

Concrete and The Sacred: Material Transformation and Contestation of Meaning in Traditional Balinese Architecture

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ABSTRACT : Traditional Balinese architecture is a manifestation of philosophical and spiritual values expressed not only through form and ornamentation, but also in the selection of primary structural materials, particularly wood. Ancient lontar texts such as Asta Kosala Kosali and Aji Janantaka meticulously regulate the types and ritual treatments of wood as part of the local belief system and ecological cosmology. However, in contemporary practice, a shift has occurred: reinforced concrete increasingly replaces wood as the main structural material, particularly in elements such as columns (*saka*) and beams (*pementang*). This study examines the dynamics of this shift using a qualitative case study approach. The analysis draws on traditional Balinese design philosophy, Bourdieu's theory of constructive structuralism, and the theory of commodification. The findings reveal a discursive struggle between traditionalists who represent value-based cultural hegemony, and entrepreneurial groups who advance counter-hegemonic logics of cost-efficiency and production pragmatism. The transformation of building materials reflects the influence of capitalist ideology on the ecological and sacred values embedded in Balinese architecture. This article contributes to the discourse on architectural conservation by offering a sociocultural perspective and presenting new insights into hegemonic dynamics in the production of traditional Balinese architecture.

Keywords - Balinese architecture, material, concretization, sacredness, commodification, Bourdieu.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Balinese architecture is fundamentally grounded in the cosmological and spiritual worldview of Balinese Hinduism, where the built environment functions as a medium that mediates relationships between humans, nature, and the divine. Architectural production is governed by philosophical principles articulated in classical lontar texts such as Asta Kosala Kosali and Aji Janantaka, which regulate spatial order, orientation, proportion, and material selection according to ritual, ethical, and ecological considerations. Within this framework, architecture is not merely a physical artifact but a sacred process, structured by the dual ontology of *sekala* and *niskala*, in which materials, particularly wood is understood to possess *atma* (life force) and require ritual purification before being transformed into structural elements.

Wood from specific tree species such as *jati* (teak), *nangka* (jackfruit), *cendana* (*Santalum album*), and *sentul* or *kecapi* (wild mangosteen) has traditionally occupied a central role in Balinese architecture, not only for its structural properties but for its symbolic and spiritual significance. Rituals including *mecaru*, *ngulapin*, and *melaspas* serve to integrate material substances into the cosmological order, ensuring that architectural construction aligns with spiritual ecology rather than merely technical efficiency [1][2]. In this sense, material

choice is inseparable from ritual obligation, ecological ethics, and indigenous knowledge systems, positioning architecture as a form of cultural and religious practice rather than neutral production.

In contemporary Bali, however, this material ontology is undergoing a profound transformation. Reinforced concrete has increasingly replaced wood in primary structural components such as *saka* (pillar/columns) and *pementang* (structural beams), even in buildings that continue to adopt traditional Balinese architectural forms. While this shift is commonly justified by considerations of durability, cost efficiency, material scarcity, and construction speed, it represents more than a technical adaptation. The substitution of ritually sanctified organic materials with industrial concrete signals a reconfiguration of architectural meaning, in which sacred materiality is displaced by functional rationality and industrial standardization.

This transformation must be understood within broader socio-economic and ideological shifts shaping contemporary architectural practice in Bali. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social fields, this study conceptualizes traditional Balinese architecture as a contested field of cultural production, where different actors: *undagi* 'traditional architect', religious authorities, homeowners, contractors, and developers, compete over the authority to define legitimate architectural practice. Within this field, symbolic and ritual capital associated with sacred materials increasingly confronts economic capital driven by capitalist logics of efficiency, speed, and commodification. As a result, traditional architectural elements are often preserved at the level of visual form, while their ritual, ecological, and ontological foundations are progressively eroded.

Existing scholarship on Balinese architecture has extensively examined spatial symbolism, cosmological order, and aesthetic identity, as well as the impacts of tourism and modernization. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the ideological implications of material transformation in primary structural elements, particularly as a site of cultural contestation and de-sacralization. This study addresses that gap by critically examining the shift from wood to concrete as a sociocultural and ideological process rather than a purely technical one.

By integrating Balinese architectural philosophy with Bourdieu's structuralist constructivism and theories of cultural commodification, this article argues that material transformation reflects a broader displacement of sacred values by capitalist rationality in the production of traditional architecture. The study contributes to architectural and cultural studies by reframing material choice as a symbolic arena where power, meaning, and cultural continuity are actively negotiated, and by offering a critical perspective on the future of sacred architecture under conditions of commodification and modernity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have widely explored the symbolic, spiritual, and philosophical meanings embedded in Balinese architecture. Goris (1954) and Budihardjo (1995) underscore the role of Asta Kosala Kosali, a traditional guideline for spatial organization based on caste and sacred orientation [3][4]. Eiseman emphasizes the importance of ritual in architectural practice, including wood selection and preliminary ceremonies [1]. Ardika (2003) and Lansing (2006) affirm that Balinese architecture reflects not only cultural identity but also ecological and spiritual systems [2][5].

Meanwhile, scholars such as Picard (1996) and Hitchcock (2000) argue that tourism has redefined Balinese architecture as an "ethnic aesthetic," subjecting its forms to commodification [6][7]. Suamba discusses the practical use of concrete in temple construction as a response to economic pressures and material scarcity [8]. However, most of these studies focus on formal typology, symbolism, or historical continuity. They lack a critical analysis of how material changes in main structures (from wood to concrete) reflect deeper ideological struggles. This article fills the gap by examining the shift through Bourdieu's concept of social field and symbolic capital, and analyzing how commodification alters the meaning of materials in Balinese architecture. Table 1 presents a detailed comparison of relevant previous studies.

