



## ARCHITECTURE AND IDENTITY IN BALI

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Since the main theme of this publication is 'Architecture, Culture, and Identity in Indonesia', my article will begin with a theoretical exploration of the notion of identity and its integration into cultural spaces and the built environment. Subsequently I will illustrate the theoretical findings using the island of Bali as an example. I have chosen an anthropological approach to architectural research, since the themes of "culture" and "identity" are the cornerstones of the discipline of anthropology and thus a variety of methodological tools have been developed in that field.

### About identity

Identity is a term that has been used extensively in various disciplines in recent years, so extensively, that it almost took on an inflationary character. Thus, it is about time to invest some energy in a deeper understanding of this term and its meaning within rapidly-changing built environments such as Bali.

Architecture has a meaning which can be perceived, constructed, and interpreted in different ways. I act on the assumption, that there is a connection between the built form (architecture) and the human perception of self (identity). The manifestation of the 'self', in a collective as well as in a personal sense, is a phenomenon inherent to architecture.

Architecture and the built environment form a surface which expresses people's thinking, and they constitute a visible world shaped by ideas and imagination. This in turn creates an 'identity' for a given place that can be produced and/or transmitted in a personal or collective way. The production and/or transmission of identity is an evolutionary development based on continuity and adaptability. Today, the trend towards globalization, rapid urbanization, the information revolution, and the spread of consumerism have set a drastic limit to the time available for adaptation, something which is particularly noticeable in regions such as Bali, that are still in the process of closing an economic gap. Through the interaction of local developments with trans-local impacts, conflicts of identity formation which are difficult to comprehend, are lying just beneath the surface. The built environment is an important medium for

visualizing such processes through images and symbols.

The term 'identity' has become a cornerstone of the discipline of anthropology since it is a most efficient tool for working with multi-layered societies. Identity and social relations lie at the core of every spatial arrangement classically studied by anthropology. Thus, an anthropological approach can help us gain a different view of the complexity of the formation of identity. The term "identity" expresses the human perception of the self. It is a heterogeneous conglomerate consisting of culture, ethnic affiliation, religion, gender, status and economic constructions (Baumann & Gingrich 2004). Basically there are two ways of working with identity: first there is the perception of 'self-identity', which distinguishes one person from another and makes each individual unique. At the other end of the scale, and more interesting in the context of spatial studies, are the various forms of 'collective identities' which are constantly re-defined and re-structured by different groups.

Identity always has to be considered in two ways: on the one hand there is a strong feeling of 'belonging to' – a group, a society, a quarter etc., and on the other hand there is 'alterity', a feeling of being distinct from others (Grossberg 1996). In Bali, both parameters are of equal importance since Balinese village life is still very much characterized by a strong social sense of 'belonging to'. At the same time the extensive spread of tourism has enforced identity formation in the sense of 'being different/distinctive' compared to other tourist destinations. Identity is always relational and incomplete, which means it has to be seen as a process (Gingrich 2004). Thus, the built environment is a physical expression of collective identity.

Through the expediency of communication, identities themselves become increasingly fluid and undefined, less constrained by either geography or ethnicity, and even enclosed island entities such as Bali cannot withstand this development. Identities in the contemporary context are syncretistic by necessity: they cross traditionally-accepted boundaries and participate in global economics and political systems.

Analyzing the identity of a place is an important parameter which forms the basis of every successful architectural research or planning intervention. Architectural



sites have long felt a need to differentiate themselves from each other, to assert their individuality in pursuit of various economic, political or socio-psychological objectives. The conscious attempt of agencies to shape a specifically-designed place identity and promote it to specific markets is almost as old as civic government itself. However, one reason for the intensification of place marketing or branding strategies, starting in the 1990s, can be seen in the growing competition between places caused by the globalization of markets (Lloyd and Peel 2008). Also, focus on differentiation has increased as images of the built environment have taken on a homogenized character. In this regard, islands such as Bali, which still possess a rich cultural heritage, have a clear advantage over regions with no distinctive historical features to build on.

