

# From Temples to Hotels: Trans-Cultural Architectural Practice and the Traditional Built Environment in Bali

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## INTRODUCTION

The traditional built environment in Bali, Indonesia is an integral part of a visitor's experience of the culture and way of life of the Balinese.<sup>1</sup> The relationship of traditional Balinese architecture to nature; its use of traditional building materials and traditional building forms; along with other aspects of traditional building design and construction are all factors that have contributed to the distinct spatial and formal characteristics of the island's built environment. As far back as the 1930's Westerners who came to live in Bali, began to adapt, modify and re-interpret the traditional vernacular so as to meet western needs while maintaining a sense of place. As tourism in Bali grew and large international hotels and resorts sprouted all over the island, western designers combined elements of Balinese architecture and traditional materials with landscape design and contemporary building technology to create an "experience" of Bali for the international visitor. In Bali, even the large international hotel chains such as the Hyatt, Hilton, Sheraton, Ritz Carlton and others have gone to great lengths to do so.

This architecture for and by the "other" has evolved into a clearly identifiable contemporary Balinese architectural style that is referred to as "Bali Style." The influence of this tourist architecture can now also be seen in the dwellings of rural Balinese, urban office buildings and shopping centers. The rapid development and proliferation of this stylistic architectural ideology has contributed to as well as polluted the traditional built environment and traditional architectural language of the Balinese. This report is based on material gathered from an ongoing study of continuity and change in traditional Balinese architecture.<sup>2</sup> It explains the typologies and components of this new "traditional style" and discusses the trickle down effects of the re-interpreted vernacular architectural traditions as they are imitated, adapted and adopted by the Balinese in their efforts to modernize their own buildings.

## HISTORY

In the early 1900s the Dutch colonists of the Indonesian archipelago attempted to promote Bali as a tourist destination. At that time only the wealthy of the world could afford to travel

to such remote destinations and Bali became a stop for those on the around-the-world circuit. During the 1920s and 30s, Western artists, anthropologists and scholars attracted by the island's rich culture, complex society and the legendary splendor of its ritual arts also began to discover, visit and write about Bali. Many even took up permanent residence on the island. Soon Bali's fame as an enchanting place with images of lush green terraced rice paddies, beaches, temples colorful ceremonies and a fascinating culture began to draw visitors from all around the world. In the late 1960's the first major but soon to be unpopular tourist hotel, the ten-story Bali Beach Hotel was built.<sup>3</sup>

Tourism in Bali got a major boost during the 1970s when the new Suharto government's goals for development happened to coincide with the increase in international tourism and the hippies who spread Bali's fame as the island of temples, rituals and artists. In less than three decades visitors to Bali have increased at a staggering rate from about 50,000 in the early 70's to more than a million today. Tourist facilities in Bali now range from simple home-stays to large resort complexes, international chain hotels, exclusive luxury resorts and private villas. In an effort to provide an experience of Bali's exotic culture and unique character for the visitor, western architects and designers of tourist facilities have made widespread use of Bali's traditional architectural forms and materials creating an architectural style that is now clearly identifiable. The new style is imitated by the Balinese as well as exported to other places in the region and the world.

## TRADITIONAL BALINESE ARCHITECTURE

Primitive simplicity is the characteristic of the traditional built environment in Bali. Indigenous materials such as mud, brick, stone, local woods, bamboo and thatch are used in a well crafted but unpretentious manner to create structures designed for outdoor living in a balmy equatorial climate. To the casual observer the arrangement of structures within Balinese dwelling compounds and the layouts of the villages that make up the traditional built environment in Bali seem haphazard and random. But in reality the traditional built environment in Bali is a clearly ordered ensemble of traditional architectural forms and building materials that provide a symbolic and meaningful

setting for the daily life, rituals and ceremonies of the island's traditional Hindu society.<sup>4</sup>

The traditional architectural laws which govern layout, proportion, measurement systems, choice of materials, architectural form and ornamentation are specified in ancient architectural treatises<sup>5</sup> written on *lontar* (palm leaf books) as are all sacred Balinese writings. The traditional architectural vocabulary consists of symbolic architectural forms and materials that are invested with religious, social and cultural meaning. When these ancient building laws are applied, the traditional built environment becomes imbued with meaning and speaks an architectural language that gives physical expression to abstract ideas concerning the Balinese view of natural order, religious beliefs, social hierarchy and cultural values.

