# EARCAG FUKUOKA 2025

**Territorial Justice in times of Polycrisis** 

Persistent Informality and Cultural Heritage: Stilt Housing in Tai O Village

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### **Research Outline – Abstract Correction**

This is a presentation of research conducted in Tai O Village, Hong Kong.

The research concerns the specific form of informality experienced in stilt housing in Tai O, a peri-urban settlement within the Special Administrative Region.

Of particular focus are relationships between stilt house inhabitants' experiences of informality in the context of post-colonial development policy.



Image: Context map showing Tai O Village, Lantau relative to The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Hung Hom Campus, approximately 2 hours travel time away. Google Maps.

### **Research Outline – Abstract Correction**

A correction to the abstract published in proceedings - especially important given the role language and demography play in producing difference in Tai O Village.

Stilt house inhabitants were erroneously referred to as 'Tanka ethnicity' in the original abstract.

This is a mis-characterization of *seui seung yahn* (Cantonese: on-water people), who can be variously distinguished either linguistically as another ethnicity (Kani, 1967) or as a Cantonese-Chinese sub-culture (Anderson, 2007).



Image: Context map showing Tai O Village, Lantau relative to The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Hung Hom Campus, approximately 2 hours travel time away. Google Maps.

Relevant History and Policy in Hong Kong (HK)

- Hong Kong's period of colonization by the British: 1841-1997.
- Treaty of Nanking cedes HK Island to the British Empire. The Convention of Peking leased the 'New Territories,' including Lantau Island, to the British.
- The 1844 Land Registration Ordinance and Crown Land Ordinance establish an exclusive leasehold system throughout HK.
- All non-leased land occupation is designated 'squatting' under the Squatter Control Policy (1891).
- The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration sets terms for HK's handover to the People's Republic of China (PRC).



Image: Context map showing Tai O Village, Lantau relative to The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Hung Hom Campus, approximately 2 hours travel time away. Google Maps.

Relevant History and Policy in Hong Kong (HK)

- 1964, 1976, 1977, 1982, 1984: Squatter Control Surveys document informal settlements in HK.
- 1982 Squatter Structure Survey 'freezes' built environment conditions in informal settlements, including Tai O Village.
- Stilt houses in Tai O are listed as, 'surveyed Squatter Structures,' meaning:
  - Occupation is tolerated but conveys no legal right to ownership.
  - Physical structure conditions may not be changed from records in the 1982 survey.



Image: Context map showing Tai O Village, Lantau relative to The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Hung Hom Campus, approximately 2 hours travel time away. Google Maps.



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History and Conditions in Tai O Village

- A. About 350 "stilt houses" ( 棚屋, *pang uk*) remain in Tai O Village (Image: Daniel Elkin).
- B. Settlement in Tai O is documented back to at least 1632 (Image: Hong Kong Police Force).
- C. In the post-colonial period, Tai O Village's natural setting and cultural heritage, including stilt housing, have become important draws for foreign and domestic tourism (Image: Hong Kong Tourism Board).
- D. In 2017, the Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD) included Tai O Village in strategic investment via the Sustainable Lantau Blueprint (Image: CEDD).





#### Informality in Tai O Village

- Informality in Tai O is a specific form of difference initiated in the colonial era and reproduced by governments in the contemporary period.
- It is, arguably, strategic. Hong Kong needs 'culture' (cultural capital) and produces difference in Tai O through informality.



Image: Stilt housing in Tai O Village. Daniel Keith Elkin

#### Informality in Tai O Village

- [Heritage conservation is part of] Hong Kong's search for a new social status in competition with other Asian societies. When many societies develop at a rapid pace and are wealthy, there is a need among them to search for new yardsticks to differentiate themselves from each other. Conservation and preservation have become a new indicator of successful modern and urban metropolis where being cultural is now fashionable and trendy (Kuah, 2016, p. 23).
- This phenomenon in Hong Kong may also connect to the 'preservatism' trend Karita Kan (2025) mentioned in Mainland China.



Image: Stilt housing in Tai O Village. Daniel Keith Elkin

#### **Research Question and Methodology**

#### Informality in Tai O Village

- Given this historical and political context, what do stilt house inhabitants experience as dwellers within a specific form of informality?
- What do their testimonies on land tenure, occupation patterns, and interactions with government officers and administrators reveal about their experience living in an urban periphery?



Image: Stilt housing in Tai O Village. Daniel Keith Elkin

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

Our project was supported by the Hong Kong General Research Fund Project 15600621. It entailed:

- 'Snowball sampling' of stilt house dwellings (n=20) in Tai O Village.
- Digital documentation of each house's physical conditions using a Leica BLK2GO 3D scanner.
- And one or more long-format (60 minutes+) ethnographic interviews with members of each household living in stilt houses conducted in 2021-2022.

