

Modernism and the experimental architecture timeline in Bali

I Nyoman Gede Maha Putra 

Architecture Department, Faculty of Engineering and Planning, Universitas Warmadewa,
Jl. Terompong 24, Denpasar, Indonesia



ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> Received August 14, 2024 Received in revised form Dec. 15, 2024 Accepted May 23, 2025 Available online August 01, 2025</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Architectural transformation Balinese architecture Colonialism Modernism Nation building</p> <p>Corresponding author: I Nyoman Gede Maha Putra Architecture Department, Faculty of Engineering and Planning, Universitas Warmadewa, Indonesia Email: gedemahaputra@warmadewa.ac.id ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9515-7120</p>	<p><i>In Bali, architecture was regarded as undergoing minimal alteration. However, this article argues that architecture in Bali has never been a neutral carrier of culture. Instead, it is a place where colonial legacies, postcolonial nation-building, and global tourists all meet. The goal of this study is to track the emergence and development of contemporary architecture in Bali to understand the elements that impact its change. Historical approaches were applied to discover knowledge from the past by combining data from numerous sources. Archival study, building surveys, and stakeholder consultations are part of the research. The material was discussed using synchronic and diachronic analysis to produce a more in-depth study. Findings reveal that different governments' political and economic growth tactics contributed significantly to the alteration of Bali's architecture. The colony's exposure to the international world in the beginning of the twentieth century influenced investment in Bali. On one hand, the economic boom encouraged modern architecture. On the other, new construction typologies, not always rooted in tradition, raised awareness that this sector needs regulation. This research demonstrated that architecture in Bali has undergone significant developments, particularly due to adaptation to new socio-cultural and economic transformations.</i></p>

Introduction

Publications on Balinese architecture often argue that the built environment on this resort island is in a state of stability, a state where traditional roots are preserved and undergo very little change. Mainstream literature portrays Balinese architecture as an exotic cultural product of a society with high local value, enduring for centuries and therefore worthy of continued preservation (Gelebet 1985; Helmi and Walker 2003). This view has its root in colonial era where the government tried to create a living museum. However, architecture does not operate in isolation. There are always external influences and local responses that can drive transformation. Global phenomenon of modernization that was

carried through colonial networks, may have influenced the spread of new architectural ideologies throughout the world (King 2004). This modernism then underwent appropriation and adaptation as it entered the colonies. It even persisted long after colonialism ended. This article challenges on sided view that construct Bali as a place where architecture is in a state of stability. To do so, various factors that influenced architectural forms across eras with varying socio-political conditions and economic contexts were examined.

Architectural historians have long recognized that historical writing is always selective and interpretive (Abramson et al. 2021; Lu 2011; 2022). In the history of architecture, this subjectivity often shapes the architectural identity of a region from the perspective of a dominant

group (Alexander and Osman 2021; Chopra 2021). Consequently, dominant accounts of architectural history are often told in a one-way fashion, with the "West" positioned at the center and the "non-West" at the periphery; the colonizer as the producer, and the colonized as the consumer (Lu 2022; 2023).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, postcolonial scholars such as Said and Spivak challenged Western epistemic dominance (Said 1979; Spivak 1988). Homi K. Bhabha, meanwhile, argues that the long-standing cultural exchange that preceded colonialism has become reciprocal (Bhabha 1994). Modernity, in this view, touches all places, each expressing its own symbolic or pragmatic emphases (Lin 2025). Recent research on architecture within a postcolonial framework has been extensively conducted to counteract Western epistemic dominance (Abidin Kusno 2014; Lin 2025; Osayimwese 2024).

The discussion of postcoloniality in Indonesian architecture started in the 1950s when architecture schools started talking about national identity. In the 1980s, it grew through talks and workshops about what Indonesian architecture is (Kusno et al. 2017). Modernization and industrialization, however, shown resilience, infiltrating the discourse through materials such as concrete unfamiliar to tradition yet extensively utilized for monumental architecture in the context of nation-building and decolonization (Hanum et al. 2020).

