



A Peculiar Incident: Tracing Balinese Architectural Knowledge Through Rewatching “Petualangan Sherina” Upon Mount Agung’s Eruption

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Abstract—The 2017 eruption of Mount Agung caused significant alarm among both tourism stakeholders and the central government simultaneously. This was not only due to the sudden eruption after fifty years of dormancy, but also because of a deeper issue reflecting the inherently selfish tendencies of humans. A mountain - literally part of the natural world - was instead perceived as an obstacle to tourism revenue, since visitors could no longer travel to Bali. It was an ironic situation, as if tourism property were more important than the natural event itself, despite the fact that, according to local belief, the eruption was timely and necessary, serving as a natural balance within which all living beings exist. During this period, the author experienced the unusual circumstance of rewatching the film *Petualangan Sherina* (Sherina’s Adventure) on a flight to Bali, after being stranded outside the island for several days due to the eruption and the closure of Ngurah Rai Airport. This peculiar incident raised numerous questions and prompted the author to explore Balinese architectural knowledge through various writings, as well as art and architectural exhibitions held in 2017. From there new perspectives are gained which answer the questions simultaneously.

Keywords: Film; Mount Agung; balinese; architectural knowledge; architectural phenomenology.

Indonesia. It offers a range of lessons on friendship

1. Introduction

This paper originates from the writer’s own experience on the impact of Bali’s Mount Agung’s eruption at the end of 2017 and watching the Indonesian film *Petualangan Sherina* (Riza, 2000), first released in 2000. It so happened that the author rewatched the film on a flight to Bali after being stranded outside the island for several days due to the eruption of Mount Agung and the temporary closure of Ngurah Rai Airport. What is the connection between these events? What is certain is that they prompted numerous questions regarding the position of architectural knowledge, particularly in Bali.

Petualangan Sherina is a film that tells of the property development expansions happening in

and perseverance, accompanied by memorable and educational musical numbers. For those familiar with the narrative of this musical drama, the film essentially follows Sherina’s adventures during her school holiday with her “nemesis” Sadam, the son of the owner of a plantation, Mr. Ardiwilaga, where Sherina’s father works in Bandung.

The pivotal scene that anchors and propels the film’s storyline occurs when a young, elegant woman named Natasya visits the Ardiwilaga plantation to meet Mr. and Mrs. Ardiwilaga. Her purpose is to once again propose purchasing the plantation, which has been yielding increasingly less profit over time. Her

offer is also framed as an attempt to prevent the land from being sold to a malicious conglomerate. Specifically, a property developer named Kertarajasa, who has been acquiring surrounding lands for an upcoming and highly modern real estate project

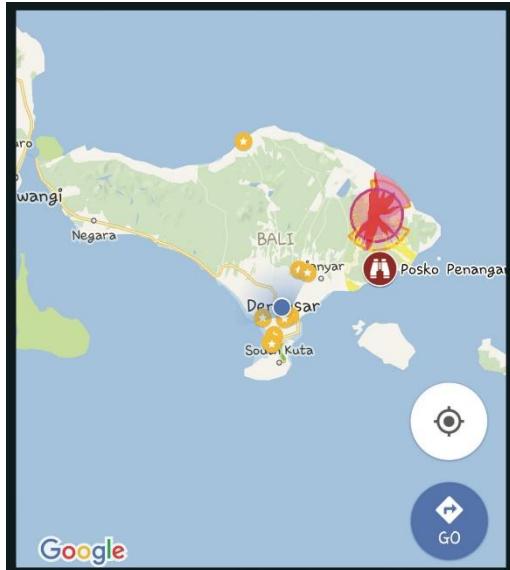


Figure 1. Google Maps of The Mount Agung Eruption area in 2017



Figure 2. Mount Agung Eruption in 2017
Source: Kompas 2017



Figure 3. Scene of the dialogue among

Mr. Ardiwilaga, Mrs. Ardiwilaga, and Natasya regarding the sale of the plantation



Figure 4. Scene of the dialogue among Mr. Ardiwilaga, Mrs. Ardiwilaga, and Natasya regarding the sale of the plantation

Their conversation unfolds as follows:

Mrs. Ardiwilaga (Mrs. A): Oh, *Sus* Natasya, why so early?

