

# The Resilience of Javanese Meaning in the Architectural Acculturation of Javanese with Chinese Ethnic Houses in the Kampong of *Sumber Girang* and *Babagan* in Lasem

Bachtiar Fauzy<sup>1\*</sup>, Antariksa Sudikno<sup>2</sup>, Purnama Salura<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Candidate in Architecture of Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer in the Department of Architecture of Brawijaya University, Malang, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer in the Department of Architecture of Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This research study aims to put forth all the correlations of influence affecting the architecture of Javanese ethnic houses and their Chinese counterparts in the kampongs of *Sumber Girang* and *Babagan* in Lasem. The methods employed in this study consist of recording and re-describing all of the available case studies so that these can be subjected to further analysis based on the anatomy of their respective architectural designs. Subsequently the concepts underlying the typical architecture are examined by way of a physical analysis of the architecture derived from the case studies. From these case studies a concept may be explored that underlies each physical element in the two case studies. The outcome of research indicates that the architecture of Javanese ethnic houses proved to be resilient to the influence of the architecture of Chinese ethnic houses, as the former still applies the meaning of human activities in the formation of its architecture.

**Key words:** architectural meaning, functional activity, form

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## INTRODUCTION

The Northern coastal region of Central and East Java constitutes an area that displays a wealth of different styles of architectural acculturation [1]. This comes as no surprise, for in its developmental process this coastal region has always been one where new arrivals consisting of Indians, Chinese, Arabs and Dutchmen gathered. The island of Java has been known as being open-minded to new arrivals who considered Java to be a rich resource for making a living [2,3,4].

The process of acculturation taking shape along this particular coast has rarely been subjected to research. But as a matter of fact, the variety of the architecture to be found there can be explored to reveal what factors have caused the resilience and ultimate survival of the architecture typical of the Javanese community [5]. This is the reason why it is important to conduct research into this architecture's specific character as encountered along the Northern coastal region of Central and East Java.

The Chinese traders and immigrants arrived in Central Java around the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Afterwards, they settled in the region of Lasem. In its developmental process, the architecture of these ethnic Chinese dwellings greatly contributed to the architectural style of the dwellers in the vicinity. Surely it is this very mixture of styles and technology that shaped the architectural character of the Javanese ethnic houses in this coastal area around the kampongs of *Sumber Girang* in Lasem [6,7]. It is known that the Chinese ethnic architecture brought to these shores by the Chinese newcomers can be classified as technologically superior to the local one. Thus, the Chinese ethnic architecture had a considerable impact on the Javanese architecture in the vicinity [8,9]. This research study explores to what extent the Javanese ethnic architecture in this particular region has managed to hold out in the acculturation process with Chinese ethnic architecture.

Based on the arguments stated above, this research study aims to reveal the entire potential of mutual influence between the Chinese ethnic residential architecture and its Javanese counterpart in the kampongs of *Babagan* and *Sumber Girang* in Lasem. The study will examine both physical and non-physical aspects affecting the two architectural styles mentioned in detail.

It may prove useful in the following ways: first of all, it may reveal the mutual influence between Chinese and Javanese ethnic architecture; secondly, it may shed light on the factors that strengthen the resilience of Javanese ethnic architecture to the cultural impact of the foreign settlers; thirdly, it may describe the various principles as well as the specific character of the architecture typical of the Northern coastal region of central and East Java; fourthly, the outcome of this research study may be used as input for a survival strategy to enable the typical architecture of this region to remain intact.

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**\*Corresponding Author :** Bachtiar Fauzy, Doctoral Candidate in Architecture of Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia. Email : bachtiarfauzy@yahoo.co.id

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Case study

According to the historical records available, the Chinese arrivals entered Central Java and the town of Lasem in particular in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, and the place where they anchored and settled can be identified as the kampong of *Babagan* in Lasem [10]. Up to the present, the artifacts of Chinese architecture have been preserved and remained intact, relatively speaking. The same goes for the Javanese Quarter that took shape autonomously around the neighborhood, namely the kampong of *Sumber Girang*, whose architectural condition has remained relatively intact.

### Research Stages

The first stage of this study consists of recording the data to be encountered in two houses situated in the Chinese ethnic kampong and its Javanese counterpart. These two houses were selected on purpose based on the criteria representative of the types of houses mentioned in the two case studies.

The physical recording of features was made based on the philosophy that the relationship between buildings and the land (soil), buildings and the sky, and the link between these two [11]. The second stage comprises an investigation of the way these architectural elements have been employed. This is accomplished by recording the daily activities of the occupants and by conducting interviews with them. The reference used for drawing up a list of questions for these interviews consists of a study of the concepts that play a dominant role in affecting each activity. [14, 15].

