

## THE SPACE IN-BETWEEN: DESIGNING ABSENCE AS A DYNAMIC FORCE IN DESIGN

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces TRIDOC, a six-dimensional, practice-based framework developed through studio teaching at the University of Moratuwa to guide design students in perceiving and working with Absence as an active element of space. Rather than treating Absence as a leftover void when form is complete, TRIDOC positions it as a dynamic spatial medium shaped by six lenses: Time, Ritual, Intangible qualities, Dynamic change, Omitted form and local Context. The framework was refined in a four-day “Beyond Boundaries” workshop with seventy first-year design undergraduates. In this workshop, students used low-cost prototypes, sensory mapping and reflective journals to engage Absence as a concrete design challenge. Using TRIDOC as both a perceptual lens and an operational guide, the study distils six spatial strategies for materialising Absence in studio work: Sound Space, Dynamic Space, Layered Memory Space, Projected and Intangible Space, Negative Space and Spaces You Cannot See. These strategies demonstrate that deliberate attention to Absence can support climate-responsive and resource-conscious design decisions. They also indicate that TRIDOC is best understood as a context-specific starting point for design curricula that seek to move beyond purely object-centred paradigms by foregrounding the space in-between as a designed and dynamic condition.

**Keywords:** *Absence; TRIDOC; design pedagogy; reflective practice; poetics of space; Ma; vernacular; resource-conscious design.*

### 1. Introduction

In design, what is seen and built often dominates how space and form are understood. Yet across diverse cultural and climatic contexts, what is left unseen, such as a gap, pause, void, blank or hidden threshold, can carry equal or greater weight. This paper refers to these conditions collectively as the space in-between, encompassing not only architectural voids but also sensory thresholds, temporal delays and Absences shaped by ritual and climate. Derrida's (1976) account of *différance* offers a philosophical provocation, in which meaning arises through difference and deferral so that presence is always marked by what is absent. The operational focus here lies in phenomenological and vernacular readings of Absence, drawing more directly on Bachelard's (1964) poetics of lived space, the Japanese principle of *Ma*, and Sri Lankan threshold practices that challenge Western paradigms of spatial closure.

Traditional architecture and daily rituals in Sri Lanka illustrate this tension. Verandas, courtyards and open thresholds are not empty by accident but are designed to shape climatic comfort, collective gathering and subtle social cues. Here, Absence is not simply emptiness but a co-author of how life circulates. This logic resonates with Bachelard's (1964) *Poetics of Space*, which reminds us that imagined, remembered, and hidden spaces shape how dwellings breathe. Similarly, the Japanese concept of *Ma*, the interval or pause between forms, positions Absence as a living condition rather than a dead void (Isozaki, 2006). Together, these perspectives contest the Eurocentric assumption that design must fill space fully in order to be complete.

Yet mainstream design education remains biased toward measurable and visible outputs. Plans and models often prioritise mass, surface and structural seams, reinforcing a material-first understanding of space. Dobritsina (2004) critiques deconstructivist architecture for treating fragmentation, gaps and voids as largely autonomous formal devices. Extending this critique to the Sri Lankan context reveals that such visually dramatic voids often lack grounding in local ritual, environmental responsiveness, or cultural memory. The risk is that Absence is reduced to a stylistic gesture rather than understood as a spatial condition that emerges from context.

This paper responds to that risk by introducing TRIDOC, a six-dimensional, practice-based framework developed through prior studio teaching at the University of Moratuwa to guide design students in perceiving and working with Absence as an active element of space. Rather than treating Absence as a leftover void when form is complete, TRIDOC positions it as a dynamic spatial medium shaped by six lenses: Time, Ritual, Intangible qualities, Dynamic change, Omitted form and local Context. The framework was refined in a four-day “Beyond Boundaries” workshop with first-year design undergraduates. Together, these dimensions position Absence not as a by-product but as an active condition that can be observed, described and worked with through design, turning philosophical and vernacular ideas about Absence into teachable studio prompts.

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At the University of Moratuwa's Department of Integrated Design, long-term studio observation shows that students working with vernacular cues often discover that what they leave unfinished becomes the site of climate responsiveness, ritual meaning and user participation (Liyanage & Hettiarachchi, 2016). The Beyond Boundaries workshop was therefore designed to surface students' latent, culturally situated knowledge, including insights drawn from courtyard thresholds, layered domestic rituals and embodied movement, as a foundation for design learning.

This layered logic is evident both in the way bodies move and in the way buildings breathe. The saree, for instance, does not encase the body but wraps it in folds that shift with posture, privacy and breeze, resisting rigid tailoring conventions (Liyanage & Hettiarachchi, 2016). A similar logic shapes vernacular Sri Lankan dwellings, where spatial boundaries are rarely singular. Domestic space transitions through layered thresholds such as verandas, courtyards and open doors, each negotiating light, air and social gesture. These examples suggest that a design's edges are rarely final. Absence, when designed, supports movement, memory and climatic comfort.