Natasya (N): I'm heading to Jakarta, Ma'am. When I happened to pass by, I suddenly thought to stop in.

Mrs. A: (laughing) Come in first, come in. (She puts her arm around Natasya as they walk together.)

(On the background: the sign "Ardiwilaga Farm" appears)

N: Before I return to Jakarta, I wanted to make one more offer... in case you might consider selling this plantation to me.

Mrs. A: Oh dear, *Sus* Natasya, if we sold this plantation, how would we make a living?

N: Your savings will not be sufficient from the sale alone. You yourself told me that the plantation has been experiencing many problems. Allow me to take care of it. The costs of restoring it are not insignificant.

Mrs. A: *Sus* Natasya, this land has been in my husband's family for generations. Whatever the challenges, he will face them on his own. Besides, the people around here depend heavily on this plantation. (Calling to her husband) Papi! We have a guest! (calling her staff)

Mr. Ardiwilaga (Mr. A): Oh, good morning, *Sus*

Natasya!

N: Good morning, Mr. Ardiwilaga. It looks like you're heading out?

Mr. A: Oh, no. I'm expecting a guest an agronomist, an IPB graduate, who spent a year in Japan, now helping me with the plantation. (He gestures his hands toward the fields.)

N: Oh, I see. (She appears offended)

Mr. A: Yes, as I've mentioned to you, I intend to continue improving the quality of this plantation.

N: (clearly annoyed) Uh-hmm.

Mrs. A: Papi! *Sus* Natasya means well. She thinks we might sell the plantation to the conglomerate Kertarajasa for his *Pasundan Valley* project. She believes that if the land must be sold, it would be better going to her hands than falling into the hands of someone who would destroy it.

N: I simply want to fulfill my grandfather's dream of returning here to manage a plantation.

After this exchange, Sherina and her family arrive at the Ardiwilaga plantation and are greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Ardiwilaga. Amid the welcome, with her characteristic detective-like intuition, Sherina grows suspicious of the young woman in sunglasses walking back towards her car. Sherina's suspicion proves justified: Natasya is revealed to be the lover of the very conglomerate orchestrating the land purchase. The film later discloses this relationship when the Ardiwilagas reluctantly agree to sell their plantation in order to obtain money to ransom their kidnapped son, which is an abduction carried out by a group working under the same conglomerate. Yet thanks to Sherina's persistence, she tracks down Sadam and rescues him. She arrives at the Ardiwilaga villa with evidence linking the kidnappers to Kertarajasa, including a photograph of Natasya, which the kidnappers keep at their bedside as reading material to ensure “pleasant dreams.” The criminal scheme ultimately unravels when Kertarajasa is arrested in the midst of a press conference launching *Pasundan Valley*.

Thus, *Petualangan Sherina* is, in fact, a pointed warning against the increasingly aggressive surge of property development during the period. The film is far from a simple Indonesian musical drama; although its songs do not explicitly communicate the consequences of rapid development, the narrative appears crafted to alert Indonesians of property development transformations unfolding around them.

Simultaneously, the author witnessed an analogous phenomenon directly in front of a family

home in Bumi Serpong Damai, or BSD City. When the house was purchased in 1996, there is a faint memory of a wall bordering the original village across from it. By 2001, that wall had inched forward, expanded sideways, and continued to encroach over time. Still in elementary school then, the author questioned the meaning of such development. Was this what *Petualangan Sherina* had been referring to? Was the same process occurring elsewhere as well?

Arising from these questions, this paper serves as a map of the author's reflections as someone who does not come from a background in architectural knowledge. With this *Petualangan Sherina* rewatches experience in hand upon Mount Agung's eruption in 2017, the author meets a peculiar incident. Hence, perspectives on the symbolic and geographical position of Mount Agung within the island of Bali will be discussed further. Following the traces are several exhibitions and writings from 2017 that have assisted the author in both understanding and interrogating the current state of architectural knowledge in Bali.

This paper aims to add further analytics on reading visual art and architecture practice as knowledge production, with film and exhibitions as primary resources. Written in a reflective-critical essay, it will touch upon various matters, naming from the spiritual perspectives, to the virtual medium roles in transmitting denials upon natural disasters.