The archetype of traditional Balinese architecture, the *bale*, is a simple, open, pavilionlike structure consisting of a mud or brick platform, upon which wooden posts and beams support a bamboo and thatch pyramidal or hipped roof.<sup>6</sup> The forms and arrangements of *bale* in a traditional Balinese compound are perfectly suited to Bali's climatic and geologic conditions. The type, size, placement, and other architectural aspects of the many *bale* that make up a Balinese dwelling or temple compound depend upon the function of each *bale*, the social status (caste) of its users and are spelled out in great detail in the architectural *lontar*.

## WESTERNERS IN BALI

In the early part of the 20th century western visitors were generally of two types. There were the wealthy travelers and then there were the scholars such as artists, anthropologists, dancers, musicians and writers. The former group came to experience the idyllic tropical paradise and to observe, from the safety, comfort and convenience of Western style accommodations, the colorful pageantry of its native people. The second group being interested in documenting, researching or studying some aspect of the culture or lifestyle of the Balinese tried to live among the locals, though not necessarily like them. This group of visitors usually preferred individual houses built out of the same materials as the local dwellings but designed to accommodate western comforts, conveniences and tastes. Some of the more famous of this group such as the artists Walter Spies, Le Meyeur and Donald Friend lived in exuberant and lavish style houses set amidst spectacular scenery or on dramatic sites.

Louise Koke describes her experience in 1936 of the house of Spies, now the Hotel Campuan, located just beyond the village of Ubud in central Bali:

"A dark brown two-storey house clung to the side of a steep ravine. Dense foliage screened it from the road and made a secret stillness. Below the house an oval swimming pool lay half hidden among the trees.... The servant brought a low table laden with bottles, glasses and ice and set it in the water at the shallow end of the pool. Mr. Spies lying partly immersed poured the drinks.... At night the slopes would be mysteriously lit by burning wicks set in hanging coconut shells. Metal threads in the servants'

garments would shimmer in the warm glow. The air would be a little heavy with burning incense, and with the odour of coconut oil in freshly washed anointed hair."<sup>7</sup>

Koke also describes the "arbored cottage" of painter Le Meyeur in Sanur, by writing that "Despite being crowded with European furniture, it had the feeling of Bali."<sup>8</sup>

Bob and Louise Koke, an American couple, came to visit Bali in 1936, fell in love with the island and decided to stay. They were the first to discover the tourist potential of Kuta Beach on the south shore of the island. They acquired land and built Kuta's first hotel. Their Kuta Beach Hotel was the first in Bali to incorporate separate bungalows or cottages for guest accommodations. All of the structures were built from local traditional materials. Koke wrote that at the time, "their thatched roofed guesthouses were looked down upon by the Dutch tourist agents" as a collection of "dirty native huts." The architectural form used by the Kokes and the fantastic environment created by people such as Spies have now become common place for tourist accommodations in Bali and are part of an architectural vocabulary now referred to as Bali style. Some of the components of the Bali style are imitations of forms used in the traditional built environment and others have been invented in order to create an "authentic" Balinese experience and a feeling of Bali for the international visitor.