During the colonial period, when Bali was opened to international visitors, studies of Balinese architecture began. W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp sketched Balinese buildings that were published and circulated in Europe. P.A.J. Moojen wrote "Kunst op Bali," considered a comprehensive book on Balinese architecture, in 1926. His study later influenced the design of the Dutch East Indies Pavilion in Paris in 1931. Artist and anthropologist Miguel Covarrubias included his observations of village and house patterns in a chapter of his famous book, "The Island of Bali." Urs Ramseyer also included his study of the monumental structures of the meru and wantilan in his book on Balinese culture. These early writings constructed an architectural identity in Bali from a Western perspective. Place identity was often used as a branding and marketing tool (Bernardo et al. 2023; Eshuis and Ripoll González 2024). While successful in shaping architectural identity, these writings did not depict the whole truth.

This study seeks to compile a historical account of Balinese architecture by analyzing the underlying factors that shape visible architectural forms. The research focuses on colonial and postcolonial studies, as well as nation-building and economic approaches.

Methods

Architecture is essential in history. Each community creates a customized constructed environment. Studying architectural history means comprehending communal events. This research examines Bali's architectural growth and controversies using archived research, building observations and surveys, and interviews. Historical insights are added to thematically grouped, descriptive data.

To analyze architectural transformation in Bali, synchronic and diachronic approaches are used. The synchronic approach lets us see a historical moment from the same period more broadly. However, this technique may miss historical patterns and changes. Thus, the diachronic approach emphasizes historical changes across cultures and countries.

Results and discussion

Some critics have argued that nostalgia for colonial architecture and nation-building has dominated the discourse on architectural history in Southeast Asia (Chang and Tajudeen 2019; Herbelin 2019). In Bali, historical writing is used as an attempt to explore original forms that are considered to shape the character of the built environment of traditional societies. Both approaches have the potential to marginalize historical facts about architectural transformations that are filled with discourse. The following section presents the facts of architectural transformation in Bali, which are filled with various debates in different eras.

Hybridization in the Colonies: Governance, commerce, and architecture

Trade played a significant role in the architectural forms of the colonies, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this period, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) went bankrupt, and its role was replaced by the

government. To rebuild the economy, they invited global investors to invest their capital. This led to an investment boom in port cities, influencing their physical appearance. Along with economic growth, European-educated architects arrived in the colonies, helping investors build offices, warehouses, and even houses for white settlers.



Figure 1. Chinese plates were applied as parts of ornament in a temple complex

Trade and the growth of architecture in large cities also influenced smaller regions, where materials and building methods were copied. In Bali, materials such as Chinese porcelain, Dutch roof ornaments, and even some carvings were adopted by local communities. This created a hybrid architecture with a traditional architectural backbone. These hybrid architectural forms were largely adopted in the palaces of local rulers who had trade relations with the outside world. Change in governance and ne international trade, thus, became the factors that caused architectural transformation.

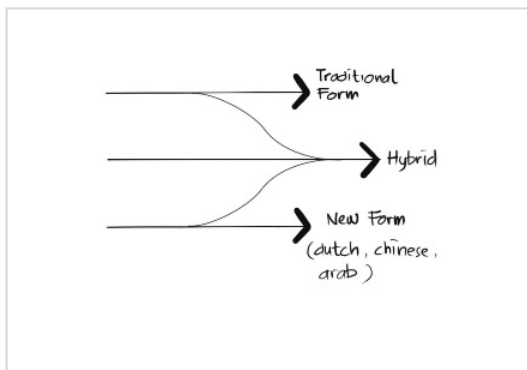


Figure 2. Local building traditions, non-local building materials and techniques, and their hybridization characterized architecture in the 19th century Bali

Annexation of Bali under Colonial rule

The colonial government's ambition to expand its territory led them to control the northern region, then the southern region, and finally all of Bali by 1908. After taking control of Bali, they introduced new spatial plans and architecture that symbolically demonstrated their power and disrupted traditional spatial patterns. Non-traditional buildings emerged, often marginalizing pre-existing traditional structures. These new buildings introduced a new spatial logic that separated Europeans from the local population