2. Methods

The method used to trace Balinese architectural knowledge here is having to question Mount Agung's position: *a manifestation of divinity or a manifestation of tourism?* When Mount Agung, one of Bali's most prominent active volcanoes and the island's highest peak, erupted in November 2017, the government attempted to downgrade, even forcibly, the volcano's *Awas* (highest alert) status before it actually erupted.

For Balinese Hindus, Mount Agung is regarded as a manifestation of God. The greatest natural force on the island resides in this mountain, and Bali's most important temple, Pura Besakih, is situated at its foot. As a Balinese person, the author found the 2017 eruption both fascinating and distressing. These mixed emotions arose from observing how the alert status and subsequent eruption affected local communities who were forced to evacuate, whose livelihoods depend heavily on tourism, and how the situation simultaneously unsettled the central government - producing a complicated entanglement of concerns.

This phenomenon raises profound questions about the position of human beings in Bali amidst ecological change. Under existing governmental and

economic systems, the primary question seems to have become: *should we safeguard, or should we sacrifice?* A deeply immoral inquiry, yet one that is undeniably unfolding.

What the public wishes to discuss is how to ensure safety, minimise casualties, and prepare for an unpredictable natural disaster. Yet what the Balinese regional government and the Indonesian central government emphasise instead is how to maintain the seamless operation of Bali’s tourism industry, prevent travel warnings, justify lowering the volcano’s alert status, ensure the continuity of upcoming international conferences, maintain ongoing development projects for the sake of economic flows, and use these narratives as political capital for the 2018 gubernatorial election and those to come.

This is comprehended by the social media hashtag *#BaliIsSafe - how can one claim safety when nature remains in constant upheaval? Why so much investment placed in such narratives? Is it for the sake of property development tied to tourism and its expanding interests?*

With these trains of thoughts, reflexive reading using visual-textual analysis upon the *Petualangan Sherina* film, related art and architecture exhibition catalogues in the period of study year 2017-2018 that were prominent responses to the eruption are vital. Prior to close reading and thematic coding of motifs through these materials - namely *mountain, ancestral, commodification* - a particular essay written in 2015 also enhanced the perspective. In “Bali: We Now Devote Ourselves to the God of (US) Dollar,” published in *Ruang Arsitektur* (Sastrawan, 2016), it was argued that the Balinese people and their government have been holding different perspectives on *how to live and understand Bali itself*. That essay discussed how expanding tourism has transformed productive lands such as rice fields, coastlines, and green areas, all of which constitute *vital* for human life are converted to *constructed spaces for tourism* through *architecture*. It posed the question: *What sacrifices are required to continuously reshape Bali, an island that functions as a crucial economic resource for Indonesia?*

From the author’s observation, Mount Agung is not an inanimate entity. No volcano on Earth is truly dead; it may rest for long periods, yet it remains alive, capable of renewed eruptions that also regenerate its surroundings. This raises another question: *Do government authorities, who arguably position themselves as though they hold divine prerogative, believe they can halt the life cycle of Mount Agung at the very moment when this natural force (the divine force the author believes in) enters a critical phase of rebirth?* - It is as if stopping a mother from giving birth to her child. In the next section we dive deeper on finding the answers to these questions through a visual-textual analysis on art and architecture

exhibition catalogs from 2017-2018 including artists’ and curators’ statements, press coverage, along with a Balinese architecture book and writer’s field notes.

3. Results and Discussion

With these trains of thoughts, one cannot help to wonder about the position of Balinese architectural knowledge in such a peculiar incident of rewatching *Petualangan Sherina* upon Mount Agung’s eruption in 2017. Such question: *Is Balinese architectural knowledge focused on property development, moral, or spiritual?* Here we will dive into various art and architecture exhibition catalogs from 2017-2018 including artists’ and curators’ statements, press coverage, along with a Balinese architecture book and writer’s field notes.

Property Imaginaries Perspectives

At the end of 2017, an exhibition entitled “*I Are House: A Living Space for Bali’s Millennials*” was held at Uma Seminyak, Kuta, Bali (IYA, 2017). *Satu Are*, the Balinese term for 100 square meters, is a common unit of measurement used when seeking land for building. Indonesian Young Architects (IYA), who held the exhibition, adopted this as the theme of their first exhibition in Bali.

