

Cultural Representation of Vernacular Housing in Melayu Jambi Traditions

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Abstract

The study examine the relationship of architecture, conservation and tourism in representing a cultural character. The study in particular assesses a building code which is the product of a collaborative government strategy between tourism planning and cultural conservations. The research directive study focus on approach in tourism planning and regulation in maintaining cultural representation. Study using a casestudy of Jambi, evaluates of legally binding guidelines in maintaining traditional architecture and investigates how local values are resilient to the vernacular identity. The findings indicate that in Jambi there is an emerging transformation towards the commercialization of local cultural products as potential tourism attractions and modernity effects. The study also provide a significant example of how to reach a desirable strategy of conservation, where a pragmatic approach can be complementary to the cognitive framework of local cultures and beliefs.

Keywords: architecture, conservation, local culture

1. Introduction

Jambinese traditional architecture, according to *Nusantara* Architecture is defined as any planning or design of a site or building that is used as a space for Jambinese society and Jambinese daily life from generation to generation, based on the principles of the *Melayu* concept. This principle is maxims concerning rule and orders in the domestic *Melayu* architecture. In practice, the modification and adaptation of the *Melayu* architectural rule are interpreted and carried out by the craftsmanship of *tukang*, the local builder (or architects) for traditional buildings.

A traditional Jambinese house is like a human being, it has a head-the family *mushola* (place for pray); arms-the sleeping quarters and the social parlour; a navel-the courtyard; sexual organs-the gate; leg and feet- the kitchen and granary. The waves of change, like other societies in the world, have gradually influenced the resilience and development of the traditional society in Jambi, particularly during the last two decades of massive modernism's development in this province.

1.1. Vernacular Values in Symbolic Meanings

Religion as a key determinant of form, from a socio-cultural perspective, may produce social order and meanings in architecture such as differences between sacred and secular realms (Mann, 1993, Humprey & Vitebsky, 1997). Like *Feng Shui* in

China, ancient Jambinese architecture also conceptualized courtesy to the sacredness and perfectionism in the context of cosmology.

In Jambi, the traditional architectural mythological doctrines were originally documented on *Daun Nipah* (palm leaves) manuscripts. The documentation of traditional architecture began in 1340 when the Majapahit Prince visited Jambi from Java, the people believed to be the mainland for the old Melayunese-Jambi ancestors. The prince is believed to have brought major social-religious change to the local people. Today, Jambinese people consider themselves to be the descendants of the ancient Melayunese who immigrated to Jambi after the time of the prince Adityawarman. The dominant Melayunese culture then became the base of Jambinese traditional costumers, including the written traditional principles of Jambinese Architecture.

The doctrines of Jambinese architecture describe the principle such as the *Bentang Alam* principle, outlining concepts and the consultation process with a traditional builder or architect called *tukang*. It contains traditional ergonomic building measurement and guidelines, primarily based on the proportion of the human body as the main perfection of architectural scale. This is also described principles of how to choose and use good local materials, considering the functions of the building and the characteristics of the materials. It explains the use of the materials by considering their weight classification.

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1.2. Principles in Planning and Building Design

Melayu-Jambinese philosophy has been put into practice with traditions that have been formed into every detail of mosque, housing and village layout. These philosophies underlie the basic cosmological concept for every Jambinese building design and master plan.

The practices of animism, Hindu-Budhism during pre-historical era and the arrival of Islam to this region somehow had mould to the Jambi worldview and principles. In architecture it merely involved new interpretations by designating new functions and meaning of the existing pre-Islamic form and structure.¹