Materials gathered through the project include:

- 20 3D scan 'point cloud' files available for public download.
- 20 interview transcripts in English and Traditional Chinese available for public download, plus summaries.
- Drawings and diagrams

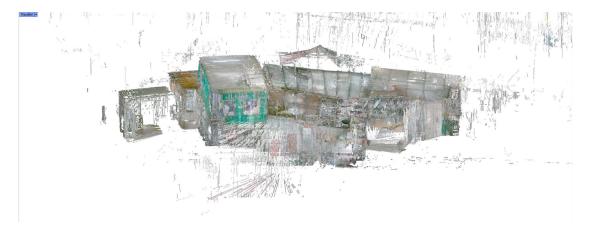


Image: a 'turntable' view of one of the 3D scans of a stilt house gathered during the project. Daniel Keith Elkin

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

- Stilt house inhabitants' reports suggest unclear understanding of their land tenure rights, and their land tenure security is deeply in doubt:
  - Informants in 11 out of 20 (55%) households surveyed indicated they held a Surveyed Squatter Structure License.
  - The informant in 1 household offered no data on their license status.
  - The remainder (8 households) indicated they had no license to temporary occupation.
  - Informants in all 20 households indicated their stilt houses had physically changed since 1982, which would mean all 20 violate terms permitting their occupation.

Household Case Number	Informant Age(s) in Years	Informant Gender(s) (M/F)	Compliant with SCP (Y/N/Unknown)	Compliance, Tenure, and Occupancy Details
023157	62	М	Ν	The informant stated that the house did not have a license.
069817	89	F	Y	The informant described the house as licensed to her late husband.
128590	85	F	N	The informant described paying 'ground rent' to another stilt house resident, rendering her occupancy of the house non-compliant. Additionally, she related that the landlord increased her rent when he was issued a license.
169032	87	F	Ν	The informant described the house as originally belonging to her father-in-law under a ground rent contract with a landowner who had a license for the oldest part of the house. This agreement renders her occupancy of the stilt house non- compliant.
241590	27	F	Y	The informant was an intermittent occupant of the house and described the stilt house as registered to her great-grandmother. Her grandparents, immediate relatives of the license holder, lived in the house full-time.
261094	88	М	Ν	The informant stated that the house did not have a license.
326789	60	М	Ν	The informant stated that the house did not have a license.
328954	88	М	Y	The informant described the case house as licensed, but also related that multiple adjoining stilt houses owned by his brothers, 'share the same stilt license,' which would be a non-compliant arrangement.
478523	60-70	м	Y	The informant stated that the house was registered to his father and the license was later transferred to his name.
539775	73	F	N	The informant described the house as being licensed in her sister-in-law's name, and the sister-in-law willed the house to the informant's husband.
583904	60-70	F	Y	The informant related that her mother-in-law applied for and secured a license for the house forty years ago and willed it to the informant's husband.
651290	82, 80	M, F	Unknown	No data.
687795	78	F	Y	The informant described the case house as licensed to her father, who willed the house to her.
694827	83	F	Unknown	The full extent of the house the informant's family lived in was originally two houses separated over a footpath with a roof bridging between them. The informant describes one part of the house as originally belonging to an aunt with no known license, and the other part as legally registered to her late husband's great grandfather.
705384	66	М	Υ	The informant described the case house as licensed in his mother's name.
729485	74	F	Υ	The informant described the case house as licensed to her deceased husband.
729580	54, 53-62	F, M	Y	The male informant described the house as legally registered in his mother's name.
837295	86, 83	M, F	Y	The informants described the house as being licensed to one or both informants but stated that the license was lost in a house fire.
853147	67	F	Y	The informant described the case house as being "licensed with a proper lot number," but gave no detail on who is registered on the license.
941756	52, 45-60	F, M	N	The house was licensed to the male informant's elder uncle, who did not live there but allowed multiple parts of his extended family to use the house intermittently.

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

- Stilt house inhabitants' reports suggest unclear understanding of their land tenure rights, and their land tenure security is deeply in doubt:
  - Informants in 2 households related living under 'ground rent' contracts with other stilt house inhabitants. This is illegal under the Squatter Control Policy.

## [House Case Number]

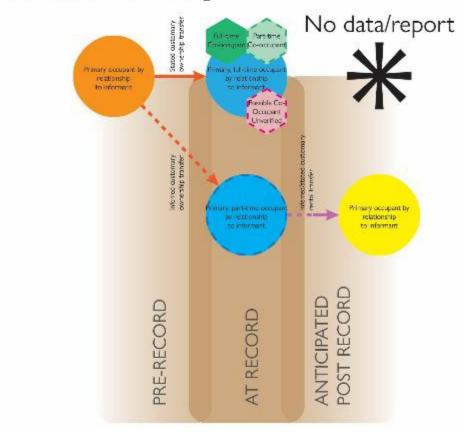
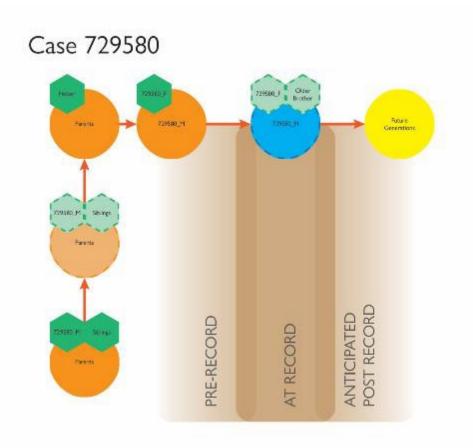


Image: Interpretation key for stilt house occupation pattern diagrams.