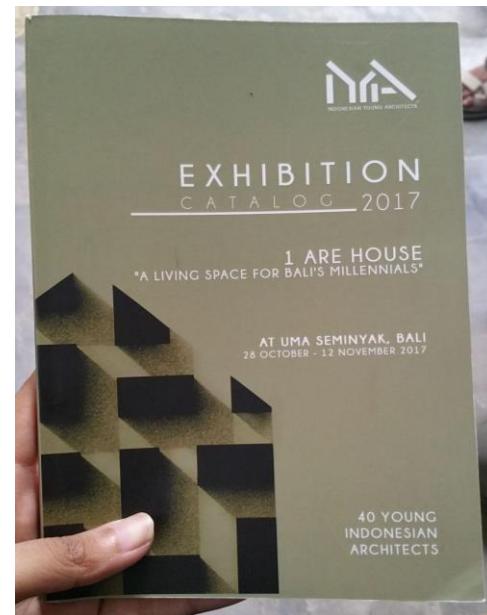


Figure 4. Catalogue of “1 Are House: A Living Space for Bali’s Millennials”

Source: Savitri, 2025

The public is frequently confronted with property developers constructing 1-are houses in Bali, often without thoughtful or adequate design. Drawing on research suggesting that “millennials are increasingly threatened by rising property prices and are at risk of not owning a home within the next five years,” IYA organised this exhibition “in the hope of educating the public on how small plots of land can still offer

opportunities for creating comfortable living spaces for a variety of uses and needs” (IYA, 2017).



Figure 5. Catalogue of “1 Are House: A Living Space for Bali’s Millennials”

Source: Author’s Documentation
 Source: Savitri, 2025

IYA believes that “good planning, creative design, and an understanding of users’ behavior and lifestyle” can transform the 1-are house into “a new, highly viable dwelling model for Bali’s millennial generation” (IYA, 2017). The author presumes this could indeed serve as a partial response to the current urban conditions of cities across Bali. Yet at the same time, despite these assurances, the author remains uneasy. The question arises: *Must we continue building on new plots of land, and what about the houses that already exist?* For instance, *would newly built homes actually be more affordable than renovating those already standing?*

In *Rupa Nir-Rupa Arsitektur Bali* by I Nyoman Gde Suardana (Suardana, 2015), lecturer in the Architecture Program at the Faculty of Engineering, Dwijendra University, Bali, and a former member of the Indonesian Institute of Architects (IAI), Bali Region (2014–2017), one finds discussions on architectural education in Bali along with critiques of its current conditions.

Suardana explains that “the existence of Balinese architecture cannot be separated from the foundational roots of its traditional architectural growth and development... possessing local wisdom... infused with the breath of spirituality, morality, harmony, and balance with nature and its environment.” This essence is closely tied to the “philosophical structure of Balinese architecture,”

characterised by a “harmonious correlation between the *bhuwana agung* (macrocosm) and the *bhuwana alit* (microcosm),” as well as by the principle of duality-in-unity known as *rwa bhineda*. [5]

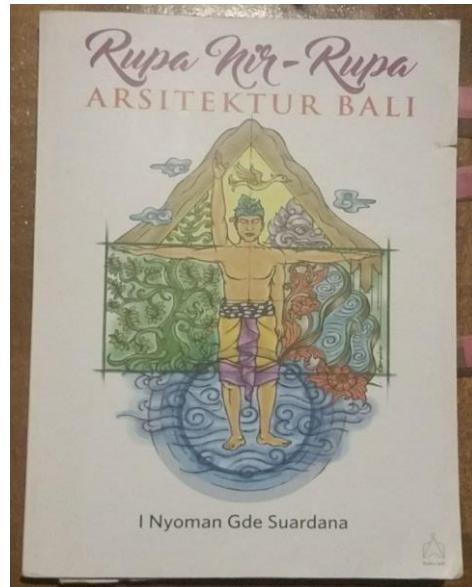


Figure 6. The cover of Rupa Nir-Rupa Arsitektur Bali depicts the human body as a unit of measurement, reflecting how Balinese architecture traditionally calibrates its spatial forms.