The third stage consists of keeping a record of all the coordinating ‘umbrella’ (*wadah*) elements (spatial and construction elements) that happen to accommodate all of the activities sketched above. Only then can we explore what concepts form the background to the creation of each spatial and constructive element in place. In this manner it can be established whether the architectural space and elements are based on one or the other, or indeed a merger of the two, as the case may be [16, 17].

This in-depth exploration yields an interpretation of the degree of resilience of Javanese ethnic architecture as local architecture to the impact made by the Chinese ethnic architecture of the outsiders. In this light, this research study is more qualitative in nature based on the theory of Function-Form-Meaning to be followed by making a scientific interpretation of the empirical data available as well as the outcome of the interviews conducted.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Meaning of Architectural Function in the Two Case Studies

The occupants of the houses described in the case studies of Javanese ethnic architecture were Muslims, but as a matter of fact they still adhered to superstitious beliefs known as *Kejawen*, as manifested through their customs and traditions. The ritual of holding ceremonial meals that forms the realization of the concept of asking for permission while showing gratitude to the Ruler of Heaven and Earth has always been conducted.

These activities are frequently centered in the space (a room called *gedongan/tengah omah*) often left empty, without any household furnishings (Illustration 2).

If Nature in its entirety can be expressed metaphorically as the palm of one’s hand (or alternatively, the sole of one’s foot), then the main residential building can be considered as its center, so that the activities placing the building in a palm always refer to the concept of balancing the arrangement or plan (*tatanan*). The building is placed in the center of the palm or in an area that can be reached equitably from all direction (fingers, wrist). Among the Chinese ethnic community, the building is always placed at the very center of the ‘palm’, too. This is in accordance with the concept of *Feng Shui*.

The activity of socializing among the occupants of Javanese ethnic houses and their community or the activity of receiving guests is conducted in the part situated at the very front of the house. In the case study of Javanese ethnic houses, the sections used for receiving guests have roofs that form a unity with the main building, that is to say on the front terrace or porch called *jogan/jogo satru*. Although this roof is linked to the one covering the main building, this space is left open, without any wall or door.

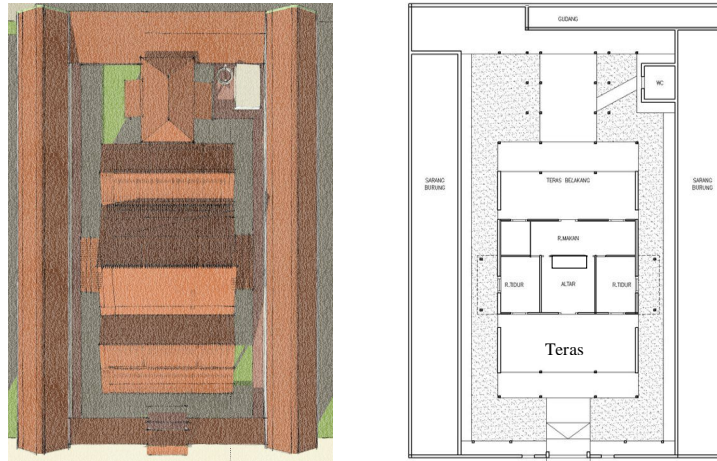


Illustration 1. Block plan (a) and plan (b) of a typical Chinese ethnic house in the kampong of *Babagan* in Lasem.

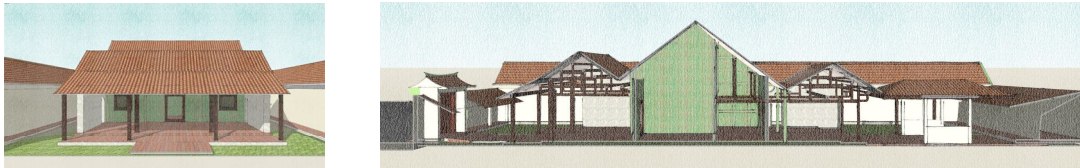


Illustration 2. Front Elevation (a) and Section (b) of a typical Chinese ethnic house in the kampong of *Babagan* in Lasem

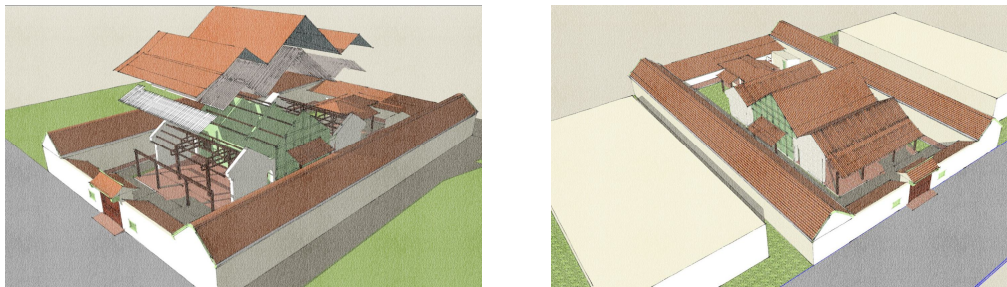


Illustration 3. Isometric (a) and Perspective (b) of a typical Chinese ethnic house in the kampong of *Babagan* in Lasem