The Beyond Boundaries workshop sought to make Absence perceptible through embodied, context-sensitive exploration. Its objective was not to teach Absence as an abstract concept, but to let students feel and activate it through light, sound and movement. Working with provisional materials and minimal intervention, participants observed how wind passed through textile folds, how light filtered through perforated surfaces and how sound resonated between layered planes. Rather than produce polished outcomes, they developed prototypes that allowed the environment to complete what the designer initiated. These experiments helped consolidate the TRIDOC framework, translating Absence into something observable, iterative and materially grounded.

The primary aim of this paper is to articulate TRIDOC as a six-dimensional, practice-based framework for equipping design students to work with Absence as an active spatial condition. To advance this aim, the paper:

- reframes Absence through selected philosophical and vernacular lenses;
- documents the Beyond Boundaries workshop as an exploratory case through which TRIDOC is activated and refined; and
- reflects on how this approach can be adapted and scaled beyond the immediate Sri Lankan studio.

The sections that follow build this case in sequence. Section 2 situates Absence within philosophical, vernacular and postcolonial debates, drawing on Bachelard's (1964) *Poetics of Space* and the Japanese notion of Ma to sharpen the theoretical base for TRIDOC. Section 3 explains the practice-based methodology, detailing the Beyond Boundaries workshop structure, participant cohort and analytic approach. Section 4 presents special strategies (Sound Space, Dynamic Space, Layered Memory Space, Projected and Intangible Space, Negative Space and Spaces You Cannot See) and shows how each connects to the TRIDOC dimensions. Section 5 discusses how TRIDOC can be assessed in studio, adapted to other contexts and aligned with resource-conscious and decolonial pedagogical aims. The conclusion situates Absence within postcolonial design discourse and underlines its value as a subtle yet forceful design ethic. Rather than seeing Absence as what is left behind, this study suggests that the space in between can become the ground where design's power to respect context and possibility begins.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Absence is often approached through Derridean deconstruction, where *différance* unsettles the binary between presence and Absence (Derrida, 1976). Meaning is never fixed but shaped by what is missing or only partially present. In design discourse, this idea supports readings of gaps, voids and unfinished edges as conditions of deferred meaning, a position that resonates with deconstructivist critiques of form and absence (Dobritsina, 2004). On its own, however, the deconstructivist lens can remain distant from material and climatic realities.

Bachelard's (1964) *The Poetics of Space* pulls Absence back toward lived experience. He reminds us that small or partially hidden places such as corners, cupboards and thresholds shape how we dwell. These voids do not simply mark where matter stops. They hold echoes, warmth and memory. This emphasis on intimate emptiness opens a way to read Absence not only as a linguistic trace, but also as a felt condition inside rooms, verandas and courtyards.

The Japanese concept of Ma deepens this view. Ma names the interval or pause between forms as a living gap that animates spatial experience and gives rhythm to action (Isozaki, 2006). It resists the tendency to treat negative space as passive remainder. In Ma, Absence is the condition that allows presence to breathe. This logic resonates with vernacular South Asian practices, where courtyards, verandas and semi-open edges channel light, air and everyday ritual without complete enclosure. In contrast, much visually striking deconstructivist work has used voids as graphic devices that are only loosely tied to climate or daily use. Bachelard's (1964) poetic voids and Ma's lived intervals instead suggest that Absence gains meaning when it is embedded in ordinary rhythm, comfort and social life.

This contrast is central for TRIDOC. Its six dimensions respond to the limits of imported deconstruction by locating Absence in everyday practice and climate. Each dimension gathers existing theoretical strands into a pedagogical tool rather than proposing a separate metaphysical system.

- **Time** acknowledges that spatial meaning shifts with changing conditions. In TRIDOC this lens draws on Bachelard's (1964) poetics of lived space and on diurnal cycles of heat, light and use. A shaded gap does not remain static. Its utility and atmosphere change from dawn to dusk. A fold may trap warmth in the morning and release it by late afternoon. Attending to such shifts helps students see Absence not as fixed emptiness but as something shaped by environmental and temporal rhythms.
- **Ritual** aligns with the idea of *Ma* as an interval that structures action. A moment of stillness before entering a temple, or the adjustment of a saree pleat before stepping into a communal space, shows how pauses and thresholds carry social and symbolic weight (Isozaki, 2006; Liyanage & Hettiarachchi, 2016). These acts do not fill space. They make it legible. The Ritual lens uses such examples to read Absence as a social medium as well as a spatial and sensory one.
- **Intangible qualities** reinforce Bachelard's (1964) insight that space is experienced through all the senses, not sight alone. Drawing on Schafer's (1977) soundscape work, this lens focuses on how gaps and unbuilt edges modulate sound, airflow and other non-visual effects. In studio tasks, this includes simple sound diaries, noise maps and notes on draft and echo.
- **Dynamic change** highlights how Absence shifts with movement and weather. Here, students test how folds, cut-outs and openings respond to wind, fans and use. This lens echoes *Ma*'s concern with interval and draws on Miles's (2008) discussion of environmentally responsive settlements, as well as vernacular devices such as adjustable screens that open or close with the breeze. Absence is read as something that moves with the body and the air.
- **Omitted form** pushes back against the habit of treating the void as whatever remains after form-making. This lens asks what has been deliberately left unbuilt or thinned. Bands of non-construction, punched openings and reduced thickness are treated as positive choices that carry weight in use, memory and atmosphere, rather than as gaps by default.
- **Local Context** ties spatial decisions to climate, culture and available resources. Within TRIDOC, this keeps Absence situated and relational rather than abstract or aestheticised. The layered sequence of verandas, courtyards and open doors in Sri Lankan dwellings, for example, shows how designed gaps regulate airflow, provide comfort and shape social encounter (de Silva, 1987). In such cases, Absence functions as a responsive medium tuned to materials, gestures and environmental rhythms.

