available. No case was retained merely to increase balance or create a difference between the two languages. Expressions with competing literal or spatial readings were recorded in the audit trail and excluded from the quantitative count when a metaphorical-relation reading could not be defended with sufficient confidence.

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APPENDIX A. CORPUS LIST

The texts used in this study are the same predefined set of ten English and ten Vietnamese texts selected on the basis of length independently of metaphor density.

ID	English subcorpus	Vietnamese subcorpus
1	A Courtyard House	Mac Casa
2	Maribyrnong I House	The Inner Court House
3	E44 Laneway House	Đà Huoai House
4	Belfountain House	F10 House
5	Ulster House	HOIKIENG19 House
6	Laver House	L Villa
7	Dyes Inlet House	S House
8	Trilogy House	Nam Đà House
9	EA House	Vesp House
10	Babylonia Residence	Tropical House 2



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