

Patricia and Peter Shannon Wilson Undergraduate Research Prize - Reflective Statement

Submission by Delia Pan

I used to think Taiwanese residential architecture looked like parasites of individuality, with facades overtaken by resident additions, balconies enclosed into extra rooms, and walls sprouting air-conditioning units in chaotic patterns. However, during the summer of 2025, I visited Taipei and began to see them differently. My 78-year-old grandmother lives in one of the five-storey walk-up apartments, climbing the stairs daily. Despite her physical constraints, she refuses to move to a better equipped apartment. Like many elderly residents living in Taipei, she refuses to leave her old home even as developers promise modern towers to replace their 'illegal' and 'informal' homes. Their attachment revealed what I had misunderstood: the walk-ups were not parasites but proof that residents had agency over their own spaces. Without consideration for the quality of life, block by block, these walk-ups are being demolished, swallowed by construction sites as more uniform towers claim the skyline. As a Taiwanese-Canadian who immigrated to Canada as a child, I realized upon returning to Taipei ten years later that I was witnessing the erasure of an architectural language I had never been taught to value.

This personal reckoning drove me to enroll in ARC456, the senior seminar thesis course at the Daniels Faculty, where I worked with Professor Simon Rabyniuk to explore urban renewal, gentrification, and housing accessibility in Taipei. What began as a quest to understand my grandmother's refusal to leave her aging home became a 30-minute thesis presentation delivered to six guest reviewers on December 16, 2025. More importantly, it became an opportunity to fill gaps in my own cultural education and contribute to an under-documented area of architectural scholarship.

The most significant challenge I encountered at the start of my research was that Taiwan is not a highly researched context in English-language urban planning and architecture literature. During office hours, Professor Rabyniuk suggested I begin with housing studies literature to establish theoretical frameworks. I started with broad keywords such as "Taipei city planning" and "urban renewal", searching across multiple databases. I strategically utilized JSTOR for historical articles, ScienceDirect for technical and research-driven papers, ProQuest for its interdisciplinary scope, and Google Scholar to cast a wider net across gray literature and emerging scholarship.

I applied filters methodically: peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and books published between 2006-2025, initially limiting results to English. This approach led me to a pivotal article by Jie Li, Xingjian Liu, Jianzheng Liu, and Weifeng Li accessed through the UofT Library's ScienceDirect portal. This paper unveiled Taipei's historical evolution from traditional Han Chinese settlement through Japanese colonialism to KMT governance, documenting how large-scale urban renewal has driven gentrification and housing affordability crises. The annotated maps and images within this article became essential references for the graphics I later created in Illustrator and Photoshop for my presentation; visual interpretations that are as important as text in communicating complex urban dynamics.

One research strategy that proved invaluable was following citation trails. At the end of the Li et al. article, I discovered new keywords: "affordable housing," "gentrification," "urban development," and "urban redevelopment." Using Boolean operators, primarily AND to combine terms, I broadened my search. When results were too sparse, I added related keywords like "mobility assistance in Taipei," "aging population in Taiwan," and "elderly in Taiwan." This led me to Hwang's 1997 article "Housing for the Elderly in Taiwan," which confirmed what I'd observed in my grandmother's experience: changing family

structures, elderly people living alone, and the critical lack of elevators in older buildings. Additionally, the term "financialization of property" emerged from these searches, revealing how land in Taipei is treated as profit rather than as space for living; a key insight for understanding the push toward high-rise redevelopment. Each source opened new pathways, and I documented all of this in an annotated bibliography to track insights and connections as my research expanded.

My breakthrough came when one of the guest reviewers, Brian Slocum, encouraged me to search for sources in their original languages. As someone who reads traditional Chinese and Japanese, I realized I could access primary research that most English-speaking scholars overlook. I'm grateful that UofT's collections include texts from diverse cultures and languages. Searching in Chinese yielded far more results on Taipei's urban context, and I began translating key passages to incorporate into my research. This multilingual approach not only solved my source scarcity problem but also allowed me to engage with Taiwanese and Japanese scholars' perspectives directly, rather than through translated intermediaries.

For site analysis, I needed demographic data to support my observations about Taipei's aging population. I accessed the UofT Map and Data Library and learned to use ArcGIS through the University of Toronto ArcGIS Online platform. Before diving in, I recognized my knowledge gaps and turned to the library's learning materials. I completed the Quercus learning module "Introduction to Infographics," a self-paced online course that taught me how to visualize data effectively through icons, charts, and spatial representations. I also studied the library's guide "Citing Data and Statistics Files in Computer-Readable Form: A Quick Overview" because I had never cited data before and wanted to ensure I was attributing sources properly. Using ArcGIS, I searched for Taipei-specific datasets and found "二級統計區老人人口" (secondary statistical district elderly population data), which revealed that 395 residents over 65 live in Yixin Village; quantitative evidence supporting my qualitative observations about aging-in-place. I later reinterpreted these Taipei-specific datasets into data visualizations in my presentation.

This research journey transformed my understanding of information literacy. When English sources proved insufficient, I expanded my linguistic toolkit. When lacking technical skills, I used the library's learning modules. UofT's multilingual collections, databases, and tutorials supported my research into this underrepresented topic. Most importantly, I learned that rigorous research can be personal; an opportunity to honor my grandmother's story and understand what these buildings truly represent to Taiwanese residents.