Localizing the identity of a place, neighbourhood, city, or island such as Bali is becoming more complex now that locality is constantly restructured by global influences. The relationship between the local and the global is critical for the architect or planner since the local, the place, the *genius loci*, has long been one of the most important indicators for planning activities. This notion of place – which until a few decades ago was an absolute concept – has now become fluid, difficult to grasp.

However, after elaborate discussions in various disciplines, one clear, rather unexpected tendency has emerged, and that is the consistency of what is local. Furthermore, within architecture, there is a tendency to turn away from globalized homogenization processes and new efforts are being made to integrate local identities into the expressive elements of the built environment. This search for the 'characteristic' (the 'self'), the specific, is ongoing: what we are still missing are satisfying answers to many questions raised in this context.

The following case study of Bali aims to show the potential to be gained by placing the notion of identity at the centre of architectural research in fast-changing environments.

### Bali: history of identity formation

Bali is an island with a heterogeneous history and diverse impacts from many directions. After the Majapahit era, during which the characteristic form of Balinese Hinduism and its cultural interpretation were formed, the period of Dutch colonization and first influences through tourism, the current status of this Hindu island within a Muslim nation is somehow unique. The past few decades of intensified global interrelations and the rapid development of tourism have brought up questions



Fig. 1: Main building of the Dutch Pavilion at the L'Exposition Coloniale Internationale in Paris, 1931

of identity, which thus far – thanks to the strong social and communal systems – have played only a minor role.

The built environment has long been an integral part of the Balinese way of life. Every building process has been embedded into Hindu ritual, oriented on cosmic principles, accompanied by a ritual master builder (*udagi*), and based on the holy scriptures of the *Asta Kosala Kosali*, a doctrine of architectural guidelines inscribed on dried palm leaves (*lontars*). Buildings have had a strong relation to the bodily features of their owner, and were seen as an interpretation of the cosmos in its physical, philosophical and spiritual manifestations. (Wijaya 2003)

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this relation to the built environment changed. The limited number of houses built by the first Dutch colonists, followed by the early expatriate communities in the 1920s and 1930s, had no significant influence on the everyday Balinese architecture. However, it was during that time that artists such as the German painter Walter Spies and the creative community around him laid the foundation for the establishment of an architectural and artistic image of Bali which has been most influential until now. The image of Bali conveyed to the world during that time found expression in the Dutch pavilion at the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* in Paris in 1931 (Achmadi 2007, p. 57). The architecture of the Dutch pavilion was inspired by a selection of picturesque architectural elements associated with the era of the Majapahit. This was the basis for the formation of an architecture which is still inextricably linked to Bali (Fig. 1).

To this day, the architecture considered 'traditional', even by the Balinese themselves, is oriented on architectural elements imported by the Javanese kingdom of the Majapahit (1292-1525). At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century,



this Hindu kingdom was displaced from Java by Muslim forces and escaped to Bali, where the Hindu tradition merged with Buddhist influences and indigenous animism to form the unique cultural environment of Bali, which is still very much alive today (see Davison 2003, p. 4). What is currently known as 'Bali style' is still oriented primarily on the palace and temple architecture of the Majapahit centred in the province of Gianyar (with focus on Ubud), where the built manifestations of this era reached their zenith.

Nowadays, what we call Majapahit, Gianyar or Ubud style is associated with the term 'traditional Balinese architecture' and is excessively used in tourism architecture. The main feature of this architecture is the use of characteristic materials such as brick, sandstone and hard wood. Further distinctive attributes are the *bale* (pavilions), arranged around a *natar* (central yard), with hipped roofs on wooden pillars, excessive decorative elements and the *kori* (typical entrance gate) (see Wijaya 2003).

Balinese Building Regulations (Pemerintahan Daerah Bali 1974, p. 27) explicitly encourage the use of the Bali style for new buildings. Since the definition of this term does not go beyond formal aspects, block-like building complexes have sprung up, especially in centres such as Ubud or Kuta, which are prettified with elaborate decoration and polished-up facades (see Achmadi 2007, p. 225). However, this artificial imposition of a homogenous style does not prevent the loss of the most important features Balinese architecture stands for: the cosmic orientation, the house as mirror of the owner, of his body and proportions, and social setting and rank.