Source: Savitri, 2025

As expressed by many Balinese cultural figures - namely artists, writers, and intellectuals - Suardana similarly argues that Balinese architecture must possess an identity, a sense of self: it must “articulate the inner spiritual dimension of the human being beyond the merely physical form.” The author identifies two particularly thought-provoking critiques he offers concerning the present development of Balinese architecture:

Humans, as *bhuwana alit*, are part of an entire symbolic cosmological order, arranged according to the principles of spatial and temporal organisation. Thus, Balinese architecture, beyond engaging the sensitivities of the five senses, accommodates basic human needs, including the need for each person to actualise their existence in both physical and psychological realms. It also responds to the Balinese need for transcendence, as a means of understanding the meaning of life.

And:

...what is absorbed is not merely physical expression. More than that, it is the ‘breath’ and ‘soul’ of traditional Balinese architecture encompassing the intangible qualities that offer a sustained sense of Balinese-ness. These imperceptible aspects may be found in the architectural *lontar* manuscripts of Balinese tradition, embodied as spirit, etiquette in shaping space, proportional systems, the placement of building masses and their composition, all rooted

in the norms and noble values upheld by traditional Balinese society (Suardana, 2015).

One of the *lontar* scriptures most frequently referenced by Balinese people in relation to architecture - whether for constructing homes, places of worship, or ceremonial structures - is *Hasta Kosala* and *Hasta Kosali*. *Hasta Kosala-Kosali* constitutes “one of the guiding texts of an *undagi*... a master builder and expert in spatial and structural design.” These guidelines are thus understood as part of a cultural heritage deserving preservation. The author also notes that the layout of traditional Balinese houses relies heavily on the human body as its unit of measurement and historically includes no multistory buildings - everything lies upon a single plane, on the ground. Consequently, traditional Balinese houses require expansive land - not merely a single *are* measurement.

Bringing Suardana’s reflections into dialogue with what IYA proposes leaves the author unsettled. Indeed, this discussion does not directly address the situation of Mount Agung, yet both serve as lenses for understanding the current conditions of architectural knowledge and practice in Bali. As a Balinese person, the question that arises is: *What must we do to preserve what we have inherited while confronting what lies ahead? Is this the time to re-interpret the Balinese architectural knowledge?*

Niskala Represented: To be Memorised or Erased?

A particularly important exhibition, the Jakarta Biennale 2017, adopted the theme “*Jiwa*” (Soul), featuring two Balinese artists whose installation-based practices embodied the theme with exceptional resonance. These two artists, together with the conceptual framing of the biennale, appear to offer a bridge between Suardana’s reflections on Balinese architecture and the propositions put forward by IYA.

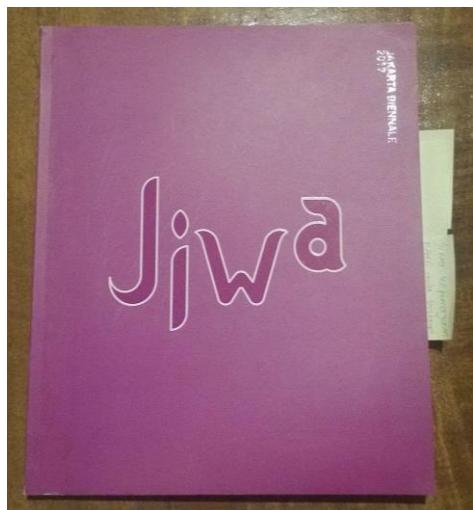


Figure 7. Catalogue of “*Jiwa*”
Source: Savitri, 2025

Melati Suryodarmo (2017), performance artist and Artistic Director of *Jiwa*, states that “there is no culture that is better or worse, only cultures that are different.” For her, art can no longer be confined to “the beautiful form of objects” but rather must be understood as “the soul that discovers its profound essence through its relationship to life itself.” Art, she argues, is no different from knowledge: its continuity relies on its capacity to “contribute to human beings and to life.” In this biennale, *Jiwa* is taken as “a necessary condition of a belief system” - a foundation that has supported human life across time. Creativity, like the soul, is never separate from nor produced outside belief systems; learning, like archaeology, positions us in relation to what has already been and invites us to rediscover it.

