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public engagement and the making of place

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REFLECTIONS ON CREATIVITY: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE MAKING OF PLACE

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Public Engagement for Cultural Heritage

Editors:

Indah WIDIASTUTI

Aswin INDRAPRASTHA

Firmansyah

Architecture Program
School of Architecture, Planning, and Policy Development
Institut Teknologi Bandung
INDONESIA



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Reflections On Creativity:

Public Engagement and the Making of Place

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Istanbul Gezi Park Resistance Movement as Public Engagement in the Making of Place <i>Murat GERMEN</i>	134
ROTOR Transdisciplinary Dialogue and Debate: A Public Engagement Case Study <i>Anna POWELL</i>	146
The Civic University: Cultural Leadership, Engagement and Art & Design Education <i>Steve SWINDELLS</i>	158
Analysis of Sustainable Tourism Village Development in Kutoharjo Village.Kendal Regency <i>Mega SESOTYANINGTYAS & Asnawi MANAF</i>	169
Creative Environmental Management in Private Land Rental Communities in Bangkok, Thailand <i>Sigit ARIF WIDODO & Orana CHANDRASIRI</i>	179
The Power of Community Engagement in Developing Rural Settlement Plan: A Case Study of Village Development around Merapi Volcano in Yogyakarta <i>Paulus BAWOLE</i>	190
Community Cultures in Making the Place Identity In Musi Riparian Settlement, Palembang <i>Maya FITRI & Sugeng TRIYADI</i>	202
Potential Waste Recycling as an Alternative to Environmental Quality Improvement Eco-Friendly Kampung <i>Nunik JUNARA</i>	211
Identification of Gentrification in Semarang Peripheral Region <i>Santy Paulla DEWI</i>	220
Transfer Policy on Creative City: The Case of Bandung, Indonesia <i>Adiwan ARITENANG</i>	229
Identifying Tourism Potentials through Community Participation <i>Imelda Irmawati DAMANIK & Marisca WIJAYANTI</i>	237
Creative User Generated Urbanism <i>Albertus PRAWATA</i>	249
The Management of Urban Vertical Housing in Indonesia: A Challenge for Creativity <i>Deva Fosterharoldas SWASTO</i>	258
Smart and Slow City. The Case-Study of Milan EXPO 2015 <i>Davide DIAMANTINI, et al.</i>	269
#OSJUBA (Open Systems Juba / South Sudan)-Open Source Urbanism in Post-Conflict Transformation <i>Stephen P.T. KOVATS</i>	281
TRACK D- PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE	291
Preservation of Daiki Old Elementary School Building as the Symbol of the Regional Environmental Sustainability, Susami Town, Wakayama, Japan <i>Tomotsune HONDA, et al.</i>	292
Trans-Gender Phenomena in the Architecture of Pohsarang: A Phenomenological Study on the Making of Place <i>Krismanto KUSBIANTORO</i>	300

Trans-Gender Phenomena in the Architecture of Pohsarang: A Phenomenological Study on the Making of Place

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ABSTRACT

Places are significant when they have meaning. The sustainability of a certain place usually depends on the sustainability of certain meaning as well. The more significant this meaning for the society, the greater possibility this building can survive. The Catholic Church of Pohsarang in Kediri, East Java - Indonesia is one of the buildings that show a phenomenon of sustainability yet being significantly alive for the people around. It was built and designed by a Dutch architect, Maclaine Pont, in 1936 as requested by Pastor H. Wolters, CM. Pont allowed local people to participate during construction and used local material as well. This triangle collaboration between the architect, the missionary and the local people produced a phenomenal local and sustainable building, since it was not merely building a church but also building the people of Pohsarang. A phenomenological research was done to comprehensively explain the existence reality of the church by finding and perusing each experienced phenomena that emerged from the various qualities of relations between the church and the surroundings. Instead of finding sustainability in the sense of preserving the original substance of the building, I found both an anatomical transformation and the shift of meaning that occurs during the interactive relation between the church and the people. The original masculine shape had been transformed to a more feminine one; the original "yang" had been transformed to a more "yin" one. I consider it as a trans-gender phenomenon. This paper tries to comprehensively describe both tangible and intangible evidence of the trans-gender phenomena of the building related to the natural context of East Java, the historical context of the place, the socio-cosmic context, the tradition and belief of the people. They all pay a great contribution to the making of Pohsarang as a place of cultural heritage.