The large-scale spread of the Bali style was brought on by the tourist influx of the 1970s when Bali was flooded with hotels and guest houses (*losmen*). The most noticeable impact followed in the 1980s and 1990s when mass tourism hit the island and hundreds of luxury hotels and resorts were built. Thanks to the boom in tourism, business people came to Bali, settled there, and integrated this tropical architectural language with vernacular elements – and western standards – into the residential homes of the upper and upper middle classes.

Since the 1990s, this form of the Bali style has also become a top export product and thus a transferable consumer good. Thanks to the glossy pictures taken by professional photographers, architecture has become a formative element, helping to fix the image of the whole island and helping to visualize its identity (e.g. Walker & Helmi 1995; Davison & Granquist 1999; Bingham-Hall & Goad 2008). And if someone wants to enjoy the Balinese life style without actually living on the island,



**Fig. 2: A dream of Bali in Costa Rica: „Villa Passiflora: Bali Design, Intimate Setting – the Villa emphasizes Balinese-inspired tropical architecture...“. This is how a Real Estate firm advertises its villas in Bali Style in Costa Rica.**



**Fig. 3 & 4: Swiss alpine romance with interior á la Bali in a Hotel in the skiing area of Lenk, Switzerland. The Balinese design practice Creative Solutions Architects uses teak furniture and Ikat paintings to create a sense of Bali.**

the Bali style villa can easily be transported elsewhere. (Figs. 2–4).

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a progressive orientation of international trends, and a new interpretation of traditional patterns can be observed in the new spa resorts and – as a result – in the residential architecture of the Balinese upper class. This architecture tends to abandon the excessive decora-

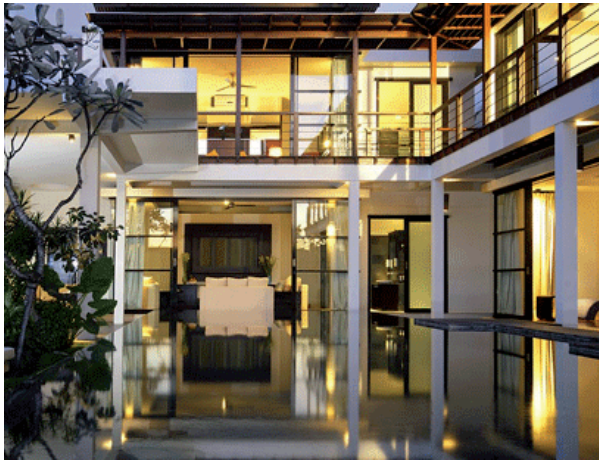


Fig. 5: Temple Hill residences, Jimbaran Bay: Reduced architecture without decoration but using traditional materials and skills

tion of the Majapahit style, distinguishing itself instead through pure, clear lines. Strong references to tradition are found mainly in the materials used and the outstanding craftsmanship worked into these materials. These new residences on Bali still function as models for building in tropical regions, from India to the Bahamas to the Philippines (Fig. 5).

### The search for identity

What can clearly be observed in Bali is that there is confusion within the built environment as to how to react to the multiple trans-local influences. A search is on for that which is distinctly, specifically, unmistakably Balinese. Whereas the Balinese intuitively adapt their built environment using more or less creative solutions, architects and planners do not yet have a clear vision of how to react.

Is it possible – from the viewpoint of identity research – to find new, more structured approaches? Is it possible to make these processes of identity formation comprehensible? Traceable? The case study of Bali is an attempt to examine a particular, relatively intact cultural environment, with a view to extracting information to enable more general guidelines to be formulated to help clarify the situation. To make comparisons with other examples possible, the situation in Bali has been analyzed according to a standardized catalogue of criteria.

Three possible reactions to trans-local influences have been examined:

- a) Total blocking/resistance (continuity versus stagnation)
- b) Unquestioning absorption (strong break with evolutionary building culture – disorientation)



Fig. 6: Water temple Ulun Danu Bratan

c) Adoptive transformation (creative processes to develop something new)

a) Blocking of / resistance to trans-local influences

If we are talking about blocking of or resistance to outside influences, in Bali, cult architecture remains widely unaffected. Elaborate temple complexes, water temples, rice temples, and small house temples – all these elements have retained a largely traditional appearance. This has less to do with the conservation of an image for tourists, than the fact that temples, spiritual values and rituals are still an integral part of Balinese culture and the foundation of a unique spirituality (Fig. 6).