Thus, the biennale frames belief systems as its conceptual core: “the relationship between the soul and belief systems is reciprocal and mutually enriching.” While belief systems can, in some cases, “limit” or raise questions about “freedom,” the exhibition responds by foregrounding “freedom of expression or artistic freedom”—“the ability to move within boundaries, whether those are traditions, regulations, norms, customs, or even artistic conventions” (Suryodarmo, 2017).

Among the Balinese artists represented in the Biennale are I Made Djirna and Ni Tanjung. Djirna is described as “a scavenger of the primordial soul of natural objects,” drawing upon a “Hindu-Balinese cultural and spiritual consciousness” that recognises the presence of the *niskala* “the unseen, possessing mythical and mythological dimensions” (Wiyanto, 2017). One of his practices involves collecting pumice stones from various beaches in Bali, from Beraban to Jumpai in Klungkung, stones formed through hundreds of years of geological processes yet dismissed today as waste to be burned alongside other refuse. Curator and writer Hendro Wiyanto writes for this artwork as such:

Djirna’s sensitivity to the *niskala* emerges only through the cultivation of *rasa*. Only through *rasa* can human beings communicate with other living beings including natural objects considered non-living. As Djirna says, “the more refined our *rasa*, the wider our communication with the universe.”

In a physical and social environment changing with increasing speed, the space for encountering the archaic becomes narrow and constrained. Since the early 1970s, Balinese society’s physical relationship with nature has shifted significantly under the forces of tourism and modernisation. Yet the modern world - grounded in rational logic - reduces the hidden to mere visibility. In response, Djirna seeks to perceive what lies behind nature’s surface appearance, something with its own *self-giveness*; something that offers itself to bring forth openness in the viewer

(Wiyanto, 2017).



Figure 8. I Made Djirna, “Unsung Heroes”

Source: Tempo

In his *batu apung* or pumice-stone installation “Unsung Heroes,” Djirna presents “an expression of Balinese culture” often grounded in “sincere devotion and offerings to the Creator,” using the volcanic stone born of eruption as a symbol “increasingly eroded by changing times.” With each pumice stone signifying a soul, “the unity of souls forms an immeasurable strength” and in this unity emerges “the energy of life” (Wiyanto, 2017).

The second Balinese artist is Ni Tanjung, born, raised, and residing in Budakeling, Karangasem, on the slopes of Mount Agung. In November 2017, amid the mountain’s rumblings, she evacuated to Denpasar, where she “began cutting cardboard again...using mirrors to see...the world behind her.” Her work “Dunia Leluhur (Rakitan no. 20)” crayon on paper she has intricately cut is an extension of an earlier body of work involving installations of volcanic stones. She was encouraged by artist Made Budhiana to introduce color, as he too spoke of ancestral presence. As curator and writer Jean Couteau wrote for this piece:

As months and years passed, the mound grew; stone by stone arranged, transforming into strange faces: the ancestors. Ni Tanjung was constructing a symbol of the sacred mountain [Mount Agung]. (Couteau, 2017).

Couteau continued explaining that Mount Agung, therefore, is not “merely a mass of stone and lava”—“the mountain is the dwelling place of the ancestors,”

The ancestors are the reason offerings are made daily at family shrines; they are those with whom the living consult when difficulties arise; they are parents or children who, upon death, are helped to attain ancestral status (Couteau, 2017).



Figure 9. Ni Tanjung

Source: Manual Jakarta [10]

When Mount Agung erupted in 1963, Ni Tanjung was still a young wife and survived the disaster. Her family believed that “she required the presence of a son to escort her soul...on its journey back to the ancestral realm,” but this hope vanished when her sons died. Couteau notes that her obsession “shifted” from the everyday practice of offering-making in Bali:

Ni Tanjung is not obsessed with violence, family, or the modern world beyond her village. She is obsessed with the archetypal world of ancient Bali, when the mountain and the world of the ancestors still governed the Balinese imagination (Couteau, 2017).