The concept of building design, according to the criteria of traditional architectural principles, generally encourages functional and meaningful character reflecting a belief in the genuine spirit of the Jambinese people. Rectangular form is used for all types of buildings and materials exposed in the walls and structural parts of building are important in terms of their texture, pattern and colour, as well as the clarity of the structural statement. The concept of *Tiga Keseimbangan Alam* or three elements of balance. These three components divide the space or utilities of design into three zones: Under space-*Dunia Bawah-Nista*, middle space-*Dunia Tengah* and upper space-*Utama*. The concept demonstrates how the Jambinese link the microcosm, the house, and the macrocosm, the universe, and in doing so, emphasize the human element as another microcosm. Every effort is made in building design to respect these links, each of which is regarded a doorstep within the world of man. The *Nista* zone represents the sewage area in a house plan or a sub-structure in building construction. The *Dunia Tengah* zone is analogous to the living area, or upper construction. Holy space always represents the sacred upper zone *Utama*, which is used for mushola (place for pray).

Building were traditionally measured from the owner's own body scale. Construction dimension were taken from human anatomy, namely the *depa*, a unit of measurement taken from the length of the height of a man in various outstretched arm position. The length of a *hasta* (one arm), a *depa* and a *telapak*, for example, are used to measure detailed parts of the building, while the length of a *bentang* (one foot step), was used for larger measurement (see the review in sketches, figure 1). The traditional builders, the *tukang*, provide standardization in building proportion by taking into account these anatomical measurement.

Today, the standardizations of design proportion have been transformed into a more popular and practical unit of measurement, the international standardization of length: the metre.

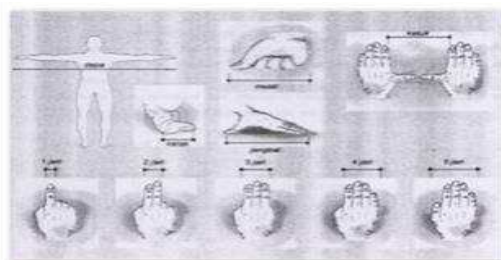


Figure 1. Traditional architectural measurement *depa* of Building design (Arifin Syed Iskandar, 2001, p,-254)

In Jambi, a house is traditionally described as a group of detached units surrounded by walls. As it is, the meaning of indoor space in Jambinese houses is inclusive of the whole plot of pavilion units-including the open space, to which the surrounding wall is a border of the outdoors or the neighbourhood area. The space enclosed by the arrangement of units is the inner open space courtyard, the *laman*. In the concept of indoor space the *laman* becomes the living area where the public activities of family members are performed. During certain ceremonial occasions, the *laman* is temporarily roofed by coconut leaves to provide a more comfortable lounge room for guests (Wijaya, 1979, quoted in Mahyudin 2003). In this regard, the concept of space between outdoor and indoor in Jambi house is interchangeable.

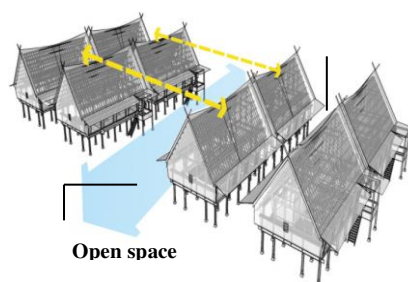


Figure 2. A typical Layout of Jambinese house yard with the open space for social activities (Author).

2. Methods

This study tries to examine house owner's perception and responses to 'Local Culture' Building code through questionnaire and interview.

The house owner's perceptions were collected by conducting a survey which included a qualitative approach and some quantitative measurement. A subsequent questionnaire, which combined close and open-ended questions, was used to gain extensive responses from many respondents. The responses were then statistically analysed by the Statistically Product and Service Solution (SPPS) program.

3. Discussion

3.1. House Forms

The form of the house is recognized in various terms in Jambi according to the level of the owner. The houses of commoners, are called *Umah* or *Rumah*. These terms were earlier used in a terminology of politeness rather than to describe the architectural context of the house. Some symbolical ornaments and typical features, however, characterize each type. The simplicity of ornaments and material used in the house represented the social level of the owner. A more complex design indicated a more prosperous owner.