Keywords: trans-gender, church, Pohsarang, meaning of place

INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that globalization is now an inevitable phenomenon that has put pressure on all aspects of human lives and design. John Naisbitt argued that this phenomenon is a paradox where greater global pressure produces stronger local identity. Therefore, globalization brings a blessing in disguise for the emergence of local values in all aspects including church architecture. The efforts of creating local churches in Indonesia have been initiated for decades. One of the most famous one is the church of Pohsarang in Kediri, East Java. It was built and designed by a Dutch architect, Maclaine Pont, in 1936 as requested by Pastor H. Wolters, CM.

The church shows certain interesting phenomena such as:

1. It shows a unique unusual synthesis by elaborating modern construction and local materials and form. It is an original synthesis that brought Pohsarang Church as one of the most significant architecture works in Indonesia.
2. Before the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church, this building is considered to be unique and unusual because it shows maximum adaptation to the local context which is not common at the time.
3. Although it had been renovated several times, the shape and the form of the building are still retained although there is no precedence on such among the surroundings.
4. It shows a local expression; or at least it came from an original reinterpretation of local culture especially Hindu Java.
5. The church is so alive. It is so significant and become an inseparable part of the life of the people of Pohsarang.

In short, if I may borrow Christopher Alexander's term (1979), the church of Pohsarang shows an unlabeled quality; a quality that no words can represent it. There are a certain mutual bonding between the church and the people of Pohsarang. The ability of a building to survive and retained lies on the relation of the building and the people around that create a particular place. So I began my research with the question of why it shows such phenomena.

The main challenge of the research is that there are no authentic records or drawings that can show the original idea of the architect. Historical information then must be gathered from some old people that live in Pohsarang and witnessed the church development. Phenomenology as a method is believed to be able to reveal the complexity of reality. By recognizing realities that appears due to active relations between the church and the subject, I wish to find a firm historical constellation of the church. So through deep interviews to the subject, I began to collect data that is related to:

1. How the subject relates to the church?
2. What the subject know about the church?
3. What does the church means for the subject?

These data then must be elaborated with the context naturally, socially and cosmologically to finally reveal new explanation on why the church shows such phenomenon.

THE ORIGINAL IDEA OF THE CHURCH

The church of Pohsarang lies in the west of Kediri; a city in the southern part of East Java province. It is about 30 minutes' drive from the city to a village in the hill of Mount Willis. In a village called Pohsarang, Macleine Pont designed and built one of his masterpiece in 1936. A church called the Church of St. Henry or we know it as the church of Pohsarang.

The story began in 1932 when Pastor Jan Wolters, CM. accompanied by four Javanese Catholics from Pohsarang, visited Macleine Pont in Trowulan. He was doing some research on Majapahit architecture and building a Majapahit museum. Suddenly these visitors amazed with what Pont was doing and asked him to build a small church for 150 people. The construction should be similar with the one that Pont do in Trowulan and they asked that people should sit on the floor inside the church. Most of the funding for the church came from a generous farmer in Brabant - a city in the southern part of Netherland - and he asked that the church should be named St. Henry.

Then Pont went to Pohsarang and developed spatial ideas that refer to the model of Majapahit palace and courts. The church building should become a central, facing to the south and surrounded by rounded stone walls with a particular temple-like entrance gate facing the east and creates an inner court. The inner rounded stone walls will become stages for Via Dolorosa prayer. A big tree must be put inside the court whilst in the north we could find a path to a cemetery. The temple-like gate of the complex is also made from stone.