It is striking how both Djirna and Tanjung foreground themes intimately connected with mountains, including Mount Agung, and treat them as the palace of ancestors. In this framing, Mount Agung becomes not only a manifestation of divinity but also of the Balinese ancestral realm. If *Jiwa and belief systems exist in a reciprocal, mutually nourishing relationship*, then one must ask: **What is the role of architectural knowledge in confronting the present state of Mount Agung as it rumbles once more?**

This brings the author to recall the Kuala Lumpur Architecture Festival (KLAFF) 2017, where one of the major works featured in the KLAFF Pavilion was titled “Sebelas Rumah: 11 Stories of Erasure.” Created by no-to-scale studio - Shamin Sahrum and Nur Nadrah, the installation highlighted eleven houses in Kampung Bharu, a historic Malay settlement in Kuala Lumpur. Once comprising 300 hectares densely filled with traditional Malaysian houses, Kampung Bharu has, over time, become a silent witness to the intensifying property development occurring within and around it. “*How should anything remain the same?*” becomes the central question when observing these traditional houses, their fading paint and peeling timber, and the presence of satellite dishes affixed to their exteriors painful reminders of the tension between who we wish to become and who we once were (KLAFF, 2017).



Figure 10. KLAF 2017 Logbook -
Sebelas Rumah
Source: Savitri, 2025

The eleven houses represented in the installation are those fortunate enough to have been registered as heritage structures, with the hope that more will follow. Suspended as if floating in mid-air, *Sebelas Rumah* re-narrates itself to the public, recalling a time when these buildings were integral to Malaysian architecture. It challenges us to consider “the existence of memory” and “the habit of erasure in contemporary urban conditions,” as these houses now stand as “architectures on the verge of disappearance” (KLAF, 2017).

Just as the author questions the positions articulated by Suardana and IYA - *what must we do to preserve what we already possess while confronting what lies ahead?* - no-to-scale poses a similar inquiry through *Sebelas Rumah* to reflect on what remains and what is yet to come (KLAF, 2017).

Another compelling argument emerges from the exhibition “10X: Thirteen Projects for Kuala Lumpur” (KLAF, 2017) which reexamines the city’s potential through acts of reimagination, reconfiguration, and recalibration via speculation, projection, and intervention offering new perspectives and interpretations of Kuala Lumpur’s urban condition. One of the projects, “Malaysian Gods” by Khairul Izzuddin and Ayub Hadi (KLAF, 2017), critiques the proliferation of places of worship that continue to increase in number despite their limited actual use. They argue that “new gods” have emerged resulting in places of worship to not become the institutions they are meant to be. Yet they remain as sacred structures decorated with cultural motifs and spiritual sculptures. As such they have become the by-products of Malaysia’s achievements in construction technology- who are now able to erect skyscrapers and massive pillars. Ironically these spaces become *empty promises made by false leaders to followers who are blinded* as the gods have vanished, yet construction in houses of worship that spends in resources and lands continue.



Figure 11. KLAF 2017 Logbook -
Malaysian Gods
Source: Savitri, 2025

Given Kuala Lumpur’s condition - densely built and marked by continuous land conversion and redevelopment to make way for newer structures - Izzuddin and Hadi argue that the construction of such places of worship does not necessarily bring people closer to their God. They therefore propose reimagining these religious spaces as *local interconnection stations*, wherein the architecture functions both as a site of devotion for believers and, alternatively, as a place of pause, transit, or gathering for those in need of space. They pose the question: *Does form define and test our religious beliefs?* - a question prompted by the example of a church that became a mosque and now stands as a museum, suggesting that such *shifts of events* transform the very essence of the building (KLAF, 2017).

Given Malaysia’s context - which does not differ greatly from Indonesia’s, particularly regarding racial and religious tensions in a nation that is inherently plural - Izzuddin and Hadi argue that *places of worship should serve as time capsules that purify the soul rather than as public declarations of identity*. Thus the project aims to *foster mutual respect* among the multicultural society and that with the practice being integrated to the everyday like *one’s daily commute* (KLAF, 2017).