In addition, buildings that have an important ritual or social meaning within the village structure are characterized by rather traditional features. For example the *kulkul* tower (drum tower) or the *wantilan* (community building) are building types that are unique to Bali and thus there are no models from outside that can be influential in any way (Figs. 7, 8).

b) Unquestioning absorption

Unquestioning acceptance is not much of a topic in Bali. The Bali Beach Hotel, built in 1969, was the first clear example of unquestioning absorption, an 'international style' building with no references to local conditions. However, it was the first and practically the last attempt in this direction, since it just wasn't successful and its negative example led to more strict building regulations (regarding building heights etc.) being developed (Fig. 9).

The most direct examples of unquestioning absorption can be observed in towns such as Kuta or Legian,



Fig. 7: *Kulkul* Tower in Penarukan



Fig. 8: *Wantilan* in Mengwi



Fig. 9: Grand Bali Beach Hotel, Sanur



Fig. 10: Commercial Street in Kuta



Fig. 11: *Sanggah* and enclosed form of *bale* (background) in a compound in Penglipuran



Fig. 12: Single family home with characteristic entrance gate and small house temple outside Penglipuran.

where shopping malls and commercial streets try to copy Western architectural elements in a rather mannerist way. However, for most Balinese, these towns have a rather negative connotation. They are seen as impure, dedicated to money and making a quick profit, since they do not follow the traditional laws that regulate Balinese life (Achmadi 2007, pp. 276-277) (Fig. 10).

### c) Adoptive transformation

The third form of reaction to trans-local influences – and for future developments the one with most potential – is adoptive transformation.

#### *Residential homes:*

In terms of residential homes, adoptive transformation can mainly be found behind the walls of the compounds that comprise Balinese villages. The pavilion-system within the village compounds is still widely intact. However, a much higher degree of individualization and the introduction of new materials such as concrete



Fig. 13: Office building with elaborate decoration

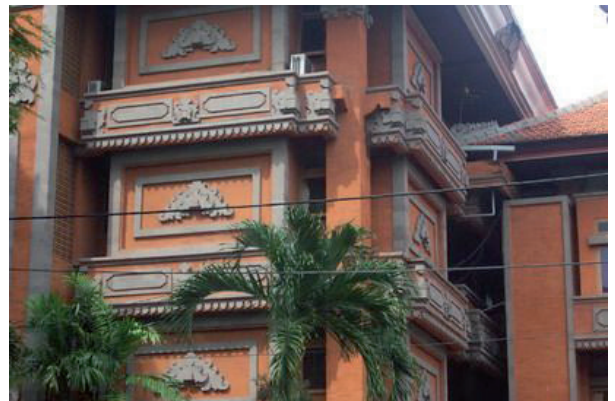


Fig. 14: Bali airport: Already upon arrival visitors are greeted with a 'Balinized' airport building.

and corrugated iron has led to the different pavilions (*bale*) being much more enclosed.

Generally, it can be said that: the more important the rank of a *bale* within the compound, the more traditional the materials used for the structure. This can clearly be seen if we look at the *uma methen* (main pavilion within a compound) or the *sanggah* (house temple) of different compounds (Fig. 11).

Also, in most cases, the trend towards building single family homes, with one compact structure instead of separate pavilions, on the outskirts of villages, can be seen as adoptive transformation. It is a clear *mélange* of imported ideas of modern living and traditional Balinese elements regarding the form of the roof, the entrance gate, the materials etc. (Fig. 12).

On the other hand, although new houses built by developers on the outskirts of urban centres do not at first glance seem to have a 'Balinese' appearance, their organization and plan clearly show a condensed interpretation of the compound system with a functional separation into pavilions.



**Fig. 15:** Christian church in Denpasar: The whole church not only takes up Balinese decoration but also architectural elements such as the *kulkul* (instead of the bell tower), a *meru*-like main tower and the entrance situation of a Balinese temple.



