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Symphony of Tradition and Technology: Integrating Traditional Woodworking Techniques with Biomimicry and Digital Fabrication

Matheus Rudo A. P. OLIVEIRA*, Ludmila S. ANDRADE

*University of Brasília
Brasília, Brazil
matheusrudo@gmail.com

[a] University of Brasília

Abstract

This article explores the innovative integration of traditional woodworking techniques – inspired by Chinese and Portuguese methods – with biomimicry concepts and digital manufacturing technologies to create wooden structures. The study proposes a dialogue between ancient knowledge and modern design and manufacturing approaches, aiming to build structures that are not only ecologically sustainable and efficient but also aesthetically rich and culturally significant. The development of advanced digital tools offers an avenue through which the knowledge and skills of older generations can be both transferred and develop by younger generations. Advanced digital technologies developed in the last decade offer respite and an avenue for the preservation of traditional Chinese and Portuguese woodworking techniques. The research is based on the modeling and simulation of these structures using software like Grasshopper and Karamba, exploring how the fusion of these disciplines can result in innovations in the field of structural design.

Keywords: Traditional woodworking techniques, biomimicry, digital manufacturing technologies, ecological sustainability, aesthetic richness, cultural significance, modeling and simulation, Evolutionary Computation, structural design.

1. Introduction to Traditional Woodworking Techniques

Wood construction techniques, especially those originating from the East and West, such as the Chinese chuandou [2] and the Portuguese Pombaline cage system [4], present a fascinating fusion of ancient wisdom and innovation. Primarily rooted in Chinese's and Poruguese's religious and geographic locale, the impact of climatic and environmental conditions on the territory's flora, and the deep respect of of treating wood as a living organism, have played a primary and significant role in the use of wood (and the development of the intricate methods associated with handling the material) in both cultures. These traditions are not just construction methods; they represent a deep cultural legacy, reflecting the philosophies, social values, and environmental adaptations of their respective cultures over the centuries.

The chuandou is an expression of Chinese ingenuity in carpentry, characterized by its structural complexity and precision in joints [10]. This technique allows the creation of structures that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also incredibly resilient. It is based on the use of wooden components that fit together perfectly without the need for nails or glue, a testament to the skill and deep knowledge of Chinese craftsmen [15]. The chuandou technique enables the assembly and disassembly of structures, offering flexibility and practicality in the use of wood as a building material. This system not only facilitates the maintenance and repair of buildings but also promotes a sustainable approach by reusing materials.

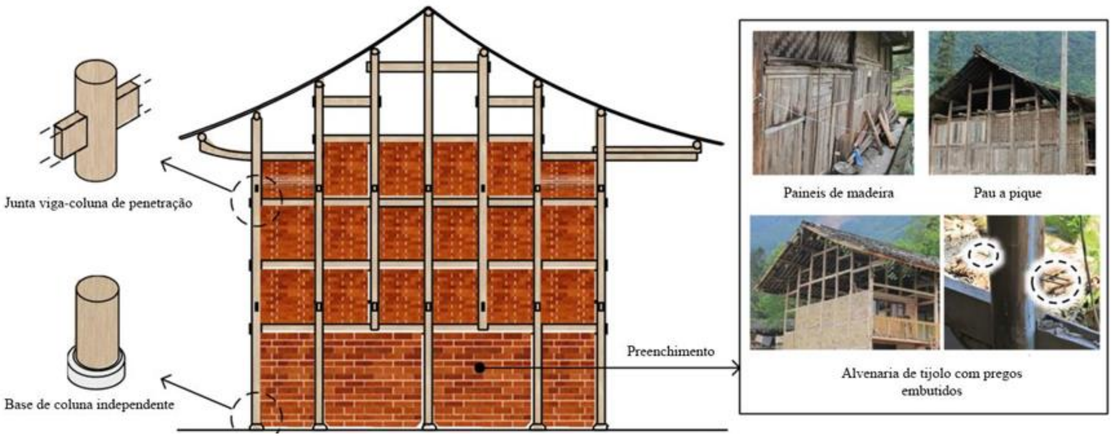

Figure 1 Configuration of a chuandou style wooden structure, filled with masory

Source: Adaptaded Qu et al (2020).