The main building has the dome-shaped roof that creates a dramatic vertical space inside. The dome was created by four timber arches that interlock and support galvanized 'nets' which supports the corrugated roof tiles. The galvanized nets are flexible enough to support the wind load and the roof tiles, enabling the whole system to perform as a membrane construction of traditional materials. At the top of the dome, there is a structural form that looks like a 4-sided-crown and a skylight. On each side of the crown there is a statue that refers to the symbol of the 4 Gospel writers: a winged-human (Matthew), a winged-lion (Mark), an eagle (John) and an ox (Luke) that also represents the four compass directions. [Hadiwikarta, 2001: 1-3]

The interior of the Church is dominated by red bricks, while the exterior is rounded stones matching the boundary fence walls, a construction technique found in many Majapahit palaces. The altar as the main interior orientation of building refers to a throne in a *paseban*. A *paseban* is a big *pendopo* for a Kingdom; a *pendopo* itself is a sheltered and open area in Javanese house where men can receive guests. So, a *paseban* is a sheltered and open area where a king can meet his guests. The idea of the main building is actually a *paseban*. It originally has no

walls. But due to some security problems, the surrounding wall was built later in 1956 during renovations.

Regarding to this idea, Pont did not just copied what he had done in Trowulan but he managed to put meanings that inspired by the priest and the people around. So this church is not only a place of worship but a place that can tell stories; a place with both symbolic and didactic functions.

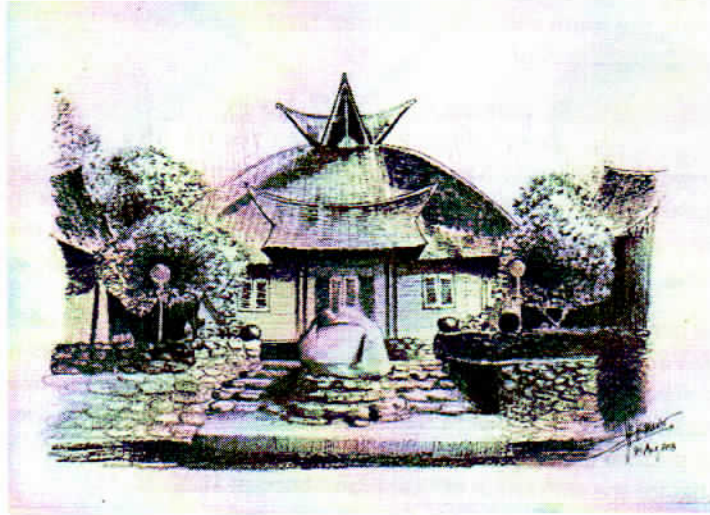


Figure 1: The Church of Pohsarang
Source: Personal illustration

When entering visitors see and touch various surface textures; at the same time the hand touches the water while entering the nave, the nose smells burning incense, the light directs the eyes towards the altar, the tongue taste the bread without yeast, and the ears hear the chanting followed by the rhythm of the wind. These effects build an exotic atmosphere that is so familiar for the Javanese, especially with their late animism ritual belief called *Kejawen*. The building is a symbol and a place that unites heaven and earth, man and God, traditional and modern, Christian rituals and *Kejawen* atmosphere, Javanese and Dutch, rough and smooth, outside and inside. The local characteristics that Pont implemented in this church are focused on the form of the roof and local materials. The roof form was Pont's main focus since Indonesian traditional architecture is a roof-dominant architecture, although Pont elaborates the traditional roof form with modern construction technology. The main purpose is to avoid univalent values that will restrain local values to emerge. [Kusbiantoro; 2013: 73]

THE CONTEXT OF KEDIRI

The city of Kediri is divided by Brantas River as 2 area: the eastern area and the western area. In the east there is an active volcano called Mount Kelud. And in the west there is no volcano, only a mountain called Mount Willis. It is why geologically the east part of Brantas River is dominated by volcanic stones, while the west part of Brantas River is dominated by tectonic stones.