**Fig. 16:** Even the figurative illustration of Virgin Mary hardly differs from an image of a Hindu goddess in front of a temple.

*Public buildings:*

Buildings which have no traditional analogy, such as public buildings, office buildings, shopping centres or airport buildings, can be seen as ‘wholesale’ import products, including the idea and the function behind them. However, there is a strong attempt towards a ‘Balinization’ of these structures, even if this effort is mainly limited to decorative elements and materials used (Figs. 13, 14).

Christian churches are another interesting example of this ‘imported’ building type. From the very beginning, the Dutch colonialists realized that the only way to introduce the Christian faith to Bali would be to include the strongly rooted, indigenous spiritual elements into their doctrine – and this is clearly visible if we look at the few church buildings in Bali (Figs. 15, 16).

*‘Tourist’ buildings:*

Whereas residential architecture sees the mingling of traditional forms with influences from outside to create something new, coming from within the people

who use this architecture, tourism and other commercial structures use a kind of artificial or ‘constructed’ identity. This is a conscious form of identity creation ‘from above’. It still falls into the category of adaptive transformation, but not in the most creative sense: at least, not until the inhabitants of Bali take up elements from tourist architecture once more and re-integrate them into their houses. Most of the tourist buildings make excessive use of the Bali style representing the Majapahit tradition in various manifestations: the use of traditional materials, spatial orientation on Balinese village structures and compounds, imitating palace architecture and integrating characteristic building types such as *wantilan*, *kulkul* or *candi bentar* in the hotel complexes (Figs. 17-19). Only within the last fifteen to twenty years have the more exclusive hotels emphasized their orientation on international spa hotels and got rid of excessive decorative elements (Fig. 20).



Fig. 17: Amandari Resort in Sayan by architect Peter Muller: The access ways within the resort consist of images copied from traditional village architecture, with enclosing walls and *alang-alang* thatched entrance gates (*kori*), that lead to single pavilions within a compound-like situation.

## Conclusions

The examination of recent identity formation processes in Bali enables us to reach the following concluding generalizations:

A total blocking of or resistance to trans-local influences guarantees a kind of continuity on the one hand; on the other hand, it carries the risk of stagnation. Unquestioning absorption usually means a sudden break with a building culture which has evolved over time, which easily leads to confusion and disorientation.

Thus, adoptive transformation, with its mixture of local architectural forms and trans-local influences, clearly shows the biggest potential for a creative, future-oriented identity process. One of the risks that accompanies every identity-formation process is that an overemphasis is put on the notion of distinction, being different and unique, instead of developing a sense of 'belonging to' as a collective experience that reinforces social bonds.

There are three main factors that influence the potential for creative processes of identity formation:

- The strong presence of a built heritage that is still intact and integrated into everyday life, whether they be cult buildings or important communal structures.
- The adaptability of traditional architecture with regard to the changing requirements of new forms of living.
- The degree to which there is a conscious perception of architecture as a valuable element for expressing 'the self'.

All these prerequisites are strongly present in Bali. With its temples, palaces and community buildings, Bali possesses a living architectural heritage and strong cultural traditions: the *bale* and compound system is quite easily adaptable to modern forms of living, and there exists a firm (external) perception and interest in the built environment, not least because of tourism.

Identity is like a carpet. If we weave local characteristics and trans-local influences together, we get a specific pattern. This pattern becomes more concrete when we try to analyze what the specific architectural identity of a region comprises.

Based on the given prerequisites, Bali has a strong potential for developing a future architectural environment which will be generally considered to be representative, aesthetic, appropriate, desirable and livable.





Fig. 18 & 19: Nusa Dua Beach Hotel by architect Greg Norman: Characteristic architectural features such as the *kori agung* (split entrance gate) and an over-dimensional *wantilan* (community building) as an entrance hall flanked by two *kulkul* (drum) towers.



Fig. 20: Amanusa Hotel in Nusa Dua by Kerry Hill Architects: Exclusiveness through reduction inspired by international SPA-architecture, refined through Balinese craftsmanship.



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