On the other hand, the Pombaline cage, developed in response to the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755, exemplifies a pioneering approach to anti-seismic construction [13]. This system uses an internal wooden frame that acts as a skeleton, providing flexibility and shock absorption during seismic events. The incorporation of Saint Andrew's crosses as additional structural elements not only increases the seismic resistance of buildings but also highlights the capacity for innovation and adaptation to environmental and technological challenges [14]. The Pombaline cage is not just a technical solution to a specific problem; it is a milestone in the development of safe and sustainable construction practices.

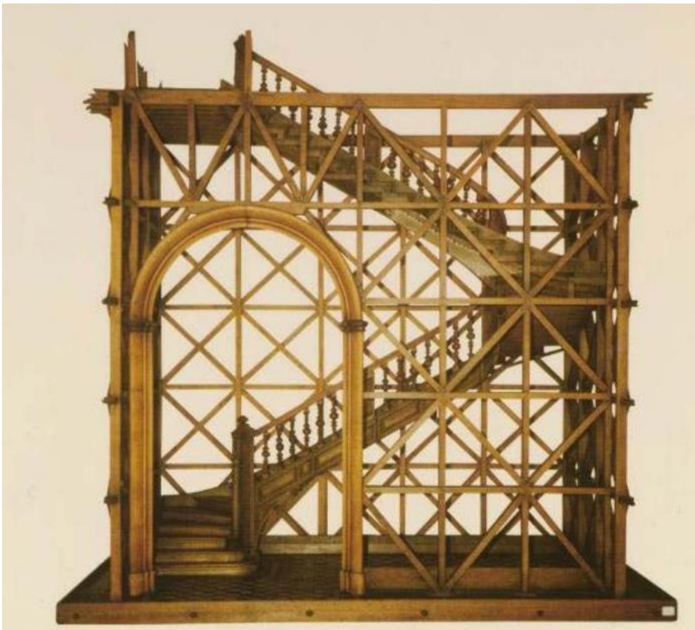

Figure 2 - Wooden model of the anti-seismic structural system known as the Pombaline cage

Source: Pinho (2008)

The integration of chuandou [2] and Pombaline cage [4] techniques in a contemporary context of design and construction represents a productive meeting between tradition and innovation. Advanced digital technologies developed in the last decade offer respite and an avenue for the preservation of traditional woodworking techniques. The transfer of knowledge, the use of advanced digital tools across a range of domains and disciplines allows for a streamlined sharing of knowledge through as well as in line with the technological advancements of the 21st century, allowing greater opportunities to explore new formats and frameworks that effectively combines traditional techniques with contemporary methods.

Ingrained in this is the transfer of knowledge between generations, primarily through a master-apprentice relationship, in which not only were the methods and techniques taught (such as selection, cultivation, distribution, treatment, design and assembly), but also the respect and moral bond between the carpenter and the tree.

To remember, the term biomimicry originates from the combination of the term bios, which means life, with the term mimicry, which means imitation. It is, therefore, a notion of imitation of biological or natural forms, contents and functions, which has already been used in the fields of architecture, urban planning, arts and design for a long time.Practices of biomimicry is so core to sustainable design fascinating observations of functional strategies found in biology into innovative technologies.

By combining these approaches with digital manufacturing technologies [1] and biomimicry principles, it is possible to create wooden structures that not only respect the cultural and technical legacy of each system but also meet the sustainability, efficiency, and aesthetic criteria of the 21st century [11]. The use of advanced digital tools across a range of domains and disciplines allows a sharing of knowledge through a feedback mechanism, allowing greater opportunities to explore new formats and frameworks that effectively combine traditional techniques with contemporary methods. This innovative dialogue between the old and the new paves the way for construction solutions that are simultaneously rooted in tradition and forward-looking, highlighting the infinite potential of wood as a building material.

Thus, exploring the possibilities that emerge from the fusion of traditional wood construction techniques and biomewith contemporary advancements is not just a matter of technical innovation; it is also a way to preserve and revitalize cultural heritage [3],[6]. The traditions of chuandou [2] and the Pombaline cage [4], when viewed through the lens of modernity, offer valuable lessons on resilience, sustainability, and beauty. This innovative integration not only honors the past but also paves the way for a future where wooden structures continue to play a vital role in our search for construction solutions more harmonious with the environment and culturally significant.