The division of the city was a legend from the year of 1042 when King Airlangga during the lasts years of his life divided his kingdom in to two: Jenggala and

Pangjalu. With the help of a famous Brahman, *Mpu Bharada*, King Airlangga split his Kingdom for his descendants. There are no official script that explained why he split his Kingdoms, but some experts think that King Airlangga was trying to avoid a war between his descendants that came from both of his wives. King Airlangga had 2 wives; one is a princess of Champa and the other one is Chinese – Malayan princess of Srivijaya. The descendant from the princess of Champa had the Kingdom of Jenggala in the north and east of Brantas River with Kahuripan as the capital; while the descendant from the princess of Srivijaya had the Kingdom of Pangjalu in the south and west of Brantas River with Dhaha or Kediri as the Capital. [Coedes, 2010: 203-206]

Kingdom of Jenggala covered the area of Malang with Surabaya, Rembang and Pasuruhan as the seaport; while Pangjalu covered the area of Kediri and Madiun. Although King Airlangga had divided his Kingdom to avoid civil war among his descendants, the war between Jenggala and Pangjalu was unavoidable. Both kingdoms assumed to have the right to the entire King Airlangga's Kingdom. In the beginning, Jenggala won most of the battles but at the end Pangjalu won the war.

On this period of time, the people of Java cultivated rice and this particular culture is undeniably give impact to present situation. Cultivation of rice is not merely an economic activity, but also a social activity, traditional rituals and manifestation of Javanese philosophy. All were closely connected and adjusted to the maintenance of the peculiar social-cosmological pattern of life which is supposed to be the essential for the cultivation of rice. [Van Akkeren, 1970: 10-11]

In the life of the Javanese, there were 3 mythical couples that shows gender differences. There were *Singabarong* (underworld creature refers to female) – *Bujang Ganong* (heavenly creature refers to male), *Nini Towong* (female) – *Ki Towong* (male), and *Sri* (female) – *Sadono* (male). These three couples were the main figures in traditional rituals that usually held before planting the rice, before harvest and on wedding ceremonies. Myth about these couples originated in the legendary wedding of *Pandji* (*Sadono*), who was the prince of Jenggala and *Tjandrakirana* (*Sri*), who was the princess of Pangjalu. Their marriage was a very important event that gathers the four directional compass: Pangjalu (west), Jenggala (east), the heaven represented by *Bujang Ganong* and the underworld represented by *Singabarong*. [Van Akkeren, 1970: 11-22].

