



The Tasks of Architecture

SHELTER

The sun had already passed its highest altitude or high noon. My estimate of the air temperature here was about twenty degrees Celsius. The air was cold but hardly polluted. We strolled through the middle of the plantation. As far as the eye could see, only green lettuce leaves were visible. Five workers appeared to be weeding the plants. She started walking rapidly in front of me. Making a lively impression, she was passing through regular rows of plants and then chatting for a while with the workers.

Her inside knowledge of lettuce was a cut above average, one could even call her a real expert in the field. This plant is included in the family of vegetables commonly served with sandwiches or burgers. Fast-food retail outlets worldwide often order lettuce here. For an interior designer usually dealing with computer screens and furniture, this surely was a far cry from the dirt of the ground, I mean it was rather strange to see her hands covered with soil smelling of manure. She was in fact the owner and manager of this lettuce garden.

We spent quite some time in this garden, too. Seeing this vast expanse of gardens, I felt the space flowing, somehow becoming detached. Now this could truly be called a natural landscape. Can we label this panorama a form of architecture? If so, then surely this lettuce garden belongs to the category of architecture. I did not have time to let my thoughts linger, as she invited me to hurry away from the garden. It beat me why.

Dark clouds seemed to be hanging low in the sky further up. The sky had been bright, but its colour began to turn into a dark grey here and there. Since the garden was located in the valley area, we had to walk uphill to reach the villa. She walked quickly in front, breathing regularly, while I was a little out of breath trying to follow her pace. I felt slightly ashamed. In terms of fitness, I was obviously trailing behind this beautiful woman.

The raindrops began to bother us, or so we felt. The longer the rain fell, the higher the number of raindrops, naturally. And my little weather forecast proved to be right. The rain was getting heavier. We were forced to take shelter in a cave situated in the central area, between the gardens and villas. In this cave there were wooden beams crosswise about half a meter from the ground for seating purposes. The length of the beam amounted to about two meters. Four wooden chandypes of quinine supported the saddle-shaped roof. The cave measured three by two meters. Admittedly, no room to swing a cat in, but it was quite a relief to huddle and find shelter there together.

The rain was now pouring down from the sky, as if someone were deliberately emptying a bucket over our heads. Playing the well-bred gentleman, I took off my jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She smiled, as if laughing at my gesture. She was right. Without the jacket covering my body, I would not be able to keep my teeth from chattering, bedevilled with the cold. This was not exactly surprising as the temperature may well have dropped by then.



It must have been below twenty degrees Celsius. Aside from the rain, this must have been due to the wind blowing very hard as if vying with the rain. That afternoon the temperature would drop to around fifteen degrees Celsius. The impulse to ask my jacket back filled me with embarrassment.

To be warm, we sat a little closer together. She asked, can this cave called *saung* be considered a work of architecture? I was silent but then remembered there had been several hypotheses proposed by foreign anthropologists and architects about Adam's hut. They had all made a detailed analysis of the particular shape of the hut where Adam and Eve had allegedly lived. The French anthropologist and architectural theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier had vented his opinion in a book entitled *An Essay on Architecture* (1753). He had actually reconstructed that the columns in Adam's hut consisted of four trees in close proximity with one another. Needless to say, it wasn't a case of a perfect square.

If this view is correct, it means the foundation of the pole was the root of the tree. The top of the tree was then united with wooden staples, then covered with leaves. Quite similar to this cave, as a matter of fact. But that must have been long, long ago. The woman beside me was not Eve of course, and you can bet your bottom dollar that I wasn't Adam. Even though we happened to have found shelter in the cave that resembled the description in Laugier's hypothesis. The theoretical writings of Laugier are often the main treatises of architecture studies derived from Western thought.

To this very day, there are many architectural teachings that establish this essay as the foundation for their academic courses. When carefully examined, the writings of Laugier are very much in favour of classical Greek architecture that tends to be simpler than baroque or the eclectic school so typically laden with decorations. The thinking behind the writings of Laugier strongly supports the view that harks back to the popular world of "back to nature" prevalent in the mid-eighteenth century. This echo of thought then penetrated into all fields, that is to say entering the realms of literature, art, music and of course architecture.