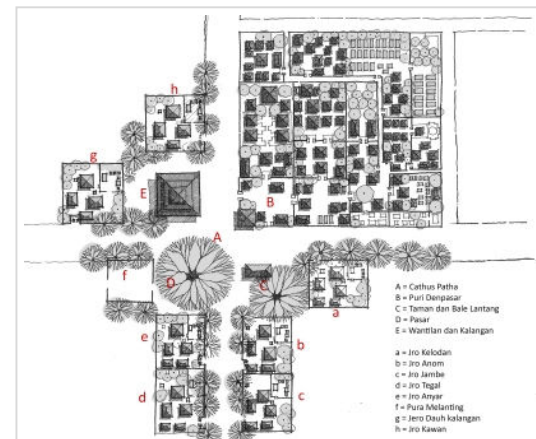


Figure 3. The situation around Denpasar Palace before the colonization



Figure 4. Colonial government built several offices in modern architecture style

Source: [Archive Kecunduk Institute, no 1857](#)

In Denpasar, the old royal palace complex was demolished to make way for colonial offices and residential areas for its employees. Other office buildings, including private ones, were also constructed around an open square. This

represented a completely new urban landscape. As tourism began to grow, a hotel was also built around 1928. While the downtown area was inhabited by white residents, the market, the epicenter of activity for local residents, including Chinese and Arab traders, was relocated to a new location, leading to racial segregation. Consequently, the urban fabric fragmented.

Differences in character also emerged in the forms of buildings. Buildings inhabited by the Caucasian ethnic group are relatively larger, with completely sealed walls to protect the occupants from tropical weather and insects. The walls are finished with plaster and painted white. Ventilation holes are provided to circulate air to cool the room. The walls support a pyramid-shaped roof structure covered with clay tiles. These buildings contrast with those of the community, which use natural materials with a pillar-like structure supporting the roof. The walls serve only as room dividers. This condition demonstrates the coexistence of modern and traditional architecture, but are strictly separated.

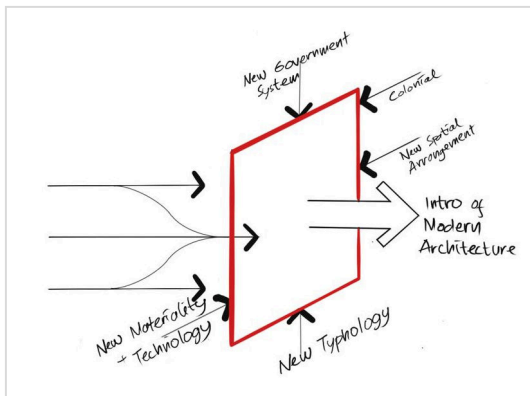


Figure 5. The introduction of modern architecture in the colonial era

The reconstruction of Balinese images

The colonial government's control of Bali made the island considered safe to visit. As a result, Bali became a popular destination for travelers from various backgrounds. The traditional atmosphere and lifestyle, especially compared to Java and Sumatra, which had been significantly altered by colonialism, inspired admiration and a desire to preserve the culture, including its architecture. This led to the formation of exotic images of Bali, which made it seem like an "other world." This, of course, contradicted the government's efforts to introduce modern architecture and spatial planning to Bali.

Bali's popularity also led to the looting and sale of many of the island's artifacts to the global market. This threatened the existence of the romantic image of Bali. The 1917 earthquake, which caused loss of life and the collapse of many traditional buildings, further exacerbated the situation. Bali could be completely transformed, especially since local residents lacked the funds to undertake restoration.