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

- Stilt house inhabitants' reports suggest unclear understanding of their land tenure rights, and their land tenure security is deeply in doubt:
  - Informants in 19 (95%) households sampled indicated their intent to transfer occupation to their family members.
  - These would not be legal transfers (no data from 1 household).



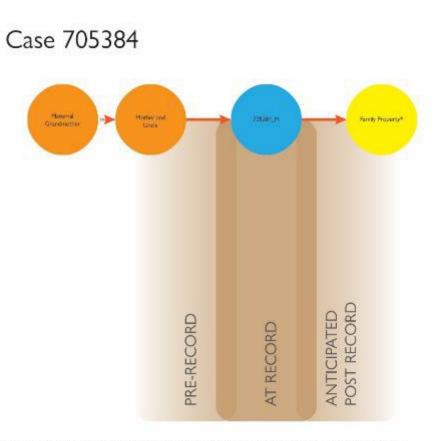
#### Image: Occupation pattern in house 729580

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

- Stilt house inhabitants' reports suggest unclear understanding of their land tenure rights, and their land tenure security is deeply in doubt:
  - Informants in 2 households related that the Hong Kong Government changed its stance on their right to rebuild stilt houses after a fire in 2000 after stilt house inhabitants applied political pressure.

Case 705384 Informant Testimony

Yes, at the beginning the government['s] attitude towards rebuilding stilt houses was very strict. I remember during a meeting at the town hall, a female officer mentioned the government would demolish the houses if they were rebuilt. We, the people of Tai O, said that we wanted to get our licenses to prove that we have been living here for a long time. Some people had licenses that were over a hundred years old, and my mother's license had been around for



\*The informant stated his desire to will the house to the family for shared use amongst its members.

Image: Occupation pattern in house 705384

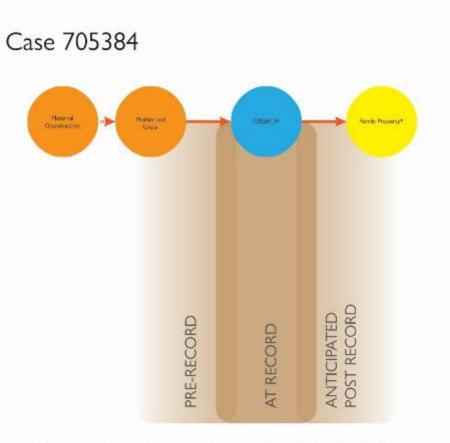
WHE OF A Cultural Heritage: Stilt Housing in Tai O Village

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Case 705384 Informant Testimony

After that meeting, no more meetings were held. Not long after, the government released a document stating that Tai O was a tourist area, and they would try not to demolish our stilt houses. It was okay for us to rebuild, but we needed to apply for permission.

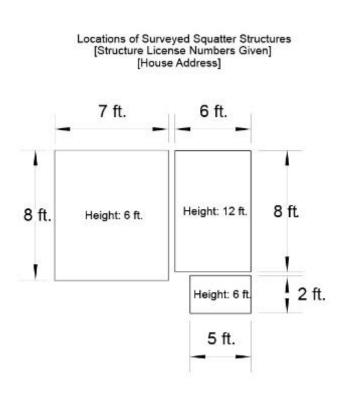


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Image: Occupation pattern in house 705384

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

- Stilt house inhabitants' reports suggest unclear understanding of their land tenure rights, and their land tenure security is deeply in doubt:
  - Informants in 1 household (case 729580) related that they faced enforcement action which forced them to renovate and then vacate their stilt house, despite having a license to temporary occupation.



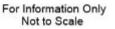
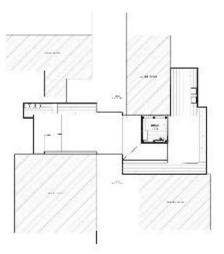


Image: Reproduction of enforcement letter issued to inhabitants of house 729580.

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

- Many stilt house inhabitants related customary land tenure arrangements that do not fit well into container categories for land occupation:
  - In cases 326789 and 694827, each household occupied a house composed of two original buildings connected over a public footpath.
  - In case 328954, multiple households in an extended family occupied several stilt houses under one license.
  - In case 941756, members of the household occupied the house temporarily, sharing it among extended family members.



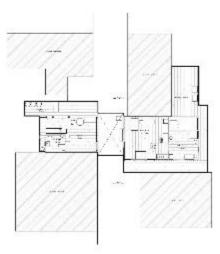


Image: Floor plans of house 326789

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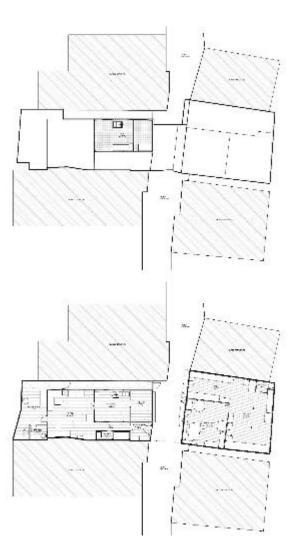
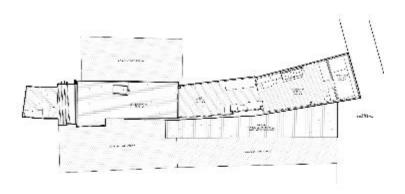
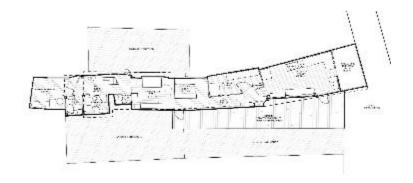