Now there have also been academic studies comparing Adam's primitive hut derived from Laugier's version with the one proposed by the Roman architect Vitruvius. The latter was very famous for having written a book entitled *De Architectura* (*On Architecture*, 30-15 BC) that focused on the planning and realization of buildings. His book is actually the oldest book on the topic ever found in the world.

It is estimated to have been written around 25 BC. Of course, this Vitruvius fellow is hardly a stranger to Indonesian architects. Practically all architecture departments in the world always teach his dictum that has become a triple byword: *utilitas-firmitas-venustas*, a Latin phrase meaning that all buildings must be useful, solid, and beautiful. I myself have always questioned this specific dictum's idiosyncrasies. I would argue that the reigning aspects in architecture are not function-beauty-form, but function-form-meaning.

A different kettle of fish altogether can be found in Joseph Rykwert's hypothesis in his book entitled *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (1972). He also happens to be an anthropologist; he holds the thesis that the construction of Adam's dwelling initially consisted of slender tree trunks whose top ends were tied to a conical shape.



Come to think of it, this looks very similar to the teepee tent of the fictive Winnetou, chief of the Apache Indians.

He further stated that the search for Adam's house was not about looking for what was lost from the house, but rather about focusing on what could not be lost. In other words, look for the basic structure that tends to remain, not the external structure that can be changed or lost. Adam's house is not just a memory of a past object, but more a reference to the state of consciousness that gave birth to a thought, one put forward not by way of archeology that focuses its attention on the artifacts of objects alone, but one that must also identify ritual ceremonies performed by a still primitive community.

Based on the profound quest for Adam's primitive dwelling, Rykwert expressed the opinion that the most essential aspect in architecture could not be found in Adam's house itself but rather in its naturalness. In the life choice made with the utmost simplicity that is not orientated on worldliness. This is the choice always made and lived out by the hermits in making a livelihood out of the meaning of life. Drawing a parallel with this simplicity, it can be said that Adam's house is the embodiment of these lifestyle choices. Of course, there are many other forms of speculation about Adam's house as proposed by the experts in the field of Anthropology. That's only natural. This is because this kind of research forms the research focus of Anthropology as an academic discipline. As for me, I feel that the salient point is the red thread running through the theses by the experts mentioned earlier. The red thread indicates that this shelter called *saung* (cave) can be justifiably classified as a piece of architecture.

The rain came down harder, at present accompanied by the strong wind blowing. The rainwater began to be blown away from the side. This cave turned out to be only fit for protecting us against rain and sunshine from above. It provided no shelter from the side. The lower parts of our bodies started to rather wet. I came up with an idea, how about running up to the villa? We were bound to get drenched anyway, dragging ourselves through the heavy rain. But I thought nothing of it for our clothes were already guaranteed to end up soaking wet.

We reached the villa that she owned. The rooms inside were not all that spacious but there was a covering (overlapping) wall. There was a bathroom as well. I inserted a dry piece of wood laid out on the edge of the fireplace and began to burn it in the open hearth. The air began to warm up rather pleasantly. My teeth remained clenched tightly, but the chattering had stopped. The villa was located at a height of fifteen hundred meters from the sea surface. No wonder the cold felt like stabbing my shivering bones. This villa was presumably built in the Dutch colonial era, possibly around the 1930s. This could easily be gleaned from the type and variety of the building materials used. At that point in time, the Dutch had already started to use cement for the construction of their buildings. As she was stirring hot water for a drink she repeated her question. Was this villa a work of architecture? Then what was the difference between the lettuce garden and a cave and a villa, not to mention buildings in general? She kept calling these items into question, sounding like a gecko chirping away.

Shedding light on the distinction to be drawn between the lettuce garden, the cave and the villa was naturally a piece of cake. But addressing the issue of how exactly buildings differed from architecture would require a more elaborate explanation.



Or was it just a matter of conjuring up the image of Nikolaus Pevsner, an expert in the field of architectural history of 20th century Europe whom stated that “a bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture”. In other words, it can be ascertained by the experts that a cave cannot qualify as a piece of architecture, let alone a lettuce garden.