## OPEN AIR LIVING AND TRADITIONAL BUILDING FORMS

The primary characteristic of the built environment in Bali is the open-air living that is afforded by the forms and layout of traditional Balinese architecture. The traditional Balinese house, temple or community meeting place consists of a walled compound in which several *bale* are loosely clustered around a central open space. The form and placement of each of the mostly open *bale* are determined according to whether a *bale* is for religious or secular activities. The absence of walls and the scattered arrangement of the *bale* are believed to provide free movement of the gods and spirits that travel constantly about the island on the wings of the wind. The form and arrangement also allows maximum access to the prevailing breezes so necessary in the tropics and shelters occupants from the intense sun and frequent rain. Open space rather than building form dominates traditional Balinese architecture and allows the Balinese to be in touch with their surroundings through the experience of one's senses. In a Balinese compound one is able to smell the perfume of the fresh frangipani blossoms and boiled rice placed in the family shrines, see the offerings for the next ceremony being carefully assembled, hear the gongs of an unseen gamelan orchestra as it accompanies a procession across the nearby rice fields or listen to the crowing of the fighting cocks in the baskets lined up on the street outside.

The first to adopt the loose cluster arrangement to facilities for Western visitors were the Kokes in the Kuta Beach Hotel built in 1936. The Koke's hotel also made use of local traditional materials for construction. The hotel consisted of a compound in which guests were accommodated in individual thatch roofed

cottages with open verandahs. Communal facilities such as toilets and dining room were located in separate buildings. Today this is the general pattern of hotels in Bali. Designers have even gone so far as to design resorts in which each guest suite is surrounded by a walled enclosure. These "guest compounds" are arranged along a street in the manner of dwelling compounds in a traditional Balinese village.<sup>9</sup>

The Kuta Beach Hotel may also have been the first to use the large two tiered roof of the *wantilan* a traditional building for cock fights, dance performances, and community gatherings to cover the dining and lounge spaces. The *wantilan* form has now become almost standard for restaurant, hotel and resort dining rooms, lobbies and performance spaces. Often dramatic lighting is used to highlight and show off the construction details of the timber posts and beams and the under side of the thatched roofs of these structures. Other traditional architectural forms and traditional building types adapted by professional and predominantly western architects and designers include the *pondok*, a bale used as a resting-place in the rice paddies and the drum tower known as *bale kul kul*. Reinterpretations of these traditional structures are sometimes quite effectively used, as garden or poolside pavilions for lounging or taking breakfast.

### TRADITIONAL MATERIALS

The tripartite arrangement of the deceptively simple *bale* is representative of the head, body and feet of the humans who build and use it. The tripartite configuration also represents the Balinese view of the universe in which the realm of gods is at the top, the world of humans in the middle and the domain of demons at the bottom.<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, building materials are categorized according to their symbolic meaning and are selected in consultation with the architectural *lontar* according to their position in a *bale*, the function of the *bale* and the social status of the owner. Likewise the architectural *lontar* also dictate the shape of roofs, the height of the masonry base and several other details in the construction of a *bale*. In doing so these ancient architectural canons maintained the human scale of traditional Balinese architecture and its harmony with the natural environment. Combine these regulations with prescribed materials, proportions and measurements, specific location, and embellishments and the simple *bale* quickly becomes a very complex entity.

The Balinese belief in an orderly tripartite universe requires everything to have its place. In order to maintain universal and earthly harmony and to ensure that everything is rightfully placed, all things in Bali are traditionally classified according to their degree of sacredness or status. In the architectural *lontar* all building materials are classified according to their place in a structure, and their suitability for religious or secular structures. For example traditional roofing materials generally consist of coconut, grass or palm fiber thatch. The first two are used for ordinary structures while the third is prescribed only for the roofs of shrines or other sacred structures. Similarly different types of wood are specified for different parts of a structure according to the wooden member's position in the structure, the function of the building and the caste<sup>11</sup> of its owner. In doing so

the traditional canons were not only addressing architectural meaning but also may have been controlling consumption of Bali's indigenous building material resources.

In the hotels and resorts of today traditional materials such as *alang alang* (wild long grass) thatch, corral rock, bamboo and coconut wood are used in extremely large quantities. The demand for traditional building materials for the construction or decoration of these so called 'Balinese style' buildings has increased the cost and reduced the quality of indigenous building materials in general, making many traditional materials less affordable and more impractical to the average Balinese.<sup>12</sup> New materials, made available because of modernization are now more attractive to the Balinese for their own building needs. The new materials such as concrete block and other mass-produced cement products are more affordable and are slowly replacing the traditional ones.