Element of the building design and the façade of a house are architectural features likely to define the social status of the house owner. One particular house element often used to communicate the status of the owner was the type of ornamental and roof. The type of ornamental and roof of the common people, dominated the landscape of housing in the village, however, the ornamental and roof of the leader's house, were also still recognizable. Until the social system gradually changed from being dominated by feudal levels to being based on economic and formal education status, the typical ornamental and roof were meaningful and became symbolic of social identity.



Figure 3. Two typical dwelling's ornamental and roofs representing the social status of the households (Author).

3.2. Spatial Arrangement and Courtyard

The Jambinese house comprises a back and front portion which revolves around the *rumah ibu* (core house) and the *dapur* (kitchen) respectively. Stairs at

the entrance lead up to the entrance *anjung* (porch) which serves as an important transition point between public and private domains. This is where unfamiliar visitors to the house are initially greeted and house occupants lounge and observe passer-by. One the occupants are warmed up to the visitors, they are invited to enter the *serambi* (verandah) connects to the *selang* (walkway). The closed verandah is used for praying, sleeping and resting. The *selang* is generally the domain where women socialize. A staircase leading up to a secondary side entrance is also located here. The kitchen is located at back of the house and is mainly the women's territory where women congregate, prepare food and cook, and where the family dines. The cooking area consist of a simple wooden firebox.

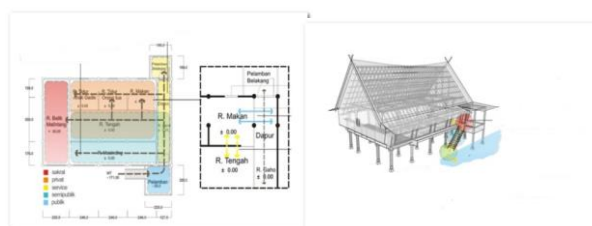


Figure 4. Illustrating the use of interior spaces in the traditional Jambinese house (Author).

Some part of the Jambinese house are decorated, while other parts are left undecorated with material and basic structure exposed. The house decorations are found in reliefs and carvings made of wood. These reliefs are carved over the house wall and the entry gateway.

The earlier versions of carved ornaments were extremely detailed and clear. Each part being was carefully characterized, therefore that the sharpness of fins and other detail were easily recognized. During the last decade, these carefully detailed ornaments of house design have become less popular in the new housing in most urbanized town in Jambi. However, they remain strongly in traditional houses and, through the regulatory compliance of the 'Local Culture', these traditional ornaments are applied in commercial buildings and most government offices.

The type of roof in Jambi traditionally represented social status, as described earlier. In addition to this, the roof also symbolized hierarchy of sacredness. The traditional roof style, is also found in common buildings such as the community buildings (Kampongs) or at traditional markets. The roof is also applied to office buildings and entrances

to villages and regencies. Some recent commercial buildings and houses choose this type of roof to represent the local cultural atmosphere of Jambi-architecture. The roof is becoming the main visual cultural representation of Jambi, following its use in many cultural destinations in the province.

4. Conclusions

Cosmological pattern as well as meaningful traditional mythology in settlement process have inspired and have been embedded deeply in the architectural forms and its vernacular maxims of Jambinese housing. These guidelines are derived from social values and processed in abstract meanings and then become indicators of cultural resilience of the domestic architecture in terms of resistance to the popular culture caused by massive tourism development and the impact of globalization.

Although it is now infrequent to visually find visually meaningful traditional dwellings in Jambi or in other urbanized areas of Jambi, the existence of a particular order in domestic architecture is possible to be related to particular beliefs and attitude toward their built environment and social activities. To achieve the objective of the study in

analyzing the effectiveness of revitalizing cultural representation in housing promoted by the local government, some cognitive variable of the social values are included in the questionnaire design.

In summary, the experience of Jambi suggest that any planning policy focused on a narrow, top-down approach is always going to be deficient while one that involves the inhabitants' participation is going to be resilient. The case of is similar to any culture negotiating the competing interests between culture-commodification arising from tourism development in the context of conservation, such as in Nepal, China, Toraja, etc.

5. References

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