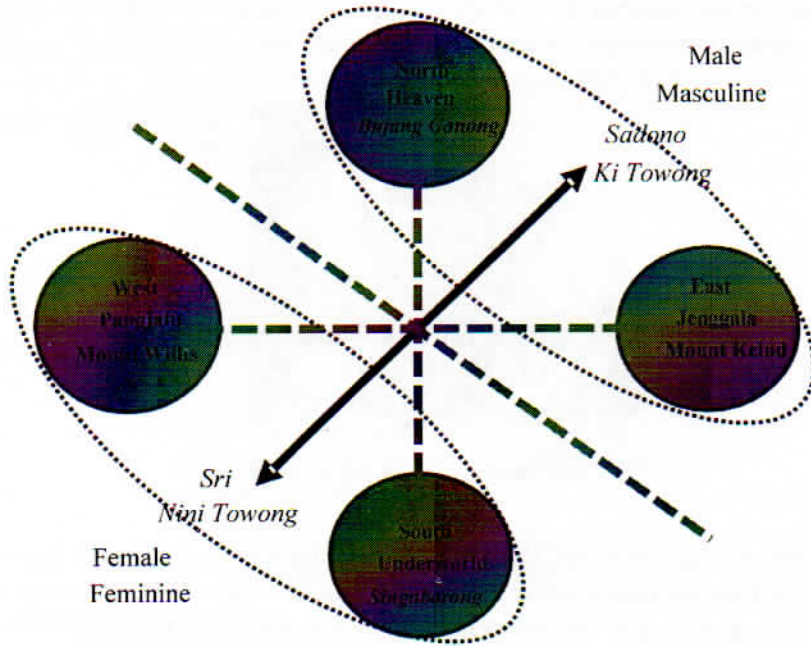


Diagram 1: Socio-cosmic Context of East Java
Source: Van Akkeren, 1970: 31

Both historical context of the 2 kingdoms and the socio-cosmic context of East Java explained the spirit of the place of both areas. The western and southern area of Brantas River, where used to be the Kingdom of Pangjalu, is a more “feminine” area. It is a place where most people struggled with agriculture; an earthly place of living. The character of the people living in this area is calmer, silent and introvert. On the contrary, the eastern and northern area of Brantas River, where used to be the Kingdom of Jenggala, is a more “masculine” area. It is a place where most people struggled with trading in markets and seaports. The character of the people living in this area is more active, aggressive and extrovert.

THE TRANS-GENDER PHENOMENA

The trans-gender phenomena of the Church of Pohsarang are closely related to the context mention above. My efforts of searching the answers of why this building survived and retained finally led me to the fact that it was transformed from the state of masculine to a more feminine one. There are several facts that lead me to such finding.

First is the rise of St. Mary’s cave as a more dominant place of worship. In the west side of the main building, there is a cave with a unique St. Mary’s statue in it. The statue is unique since it shows St. Mary using traditional Javanese garment instead of the ordinary one. St. Mary is a much closed figure for the Javanese people because she reminds them of their own mothers and also Dewi Sri, the goddess of rice. [Nugroho; 1999:8] The cave was part of the complex and was a very significant place of worship for the people of Pohsarang beside the church. Many

believe that many prayers were answered and miracles took place. It is a pilgrimage destination for many people and mostly visited because they can go anytime rather than the church which is opened only on Sundays.

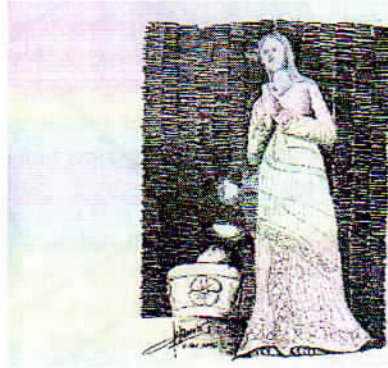


Figure 2: The Unique St. Mary's Statue
Source: Personal illustration

The second is that the church is architecturally transformed into a more enclosed form. As mentioned earlier that the building was originally a shelter with a skylight but without walls. The idea was to create a *paseban* or a *pendopo* which is a male domain in the Javanese houses. It is open, accessible and lighted. [Tjahjono; 1989: 105] Borrowing the terms from Taoism, the building was more “*yang*” rather than “*yin*”. But now, the building expresses a different character. Due to the security issue, a surrounding 1-metre wall under the roof was build and followed by a surrounding fence on top of it until it touches the roof. The skylight was removed so that the interior received less natural lighting. The building became more enclosed and the ambience is more likely to be dark and inaccessible. Now, the building is more “*yin*” rather than “*yang*”. In Javanese house, the building is more likely to be the *omah* rather than the *pendopo*. *Omah* is a Javanese house element that is more enclosed, inaccessible and dark. *Omah* is considered a place where one can calm mind. *Omah* is divided into 3 sections from the outer to the rear: *emperan*, *dalem* and *senhong*. The rear section of *omah* consists of 3 *senhong*s. The right *senhong* was used to store rice or other agricultural products, while the left was sometimes left empty for the practice of asceticism or, if used, was to store equipment of daily activity. The middle *senhong* should never be mistakenly use for other purpose without a special treatment for it is the permanent resting place of *Dewi Sri*, the rice goddess. *Dalem* and *senhong* is a specific female domain in Javanese houses. [Tjahjono; 1989: 100-103]