This forms the realization of openness based on the concept of *tepo-seliro*, that is to say the principle of putting oneself in another's place. In the Javanese ethnic houses owned by the aristocracy, this *jogo satru* space is constructed with a separate roof often referred to as *pendhopo*, a large open structure or attached open veranda. The daily family activities carried out by the occupants generally take place behind the *gedongan* areas, that is to say the space named *pawon* situated opposite the guest room or *jogo satru* mentioned earlier, so that the placement of the former can be regarded as the counterpart of the latter.

The underlying concept of this particular lay-out is hierarchic. Parents rank above their children in this strict hierarchy. The Javanese occupants of these ethnic houses observed in the case study consistently cling to the concept known as *kualat*. For example, the area named *senhong* (small inner room traditionally used for family ceremonies) situated in the same zone as the *gedongan* area may only be entered by the heads of the family (father-mother). The space reserved for the children is placed in the *gandok tengen* and *kiwo* placed on the left and right side of the *kudang/pawon*.

From the two case studies above the mutual influence between the functional meaning of the Javanese ethnic residential architecture and its Chinese counterpart can be concluded to be relatively non-existent.

### The Meaning of Architectural Form in the Two Case Studies

In the Javanese ethnic houses of the case study it is plain to see that the most dominant aspect of the outer appearance is the saddle-shaped roof extended by the roof angle measuring approximately forty-five degrees. Other roofs are only oblique in shape, whose roof angle measures twenty-five degrees with an extended position or attached to the dominant lower part of the roof. These shapes are a symbolic expression of the

concept that the area beneath the roof forms a hierarchic space deemed superior to all other spaces in the building. The outcome of this research study indicates that the area beneath the roof consists of the *gedongan* or main central space of the mansion. This area is sanctified by its occupants because it is used exclusively for the *selamatan* ritual mentioned earlier or for activities such as saying prayers or Koranic recitation.

In their place of origin in the countryside, the three-dimensional shape of the gedongan area found in Javanese houses is based on the concept of *tengah*, that is to say taking a neutral stance, pointing upward. As a consequence, the shape of the building will be centered with a pointed roof pointing upward like a shield (*perisai*), to be extended with the expansion of a four-sided collar at the same angle as the slanted one of the roof that is slightly more sloped.

The case study of the Javanese ethnic houses shows that the shape of the roof is not centered but rather stretched along a length. As a result, the shape of the building becomes stretched or linear. Even so, in this *gedongan* space, the four main pillars can still be found, which are generally employed to support the main saddle-shaped roof. The area of the *senthong* mentioned earlier on the left and right side is also covered by the same roof (III.3).

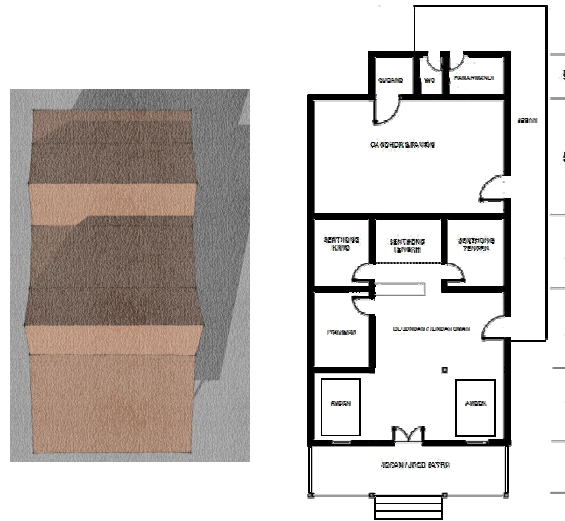


Illustration 4. Blockplan (a) and Plan (b) of Javanese ethnic houses in the Kampong of *Sumber Girang* in Lasem.