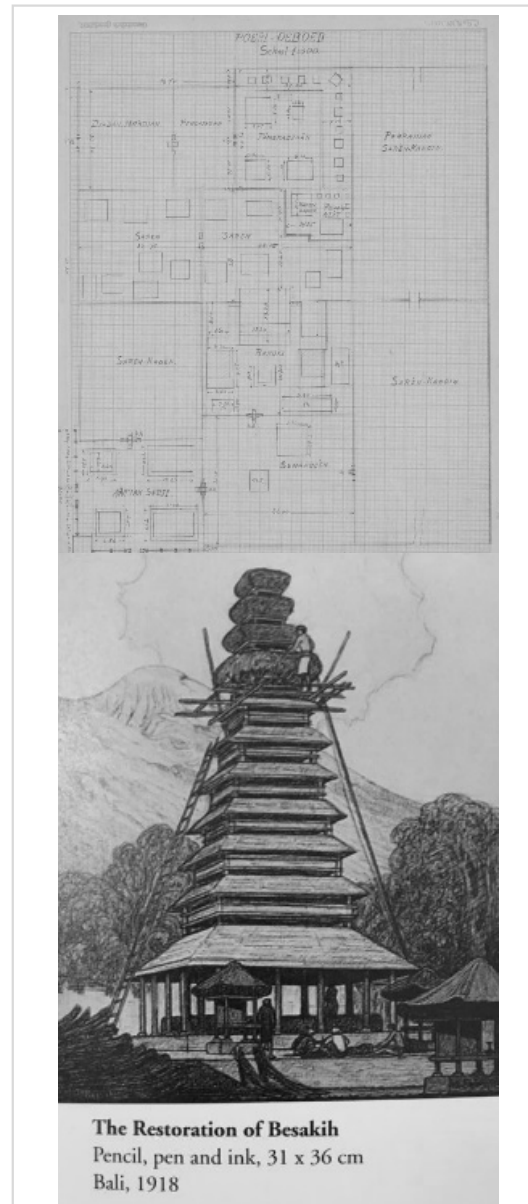


Figure 6. Restoration Plan and action in P.A.J. Moojen's conservation project
Source: [Archief Pieter Adriaan Jacobus Moojen Leiden: Universiteit Leiden and W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp, Bali en Lombok](#)

The colonial government then planned an intervention aimed at saving the image of Bali's built environment. Governor-General van Limburg Stirum approved the proposal to commission P.A.J. Moojen, considered to understand local architecture, surveyed the damage and prepared a funding proposal for repairs to Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. This demonstrated the colonial government's interest in making Bali a living museum.

Many travelers, particularly artists and anthropologists, ultimately pushed for Balinese cultural preservation efforts. In 1931, an ethnographic museum with local architectural styles was established in Denpasar. That same year, during the Dutch East Indies government's participation in the International Colonial Expo, Balinese culture, especially its architecture, was also displayed in Paris. Both were manifestations of the government's agenda. This agenda was further expanded after 1931 when the government introduced the "Baliseering" policy. This was a government call for local communities to return to traditional lifestyles. Tradition here was curated to suit the government's desires. It became a preservation strategy that was selected and shaped by politics rather than heritage.

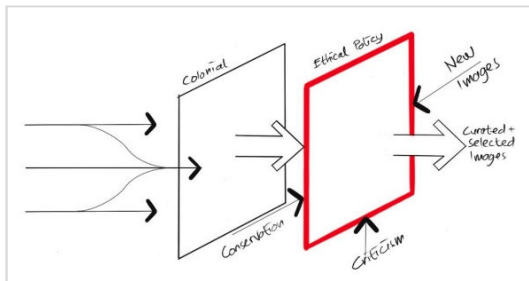


Figure 7. The colonial government construct the identity of Bali by curating and selecting images based on their favour

Baliseering and the seed of tourism

The Baliseering policy, initiated by the colonial government, was an attempt to preserve Balinese culture while simultaneously promoting it as an exotic destination for commercial purposes. One key figure behind this policy was H te Flierhaar, a school principal in Klungkung. However, young Balinese, particularly those who had been educated in Java since the 1920s, opposed this policy. Influenced by nationalist ideas, they rejected the government's attempt to stifle tradition (Krisnadi 2023; Pageh et al. 2021). This policy began to be seen as a political effort to

maintain apolitical Balineseness while simultaneously exploiting its economic potential through tourism.



Figure 8. Traditional form that house modern function of Walter Spies' house

Source: [John Stowell](#), Walter Spies: A Life in Art

In contrast, through his independent efforts in Ubud, Walter Spies saw Ubud as a "different world" and sought to preserve it to satisfy his need for a "refuge" from Western cities. His house, built in traditional Balinese style, became a focal point for Westerners visiting Bali, especially after the 1931 Paris Expo. Consequently, KPM, the colonial government's shipping company, commissioned him to build accommodations in the same style in several locations, although not many were built. This demonstrated the potential of architectural images curated for tourists.