In this context, the presented research examines the relationship between old and new by cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations, while on the other, the necessary acceptance and adaptation to the inevitable future change brought on by technological advancements.

1.1. Parametrization and Digital Technology: A New Dimension in Carpentry

Parametrization emerges as a powerful ally in the process of merging millennial carpentry traditions with contemporary innovations in design and manufacturing. This method, which relies on the use of algorithms to establish the geometrical and dimensional relations of an object, transcends mere design automation, positioning itself as a catalyst for architectural innovation. By adapting traditional techniques such as the Chinese chuandou [2] and the Portuguese Pombaline cage [4], parametrization not only preserves the cultural and technical value of these practices but also rejuvenates them, infusing them with new possibilities and functionalities.

Blender, an open-source 3D modeling software [7], along with structural analysis plugins like Karamba3D [1], exemplifies the digital tools that facilitate the application of parametrization in architectural projects. These technologies allow designers to explore structural complexities with precision previously unattainable, simulating the mechanical behavior of structures under various conditions [11]. Thus, parametric modeling is not just a matter of aesthetics; it is rooted in functionality, sustainability, and structural resilience, enabling precise adjustments that optimize the performance of materials and constructions [11].

Applying parametrization to traditional techniques like chuandou [2] and the Pombaline cage [4] opens up a range of possibilities for reinterpreting these construction methods in a way that respects their legacy while adapting to contemporary demands. For example, the precision achieved through parametric modeling can replicate the complexity of the chuandou wood joints with impressive fidelity [10], while allowing for design innovations that could expand its applicability. Similarly, the parametrization of the Pombaline cage can facilitate experimentation with different structural configurations, optimizing it for better seismic performance without losing the essence of its original functionality [13][14].

Furthermore, parametrization aligns perfectly with the principles of sustainable design, allowing for detailed analysis of the environmental impact of different materials and techniques. The ability to simulate the complete lifecycle of a structure, from its construction to its eventual dismantling or recycling, is crucial for advancing more responsible construction practices. This aspect is particularly relevant when considering the renewable nature of wood, a central material for both chuandou and the Pombaline cage [2][4].

The integration of parametrization with traditional carpentry techniques represents a dialogue between the past and the future, where reverence for craftsmanship and technological innovation coexist. This meeting of worlds not only honors the architectural legacy of distinct cultures but also proposes a sustainable path for the future of construction. By uniting traditional wisdom with the most advanced design tools, architects and designers are able to create structures that are simultaneously innovative, aesthetically rich, and environmentally conscious, thus marking a new chapter in the long history of carpentry and wood construction [1][7][11].

1.2. Reviving the Past: Integration with Biomimicry and Digital Fabrication

The integration of chuandou [2] and Pombaline cage [4] techniques with biomimicry concepts and digital fabrication technologies paves the way for innovative wooden structures. Biomimicry, which seeks sustainable solutions through the imitation of natural systems, combined with the precision of digital fabrication [1], enhances the efficiency and sustainability of these ancient techniques, offering new design possibilities that are both aesthetically rich and culturally significant.

The fusion of traditional knowledge with modern concepts and technologies not only revitalizes ancestral carpentry techniques [2][4] but also significantly contributes to the advancement of sustainable structural design. By exploring the potentials of chuandou [2] and the Pombaline cage [4] through parametrization [11] and digital fabrication [1], this study proposes a new approach to wood construction, which respects cultural heritage while embracing innovation and sustainability.

2. Biomimicry and Sustainable Design

The fusion between traditional carpentry techniques [2][4] and the cutting edge of biomimicry [3] opens a fascinating field of possibilities for structural design. This segment of the article delves into the principles of biomimicry [3], exploring how nature, through its systems and processes refined over millions of years of evolution, offers valuable insights for creating more efficient, sustainable, and aesthetically pleasing wooden structures.

Biomimicry not only serves as a bridge connecting the ancient wisdom encapsulated in traditional carpentry techniques like the Chinese chuandou [2] and the Portuguese Pombaline cage [4] with modern sustainability goals but also integrates seamlessly with digital fabrication technologies [1] to revolutionize the way we think about, design, and construct with wood. By imitating the intricate designs and strategies seen in natural ecosystems, architects and designers can develop wooden structures that excel in energy efficiency, environmental friendliness, and resilience to natural disasters.