Image: Floor plans of house 694827

Review of point cloud geometry and thematic coding of interview data reveal that:

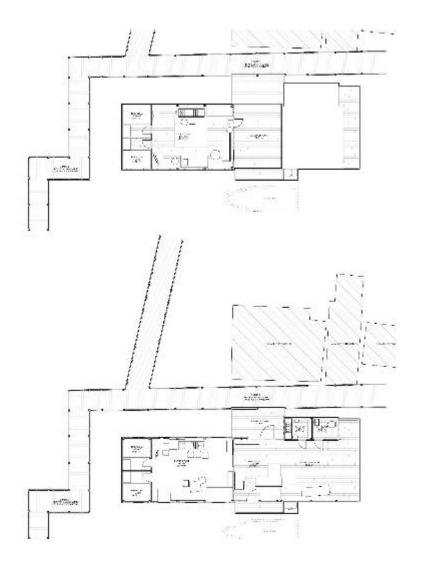
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  - In case 941756, members of the household occupied the house temporarily, sharing it among extended family members.



#### Image: Floor plans of house 941756

## Discussion

#### Findings:

- Inhabitants' land tenure is highly uncertain, and the terms of their tolerated occupation are likely poorly communicated, given how inhabitants understand their tenure.
- Inhabitants' occupation patterns and understandings of tenure are highly diverse and do not fit well into governmental container categories of 'legal' tolerated occupation.



Image: Stilt housing in Tai O Village. Daniel Keith Elkin

## Discussion

#### Limitations:

- The HK Lands Department does not keep records of stilt house occupancy conditions, making verification of inhabitants' land tenure status claims nearly impossible or meaningless.
- The political environment in HK and Tai O Village made sampling difficult, meaning our sample is not representative of the ~350 remaining households remaining in stilt houses.
- It bears stating that stilt house inhabitants live nominally without paying land taxes and often paying minimal or no rent.
- Despite their land tenure insecurity, and their reports on increasingly severe damage to their housing from typhoons and flooding (climate change) they generally reported that they wanted to remain in their housing.



Image: Stilt housing in Tai O Village. Daniel Keith Elkin

## Conclusion

Tenure conditions and security in stilt houses in Tai O Village are complex, poorly understood, and broadly non-compliant with constraining development policy.

Given the HK Government's desire to conserve stilt houses as cultural heritage, political will and innovative strategies will be necessary to halt their decline under the 'managed persistence' of informality (Smart, 2001).

In the meantime, stilt house inhabitants face uncertainty regarding their land tenure status, which could threaten their persistence as a housing culture.

Officers of the HK Government have also specifically suggested seizure of stilt houses to 'facilitate cultural conservation' (Wong, 2019).

Any effort to "regularize" land tenure in Tai O Village, even on the condition that stilt houses are vacated, would require considerable legal negotiation.

A retired Lands Department officer stated any



Image: Stilt housing in Tai O Village. Daniel Keith Elkin

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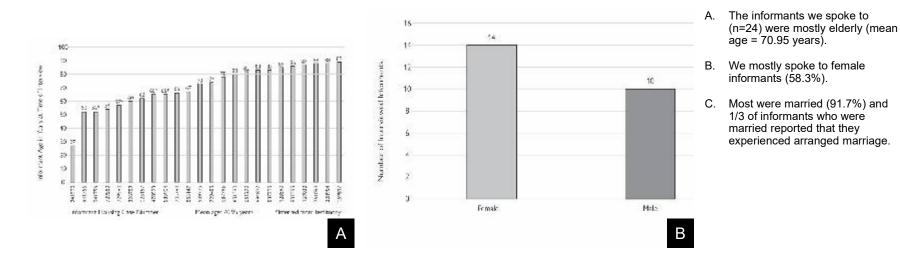
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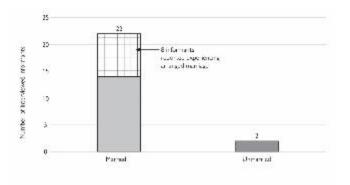
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#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

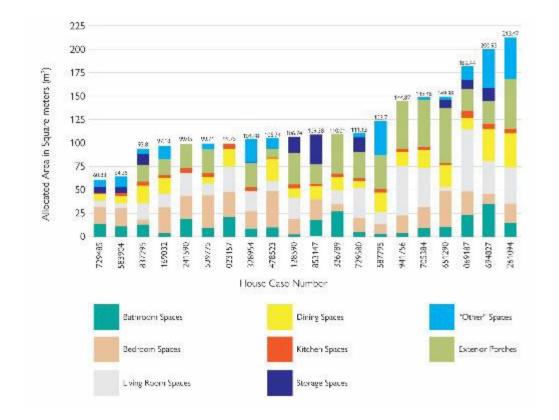




С

Image: Interpretation key for stilt house occupation pattern diagrams.