In the Beyond Boundaries workshop, these six dimensions functioned as overlapping lenses rather than separate boxes. There is conceptual overlap between them (for example, between Intangible qualities and Omitted Form). TRIDOC therefore treats its dimensions as intertwined guides, not rigid silos. Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner model underpins this orientation, with theory expected to "loop back" through practice. Section 3.3 explains how each dimension was translated into concrete workshop tasks.

Taken together, the theoretical strands of Bachelard, *Ma*, and vernacular practices frame Absence as a situated, lived condition rather than a purely formal or abstract concept. TRIDOC builds on this foundation by providing a structured way to perceive thresholds, pauses, and gaps as active tools for negotiating climate, culture, and everyday use under resource constraints. The next section explains how this conceptual orientation was operationalized in the Beyond Boundaries workshop as a pedagogical strategy, outlining the institutional context, workshop phases, participant roles, and ethical considerations."

### 3. Methodology

This study uses a practice-based, single-case approach to examine how Absence can be treated as a designable condition in an introductory studio and to clarify the role of the TRIDOC framework. The research follows a qualitative, interpretivist orientation. It assumes that spatial meaning and absence are constructed through practice, discourse and context, rather than discovered as fixed properties. The empirical focus is a four-day "Beyond Boundaries" workshop with seventy first-year design undergraduates at the Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. The workshop was led by the principal author and supported by seven facilitators and two craft advisors, who helped structure tasks, guide observation and document student work. Students used low-cost materials to produce shadow and airflow maps, sound diaries, sketches and one-to-one or half-scale prototypes, which were recorded through photographs and journals. After the workshop, the output material were reviewed, with TRIDOC acting as a sensitising lens and six recurring strategies for materialising absence in studio work were identified. The study privileges depth over generalisability, acknowledges the distinct researcher and facilitator roles and outlines the ethical safeguards used in the study.

#### 3.1 WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

The workshop was embedded in the first-year design curriculum and ran over four consecutive teaching days in July 2024.

Activities were organised into four overlapping phases: immersion, prototyping, critique and refinement. Each phase built on the previous one but maintained a degree of flexibility so that responses to site and climate could shape the next steps.

- In the **immersion** phase, students undertook short site walks and seated observations in verandas, corridors and stairwells. They sketched how air, light and movement circulated and noted where people paused, gathered or avoided.
- In the **prototyping** phase, teams developed rapid interventions using coir rope, scrap fabric, cardboard and found timber. These prototypes were attached to benches, railings or door frames and adjusted in response to airflow, shadow and use.
- During **critique**, students presented their interventions to peers and facilitators, discussing how each piece engaged absence and how it altered comfort, sound or movement.
- In the **refinement** phase, selected prototypes and mappings were stabilised and documented through drawings, photographs and short written reflections.

Table 1 summarises the phases, their duration and the main participant roles.

Table 1. Beyond Boundaries workshop structure

| <i>Phase</i>       | <i>Duration (days)</i> | <i>Activities</i>                             | <i>Participants</i>               |
|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Immersion</i>   | 1                      | Site walks, sensory mapping, group reflection | 70 students; 7 facilitators       |
| <i>Prototyping</i> | 1.5                    | Material testing, fold-making, early models   | 70 students; 2 craft advisors     |
| <i>Critique</i>    | 0.5                    | Peer critique, facilitator feedback           | All students and facilitators     |
| <i>Refinement</i>  | 1                      | Final adjustments, sketching, documentation   | Students with facilitator support |

### 3.2. FACILITATOR ROLE AND POSITIONALITY

The student cohort brought together learners from rural and urban backgrounds, which enriched the workshop with varied experiences of thresholds, airflow and everyday spatial negotiation. Many students drew on vernacular practices such as open courtyards, layered domestic transitions and embodied dressing rituals when explaining their sketches and models. These culturally situated references shaped how absence was described and explored in journals, discussions and prototypes. Individual identities are not reported, but the mix of backgrounds and disciplines is typical of the programme and helps explain how vernacular knowledge entered the studio.

Facilitators moved between guiding, observing and co-reflecting, with roles kept intentionally flexible. This structure encouraged peer learning and improvisation, yet also introduced positional bias, since facilitators' interpretive authority, design language and framing of absence could influence how participants perceived and recorded spatial phenomena. The primary author acted as both studio tutor and researcher, which further shaped how absence was framed, how critique was steered and how the material was later interpreted. This dual role carried advantages, including long familiarity with the site, the cohort and the curriculum, and the ability to tune tasks in real time as patterns emerged, while also increasing the risk of selective emphasis.