This situation is producing irrevocable results. The visual harmony between the natural and the man-made environment, a characteristic of traditional Balinese architecture and a perfect physical manifestation of their belief in harmony between the natural and the manmade world is slowly but surely being lost. Also eroded are the traditional beliefs in the appropriateness of materials for particular functions and their symbolic meaning when used in architecture. In many places such as Kuta and even Ubud the traditional environment is hardly recognizable.

### ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENTATION

In traditional Balinese society, social rank and place are very important. One must act, speak and behave according to one's caste. This social hierarchy is represented in language, religious rituals and in architecture. The architectural *lontar* specify the particular types of ornamentation that can be used in Balinese architecture so that buildings can announce their function (sacred or secular) as well as the caste of the owner. Ornamentation such as statues of gods and mythological creatures and carved *bas-relief* representing the faces of demons (*boma*), are reserved for temples and palaces, their function being to protect these sacred places from evil. Other traditional decorative motifs are used to adorn the *kori* (tall house gateways) and *bale* in the dwelling compounds of the upper classes so as to indicate their elevated social status.

In the decade 1975-85, many new government office buildings were built in Denpasar, Bali's capital city. These primarily modern concrete and glass structures like the large resort hotels at Nusa Dua<sup>13</sup>, were made to appear Balinese in character by the application of traditional architectural forms and decorations in an eclectic manner without regard to religious, social or cultural symbolism or meaning. Traditional architectural *bas-relief* used on the surfaces of these buildings were fashioned in the flowery Gianyar style of carving typical of south Bali.<sup>14</sup>

During this same period, in a drive to create a Balinese aesthetic for a new consciousness toward architectural regionalism within Indonesia, the government began to require that all new shop-fronts, banks and office buildings in Bali, apply Balinese style architectural decorations to their facades. As a result architectural decoration in the Gianyar style has now

become an island wide fashion. Architectural bas relief are now mass produced, molded from cement concrete instead of hand-carved from the traditional *paras* (a soft volcanic tuff). They can be purchased along with other prefabricated traditional architectural forms such as gates, shrines and shrine bases from building supply agents all over the island. Excessive and meaningless adornment has become the trend and Gianyar style architectural relief is used to decorate everything from hotel lobbies and masonry planter boxes along the streets, to gates, walls and pavilions in dwelling courtyards. Today architectural decoration has become a means of expressing economic status rather than caste in contemporary Balinese society. Even the island's temples have not been spared from the filigree of the Gianyar style decorations and many unique temples and some special villages such as Tenganan Pegringsingan<sup>15</sup> are in danger of losing their local architectural identity.

### LANDSCAPE AND WATER

Traditionally, plants and trees in the traditional Balinese dwelling or temple compound were grown primarily for their flowers which are used in offerings or for their fruit. Ornamental plants are not characteristic of the traditional built environment and the traditional Balinese compound generally does not include very many large trees. The shade from the trees prevents roof thatch from keeping dry and whatever falls from the trees may damage or cause deterioration to the thatch. As Westerners began to adapt traditional Balinese courtyard architecture to their needs they also introduced the use of ornamental plants, water features and other elements of western gardens. Today the demand for plant material and other components of contemporary Balinese gardens in hotels and private villas necessitate imports from other parts of Indonesia. Fragrant plants, outdoor performance stages and other landscape features are combined with Balinese statuary, dramatic lighting and luminaries to recreate the sensory experience of living in a traditional Balinese compound. Traditional temple statuary and *Sanggah* (shrines) are adapted for use as lighting fixtures and for dramatic accent in gardens, along pathways, around swimming pools, and other outdoor areas.