#### **Appendix – Data Pages**



A. Stilt houses sampled ranged in gross floor area from 60.83 to 213.47 square meters in size.

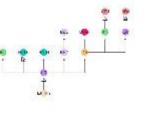
Image: Spatial allocation by program areas in sampled stilt houses. Daniel Keith Elkin

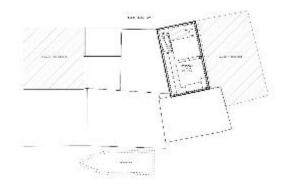
#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, male informant. 62 years of age.

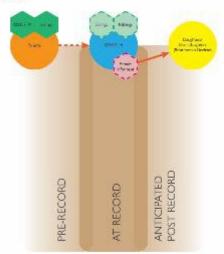
Stated the house did not have a license, and that he planned to transfer the house to his daughters or granddaughters.





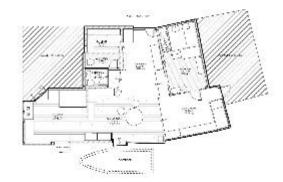


#### Case 023157



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#### First Floor Plan



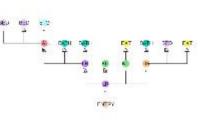
#### **Ground Floor Plan**

NODE COUNT 10 SREACH COUNT 10 SREACH LEVELS & QUERT DOCTOR 10 ACCESS TO ADJACENT NO

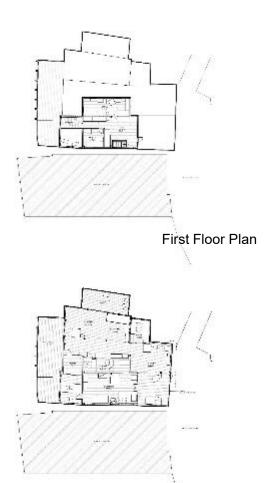
#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, female informant. 89 years of age.

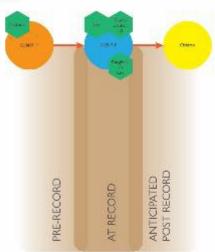
Stated the house was licensed to her deceased husband. Indicated her desire to transfer the house to her children.



069817 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE



Case 069817



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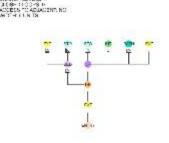
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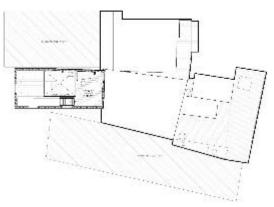
EGEND

#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, female informant. 85 years of age.

Stated she paid 'ground rent' to another stilt house resident 'landlord' who had a license for the location. Stated she intended to pass the house to her eldest son. 128590 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE

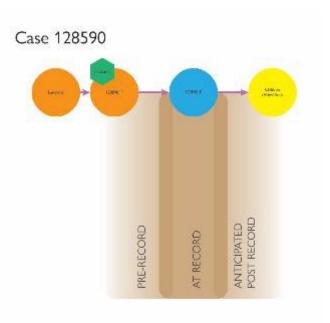








#### Ground Floor Plan

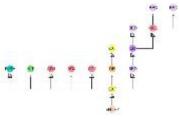


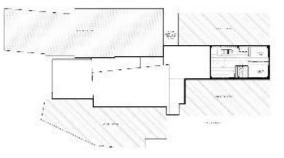
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#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

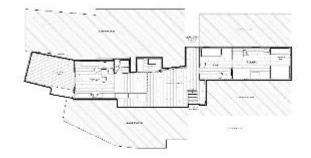
One, female informant. 87 years of age.

Stated the house originally belonged to her father-inlaw who paid ground rent to a landowner who had a license for the house. Stated she wanted to will the house to her children. 169032 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE

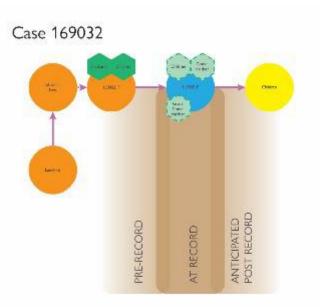








#### Ground Floor Plan



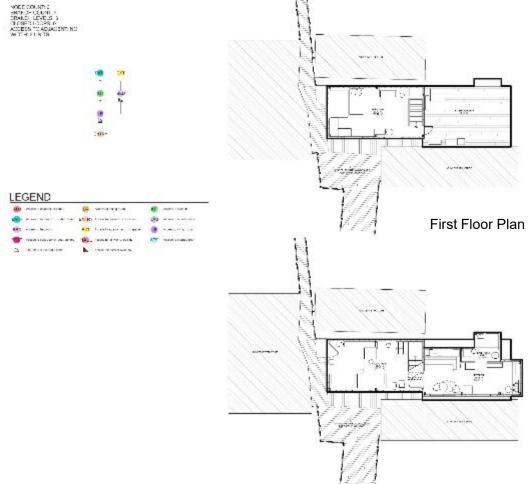
241590 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE

#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, female informant. 27 years of age.