Figure 9. The Dutch East Indies pavilion at the International Colonial Expo in Paris, 1931

Source: [Archief Pieter Adriaan Jacobus Moojen Leiden](#): [Universiteit Leiden](#)

A similar image also underpinned the development of an early resort in Kuta, South Bali, built by surfers Robert and Louise Koke around 1936. Inspired by Walter Spies' house, they wrote in their book, "Our Hotel in Bali," that the desire to live like a local, rather than staying in a sterile, government-style hotel, was a dream for many tourists. Consequently, their hotel was a

huge success, sparking the birth of the Balinese style of architecture in the 1970s.

The government's politically motivated efforts to curate Balinese architectural styles, while also offering potential in the form of economic tourism.

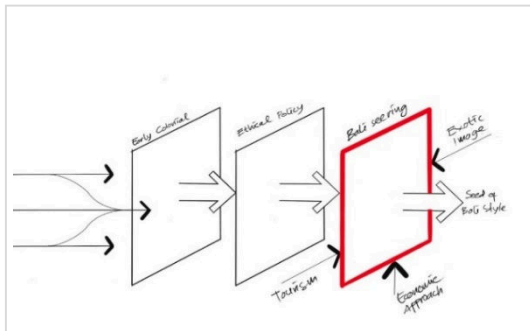


Figure 10. The success of image construction of Bali created new economic potential in the form of tourism

Nation building and the formal introduction of modernism

The outbreak of World War II in 1938 and its subsequent eight-year duration ended government control over architecture and marked a shift in its political role. After Indonesian independence, Sukarno saw architecture as a potential unifying tool for Indonesia's heterogeneous population and for projecting national progress. Modern architecture, with its universal appeal, utilizing industrial construction techniques and materials, symbolized a break with colonial tradition and a step toward a modern future.



Figure 11. The international style of the Bali Beach Hotel in Sanur built around 1963-1966

The absence of formal government buildings in Bali due to the implementation of the Baliseering policy in the previous decade prompted Sukarno to commission Bandung-based architect R.M. Soedarsono to design a palace in Tampaksiring near Gianyar. The palace was constructed with a modern approach but also combined traditional ornamentation from local undagi (traditional Balinese masterbuilders). This reflected the search for a modern identity without abandoning tradition.

A larger architectural diplomacy was achieved through the construction of a gigantic hotel in Sanur, funded by Japanese war reparations. Built in the International Style, the hotel represented Indonesia's gateway to global modernity. The monumental relief on the lobby wall represents independence and development, an effort to welcome progress.

Modernist ideas soon became popular, especially in large cities like Klungkung and Denpasar, two cities devastated during the anti-colonial war. Communities demolished traditional buildings to make way for more modern architecture. Australian artist Donald Friend wrote in his biography that a shop in Klungkung became an agent for traditional buildings sold by their owners.

Architecture during the early independence period, then, was not merely an effort to fulfill basic needs but a statement of optimism. It also manifested the aspirations of the Indonesian people for a united and modern nation.

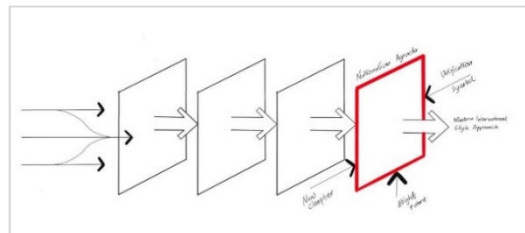


Figure 12. The introduction of modern architecture to Bali through government's intervention

Central government and regional development: Bali under the new order government

The transition of government brought about a shift in policy strategies that reshaped Bali's physical development, including architecture. Sukarno's successor, the second president, Suharto, focused on economic growth, contrasting his previous focus on community integration and the development of a shared

vision. In collaboration with the World Bank, the government commissioned the international consultant SCETO to develop the Bali Tourism Masterplan, which positioned culture as the foundation of tourism development. This echoed the Baliseering strategy of the colonial government some four decades earlier. However, the minimal involvement of local actors in its development raised concerns that tourism development would only benefit the elite.