Several safeguards were used to hold these dynamics in view. Students maintained daily journals without facilitator editing, critique sessions emphasised peer interpretation over expert judgement, and facilitators documented their own reflections separately. Together, these practices created a layered feedback loop that allowed for reflexivity and divergence. Within this arrangement, student voices and artefacts are treated as primary data, and the workshop is read as a co-produced event rather than as neutral observation.

### 3.3. TRIDOC AS METHOD LENS

Within the workshop, the six TRIDOC dimensions operated as method lenses that shaped tasks and observations rather than as categories for students to memorise. Each lens directed attention to a particular way of noticing or intervening:

- **Time** was foregrounded through repeated site visits and time-stamped sketches. Students recorded how light, heat and occupancy shifted across the day, using shadow traces and short notes to track when a gap became comfortable, glaring or unused.
- **Ritual** was explored by mapping everyday thresholds and pauses in movement, such as habitual waiting points, entry routines and informal gathering spots. These mappings helped students see how small intervals in space and time structure social behaviour.
- **Intangible qualities** were approached through listening and touch. Drawing on Schafer's (1977) soundscape framework, students kept brief sound diaries and listening notes to capture how gaps, edges and surfaces filtered noise, echo and background hum.
- **Dynamic change** was tested by observing how folds, cut-outs and suspended elements behaved under moving air from fans and wind, and by adjusting these elements in response. Simple motion sketches documented how voids expanded, collapsed or shifted with use.

- **Omitted Form** focused attention on what was deliberately left unbuilt. Students traced how air and light moved through openings, using basic airflow tests and shadow projections to make the effects of leaving material out visible and discussable.
- **Local Context** kept prototypes tied to their climatic and institutional setting. Materials were low-cost, locally available and repairable, and students were asked to justify how their choices responded to heat, humidity, social codes and studio resource limits.

Taken together, these lenses oriented students toward Absence as something that could be observed, tested and refined in relation to lived conditions, rather than treated as a purely abstract idea or incidental by-product of form.

### 3.4. OBSERVATION AND MATERIAL PROTOTYPING

Students began with short site walks and seated observation in and around verandas, corridors and stairwells on campus. They sketched how air circulated around bodies, how shadows moved across the day and where conversations thickened or thinned. These drawings acted as base maps for deciding where to cut, fold or suspend material in later tasks.

Using coir rope, cardboard, scrap fabric and found timber, teams built quick one-to-one or half-scale prototypes that could be attached to benches, door frames or railings. Each intervention was photographed from multiple angles and described in field journals, capturing both intended effects and unplanned consequences. This mix of drawing, prototyping and writing formed the main body of material reviewed after the workshop.

Resource constraints shaped both scale and behaviour. Thinner cloths allowed greater airflow but tore easily, prompting discussion about how minimal design requires iterative testing rather than idealised restraint. The process revealed that what is left unbuilt must be engineered with as much care as material surfaces.

### 3.5. CRITIQUE AND REFLECTION

Critique was structured to foreground multiplicity rather than convergence. Facilitators rotated roles and perspectives so that no single reading of a spatial gap dominated interpretation. Students first presented to peers and then to mentors, creating a layered dialogue between lived experience, observation and design intention.

This process accommodated the multiple connotations that Absence can carry, such as thermal comfort, sensory calm, ritual delay or social openness, depending on one's positionality and background. Rather than resolving a prototype into a singular meaning, critique expanded the field of possibility. This approach aligns with Schön's (1983) account of reflection-in-action, in which iterative feedback refines understanding without prematurely closing design inquiry.

### 3.6. PRE/POST AWARENESS LOOP

To support reflective growth, a process-oriented awareness loop was piloted to help students assess their evolving sensitivity to spatial Absence. Rather than measuring outputs, this tool invited students to examine how their design intentions shifted over time through prototyping, critique and interaction with environmental conditions.

One guiding prompt asked: "Rate how intentionally you designed gaps, thresholds or pauses in Project A versus Project B on a scale from 1 to 5. Explain one concrete decision that changed between the two." The scale was less important than the explanation. The prompt was designed to encourage students to verbalise how they were learning to work with Absence. Student scores and short reflections were treated as prompts for articulation, not as validated measures of learning. They offered a small window into how students described shifts in their use of Absence but were not used to claim statistical evidence of impact.

### 3.7. ETHICAL CLARITY

All field sketches, journals, and quotes used in this paper were anonymised, and no student-identifying information is reported. Workshop documentation is archived within the Department of Integrated Design as internal teaching material.

### 3.8. LIMITATIONS

This study is based on a single workshop cycle shaped by the south-west monsoon season and by the institutional realities of a first-year studio in one Sri Lankan university. The findings cannot claim statistical generalisability. They offer thick, situated insight into how Absence can be made teachable through low-cost prototyping, reflection and critique. Future iterations in other seasons, year levels and schools will be needed to explore how far TRIDOC travels across climates and curricula.