Furthermore, the application of biomimicry in conjunction with parametric design tools [11] and digital fabrication methods [1] allows for a level of customization and complexity previously unimaginable. Complex geometric patterns inspired by the growth patterns of trees or the structure of honeycombs can now be accurately modeled and produced, bringing a new dimension to the aesthetic and functional qualities of wooden architecture.

The potential of combining these diverse approaches—traditional carpentry, biomimicry, parametric modeling, and digital fabrication—lies not only in the creation of structures that are more aligned with our environmental and sustainability objectives but also in the revitalization of carpentry as an art form. This multifaceted approach ensures that wooden structures of the future will not only be more sustainable and efficient but also carry forward the rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship of traditional carpentry into the modern era [2][4][11].

Thus, the integration of these methodologies represents a promising pathway towards a more sustainable, efficient, and aesthetically vibrant future in structural design. As we continue to explore and refine these synergies, the possibilities for innovation in wooden construction seem limitless, heralding a new age of architectural excellence that honors both our past and our planet.

2.1. Inspiration in Nature: The Foundation of Biomimicry

Biomimicry [3], an interdisciplinary field that seeks innovative solutions for complex challenges through the imitation of patterns, strategies, and processes found in nature, offers a unique prism for reevaluating and reimagining the design of wooden structures. By observing and understanding the mechanisms through which living organisms adapt to their environments, designers and architects can extract fundamental principles applicable to the development of more resilient, effective, and environmentally harmonious constructions.

This approach not only highlights the potential for innovation inherent in the natural world but also underscores the importance of integrating these principles into the fabric of modern architectural practices. The insights gained from biomimicry can inform the use of materials, the optimization of structural designs, and the implementation of energy-efficient solutions. For instance, the structural efficiency of bamboo or the self-cooling properties of termite mounds can inspire new ways of thinking about material strength and climate control in buildings.

Furthermore, the principles of biomimicry [3] align closely with the goals of sustainable design, advocating for approaches that minimize environmental impact while maximizing functionality and user comfort. When combined with the precision and flexibility of digital fabrication technologies [1], these insights can lead to the development of wooden structures that are not only innovative and sustainable but also deeply connected to the natural world in their design and function.

Incorporating biomimicry into the design process encourages a holistic view of construction, where buildings are seen not as isolated entities but as integrated parts of their ecosystems. This perspective can significantly enhance the sustainability of construction practices, leading to the creation of spaces that contribute positively to their environments and the well-being of their inhabitants.

As the field of biomimicry [3] continues to evolve, its application in architecture and design promises to deepen our understanding of the relationship between human-made structures and the natural world. This ongoing exploration stands to enrich the architectural landscape with designs that are as aesthetically pleasing as they are ecologically responsible, marking a significant step forward in our journey toward sustainable living environments.

2.2. Efficiency and Sustainability through Biomimicry

Digital fabrication technologies [1], as previously mentioned, play a crucial role in translating biomimetic principles [3] into architectural practice. The precision and flexibility offered by digital fabrication allow for the exploration of complex shapes and structures inspired by nature, which would be impractical or impossible to achieve with traditional construction techniques. Thus, parametrization [11] and 3D modeling [7] facilitate the experimentation and implementation of biomimetic designs, paving the way for innovations that combine aesthetics, functionality, and environmental respect.

The integration of these digital tools with biomimicry [3] not only enhances the potential for sustainable and efficient design but also democratizes the design process. Designers and architects can now rapidly prototype and test various configurations, making sustainable and innovative designs more accessible and feasible. This iterative process, empowered by digital fabrication [1], encourages a more adaptive and responsive approach to architectural design, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of living systems observed in biomimicry.

Moreover, the use of parametric software [11] and digital fabrication technologies [1] in realizing biomimetic concepts allows for a level of detail and complexity in design that goes beyond aesthetic considerations. It enables the creation of structures that are more attuned to the natural environment, optimizing light, heat, and air flow in accordance with biomimetic principles [3], thereby reducing the need for external energy sources and minimizing the environmental footprint of buildings.