Water is an ever-present aspect of the Balinese landscape. The lush green terraced rice paddies that are characteristic of Bali are fed by complex water delivery systems and the sound of running water is part of one's experience of rural Bali. In traditional Balinese architecture water is celebrated in the communal bathing places found in villages and at significant sacred places. These bathing places are usually discretely tucked away in ravines beside natural springs or near hidden streams. Landscape designers and architects have drawn inspiration from these open-air bathing places to develop what has now become an essential feature of a Balinese experience—the open-air bathroom. They have also drawn from the floating pavilions in the palaces of some of Bali's more extravagant *rajas*, and from the forms of the flooded rice paddies themselves, to create designs for water features such as pools, ponds, fountains and water spouts that have become essential components of the new Balinese architecture.

### GATES, SHRINES AND TEMPLES

Since traditional Balinese architecture consists of collections of individual structures within walled compounds, gateways are a prominent feature of the traditional built environment. Traditionally, particular gateway forms are reserved for particular uses. The ubiquitous *candi bentar*, the tapering split gateway that has now become an icon for Bali was traditionally reserved only for temples and sacred places. This powerful architectural statement dramatizing the act of splitting open and tearing apart a boundary is traditionally used only for the outer courtyards of temples, palaces and other spiritually powered places. The triangular form is symbolic of the cosmic mountain of the Hindu universe and is therefore associated with the sacred. Today this architectural form that the Balinese traditionally dared not use for any other purpose has now become a tourist symbol of Bali. Visitors now encounter this temple gateway entirely out of context in places such as the arrival hall of the international airport, in front of hotels, carparks, offices and shopping centers. Some *candi bentar* and other gateways at the entrances to the luxurious resort hotels in Nusa Dua, Bali's five-star tourist enclave, are bigger and grander than in any Balinese temple. Today the hotels are the new temples of fantasy. Like traditional Balinese dwelling compounds, hotels even have their own "in-house" temples and shrines complete with offerings, priests, dancers and ceremonies and guests do not even have to leave the "hotel compound" to "experience" a Balinese temple.

### DISCUSSION

The question of how this architecture of and for the "other" in Bali has contributed to the blending of tradition and modernity in architecture is a complex one. Many of examples of the new style are improved versions of the vernacular. But are these the real things? Like tourism, an industry that frequently pays off as it undermines its very base, this new architectural style based primarily on image represents a source both of constructive experience and architectural enrichment as well as alienation and degradation of the traditional built environment in Bali. On the one hand use of traditional architectural forms and materials by the tourism industry has created awareness among the Balinese that there is merit in the continuation of architectural traditions. But at the same time it has also made it increasingly difficult for ordinary Balinese to afford traditional materials and the services of skilled craftsmen. While the use of traditional architectural details has been a source of lucrative employment for craftsmen, it has also been a source of shoddy mass produced architecture churned out *en masse*.

On the positive side some of the better examples of these trans-cultural works such as the resorts by Peter Muller and a few others have influenced the designs of new hotels not only in Bali, but also in other parts of Southeast Asia and in tropical regions in other parts of the world. In this respect the Balinese case has been truly trans-cultural. Here designers from other cultures have combined Balinese traditions with functional and "fantasy" expectations of non-Balinese visitors, to produce de-

signs for buildings that appear Balinese. Through the processes of globalization (such as electronic and printed media), this new Balinese style of architecture is now influencing tropical resort design in other parts of the world beyond Bali and Southeast Asia. In addition to the ideas that are spread through publications in architectural and travel magazines, there are now also companies that build and export complete Balinese style buildings to other parts of the world. Some of these exports are not even fabricated in Bali but in other parts of Indonesia and even as far off as Hawaii. On the negative side, the trickle-down effects of imitation have sprouted numerous progeny, most of which are tacky.

In terms of architectural meaning and symbolism, the new Bali style has isolated traditional architectural forms from their traditional meanings. The new style is merely one of image and does not reconcile form with content. Its use of certain traditional architectural forms merely for the sake of sentimentality and image has polluted the powerful symbolism and meaning of these forms in the traditional built environment. From this point of view the authenticity of the new Balinese architectural style is questionable. An authentic architecture cannot be based upon mere sentimentality, romanticism, and fantasy. Authenticity suggests an honesty of architectural synthesis in terms of a multitude of factors that pertain to the social, cultural, religious, geographic, climatic, political and technological milieu of a society and is not based upon visual or formal attributes alone. Mere mimicry of traditional forms for the sake of sentimentality ultimately undermines and pollutes the traditional architectural language, vocabulary and built environment it tries to reproduce. The effects of this are already apparent in Bali.