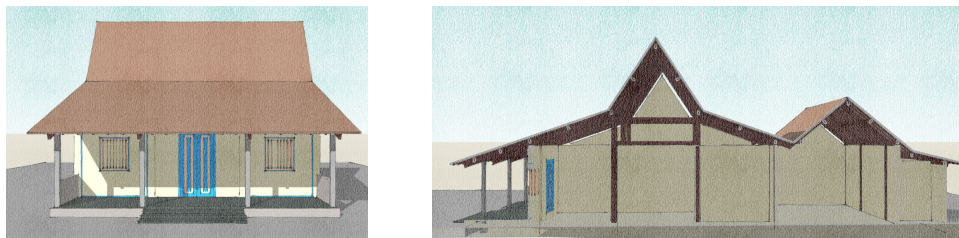


Illustration 5. Front Elevation (a) and Elevation (b) of Javanese ethnic houses situated in the Kampong of *Sumber Girang* in Lasem.

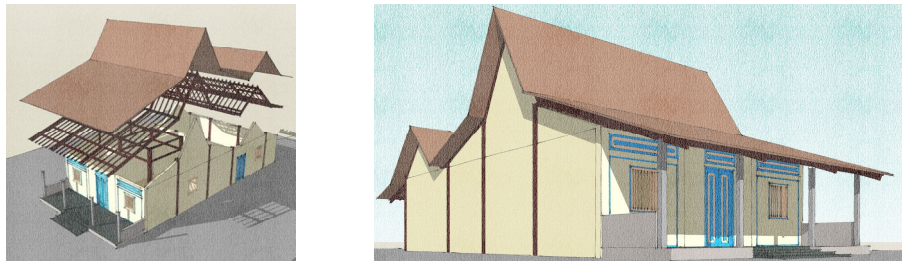


Illustration 6. Isometric (a) and Perspective (b) of Javanese ethnic houses situated in the Kampong of *Sumber Girang* in Lasem.

On closer inspection, the roof's shape is similar to that of the Chinese ethnic houses observed in the case study. It may be assumed that their Javanese ethnic counterparts developed their roof shapes in imitation of the Chinese ones. Having made this assumption, the construction of the roof support in the shape of beams or rafters looks strikingly different.

An analysis of the concept behind the entire range of activities may sketch the meaning of form for the occupants described in the case study. Even though the main shape of the roof in the case study of Javanese houses follows or has been influenced by that found in the case study of the Javanese houses, the concept behind the spatial formation is markedly different.

### **The Relationship between Mutual Architectural Influence in the Two Case Studies**

Based on this research study, the spatial arrangement or lay-out in the Javanese ethnic houses of the case study can be said to refer to relatively closely to the concept behind the spatial arrangement of their Javanese country cousins, whereas the roof shape and ornaments refer more to Chinese ethnic architecture.

Thus it would be safe to state that the relationship of the mutual influence between the Javanese ethnic houses and the impact of their Chinese counterparts can only be discerned in the outer shape of the buildings. This impact derived from the outer shape of the Javanese ethnic houses observed in the case study cannot be found in the construction system applied or in the character of the inner space or chambers.

With reference to the theory that the aspect of meaning is believed to consist of meaning connected to the inner and outer layers, the former can be regarded as equivalent to the structure or function and all-encompassing 'umbrella' (*wadah*), whereas the latter is seen as equivalent to architectural physical elements such as floors, walls and roofs of the buildings in question.

Based on an analysis of the interpretation of the in-depth description made, it may be concluded that the meaning of the inner layer (the functional structure and all-encompassing 'umbrella') of space in Javanese ethnic houses has not all been affected by Chinese residential architecture. The impact that can be established lies in the influence of the shape of outer elements and ornaments that can be categorized as the meaning of the outer layer or mere surface.

### **CONCLUSION**

The research result yields the following conclusions:

First of all, the architecture of Javanese ethnic houses observed in the case studies has received obvious input from the craftsmanship of its Javanese counterparts. The architectural elements derived from the latter can be found in the roof shape, details added to the side walls, the covered passageway console as well as the decorative ornaments attached to the roof top;

Secondly, the Javanese ethnic houses observed still take as their starting-point the four central pillars that form the main ones, even if their shape obviously refers to that of the Chinese ethnic houses observed. The construction of the supporting roof beams consistently employs the Javanese construction system for its roofs. The central space sheltered by the roof (*gedongan*) is still reserved for sanctified activities;

Thirdly, the architectural character of the Javanese ethnic houses observed can be said to have accommodated the foreign styles very well. Even so, the foreign input that is often developed or merged in nature can only be found in the non-structural scope ranging from the outer shape to the decorative ornaments;

Fourthly, the resilient power of Javanese ethnic architecture can be identified as the consistent reference to Javanese concepts underlying all activities. The meaning of layers found in activities that are consistently applied to this day consists of *selamatan* (holding ceremonial meals), that is to say the relationship between the Javanese and the Almighty, *tatanan* (divine or cosmic plan), that is to say their relationship with cosmic affairs, *tepo-seliro*, namely the relationship between the Javanese and their community and finally *kualat*, referring to the relationship between the Javanese and their families or relatives.

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