This synergy between biomimicry [3], parametrization [11], and digital fabrication [1] represents a forward-thinking approach to architecture that not only respects the environment but also enhances human interaction with natural elements. By drawing inspiration from the efficiency and adaptability of natural systems, architects can design structures that are both innovative and in harmony with the planet, setting a new standard for sustainable and responsive architecture in the 21st century.

2.3. Digital Fabrication Technologies: Partners of Biomimicry

Digital fabrication technologies [1], as previously mentioned, play a crucial role in translating biomimetic principles [3] into architectural practice. The precision and flexibility offered by digital fabrication allow for the exploration of complex shapes and structures inspired by nature, which would be impractical or impossible to achieve with traditional construction techniques. Thus, parametrization [11] and 3D modeling [7] facilitate the experimentation and implementation of biomimetic designs, paving the way for innovations that combine aesthetics, functionality, and environmental respect.

By leveraging these advanced technologies, architects and designers are empowered to create structures that not only mimic the intricacies of natural forms but also embody the sustainability principles inherent in nature. This process involves a dynamic interplay between the latest digital tools and the timeless patterns found in the natural world, fostering a design ethos that is both innovative and ecologically attuned.

The integration of digital fabrication with biomimetic principles opens up new avenues for architectural innovation. It enables the creation of buildings that are more responsive to their environment, optimizing energy use and improving the well-being of their occupants. Through the use of parametrization [11] and 3D modeling [7], designers can generate and test multiple design iterations quickly, ensuring that the final product is both aesthetically pleasing and functionally aligned with the principles of biomimicry [3].

This approach not only heralds a new era of architectural design but also represents a significant step towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between human-made structures and the natural world. As digital fabrication technologies continue to evolve, the potential for their integration with biomimetic principles in creating innovative, sustainable, and visually compelling architectural solutions is bound to expand, marking a promising direction for the future of architectural practice.

2.4. Innovative Projects and the Future of Sustainable Design

Projects that incorporate the principles of biomimicry stand out not only for their uniqueness and beauty but also for their commitment to sustainability. Structures that mimic the efficiency of natural systems not only have the potential to reduce the environmental impact of construction but also to offer spaces that promote well-being and connection with the natural environment. Therefore, the integration of chuandou and Pombaline cage techniques with biomimicry represents a promising frontier for the development of design practices that honor both cultural heritage and ecological imperatives.

By exploring the principles of biomimicry and its applicability in the context of wooden structures, this segment of the article not only reinforces the relevance of nature as a source of inspiration for sustainable design but also illuminates the path to a new era of constructions that are ecologically integrated, efficient, and aesthetically evocative. The collaboration between the traditional wisdom of carpentry and the innovations of biomimicry and digital fabrication promises not only to advance the field of structural design but also to contribute to a more holistic and sustainable approach to architecture and construction in the 21st century.

3. Digital Fabrication and Innovation

The evolution of digital fabrication over the last few decades has radically transformed the field of architecture and structural design, especially in terms of wood construction [1]. This section of the article explores how digital fabrication not only enhances precision and efficiency in building wooden structures but also opens up new possibilities for customization and the introduction of complexity into design.

Through tools like CNC machines, 3D printers, and robotic assembly systems, digital fabrication enables the realization of intricate designs that were once beyond the reach of traditional carpentry methods [1]. This technological advancement allows for the precise cutting, shaping, and assembling of wood, reducing material waste and improving the overall quality of construction.

Moreover, digital fabrication's ability to facilitate complex designs extends the creative boundaries of wood architecture. Parametric design software [11] plays a critical role in this, offering architects and designers the ability to explore innovative structural forms and patterns that respond to specific environmental and functional requirements. This level of customization ensures that each project can be uniquely tailored to fit its context and the needs of its users, marrying form with function in previously unimaginable ways.

Furthermore, the integration of digital fabrication techniques with biomimetic principles [3] opens up a wealth of opportunities for sustainable design. By mimicking the efficiency of natural systems, architects can create wooden structures that are not only structurally sound and aesthetically pleasing but also minimize energy consumption and environmental impact.