Reading *Malaysian Gods*, which questions the existence of religious architecture that increasingly occupies land, the author begins to wonder whether Bali is experiencing something similar, particularly in relation to Mount Agung. The issue is not solely about Pura Besakih, the largest and most central place of worship for Balinese Hindus, but about Mount Agung itself, leading back to the method’s question: *Is Mount Agung a manifestation of God, or has it become a manifestation of tourism?*

Mount Agung as a Living Architecture

Tourism seems to be a word that did not escape in the whole essay. As written in writer’s curatorial writing in 2018 for Syafiudin Vifick’s “Perjamuan Terakhir” (Sastrawan, 2025) that was also inspired by

Mount Agung's eruption in 2017, it quoted one of Michel Picard's essays titled “Cultural Tourism, Nation-Building and Regional Culture: The Making of Balinese Identity” from the year 1990 (Sastrawan, 2025), which argued that we should not question how the Balinese culture has survived the impact of tourism because it has indeed “contributed” to shaping the Balinese culture as a “touristic culture”. Tourism has become the driving economy for Bali and ironically became an indefinitely *touristic culture*.

Hence an interesting note that appears during this peculiar incident from Photographer and Hindu Philosophy graduate, Wayan Martino, seems to give a light to the discussion. He writes in a short note on Facebook:

Sir, everything has its time. Do not grieve over the reduced number of foreign visitors these past months. The beaches are quiet, the roads are quiet, the airport and hotels are quiet... When it was bustling, were you not granted the opportunity to fill your coffers? Why must today's situation provoke complaints? Do you not believe that Mount Agung is the meditation seat of the Great Shiva? If He now wills a process of dissolution, why not be grateful for it?... With all due respect, please exercise a measure of wisdom in responding to the situation of the Mountain where the Great Shiva meditates. I can understand your sorrow about tourism, yet it would be far more meaningful if that sorrow transformed into empathy for your brothers and sisters living at the foot of Mount Agung. Surely the wealth you have accumulated will not shatter under the weight of your compassion (Martino, 2025).

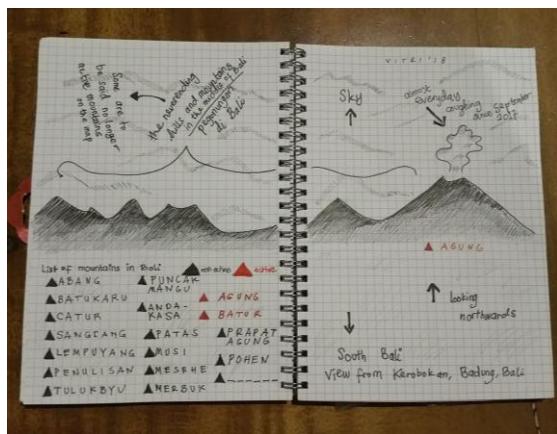


Figure 12. Author's notes on Bali's volcanoes during the eruption in 2017
 Savitri, 2025

4. Conclusion

Reflecting on all of this - and drawing from the author's own Hindu beliefs - if Balinese architecture is indeed rooted in spirituality, morality, harmony, and attunement with nature and the environment, grounded in the “philosophical structure of Balinese architecture,” namely the harmonious correlation between *bhuwana agung* (macrocosm) and *bhuwana alit* (microcosm), as well as the principle of *rwa bhineda* (duality), then Mount Agung seems to constitute *a form of architecture* in its own right.

Mount Agung is shaped by nature and in turn generates nature - both for the visible and invisible: stones, ancestral spirits, and the *niskala* world imbued with soul, as exemplified in the works of Djirna and Tanjung. Furthermore, Mount Agung forms part of the belief system that regards it as the meditation seat of the Great Shiva, the dwelling place of Shiva—the most powerful deity in the universe according to Hindu belief.

Returning to what the author calls the lesson of *Petualangan Sherina*, everything still feels entangled. There seems to be no clear solution to the conditions unfolding in Bali. Given the belief systems at play and the architectural desire always to build toward something better, what might architecture - and especially architectural knowledge in Bali - express or remind us of in this moment? Further community research with *undagi* and *lontar* scriptures along with policy engagement could enrich this paper. However, from the limitation of notes used, the knowledge gained in this paper can inform more ethical approaches to Bali's economic development - especially on tourism. Hence, this paper offers a different perspective that also attempts to answer the many questions simultaneously in the matter of Balinese architectural knowledge that persist in cosmologies, artistic practices, and public debates - including its policies.

Acknowledgment

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