This architectural transformation was done in several renovations that involved the church superiors, and also some people of Pohsarang that participate. This transformation produces a more feminine image. Only some old people who lived and experienced the masculine period of the church that is able to sense the difference. Most people will not aware of the difference and even when the priest were asked about the meaning of the interior elements of the church, he said that the altar is the middle *senhong* and the nave is as the same concept as *dalem* in Javanese house. It is totally different with the original concept of *paseban*.

The third fact that shows a trans-gender phenomenon is that they renamed the church. In 2008, a new commemoration stone was put in front of the main building that stated name of the church "The Church of St. Mary" instead of "The Church of St. Henry". The commemoration stone seemed to proclaim a new gender of the church.



Figure 3: Recent condition of the Church
Source: Personal illustration

From the description above, I found at least two reasons that caused the trans-gender phenomena. One relates to the spirit of the place of Pohsarang – Kediri as a "female" area. Referring to the architectural form of Majapahit Museum in Trowulan that was built by Pont, it seemed that Pont miss-placed the structure in Pohsarang. What he did in Trowulan was an elaboration between what he studied in Majapahit archeological sites and a dome structure experiment that he did during his stay there. [Jessup; 1988: 255] Kingdom of Majapahit was built by *Krtarajasa Jayawarddhana* in 1293 as successor of Kingdom of Singosari. [Munandar; 2011: 30] Kingdom of Singosari was a new dynasty that rise from the former Kingdom of Jenggala who finally defeated Kingdom of Pangjalu and reunite Java. [Coedes; 2010: 255] So it is obvious that Majapahit is a Kingdom in the northern part of East Java which happened to be in the "male" area; and what Pont did was that he copied a structure from the "male" area to Pohsarang which was the "female" area.

The second reason is what I called the primordial religiosity instinct. DeConnick wrote in her book that one of the greatest tragedy of Christianity is the loss of the female aspect of God. [DeConnick; 2011:1] The Trinity God of Christianity always refers to a male God. Some other argue that in the context of God there is no gender, or in other words the greatness of God is beyond the gender issue. In fact in the early Christianity, the female aspect of God presented in the Holy Spirit. "*Spirit*" or "*ruah*" in Jewish or "*ruha*" in Aramaic is actually a feminine word. [DeConnick; 2011:1]. So in the idea of the Christian Jews, God is so familiar in their daily concept of a family. [See also Armstrong; 1999: 60] But the fathers of the church missed the idea and translated the word "*Spirit*" wrongly. In Latin, Holy Spirit is "*Spiritui Sanctus*" – a male verb. In German, "*spirit*" is "*der Geist*" – another male verb. And now Christianity introduces The Trinity God as a male God.

In the context of Pohsarang, people who used to be Kejawen and familiar with the figure of *Dewi Sri* - the rice goddess, unconsciously feel the loss of the female aspect of God when they become Christian. That is why St. Mary become a more popular figure and worshiped more. The quest of the female God is something primordial for Javanese people. So when they have the opportunities to develop or renovate a place of worship for God, they associated the place as *senthong tengah* - a resting place of *Dewi Sri*.

CONCLUSION

The quality without a name that we can learn from the Church of Pohsarang is its ability to accommodate changes. People change day by day. The relations between these people and the works of architecture create meanings; and meanings will also change along with it. The plurality of relations between the people and the works of architecture determine the future of it. Those buildings which are able to accommodate changes will survive.

The Church of Pohsarang is one particular example. The trans-gender is merely a phenomenon of how it struggled to accommodate changes. At the end, it is the people who play a great role in making the church a place of worship, a place of living and a place of cultural heritage.

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