The continuous advancement of digital fabrication technologies promises to further revolutionize wood construction, leading to even greater efficiency, sustainability, and design innovation. As these technologies become more accessible and integrated with other design principles like biomimicry [3], the future of wooden architecture looks increasingly dynamic, with possibilities limited only by the imagination of designers and the evolving capabilities of digital tools [1][11]. This evolution marks a significant shift towards a more adaptable, sustainable, and innovative approach to architecture and structural design, heralding a new age of construction that seamlessly blends tradition with technological progress.

3.1. The Impact of Digital Fabrication on Constructive Precision

Precision is crucial in the construction of wooden structures, where each piece must fit perfectly to ensure the integrity and durability of the whole. Digital fabrication, using tools such as CNC (Computer Numerical Control), 3D printers, and assembly robots, allows for millimeter-precision cuts and assemblies that would be practically impossible to achieve manually. This precision not only improves the quality of constructions but also optimizes the use of materials, reducing waste and increasing the sustainability of projects.

3.2. Efficiency and Speed in the Construction Process

Beyond precision, digital fabrication brings significant efficiency and speed to the construction process. Through the automation of cutting and assembly, production times can be drastically reduced, allowing complex projects to be completed in much shorter timelines. This increase in efficiency not only has a positive impact on the cost and sustainability of projects but also allows architects and builders to respond more quickly to client needs and changes in project scope.

3.3. Personalization and Complexity in Design

One of the most exciting aspects of digital fabrication is its ability to facilitate personalization and incorporate complexity into the design of wooden structures. With advanced 3D modeling and parametrization software, designers can explore organic shapes, complex patterns, and innovative structural solutions that would be unfeasible with traditional construction methods. This capacity for customization not only expands the aesthetic possibilities of wooden structures but also allows for greater adaptation to the specific needs of each project and its environmental and cultural context.

3.4. Beyond Construction: Digital Fabrication as a Tool for Innovation

Digital fabrication is not limited to improving existing construction processes; it also acts as a powerful tool for innovation, enabling experimentation with new materials, joining techniques, and structural systems. The integration of sensors and electronic components into wooden structures, for example, can lead to "smart" buildings that adapt their behavior in response to environmental conditions, enhancing user comfort and the energy efficiency of constructions.

Digital fabrication is redefining the field of wood construction, ushering in a new era of precision, efficiency, personalization, and innovation. By combining traditional carpentry techniques with the nearly limitless possibilities of digital fabrication, architects and designers are creating structures that not only meet contemporary demands for sustainability and performance but also enrich our built environment with their beauty and complexity. As we continue to explore and push the boundaries of digital fabrication, we can expect to see even more innovations that will transform the way we think, design, and build with wood.

3.5 Experimental Results

As far as architectural heritage conservation is concerned,the task in our case is to preserve the original knowledge and skills of older generations can be both transferred and develop by younger generations. Preserving the original structural conception of traditional timber frames without inappropriate increase of stiffness and weight. Stresses that the geometry of traditional timber joints was the direct result of the available tools.

Figure 3: Example of traditional carpentry. Source: Boeme et all.