One thing’s for certain, the initial task of architecture is to provide shelter for human beings. Even though the cave was uncomfortable with the wind-blown rain from the side, it was still functioning as a shelter. Having said this, there was no other important activity that we could carry out inside the cave. Our only activity there consisted of huddling together waiting for the rain to stop. Good job we were entertained by frogs cheerfully chattering away, talking back and forth in response to the pitter-patter of the rainfall.

I happen to see eye to eye with the anthropologists mentioned above in the previous section. My views also run parallel with an architectural authority by the name of Christian Norberg-Schulz who always uses the phenomenological approach in his books. In one of them, he even goes so far as to propose the thesis that the task that lies ahead for architecture takes four shapes, namely: exerting physical control or providing protection in the form of shelter, accommodating activities, representing social strata and conveying cultural symbols.

This villa actually felt far more comfortable than a run-of-the-mill one. Both of us could sit facing the fireplace and sip warm coffee. This villa already functioned as a space where the two of us could carry out lots of activities. Eating, reading, sitting, exchanging playful banter, and sleeping without getting rained on or feeling chilly. This villa was no mere shelter but was far more developed than that basic function.

It could be labelled as a small house. The roof, and the wall along with its scaling floor served as a filter from the surrounding environment. Based on the experience of finding shelter in the cave and then this villa, one felt a significant change in the quality of spatial experience, ranging from the cave where our activities and comforts were limited to the villa where the activities are more diverse and most comfortable. Although different, don’t both contain space for human use? Moreover, doesn’t architecture always take space as its starting-point?

A PLACE FOR ACTIVITY

This time around I found myself in a large room; its occupants amounted to about a hundred people. All of them were female. They were all seated in front of a table. There was a cutting-table, a sewing-table one for attaching buttons and an ironing-board, down to one used for packaging. She invited me to take a look at the interior she herself had designed. A garment factory.

Indeed, I had already pigeon-holed her as a first-rate interior designer. This factory didn’t feel warm or stuffy, despite the absence of an artificial evaporator. It struck me that there was no horizontal ceiling here.



The one used for this room looked as if designed to follow the declivity of the roof's shape. Its construction was made of wood with a two-storied roof. Among the layers of the roof there was an aperture for light and air extending along the long roof gais. The hot air tending to move upward felt quite comfortable. The height of the roof top (referred to as *nok*) reached more or less eight meters from the floor. Perhaps it was this relatively high room that guaranteed the circulation of air to run smoothly. She had applied paint in pastel colours to the walls and to the roof beams. The resulting effect made a refreshing, even cheerful impression. This time it was my turn to ask: Is this factory a piece of architecture?

The activities carried out here were far more numerous and varied compared with the time the two of us were in the extremely cold villa. The expression conveyed by this factory promised warmth and that was realized. Warm inside, but not oppressively hot. She was speaking softly, but I had trouble hearing her. I put my ear close to her lips. It seemed that this particular move turned the two of us into the centre of attention in the eyes of the factory workers. This was a space very different in nature from the villa's atmosphere. This space was very public whereas at the villa nobody cared about what was going on. Here, it seemed that all eyes were full of curiosity, like little nosy parkers.

Outside of the factory building, there was a large area with water pools where pieces of cloth were being washed. Dozens of women were occupied with washing and drying cloth while joking. There was no roof covering over their heads, so in order to withstand the heat of the sun, they all wore conical hats called *caping*. There was no protective wall either, only a two-meter-high fence. Now this could also be called activity space.

Was this a building? Would it qualify as a piece of architecture? The factory in question exuded a comfy atmosphere and had the capacity to accommodate public activities carried out by a relatively high number of workers. Of course it differed from the villa. On the other hand, the open area of the yard used for washing pieces of cloth was far from comfortable. The workers had to wear their head covers called *caping* if they wished to avoid the stinging glare of Helios, the sun. Which one would pass for a mere building? Which one for a piece of architecture?

A SPECIAL PLACE

This place of worship is very simple, unadorned. The enclosure of the wall measured only eight by six meters. Outside there was a veranda covered with a simple roof. There was a pulpit at the far end of the room and a wooden cross attached to the back wall of the pulpit. A cool atmosphere enveloped by sacredness.