Furthermore, while TRIDOC is conceptually adaptable to other settings, it would require careful calibration to remain sensitive to different cultural and material conditions. What counts as Ritual or Local Context, for example, will vary widely. That said, the insights from this case provide a valuable proof of concept. The next section discusses how the analysis of the student prototypes yielded six thematic strategies, each illustrating one or more TRIDOC dimensions in action. Evidence

from sketches and journals is used to support each strategy, and connections are made back to the theoretical references discussed earlier.

#### 4. Findings: Absence as a Design Medium

As described in Section 3, the Beyond Boundaries workshop generated a rich set of journals, sketches and prototypes that made Absence observable in studio work. In analysing this material, Absence was treated as a potential design medium, and attention was directed to recurring spatial strategies rather than isolated anecdotes. The following sub-sections present six spatial strategies that emerged from this material. Each strategy is illustrated with a short example and a figure to make the pattern legible for other studios. Before detailing each strategy, we provide an example of how the analysis was conducted: For instance, one student journal described a coir screen as “a gap where the fan wind still comes through, but the four-to-six glare does not hit my table,” accompanied by a sketch marking a bright strip on the floor. In analysis, this entry was read through the Time, Dynamic and Intangible qualities lenses because it linked the sun’s shift, changing airflow and visual comfort. It was then grouped with other sketches that used partial enclosures to modulate heat and light. Together, these formed part of the Dynamic Space strategy. In this way, individual notations moved from raw description to shared spatial strategies grounded in TRIDOC.

##### 4.1. SOUND SPACE

Sound Space illustrates how designed gaps modulate acoustic qualities. This strategy draws on Schafer’s (1977) soundscape theory that every environment produces a characteristic sonic signature.

In one intervention, students arranged coir strips as a semi-enclosed canopy that softened street noise while amplifying the rustle of wind. A student noted in her journal, “When I walk under it the sound changes. My footsteps get softer and the gap kind of catches my voice.” Sketch maps traced how drawn wave lines bent around layered openings and faded at thicker overlaps. The final sketch overlay (Figure 1) shows how perceived sound shifted across the strip arrangement, suggesting that small adjustments to gaps can recalibrate the acoustic character of an everyday circulation space.

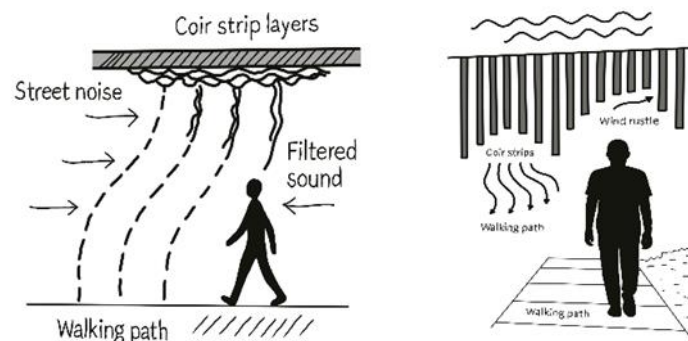


Figure 1. Sound Space: student soundscape sketch overlay showing wave deflection through coir gaps.

##### 4.2. DYNAMIC SPACE

Dynamic Space shows how Absence responds to body movement and air currents. In one intervention, a student created a folded fabric panel that opened and closed as it was rotated, producing a small pocket of moving air. In her journal she noted, “When I turn the board, the fold sort of moves with the breeze.” A simple motion diagram recorded fold angles against airflow direction (Figure 2), indicating when the opening channelled wind and when it stalled. Together, the prototype and diagram suggest that the void between fabric layers can act as a flexible thermal mediator, adjusting with gesture and changing air speed.

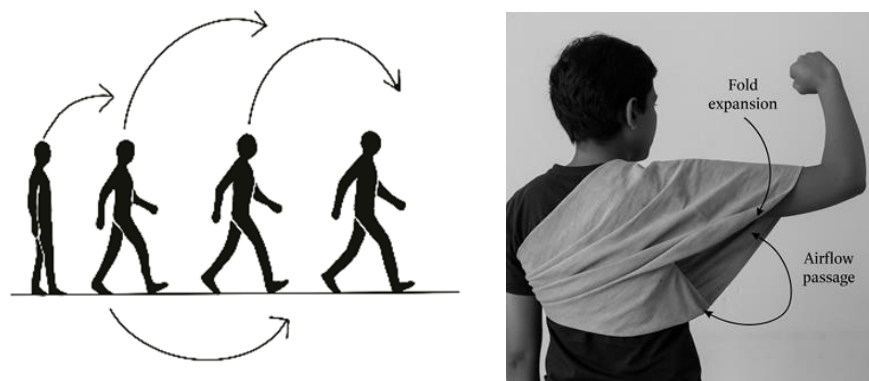


Figure 2. Dynamic Space: motion diagram mapping fold expansion against airflow.

#### 4.3. LAYERED MEMORY SPACE

Layered Memory Space describes how repeated small actions leave cumulative traces so that Absence begins to hold habit and memory over time. In one series, a student tested daily pinning of modular cloth panels, drawing on Bachelard's (1964) idea that small, enclosed places hold traces of dwelling. Each day the panel was folded and re-pinned to slightly different points on a studio wall.