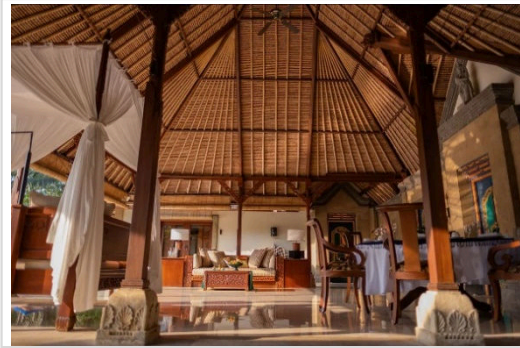


Figure 12. Vernacular architecture style inspires hotel building design known as Bali style

Concurrent with government efforts, several expatriates also expressed interest in developing tourism. In line with the consultant's approach, they also leveraged the curated image of Bali, established in the 1930s as a starting point. Wija Waworuntu and his Australian artist partner, Donald Friend, assisted by professional architects Peter Muller, Geoffrey Bawa, and later Kerry Hill, experimented with creating vernacular architecture that could serve the modern needs. This resulted in modern tourism accommodations, architecturally rooted in traditional aesthetics. In many publications, this style is referred to as the Balinese Style. This hybrid form mediates modern needs and traditional forms, setting a new standard for tourism buildings.

These efforts naturally involved many local craftsmen and artisans. Unfortunately, the role of these local people is rarely mentioned, despite their crucial role in the transition to modern architecture in Bali.

Bali's growing economic growth attracted national companies, including state-owned enterprises (BUMN), to establish businesses and representative offices in Bali. Many of these companies brought architects from Jakarta and Bandung, two cities known as centers of modern architectural education, introducing monumental

office buildings that contrasted with the scale of the surrounding vernacular buildings. These large buildings facilitated the adoption of concrete, steel, and glass, as well as modern construction techniques, demonstrating the penetration of modern architecture in Bali.



Figure 13. Modern and monumental design of a government body in Denpasar built in the 1970s

Examples of these modern buildings include the Bali Handara Resort in Tabanan, the Bank Indonesia Head Office (now the OJK Office), the State Finance Building (GKN), Bank Mandiri, and the PLN office, all in Denpasar. Despite their monumental scale and highly modern structures, they still strive to align with Balinese character by adding traditional ornamentation to their facades and lobbies, creating a distinct visual language.

Until the end of the 20th century, Bali's built environment evolved around these two hybrid styles. First, the Balinese Style, a style driven by the romanticization of the vernacular, is often cited as an attempt to modernize Balinese architecture. Second, are giant concrete buildings imbued with traditional ornamentation, a style often referred to as "Balinese" modern architecture. Together, these two approaches characterize Bali's built environment, differing methodologically but demonstrating a similar effort to maintain identity.

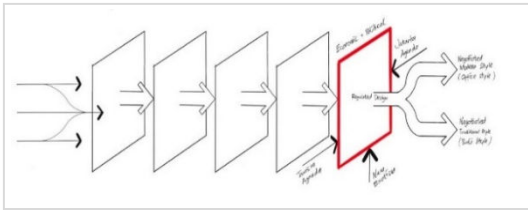


Figure 14. The architectural identity of Bali forms two distinct directions that are the hospitality designs and government building designs

Conclusions

This article analyzes the development of architecture in Bali throughout the 20th century. The analysis reveals that the image of Balinese architectural stability associated with vernacular traditions is a colonial construct established in the 1930s for political and economic purposes. This image was repurposed in the 1970s when the government sought to promote tourism as a means of local economic development.

However, the analysis shows that architectural transformation in Bali was far from stable. Resistance to efforts to stifle Balinese culture has been present since the government's inception. Community groups desired a Bali free from colonial shackles and a path to progress. Unfortunately, these efforts were drowned out by the euphoria of the colonial government's propaganda about the "successful preservation of Balinese culture," demonstrated at the 1931 International Colonial Expo in Paris.

The postcolonial government apparently continued the efforts of Balinese youth groups to pursue progress. Furthermore, as the first president, Sukarno needed a tool that could unite the diverse ideas that shaped their new nation and simultaneously demonstrate the direction of progressive national development. Colonial legacies were abandoned, and architectural works that typified global progress were introduced not only to the local community but also to the world. The modern International Style architecture built in Sanur also served as a tool of cultural diplomacy.