She was kneeling in front of it. It looked like she was praying. I spotted her from a distance. Standing near the door. My eyes were wandering, rolling around. I was even more convinced that was an interior designer of the finest water, for a certain ethnic image always stuck to the elements of her furniture. Quite unique.

After she had finished praying, we resumed our discussion on the veranda of the little chapel while sitting cross-legged. She was planning to build a mosque near her lettuce garden. She asked whether I would be willing to design this mosque. Naturally, I was only too glad to welcome her offer. On the spur of the moment I made a sketch on the tablet that I always carry. She observed me attentively. Like other religious buildings, mosques must convey strong symbolic values. I was mounting my hobby-horse again, babbling away. First of all, buildings must be able to accommodate the physical need for the activities of their users. Only then can other values such as symbolic ones be integrated. She smiled. Was her smile directed at me or my twaddle?

In the course of the afternoon, she took me to a storied building. We took the elevator up to the eighteenth floor. This was her apartment. She had three bedrooms all to herself. There was also a room for her domestic servant. The odd thing was that this apartment felt kind of empty, lacking ambience, even though it was crammed with modern furniture scattered all over the place. There didn't seem to be any furniture made in this country whatsoever. Everything had been imported. Ranging from crystal lamps, kitchen utensils, and the settee down to the bed. Even the decorative flowers seemed from somewhere else, certainly not home-grown. Apart from making a luxurious impression, it also expressed a certain sterile coldness.

Possibly because it had been rarely used, this apartment lacked true spirit, it was soulless. According to her, it was only used by way of investment. She had bought it only last year when it had come on the market. Last month there had been an offer. It amounted to one and a half times the amount she had spent on it last year. A building or piece of architecture was beginning to fluctuate in value like gold or diamond or even shares. Function was not part of the process here. There was no spirit to be found there.

This change in value could only be comprehended with reference to the concept of consumerism as put forth by Karl Marx. He talked about the production process, human needs and commodities. He held the view that commodities were products created more for the market community than for individual consumption. So commodities were far more significant for their exchange value than for their beneficial value. This Marxist opinion seemed a continuation of Webber's thesis about capitalism. According to the latter, capitalism is solely aimed at the pursuit of profit.



Slowly but surely, this purpose would spawn the human desire for pleasure in life. It was this train of thought that would eventually yield consumerism. This concept could be identified as a thought pattern that gave birth to the mindless activity of purchasing products just for the sake of purchasing them. So the reason for buying that item is not the particular need for it but simply triggered by the desire to quench the secular thirst for material things in living one's life. Sooner or later, this "want" is bound to turn into a "need" (or must-have) without people realizing it.

In the course of consumerism, the city and urban architecture that form its centre of social activity are positioned as a place to satisfy craving by way of wish fulfillment. As a result consumerism began to gradually permeate and slowly give shape to everyday life. The Latin expression *Cogito Ergo Sum* (I Think, so I Exist) by Descartes began to change into "I Shop, so I Exist". Seemingly, a legitimate stage was being created as a meeting place for buyers and vendors alike. The significance of the real marketplace was becoming subject to erosion. The stage seemed to be taking on any shape, in one particular instance as an apartment with an excessively luxurious architectural style. This kind of apartment began to mushroom in big cities at that time.

She told me about how she would invite several close friends to this place. Her pals had commented that this apartment was a work of architecture whose esthetic value was very high. She glanced at me as if inviting my opinion on the matter. I did not give her an immediate answer.

I only said that I preferred the two of us sitting at her villa dominated by the element of wood, without artificial air, without imported items. The fireplace only wrapped in refractory bricks, the floor made of warm teak panels. A cool river stone floor on the terrace. As for me, it touched me more profoundly. I told her I missed that specific atmosphere. That kind of architecture. Needless to add, I was also craving for every moment we had been spending in each other's company. Just the two of us. She showed no response. Perhaps she disagreed, or else she felt offended, but then again she might agree with me. I didn't know and didn't want to. Then I muttered to myself, "Could this also be a form of architecture?". She got up languorously, approached me, and finally embraced me so tightly that it seemed she would never let go.