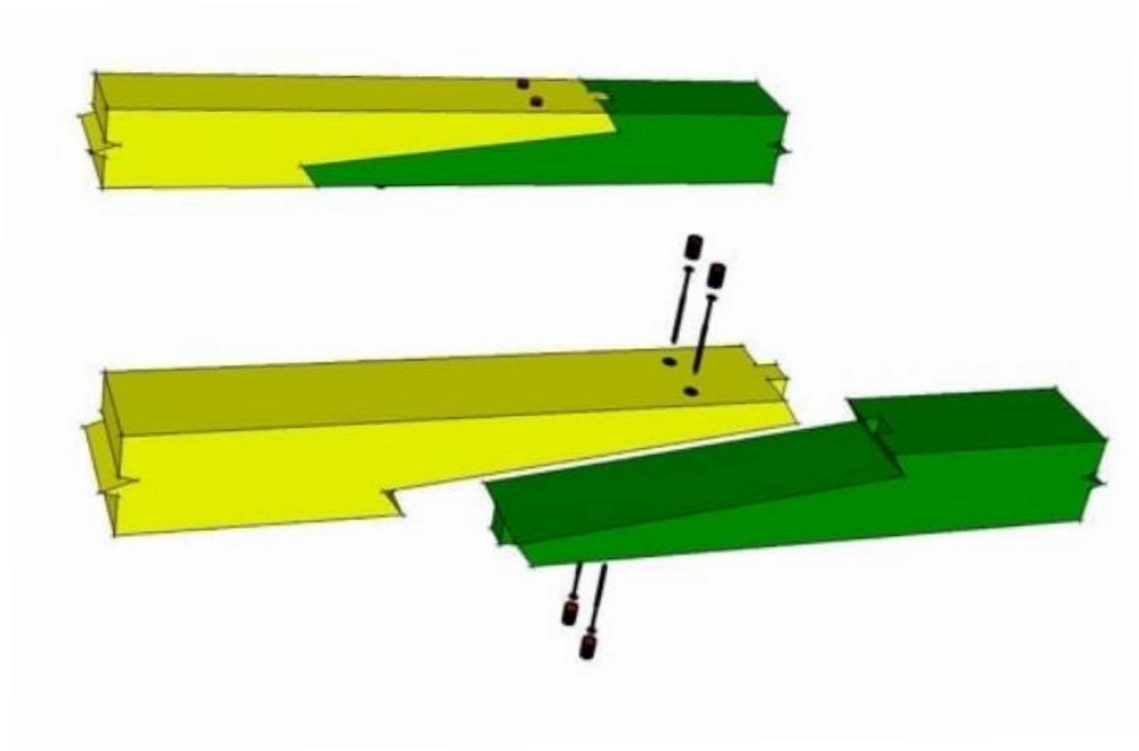

Figure 4: Example of traditional carpentry. Source: https://timberframehq.com/

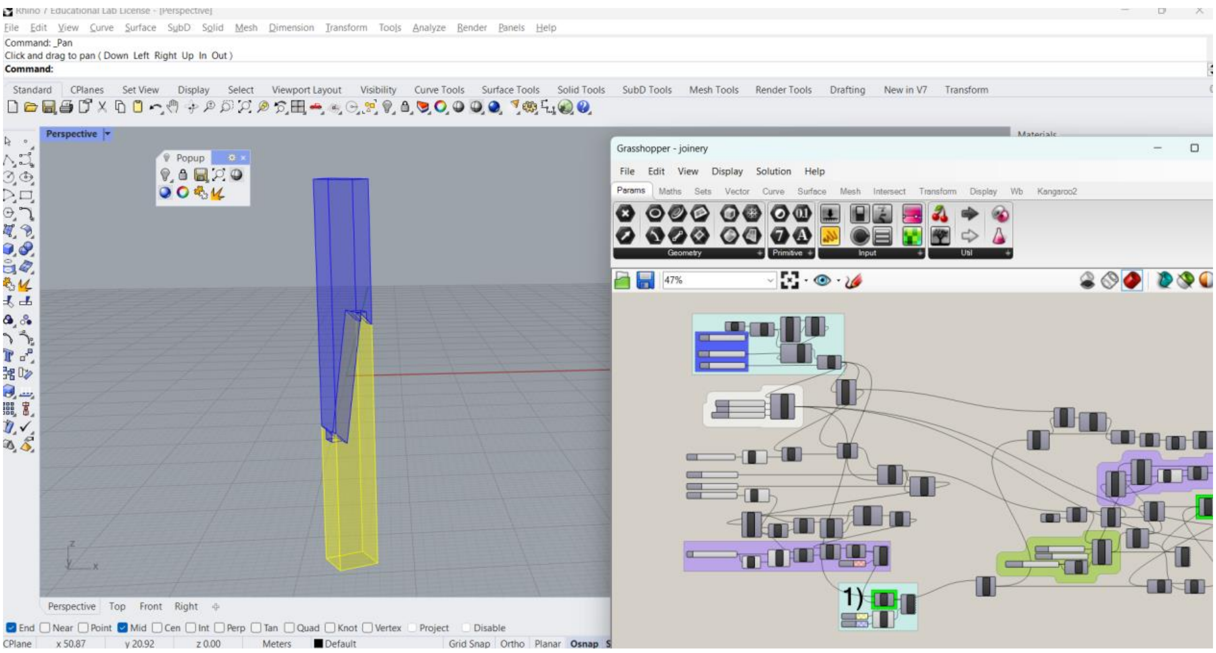

Figure 5: Application of traditional carpentry systems in parameterism in the Rhinoceros program. Own source.