The student observed, "Every pin leaves a small dent, so the cloth kind of remembers where it was folded yesterday." The sequence map (Figure 3) shows how creases and pinholes accumulated over five days, recording a quiet ritual of touch and adjustment. The cloth shifted in position, but the layered marks revealed Absence as a carrier of memory rather than as a neutral blank.

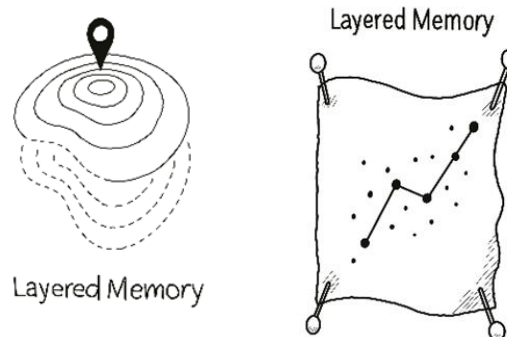


Figure 3. Layered Memory Space: pin map sequence tracking fold changes over five days.

#### 4.4. PROJECTED AND INTANGIBLE SPACE

Projected and Intangible Space describes how gaps extend beyond their physical edges through light and shadow, making Absence visible as a moving pattern. In one exercise, a student perforated cloth panels and lit them from behind so that shadows stretched across adjacent walls and floors.

In her journal she wrote, "Before this I thought the gap was just empty. When I saw the shadow moving on the wall I realised it is doing something" A shadow overlay sketch (Figure 4) traces how small perforations cast larger, shifting void shapes as the light source moved. The study suggests that even minor cuts in fabric can project Absence beyond their physical size, turning light and shadow into a temporal extension of the gap.



Figure 4. Projected and Intangible Space: shadow overlay sketch expanding the visible void.

#### 4.5. NEGATIVE SPACE

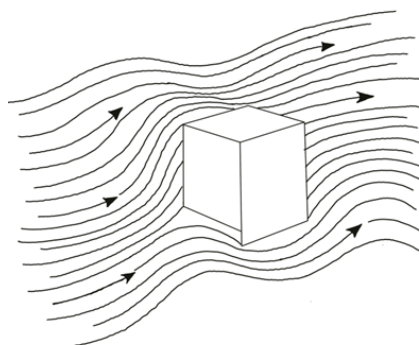


Figure 5. Negative Space: airflow diagram for hexagonal bench cut-outs.

Negative Space describes how deliberate cut-outs and openings work as active environmental devices rather than leftover decoration. Drawing inspiration from courtyard furniture, one student tested a folding bench with hexagonal cut-outs aligned to the prevailing wind direction. Simple temperature readings taken during the exercise indicated a slight cooling effect beneath the seat.

The airflow sketch (Figure 5) illustrates how the openings channelled breeze under the user's body. The study suggests that carefully placed voids in seating can act as small-scale climatic devices rather than decorative motifs.

#### 4.6. SPACES YOU CANNOT SEE

Spaces You Cannot See describes how Absence is perceived through the body when it cannot be visually located. In a blindfold exercise, students were asked to map warm and cool air by touch alone while standing near a folded textile screen. One student noted, "I cannot see the air, but I can feel where it comes in from that seam." A tactile zone map (Figure 6) records his tracing of contact points and air gaps around the neck and shoulders. The study suggests that Absence can be located and described through embodied sensing, even when it cannot be directly seen.

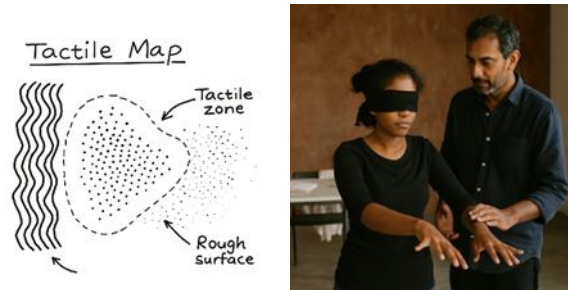


Figure 6. Spaces You Cannot See: tactile zone sketch showing contact and airflow points.

#### 4.7. CROSS-STRATEGY SYNTHESIS

Taken together, the strategies show that Absence is not a flat or uniform category but a family of related spatial behaviours. Sound Space and Dynamic Space foreground how gaps redirect noise and air. Layered Memory Space and Projected and Intangible Space show how traces of use and light accumulate over time on surfaces and walls. Negative Space and Spaces You Cannot See remind us that what lies under or beyond the line of sight still governs comfort, movement and risk. Read through TRIDOC, these patterns indicate that Time, Ritual, Intangible qualities, Dynamic change, explicit Absence and Local Context interweave rather than functioning as separate checklists.

Projected and Intangible Space resonates with Ma as the interval that renders presence intelligible and layered rather than immediate or total (Isozaki, 2006). Negative Space and Spaces You Cannot See suggest that Absence can support comfort, cooling and sensory orientation, positioning it as an embodied design resource. In this reading, ritual is not static repetition but a practice of modulation that allows the same gap to carry different meanings across time, season or use.

