Localizing the Universal Values of Christianity in Local Church Design of Indonesia: towards sustainability

(Case study: Church of Poh Sarang and Church of St. Mary Assumption)

Krismanto Kusbiantoro, Maranatha Christian University, Indonesia

Abstract: 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.

The issue of global versus local in Indonesian church design has existed for decades. As a foreign culture introduced during the colonial era, Christianity, with the spirit of universalism, faced problems of acceptance. Christianity had to address the local cultures that had existed for many centuries in order to be accepted. Therefore the issue of localizing emerged to adapt Christianity with its context, including its design.

It is critical to understand that a place, including churches, means significantly to people because they have certain values. Churches that show local characteristics prove to be culturally significant to the people and therefore more sustainable in the long term. The presence of this kind of church in a local district ensures it will become inseparable from place, and hence, strengthen the local character. For example the Church of Poh Sarang (by Maclaine Pont) and the church of St. Mary's Assumption Klaten (by Mangunwijaya) are churches designed with the spirit of locality. Local values and meanings are crystallized within design elements of these churches.

This paper will describe how architects adapted universal values of Christianity into local ways and design elements, in order to survive as an inseparable part of society. These churches show how design can contribute to the sustainability of Christianity in Indonesia.

Introduction

A discussion about the word 'local' is difficult due to its multiple meanings. The word 'local' comes from the Greek word *locus* which means a place or anything related to a certain place. The ambiguity of the word allows us to interpret it either in a broad or narrow sense. But in every use of the word, we can guarantee that it is always related to a specific place.

Apart from the place matter, the word 'local' also has a subject orientation. A place local to someone or a certain community might not be local to someone else. Every person or community has its own local, and a place that is local to someone now might not be local in the future. So the word local also has something to do with time or a specific period. Therefore I can conclude that when we are speaking about 'local', 'locality' and 'localizing,' we will have to deal with these three keywords: *place*, *subject* and *time*.[1]

Locality is inseparable from the inevitable globalization phenomenon. John Naisbitt in his book *Global Paradox* argues that this is a paradox phenomenon where bigger global pressure

produces stronger local identity.[2] Therefore globalization brings a blessing in disguise for local values to emerge. The issue of global versus local always becomes an interesting issue for philosophers, historians, theorists, and even designers. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has advanced the thesis that a hybrid 'world culture' will only come into being through a cross-fertilization between rooted culture on the one hand, and universal civilization on the other.[3] consequently both rooted 'local' culture and universal 'global' culture play significant roles in determining our future culture and architecture. Moreover it is important to understand that both culture and architecture are always dynamic.[4]

I believe that in architecture, a form is created for certain purposes. The design's point of departure starts with the needs and wants that must be facilitated. Architecture is a materialization of certain cognitive systems that is determined by the relationship quality of human beings and their surroundings.[5] Therefore architecture cannot be separated from its context. So the discussion about the act of localizing architecture is actually the act of contextualizing architecture; putting architecture in its context.

Local and sustainable building

Before we continue the discussion, I need to explain the word 'local' in connection with the idea of sustainability in order to begin discussion of the following case studies. Apart from its acclaimed achievements, modernism has made a massive assault on the continuity of tradition and established rationality as a new basis of thinking.[6] However, since the decrease of its domination in the 60's, there has appeared a counter approach that restructures the relationship between subject and object. One of the most influential is phenomenology.[7] A phenomenological approach is based on the assumption that reality is multi-faced, suggesting that we need a holistic perspective. I want to begin this discussion about the word 'local' by borrowing the idea of phenomenology.

One phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger, was trying to separate the often confusing idea of place and space through linguistic approach. He suggests that a place refers to an environment, entity, or concrete form of space that means more than just an abstract location. A place where man is capable of dwelling is somewhere between landscape boundaries (horizontal axes) and the earth and the sky (vertical axes). Only in a place where we can find the concept of dwelling, can we clearly distinguish the outside and the inside. In a place we find a certain identity or character that we often know as *genius loci*.[8]

On the other hand, a space denotes the three dimensional organization of the elements which make up a place. A space can be understood as a concrete three-dimensional geometry as well as an abstract perceptual field. A space helps to give form to a place.[9] Based on Heidegger's thinking, Schulz summarize that architectural works are not just an abstract organization of space but a medium where man can dwell in a landscape.[10] In the context of philosophy, dwelling is often described as a condition that is diametrically opposed to modernity. Dwelling refers to a way of being, whilst modernity is characterized by forgetfulness of being. Hence Adorno, Berger and Kellner all conclude that dwelling and modernity are always opposed to each other.[11]