Described the house as licensed to her deceased great-grandmother. She was an occasional occupant who expected her grandparents to will the house to her.

PRE-RECORD



Ground Floor Plan

Case 241590

ANTICIPATED POST RECORD

RECORD

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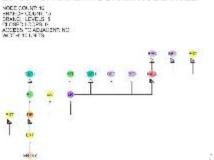
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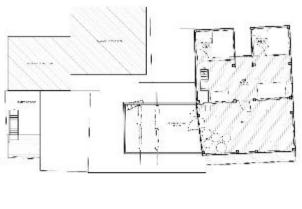
#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, male informant. 88 years of age.

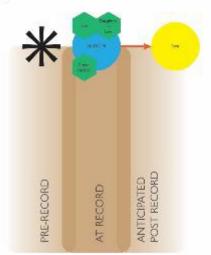
Stated that the house did not have a license. Stated his intent to will the house to his children.



261094 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE



#### Case 261094



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First Floor Plan



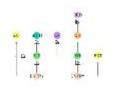
**Ground Floor Plan** 

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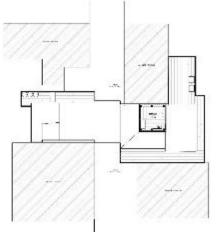
#### **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, male informant. 60 years of age.

Stated that the house did not have a license. Stated his intent to will the house to his children. The house also includes two buildings spanning over a public footpath. 326789 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE SOLE OF AN IN THE STATE OF A CONTRACT OF A CONTRACT



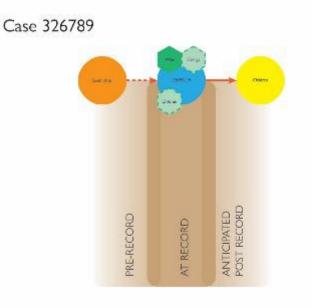
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First Floor Plan

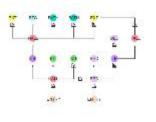


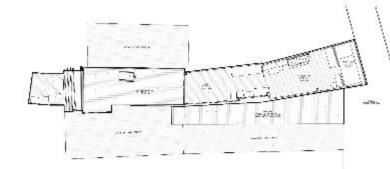
Ground Floor Plan



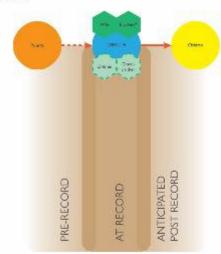
One, male informant. 88 years of age.

Stated the house did have a license, but that surrounding houses occupied by his brothers were occupied under the same license. Stated his desire to will the house to his children. 328954 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TF SOLECOMENT SPACE COMPANY SPACE C

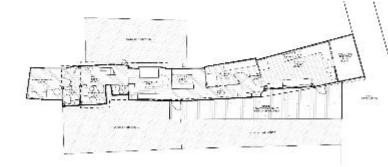




#### Case 328954

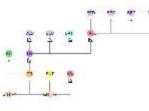


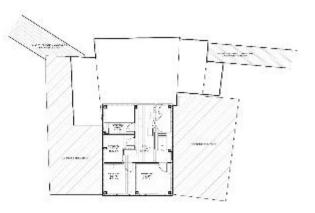
\*The informant's brothers occupy adjacent still houses under the same Surveyed Squatter Structure License assigned to the case house. First Floor Plan



One, male informant. 60-70 years of age.

Stated the house had a license in his name, originally his fathers. Stated his intent to will the house to his younger brother. 478523 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE MOLECOMMENTS PRODUCTION PRODUC



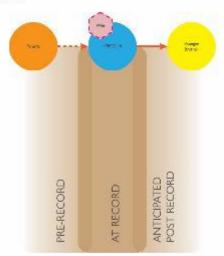


First Floor Plan



**Ground Floor Plan** 

#### Case 478523

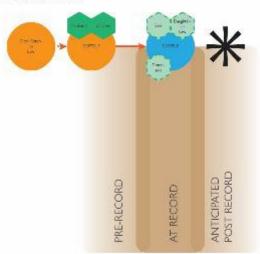


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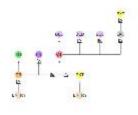
One, female informant. 73 years of age.

Stated the house was licensed in her sister-in-law's name. Sister-in-law willed the house to the informant's husband. No data on intended future transfer.

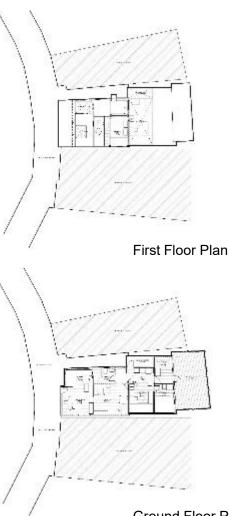






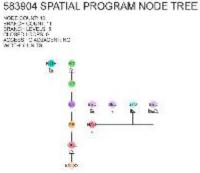






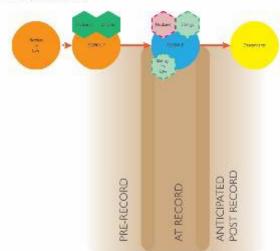
One, female informant. 60-70 years of age.