By explicitly linking each strategy to one or more TRIDOC dimensions, the findings indicate how Absence can be taught as a deliberate component of studio decision-making rather than an incidental side effect. TRIDOC thus functions as a structured starting point for working with Absence in design education, while leaving questions of long-term validation, transfer and measurement to future research.

### 5. Educational Framework and Implications

The six spatial strategies show that Absence can be observed, prototyped and discussed in ways that are legible to first-year students, even without advanced digital tools. They also show that a practice-based framework such as TRIDOC can give structure to this work by naming dimensions, shaping studio prompts and guiding reflection. This section translates those insights into educational tools, assessment approaches and adaptation possibilities beyond the immediate Sri Lankan context.

#### 5.1. TRIDOC AS A STRUCTURED TOOL

Building on its demonstrated use in the workshop, TRIDOC can function as an adaptable pedagogical toolkit. Its value lies less in fixed exercises and more in translating its six dimensions into generative principles for curriculum and studio design. A central principle is a shift in evaluation: from judging only the resolution of form to critiquing how intentionally voids are conceived and used. This reframes student work. Projects can be discussed not only in terms of visual composition, but also in terms of how gaps respond to Time, perform Intangible functions, or embody Dynamic change. In this way, Absence becomes a deliberate criterion in briefs, critique and grading, rather than a side effect of form-making.



This adaptability makes TRIDOC a bridge between theory and diverse studio contexts. In colder climates, the Local Context dimension might emphasise insulating voids and layered thresholds. In digital studios, Omitted Form might first be explored through masking, layering and erasure on screen. Across such variations, the six dimensions provide a shared vocabulary for critical conversations that centre Absence while allowing educators to tailor briefs to their own environmental and cultural conditions. The framework thus provides a structured vocabulary—Time, Ritual, Intangible qualities, Dynamic change, Omitted Form, Context—for cultivating a more nuanced, context-aware design intelligence.

A visual TRIDOC diagram (Figure 7) shows how these six dimensions overlap in studio tasks and critique. It is intended as a reminder that the lenses interrelate rather than form a linear checklist.

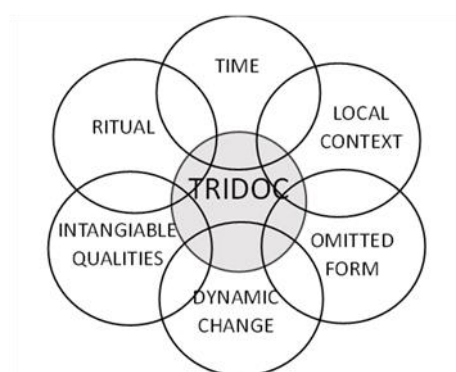


Figure 7. TRIDOC dimensions diagram.

## 5.2. MEASURING STUDENT GROWTH

TRIDOC supports process oriented evaluation rather than only outcome based grading. Growth is read in terms of how students learn to perceive and work with absence across a project, not only in the quality of final artefacts. In this workshop, change was traced through four recurring evidence points that could be compared over time:

- **Shadow and airflow maps**  
First and later maps were compared for how precisely they track change over the day and how confidently they infer spatial effects. Early maps often recorded isolated observations. Later maps more frequently linked patterns of shade or breeze to comfort, use or gathering.
- **Soundscape logs**  
Listening notes were read for shifts from listing sounds to interpreting quiet zones, echoes and gaps as acoustic tools. Growth appeared where students began to describe how adjusting a gap or surface might change noise levels or privacy.
- **Reflection journals**  
Journals were marked for evidence of iterative refinement, deeper description and explicit links to studio decisions. Entries were compared across the four days to see whether gaps, thresholds and omissions moved from being described as accidents to being framed as deliberate choices.
- **Pre and post awareness prompts**  
Short written prompts at the beginning and end of the workshop asked students how intentionally they designed gaps or thresholds in two recent projects and to explain one concrete decision that changed. Responses were compared for the presence of TRIDOC language and for the specificity of examples.

In this case study, classroom evidence suggested modest but consistent shifts in how students wrote about absence. Early entries tended to describe gaps as leftover space. Later entries more often named them as tools for cooling, filtering or gathering, and linked these descriptions to particular design moves. These patterns are promising rather than conclusive. They indicate that TRIDOC can support students to articulate their own growth, while questions of long-term impact and formal rubric development remain open for future cohorts and longitudinal studies.

## 5.3. ADAPTING BEYOND SRI LANKA

TRIDOC is not bound to a tropical climate or to a single institution, although it was developed in one. The six dimensions can be translated into other contexts by asking what counts as Time, Ritual, Intangible quality, Dynamic change, Omitted Form and Context in those settings. In colder climates, for example, attention may shift from monsoon breezes to drafts, insulation layers and patterns of indoor congregation. In fully digital studios, Absence may first be explored through on-screen masking, layering and erasure before being translated into physical interventions.