In the context of what I have discussed earlier about locality, dwelling is a local concept that accommodates the creation of a place. The person who dwells is someone who is open to all

fundamental dimensions of being which the plural modern society has generally left behind. The plural modern society, with intensive individual mobility and migration, has forced the life of the society to move from one space to another, instead of a remaining in a place. The modern society is freed from the limitations imposed on them by their family or clan or by their village community. Therefore we can see that only universal values determined the individual life of modern society. The renunciation of the traditional framework or reference and also local values of their lives means a loss of certainties and of meaning. It is perhaps why, in the context of design and architectural expression, we see the dominance of individuality over collectivity, which is local.[12]

So the idea of 'local' in this paper opposes the universal idea of modernity. It is unique instead of universal, although the uniqueness is common to its own society. It is related to traditional frameworks, values and sometimes beliefs, instead of the modern way of thinking that promote rationality. It is related and attached to society, and parallels Heidegger's concept of dwelling. In a design context, 'local' suggests the making of a place rather than a space; it consists of a holistic concept of everyday living. Romantic notions of the past are not a must, but sometimes emerge in the act of design. We cannot separate the idea of 'local' with society and daily life. Something that is local always embeds with the life of the society, including the rituals, the values, the beliefs and even the art of making architecture.

Although the word 'sustainable' has many meanings, for this paper it refers to the idea of conserving both tangible and intangible aspects of the building. The tangible aspects address physical elements while the intangible aspects relate to ideas, concepts, and meanings attached to the building. A building that is 'sustainable' in this paper refers to a building that is long-lasting, rather than 'eternal', and is physically well preserved and significant to the society because it is meaningful. I suggest that a building that is local will be sustainable since it is meaningful yet significant for the life of the people around it.

Christianity and Indonesian churches

Indonesian church building began after the Portuguese introduced Christianity during the colonial era (began at 1496)[13] and was followed by the Dutch period of occupation (began at 1595 until 1942)[14]. Although some sources mentioned that missionaries came to Indonesia from southern India twice in the fourteenth century, no artifacts of their arrival remain.[15] As a promising archipelago, Indonesia once was a great destination for trading from China, India and Persia.

The period between 16th – 18th centuries is known as the Early Modern Era for the Indonesian archipelago and was marked by the arrival of European traders.[16] The Portuguese and the Dutch were two foreign powers that played a role in spreading Christianity throughout Indonesia, although Northern Indonesia was, for some period, greatly influenced by the Spanish who already settled in the Philippines.[17] The Dutch began to colonise Indonesia and build churches within fortress complexes, using an architectural expression transplanted from Europe with minimum adaptation to the local context.[18]

Indonesia's Modern Era began in the nineteenth century and lasted until 1940 (just before the World War II). During this period almost all parts of Indonesia were colonized by the Dutch who built roads, railways, transportation systems, offices, post offices, military complexes,

civic buildings, churches and residences, and planed many cities.[19] However following World War I, the great depression in Europe produced many critics of positivist thinking, and the emergence of social sciences concerned with humanist rather than imperialist ideas. Moreover the early decade of the twentieth century, saw many colonized countries able to experience the fruits of ethical politics.[20] For example European émigré architects opened offices in colonized countries, and in Indonesia built more churches for the local Christian community. The architectural expression that emerged during this period accommodated the local context of Indonesia. The most significant adaptation being recognition of the local tropical climate, formalized through roofs, wall openings and terraces. European styles, such as neo-gothic and art deco were also used but with the awareness of the local tropical climate.

Churches were an 'imported' function necessary to provide the increased Indonesian Christian population with places to worship. But as an imported foreign culture Christianity, with its spirit of universalism, faced problems of acceptance and, in order to be accepted, had to engage local cultures that had existed for many centuries. Therefore the issue of localizing emerged, whereby Christianity and the design of its places of worship had to adapt to its context.

Localizing church architecture was begun by the Catholic Church through a process Father Huub Boelaars terms 'indonesianization'.[21] The aim of Indonesianization was to integrate, rather than alienate, the Church into the life of Indonesians. The main purpose was to present the Church as truly rooted and growing in the very heart of Indonesian people, while expressing the unique characteristics of Indonesia. Of course it is an ongoing process since indonesianization is the continual integration of two different cultural bodies; Church and Indonesia. [22]

Henry Maclaine Pont, a Dutch-Indonesian architect and Y.B. Mangunwijaya, a local architect who is also a Catholic priest, are architects who show their passion for localizing Indonesian church architecture. Pont began this process in the early decades of the 20th century, whilst Mangunwijaya started in 1960's. Local values and meanings are crystallized within design elements of their churches, and they tend to be more culturally significant to the people and therefore more sustainable.