Stated her mother-in-law secured a license for the house and willed it to her husband. Stated her intent to will the house to her children.





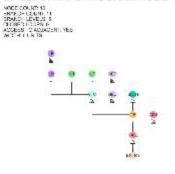


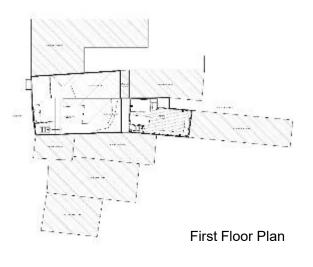


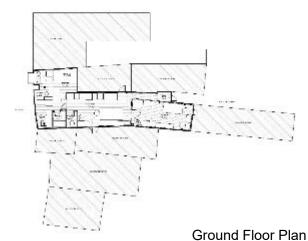


Two, informants. 1 Male, 82. 1 Female, 80.

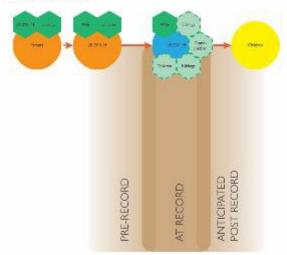
No data on license status. Stated their intent to will the house to their children. 651290 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE







#### Case 651290



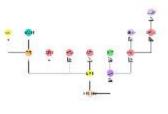
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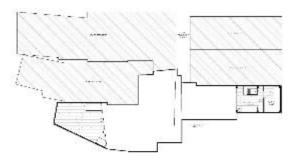
One, female informant. 78 years of age.

Stated the house was licensed to her father, who willed it to her. Stated her intent to will the house to her daughters.

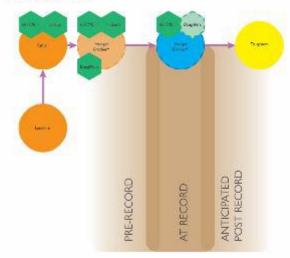
#### 687795 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE

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#### Case 687795



\*The informant's younger brother laborited the customary right to live in the case house from their latter, but he did not live there at the time of record.

# EGEND

First Floor Plan



EGEND

## **Appendix – Data Pages**

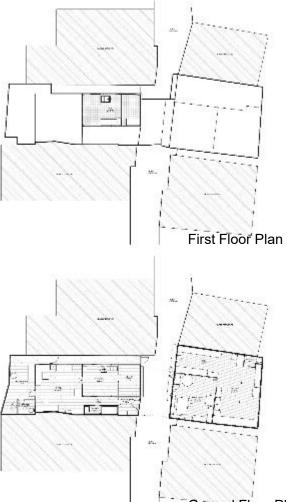
One female informant, 83 years of age.

One part of the house was originally licensed to her husband's great grandfather. The other part belonged to her aunt, with unknown license status. Stated her intent to will the house to her daughters.

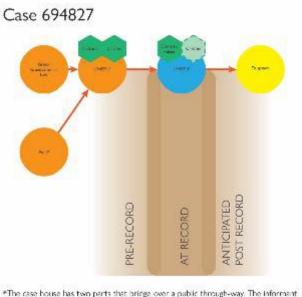
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694827 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE



Ground Floor Plan



inherited each part of the house from a different family member.



16/4/2025

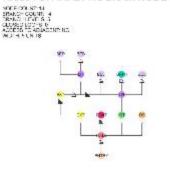
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## **Appendix – Data Pages**

One, male informant. 66 years of age.

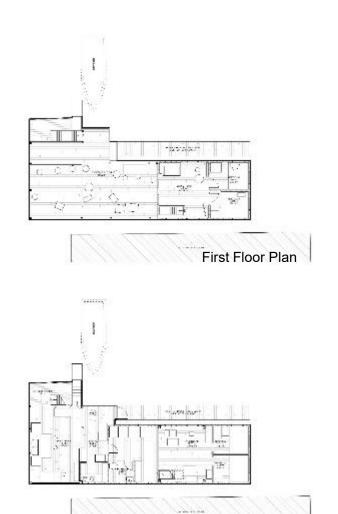
Stated the house was licensed in his mother's name. He stated his intent to will the house to the family as a sharing property.



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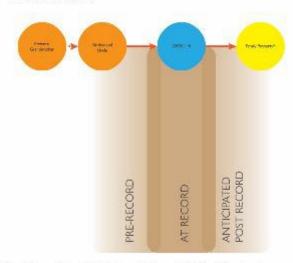
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705384 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE



Ground Floor Plan

#### Case 705384



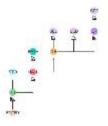
\*The informant stated his desire to will the house to the family for shared use amongst its members.

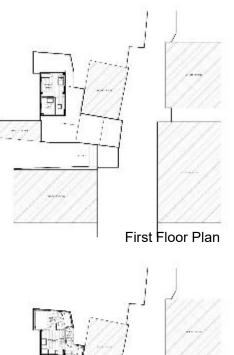


One female informant, 74 years of age.

Stated the house was licensed to her deceased husband, and that she intended to will the house to her son.