Educators working in product-oriented or curriculum-constrained programmes can adapt TRIDOC as a light overlay rather than as a new course. One or two existing assignments can be reframed to highlight gaps, thresholds, shadows or

acoustic pockets, while marking schemes are adjusted to acknowledge these moves. In this way, Absence begins to enter the language of briefs, rubrics and critiques as a design ethic, not only as a spatial trait.

TRIDOC is not offered as a template to be copied. It works better as provocation for educators to tune their own frameworks to local climates, materials and social histories. The six dimensions are deliberately open enough to be renamed, expanded or questioned. The intention is to hold Absence in view as a dynamic force shaped by climate, culture and the politics of presence, rather than to fix it in a universal model.

#### 5.4. RESOURCE USE AND ETHICS

Resource constraints shaped the prototypes in this study. This limit became a strength that showed students how to do more with less. Voids often cost less than solid surfaces, while airflow, shadow and ritual pause add forms of value that an enclosure cannot provide. In this reading, working with Absence becomes both a spatial and an ethical practice, linking material restraint to climatic responsiveness and user comfort.

The same ethic can be extended to other studios. Asking students to account for the resource and energy implications of what they omit as well as what they build encourages a wider sense of responsibility. Absence then becomes part of a larger conversation about care, repair and long-term adaptability.

#### 5.5. A POSTCOLONIAL REFLECTIVE STUDIO

The TRIDOC framework does not reject Western concepts such as deconstruction or phenomenology. It repositions them within a studio that begins from vernacular thresholds, climate realities and everyday labour. In this sense, the space in-between becomes less a stylistic motif and more a site where colonial habits of filling, enclosing and monumentalising space can be unsettled in practice. Absence becomes a way to listen to what already exists and to invite other rhythms of comfort, ritual and dwelling, rather than an empty sign of incompleteness.

In the TRIDOC diagram (Figure 7), the six dimensions overlap in studio learning. Time and Dynamic describe how voids shift as temperature, airflow and gesture change. Ritual and Intangible draw attention to sensory and social codes that extend beyond visible form. Omitted Form is treated as a material decision, while Local Context grounds each move in climate, culture and resource conditions. What may look at first like constraint, such as heat, humidity or limited material, becomes an opportunity to calibrate rather than accumulate. Linked to Schön's (1983) account of the reflective practitioner, TRIDOC supports an open-ended studio culture in which students are evaluated not only on finish or mass, but on how their work responds to environmental flows and lived use.

In many Global South settings, this marks a modest but meaningful departure from spatial logics that equate presence with value. Students begin to see that air, pause, shadow and silence are not what is missing, but what carries intent. TRIDOC reframes the space in-between as a place of negotiation, not a default, but a decision.

As climate pressures and social inequalities reshape the role of design, frameworks like TRIDOC help centre resource ethics, perceptual sensitivity and context-responsive pedagogy. What emerges is not a universal solution, but a grounded method for recognising that sometimes what is left out is what makes space work.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Absence, when treated as an active agent rather than a passive leftover, opens useful pathways for responding to climate, culture and everyday life. It shifts attention from filling space to calibrating how gaps, pauses and thresholds work. Grounded in Bachelard's (1964) *The Poetics of Space*, the Japanese principle of Ma (Isozaki, 2006) and Sri Lankan vernacular thresholds, the study reframes Absence as a generative spatial force shaped by ritual, rhythm and sensory interaction.

Within this argument, TRIDOC was introduced as a six-dimensional, practice-based framework for perceiving and working with Absence in studio teaching. Through the Beyond Boundaries workshop, the lenses of Time, Ritual, Intangible qualities, Dynamic change, Omitted Form and Local Context were operationalised as prompts for observation and making. The six spatial strategies that emerged from the workshop outputs, such as Sound Space, Dynamic Space and Spaces You Cannot See, showed that voids, folds and pauses are not abstract metaphors but material tactics. Elements such as sound, airflow, warmth and social intervals moved from the margins of critique to the centre of design concern, supported by Schafer's (1977) soundscape thinking and Schön's (1983) account of reflective practice.

By returning to practices such as shaded courtyards, layered domestic thresholds and embodied dressing rituals, TRIDOC questions the assumption that emptiness is a defect to be fixed. Instead of reinforcing a global emphasis on mass and finish, the framework encourages restraint, responsiveness and continued interaction as core design values. It shares concerns with critical regionalist thinking, yet its emphasis lies less on tectonic expression and more on the lived qualities of presence that become possible through conscious Absence.

The study is limited to a single workshop in one institutional and climatic setting, so it does not claim statistical generalisability. Its contribution lies in offering a set of concrete tools. Modular studio exercises, low-tech simulations and simple awareness prompts show how TRIDOC can be adapted to other pedagogical, environmental and cultural settings. In this sense, the framework is best understood as a grounded starting point rather than a universal model, inviting further testing across cohorts, climates and curricula.

This reframing positions minimal intervention as an ethic of care that accounts for long-term adaptability and generational relevance. When a courtyard holds quiet or a fold invites air rather than sealing it out, Absence becomes an essential material. In a period shaped by resource limitations and spatial inequity, the space in between does not solve every problem, but it offers a site for beginning again, grounded in attention, humility, and care.

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