Tourism development under Suharto's administration appeared to reverse the situation. This likely occurred because the assigned international consultants were entirely foreign nationals, allowing them to view Bali through their own lens. A similar trend developed among expatriates, who still held a romantic image of

Bali. Nevertheless, modernism continued with the presence of branch offices of companies and national government agencies in Bali.

This article demonstrates that historical writing has always been curated. This has been the case in Bali since the colonial era. During the development of tourism, this curation continued as an effort to maintain the region's appeal. Understanding history by analyzing more data can reveal new insights and deepen understanding. This also presents a weakness in historical studies, where access to sources is often limited. Further research needs to include more data by expanding access to it.

References

- Abidin Kusno. (2014). *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Routledge.
- Abramson, D. M., Alexander, Z. Ç., & Osman, M. (2021). Introduction: Evidence, Narrative, and Writing Architectural History. In *Writing Architectural History* (pp. 3–16). University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2269htv.4>
- Alexander, Z. Ç., & Osman, M. (2021). The Banister Fletchers' Tabulations. In *Writing Architectural History* (pp. 117–132). University of Pittsburgh Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2269htv.12>
- Bernardo, F., Loupa-Ramos, I., & Coelho, R. (2023). How to Capture Place Identity Contents? A Tool for Planning Interventions. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 15(21). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152115535>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Chang, J.-H., & Tajudeen, I. bin. (2019). *Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture, Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power*. NUS Press.
- Chopra, P. (2021). Sir Banister Fletcher's Global History of Architecture, 21st edition. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 80(4), 485–486. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2021.80.4.485>
- Eshuis, J., & Ripoll González, L. (2024). Conceptualising place branding in three approaches: towards a new definition of place brands as embodied experiences. *Journal of*

- Place Management and Development*.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-11-2023-0109>
- Gelebet, I. N. (1985). *Arsitektur Tradisional Daerah Bali*. Dinas Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan.
- Hanum, N. N., Lukito, Y. N., & Kurniawan, K. R. (2020). Concrete: Politics in the Development of Modern Architecture in Indonesia. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 452(1), 012009. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/452/1/012009>
- Helmi, R., & Walker, B. (2003). *Bali Style*. Vendome Press.
- Herbelin, C. (2019). Jiat-Hwee Chang and Imran bin Tajudeen, Southeast Asia's Modern Architecture, Questions of Translation, Epistemology and Power. *ABE Journal*, 14–15. <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.6336>
- King, A. D. (2004). *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity*. Routledge.
- Krisnadi, L. A. (2023). Baliseering as Reductionism Project: Vandana Shiva's Ecofeminist Approach. *Digital Press Social Sciences and Humanities*, 09, 00010. <https://doi.org/10.29037/digitalpress.409442>
- Kusno, A., van Bergeijk, H., & Hein, C. (2017). *Gunawan Tjahjono & Josef Prijotomo Postcolonial Traditionality (Inaugural Speeches in the Built Environment: Global and Contextualised; No. 2)* (Vol. 2). TU Delft OPEN Publishing.
- Lin, F. C. H. (2025). Theorising the postcoloniality of contemporary architecture: a perspective from urban maritime Asia. *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, 24(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13467581.2023.2287201>
- Lu, D. (2011). Introduction: Architecture, Modernity and Identity in The Third World. In Duanfang Lu (Ed.), *Third World Modernism Architecture, Development and Identity* (1st ed., pp. 1–28). Routledge.
- Lu, D. (2022, July 5). *A Conceptual Framework for Architectural Historiography*. <https://doi.org/10.55939/a4005p6e3c>
- Lu, D. (2023). Architecture in the Age of Playfulness. In *the Routledge Companion to Contemporary Architectural History* (pp. 1–80). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315674469-1>
- Osayimwese, I. (2024). From Postcolonial to Decolonial Architectural History. In *Architectures of Colonialism* (pp. 17–42). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783035626704-002>
- Pageh, I., Arta, K., & Pardi, I. (2021). Transformation of baliseering into ajeg bali: Comodification of bali in exotic tourism industry. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Law, Social Sciences and Education, ICLSSE 2020, 10 November, Singaraja, Bali, Indonesia*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.10-11-2020.2303399>
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage.
- Spivak, G. P. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 24–28). MacMillan.

This page is intentionally left blank