729485 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE

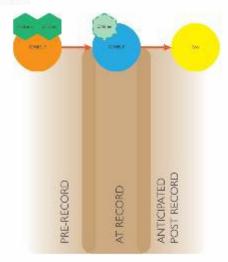






Ground Floor Plan

#### Case 729485



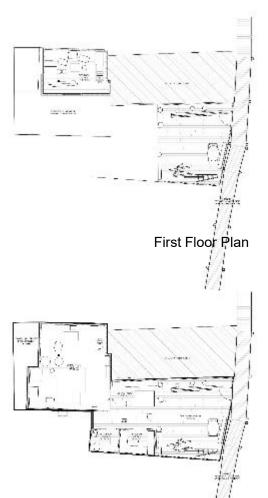
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Two informants. One female, 54. One male, 53-62.

Stated the house was licensed to the male informant's mother. This house faced enforcement action in 2021/22.

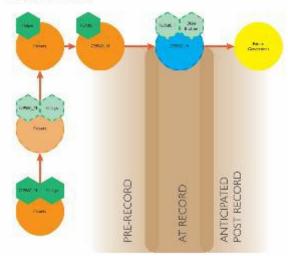
729580 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE MOLECOMMENT SPACE LEADER & COMPACTING ACCESS CAMAGEMENT WITCHING





#### Ground Floor Plan

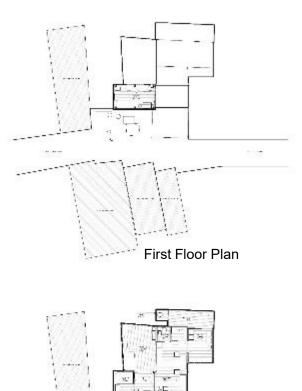
#### Case 729580

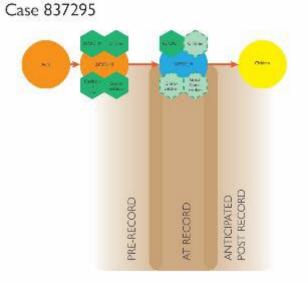


LEGEND

Two informants. One male, 86. One female, 83.

Stated the house was licensed to one or both of them, but license lost in fire. Stated intent to will the house to their children. 837295 SPATIAL PROGRAM NODE TREE





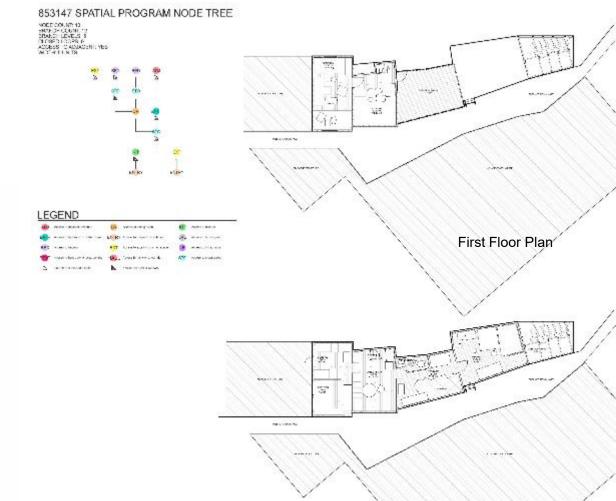


One female informant, 67 years of age.

Case 853147

16/4/2025

Stated the house was licensed but gave no detail on who held the license. Stated her intent to will the house to her daughters.



AT RECORD

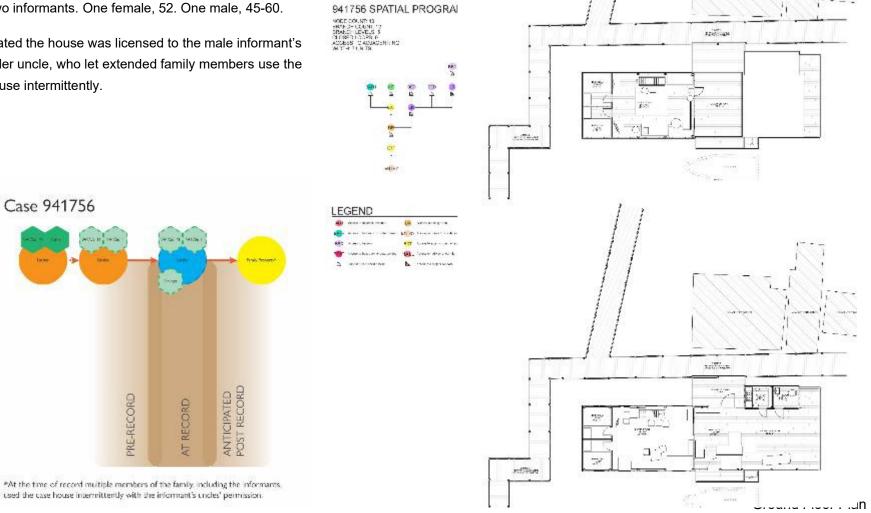
PRE-RECORD

ANTICIPATED POST RECORD

Two informants. One female, 52. One male, 45-60.

PRE-RECORD

Stated the house was licensed to the male informant's elder uncle, who let extended family members use the house intermittently.



Case 941756

ANTICIPATED POST RECORD

RECORD

5