## CONCLUSION

In Bali as elsewhere in the Third World, the architecture of international resort hotels and the local works of western architects are generally viewed as conspicuous symbols of modernity and are imitated by the locals. Today the Balinese imitate the imitations of their traditional architecture. As they do so their once clearly meaningful architectural language is now becoming polluted. The use of architectural forms and traditional materials in nontraditional ways in the new Bali style and the introduction of new materials and architectural forms by the locals has begun to blur the order, harmony and profound symbolism that existed in the traditional built environment. Modernization and change is inevitable and cannot be denied to any society. The Balinese view change as an integral part of tradition and their ability to adapt, absorb and adopt change has been acknowledged by scholars as the reason their culture has survived into the twentieth century. Modernity and the continuity of architectural traditions in Bali are a much more complex problem. While the Balinese culture has demonstrated an ability to continue despite forces of change, traditional Balinese architecture faces a tougher challenge.

## REFERENCE NOTES

1. The form of the built environment and traditional architectural practices in Bali date back to the 16th Century when the Hindu Majapahit Kingdom fled Java to escape Islam and set up their kingdom in neighboring Bali.
2. The author has been studying traditional Balinese architecture since 1986 and has visited Bali several times. The most recent visit was an extended stay of several months to document and study continuity and change in traditional Balinese architecture. This visit was made possible by a fellowship from the Asian Cultural Council. The data and observations presented here are part of that research.
3. Realizing that the scale of buildings in Bali would be destroyed by such high-rise development a restriction on building height was imposed and since then no building can be taller than the height of a coconut palm.
4. For details on Balinese Hinduism see H. and C. Greetz, *Kinship in Bali*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975), pp. 9-12.
5. There are many versions of these architectural treatises. The most commonly used is the Hasta Kosala Kosali.
6. For details on traditional Balinese construction see entry by J. Aranha in *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, Paul Oliver, Ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Vol. 2.II.3.c-i, pp.1110-1111.
7. Louise Koke, *Our Hotel in Bali*. (New Zealand: January Books, 1986), pp. 49-50.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 126
9. Such as the Amandari Resort (designed by Australian architect Peter Muller in 1989) near Ubud in central Bali.
10. The geography of the Island is itself a reflection of the tripartite order of the Balinese universe. The cone of Bali's tallest and most sacred volcano Gunung Agung, represents a symbolic central axis. Its misty summit represents the upper-world of the gods, the sources of life and creation. The surrounding plains represent the middle world of humans and in the depths of the sea is the lower world of demons, the sources of death and destruction. The mountain-land-sea axis and the sunrise-sunset axis create a nine square *mandala* (diagram) in which *kaja* or mountain-ward is most sacred and *kelod* or seaward is profane.
11. There are four castes in Hindu social organization.
12. Traditional materials such as *alang alang* came from particular regions of Bali. Its strength and durability depended upon how long it was allowed to mature before harvesting. The demand for the grass from traditional sources cannot now be met, and the grass is grown elsewhere using chemical fertilizers that accelerate growth but do not allow sufficient time to achieve maximum strength and durability. The life of a roof made from *alang alang* too much of an economic burden for any generation to have to replace so frequently.
13. In the early 1980s the once sleepy fishing village of Nusa Dua was selected as a site for major large-scale luxury resort development. The area is now a gigantic and exclusive self-contained enclave consisting of several five-star hotels a golf course and other tourist amenities.
14. Even though Bali is small there are distinct styles of traditional architectural ornamentation in different parts of the island.
15. The village of Tenganan Pegringsingan is one of Bali's best-preserved examples of a traditional village. Its strong social organization has until recently kept its built environment almost intact from contemporary influences. Today, in this highly conservative traditional village commercialism together with the need to modernize are causing major changes to the built environment.