Local Design: Maclaine Pont's Church of Poh Sarang

The Catholic Church of Poh Sarang in Trowulan, East Java (1936) was ordered by Father H. Wolters, CM as the Pastor in the Diocese of Kediri. In accepting the commission Pont proposed that modern functional architecture can be materialized in the local forms and themes. The church complex consists of two main parts; the first is the main building, a sacred area containing the altar, baptistery, nave and tabernacle. The second area is the terrace that in Javanese is called a *pendopo*. The uniqueness of this building is the dome-shaped roof that creates a dramatic vertical space inside. The dome is created by four timber arches that interlock and support galvanised 'nets' which supports the corrugated roof tiles. The galvanised 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. The idea for this construction came from Pont's research into traditional housing in Java villages that used

bamboo as the primary building material. Pont was trying to integrate the traditional roof form with modern construction technology of wood, membrane and steel.

Figure 1
The Church of Poh Sarang by Henry Maclaine Pont

Figure 2
The unique roof construction of the
Church of Poh Sarang

At top of the dome the unique crown shape houses symbolic images of the four writers of the gospels; a winged-human (Matthew), a winged-lion (Mark), an eagle (John) and an ox (Luke) that also represent the four compass directions. Beneath this the altar is composed of rounded stones which are available locally in abundance. On the cylindrical stones there is an interesting carved relief depicting a deer which is drinking while the others await their turn.

Figure 3
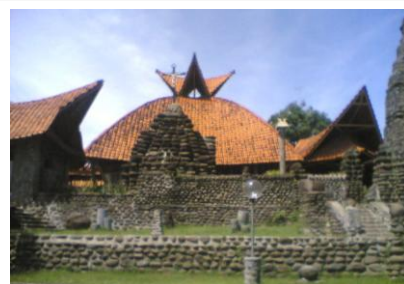The altar of the Church of Poh Sarang

Figure 4
The rounded-stone walls of the Church of Poh Sarang

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 temple-like gate of the complex is also made from stone.

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.[23]

Local Design: Y. B. Mangunwijaya's Church of St. Mary's Assumption

The Church of St. Mary Assumption in Klaten (Central Java) is an authentically preserved masterpiece by Y. B. Mangunwijaya, an Indonesian architect, Catholic priest, writer and social worker. Although built in 1972 the architect in a book of commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the Church of St. Mary Assumption, stated that the inspiration for the design came from the renewal spirit of the Second Vatican Council (1964-1967).[24]

Located in the residential district of Klaten, the building is a rectangular form consisting of two squares. Of the two squares the layout of the main one is symmetrical with diagonal axis and an altar on the corner, while the other is also symmetrical with horizontal axis. Circulation begins with the front yard and is followed by an inner entrance court. Visitors are welcomed by a garden and a fish-pond, indicating that the journey to God is being prepared by sequences. When entering the building the sense of warmth and homely atmosphere is significant since orientation is away from the altar – which directly expresses sacredness.

Figure 5 The Church of St. Mary's Assumption (front)	Figure 6 The Church of St. Mary's Assumption (east)

The interior of the church expresses a particular atmosphere created by local ornamentation on the building envelope. Most of the ornaments are symbolic forms found in churches such as Christ's blood as the red wall, the green tree of life, and the bird-shaped roof. But they also display characteristics of the local Javanese culture. In Javanese culture there is also a sacred tree symbol called *pohon hayat* (the tree of life) or kalpadruma or kalpataru in Hinduism which is believed to be the tree of hope and life.[25] Another symbol is the tripod-shape column in the centre of the façade, which refers to the Holy Trinity in Christianity, but in Javanese culture it is part of the *saka guru*; the main sacred column groups that always become the centre of the cosmos.[26]

Early in the morning the sacredness of the worship place is created by the dramatic entrance of sunlight through wall openings and the gap between wall and roof. In this church the roof is not attached to the wall, and is different to the 'tent' concept, inspired by Moses' Holy Tent built during the exodus. A tent is portable and movable along with the concept of the pilgrim church in the world.

Figure 7
The Church of St. Mary's Assumption
(interior after the morning mass)

Javanese people believe that there are three important relational aspects that need to be encouraged in Javanese culture. First is the relation between human and God, second is the relation between humans, and lastly is the relation between humans and nature (cosmos). This concept becomes a basic conception of the ordering principles in the building.