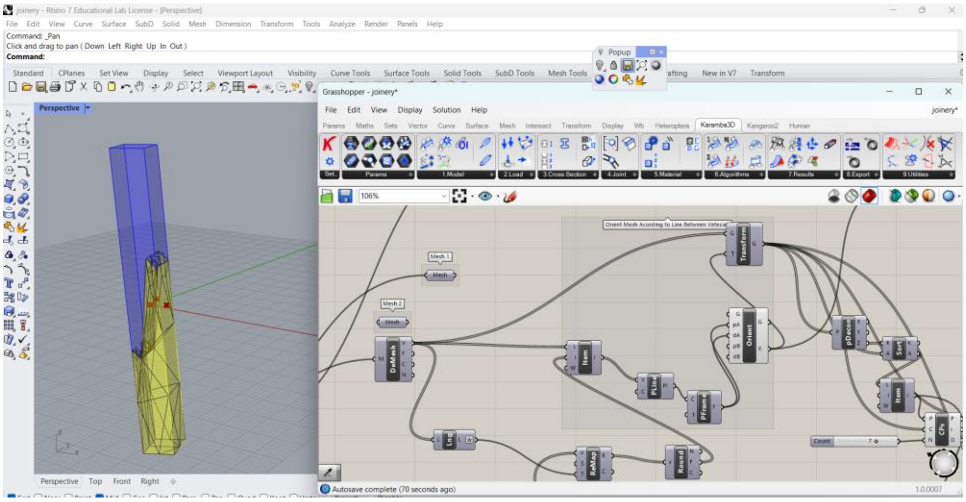

Figure 6: Application of traditional carpentry systems in parameterism in the Rhinoceros Karamba 3D program. Own source.

4. Conclusion: submission of contributions

The integration of traditional carpentry techniques with the innovations of biomimicry and digital fabrication marks a new era in the design and construction of wooden structures. This multifaceted approach not only promotes an innovative reinterpretation of ancestral methods but also paves the way for construction solutions that are ecologically sustainable, efficient, and culturally enriching. However, the implementation of these integrated approaches faces significant challenges, and exploring their future prospects requires an ongoing commitment to research and practice.

One of the main challenges in implementing these integrated approaches is the need for specialized knowledge across multiple disciplines. Merging traditional carpentry with biomimicry and digital fabrication demands professionals who not only understand the nuances of each field but also know how to apply them synergistically in construction projects. Additionally, resistance to change within the construction industry, which often favors conventional methods due to familiarity and perceived cost-effectiveness, can be a significant obstacle.

Another challenge is the initial investment in technology and training. Digital fabrication and parametric modeling require access to specific software and hardware, the costs of which can be prohibitive for small firms or projects with limited budgets. Moreover, the sustainability of the employed techniques must be assessed not only in terms of material and energy efficiency but also considering their environmental impact over the construction's complete life cycle.

Despite these challenges, the future prospects for the research and practical application of these integrated approaches are promising. The growing demand for sustainable constructions and adaptations to climate change encourages the development of new solutions that combine tradition and innovation. Ongoing research in biomimicry, for example, could uncover yet unexplored natural strategies that might inspire significant advancements in structural design.

The education and training of professionals equipped to work at the intersection of these disciplines are also crucial. Educational programs that promote a holistic understanding of wood construction, incorporating elements of sustainable design, engineering, and digital technology, are key to preparing the next generation of architects, designers, and builders.

Furthermore, collaboration among industry, academia, and governments can facilitate the adoption of these integrated approaches. Incentives for innovation, regulations that promote sustainable construction practices, and investments in research and development are essential to overcoming initial challenges and promoting large-scale implementation.

The fusion of traditional carpentry techniques with the innovations of biomimicry and digital fabrication represents an exciting frontier in sustainable construction. While we face significant challenges in its implementation, future prospects suggest a path rich in possibilities for the evolution of design and construction of wooden structures. Continuing research, education, and interdisciplinary collaboration will be crucial to unlocking the potential of these integrated approaches, leading us to a future where architecture not only respects the environment but also celebrates it in its form and function.

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