The inner court at the entrance is a place that symbolizes the relation between humans and nature. Next is a place with a higher platform where people met and greet each other. This symbolizes the relation amongst humans. The Southern area (the main square) has a lower platform and higher ceilings, and is a place that symbolizes the relation between humans and God. The sacred area is larger and has higher ceilings that the profane area. Although both areas have similar colours, textures, and ornaments, it is clear that there s a difference in hierarchy. The sacred area is primary and the profane secondary. During the mass, both areas function as a nave but the character of the profane area is more horizontal due to the lower proportion compared to the sacred area.
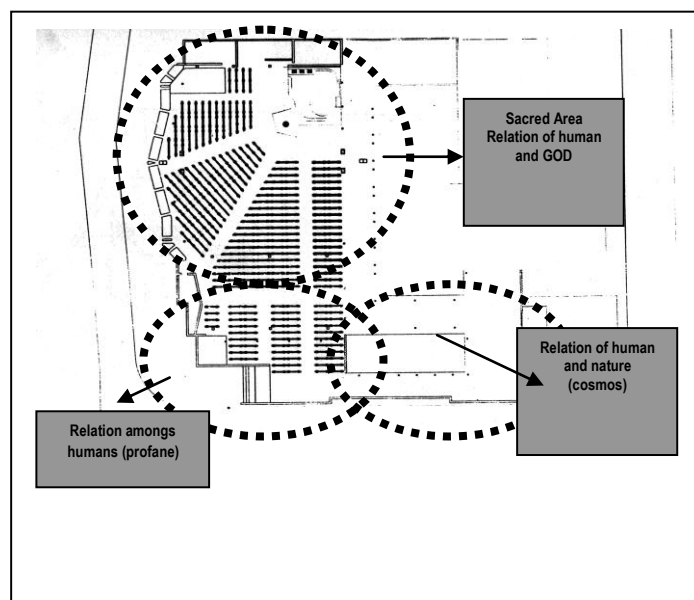

Figure 8
Zoning concept symbolising three important relational aspects of Javanese culture

Beside proportions, the difference between sacred and profane spaces is strengthened by a different orientation of the furniture. In the profane area, furniture is arranged in parallel with the main horizontal axis, while in the sacred area it is radially arrayed.

Figure 9
Concrete columns and beams with unique textures

In these areas ceilings are made of wood with a gloss finish, whereas in the corridors they comprise woven bamboo also finished in a similar manner. Columns and beams are made of concrete with an unusual texture resulting from the imprint of bamboo form-work. These exposed and painted textures align perpendicularly with the span direction. Generally walls are made of roughly plastered and painted brick, but several wall surfaces are specially treated to create accents. The front exterior walls are painted in red with a horizontal textured line as an eye catcher for the surroundings. The background wall to the altar is made of small carved rectangular sections of timber with a gloss finish. Other solid walls are roughly plastered and painted in various colours.

Figure 10
Pattern of carved timbers behind the altar

Figure 11
Non Solid wall that was destroyed during the earthquake

Along the walls are several ornamented ventilation openings made by high-skilled local craftsmen. There is also a non-solid wall made of concrete that beautifully decorates the nave; unfortunately this wall was destroyed during the earthquake two years ago. Floors are made of pre-cast pattered concrete and arranged together with small round stones. These

floor patterns also indicate differences between the sacred and the profane area. The sacred area uses a circle pattern which symbolises perfection and likeness to God, whereas the profane area uses a dove-like pattern to symbolise the Holy Spirit who is always with believers in their daily life.

The local characteristic that Mangunwijaya tried to implement in this church is focused on the decorative elements of design. The details of the walls, openings, ceilings, columns and beams are meticulously designed and show local characteristics that interpret the context of the place. There are so many beautiful and valuable details on Mangunwijaya's architecture, all of which have unique local touches suitable for further study. But until now there has been no comprehensive documentation in the form of models or replicas so whenever the originals are damaged or destroyed, it is still to be reconstructed. The fact is that these details are truly valuable cultural artefacts and absolutely need to be conserved.

Conclusion

To summarise, the effort to raise the local in architecture as we have seen from the examples by Pont and Mangunwijaya, are efforts at reinterpreting locality – a conceptual device that has little to do with style and/or decoration. The aim is to try and create modern expressions with a cultural spirit that are meaningful for the local society, so that they become significant, sustainable and enduring.

The two case studies demonstrate that the presence of the church in the local area strengthens the local character such that it becomes an inseparable part of the place. The environmental context and local values are both important issues to be considered in the design process. Churches, which are contextual, when designed to suit both the natural environment and artificial environment, will be an inseparable part of the life of the local people. Places are significant when they have meaning; and something that is significant culturally can be considered local for the society. Therefore as long as it is meaningful for the society, we can presume that it is significant and its sustainability is assured since the society will become involved nurturing and conserving it as part of their daily lives.

Endnotes

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