Table 1. Comparative Review of Previous Studies on Balinese Traditional Architecture and Research Gaps

| No | Author & Year | Focus of Study | Method / Approach | Key Findings | Limitations / Gaps |
|----|-----------------------|---|---|--|--|
| 1. | Eiseman (1990) [1] | Spiritual dimension of wood materials | Ethnographic and visual | Ritual purification of wood reflects cosmological values | Does not explore substitution with modern materials |
| 2. | Ardika (2003) [2] | Architecture as ecological and ritual system | Historical-archaeological | Sacred wood is part of ecological-spiritual cycle | Does not relate to capitalist transformation or modern practices |
| 3. | Goris (1954) [3] | Social structure in Balinese house layout | Philological study of <i>Asta Kosala Kosali</i> | Balinese houses reflect caste-based spatial orientation | Does not address material use or contemporary change |
| 4. | Budihardjo (1995) [4] | Spatial patterns and morphology of traditional houses | Descriptive-analytical | Spatial zoning follows cosmological order | Lacks discussion on material transformation or ideological context |
| 5. | Picard (1996) [6] | Cultural tourism and identity shifts in Bali | Cultural sociology | Architecture becomes part of performative exoticism | No focus on structural change or material ideology |
| 6. | Hitchcock (2000) [7] | Commodification of Balinese architecture aesthetics | Visual-cultural studies | Traditional forms become “visual brands” in tourism | Ignores structural/ritual substance and symbolic loss |
| 7. | Suamba (2017) [8] | Use of concrete in temples | Case study approach | Concrete seen as cost-effective and durable alternative | No ideological analysis or discussion of cultural negotiation |

Source: Authors, 2026

Research Gaps and Contributions of This Study:

- a. From formalist focus to ideological-material discourse:
 - Most prior studies focus on form, symbolism, spatial function, or historical continuity [2][3][4].
 - This study highlights the material shift in primary structure as a discursive and ideological phenomenon, not merely technical.
- b. From static spiritualism to contemporary power dynamics:
 - Eiseman and Ardika affirm wood’s spiritual significance but do not analyze how those values erode or conflict with modernization [1][2].
 - This study applies Bourdieu’s social field theory and commodification theory to map ideological struggles around material use.
- c. From empirical observation to social field analysis:
 - Suamba presents concrete as a practical material solution [8], but without dissecting the actor relations and symbolic power involved.
 - This article identifies conflicts between traditionalists and entrepreneurs within a contested field of cultural production.
- d. From visual exoticism to the problem of meaning and sacrality:
 - Picard and Hitchcock address architectural aesthetics in tourism but focus on surface representation [6][7].
 - This study delves into the deeper crisis of sacred value, cultural meaning, and spiritual ecology affected by material commodification.

Conclusion of the Review:

This study fills a critical gap in the discourse on Balinese traditional architecture by:

- Reframing material as more than a technical choice, but a symbolic and ideological site of contestation;
- Offering a critical reading of commodification and de-sacralization in contemporary building practices;
- Applying constructivist sociology (Bourdieu) and cultural economy frameworks that are underused in traditional architectural studies in Indonesia.

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach. Data collection included participatory observation, photographic documentation, traditional architecture textual analysis of *lontar* manuscripts (Asta Kosala Kosali and Aji Janantaka), and in-depth interviews with academic architect, *undagi* (traditional architects), high priests and assistant priests (*sulinggih* and *pemangku*), local carpenter, and homeowners in Denpasar, Bangli, and Karangasem. Data were interpreted using an analytical framework grounded in Bourdieu's structuralist constructivism and theories of cultural commodification [9][10].

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Material Transformation and the Shifting Ontology of Building Practices

Field observations and in-depth interviews reveal that the growing preference for reinforced concrete in the construction of traditional-style Balinese buildings "*Bale*" is driven by three interrelated motivations: (1) economic efficiency, including reduced material costs and labor needs; (2) material durability, especially resistance to termites and climatic deterioration; and (3) the desire to preserve the visual aesthetics of Balinese architecture without engaging in its complex ceremonial obligations (see Figure 1 and 2).



Figure 1 Prepare Concrete Coloum dan Beam for *Bale*
[Source: Survey, 2025]



Figure 2 Process of Assembling the *Bale* until Finishing with Gold and Wood Colour Paint
[Source: Survey, 2025]

As articulated by a senior *undagi*: "People want it fast. With concrete, you just cast it. No need for ceremonies anymore." This sentiment is emblematic of a broader cultural and epistemological shift from a ritual-oriented material ontology to a technocratic logic of architectural production. In traditional practice, as documented by Eiseman and Ardika, materials especially wood were imbued with spiritual agency (*atma*) and required extensive rituals such as *mecaru* and *ngulapin* before installation [1][11]. These ceremonies were not merely symbolic but served to align the built environment with cosmological forces and ecological ethics.

In contrast, concrete, as a neutral and industrially-produced material, is largely exempt from such ritualistic treatment. It enters the building process as a functional commodity, unburdened by sacred associations. This transformation is not only practical but ideological.

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital and social fields, this shift can be interpreted as a displacement of symbolic capital represented by ritual legitimacy, spiritual resonance, and indigenous authority by economic capital, which emphasizes speed, cost, and mass replicability. Builders and clients increasingly operate within an architectural field governed by economic rationalism, sidelining the cosmological and ritual dimensions that traditionally anchored Balinese spatial production [12].

This process also reflects what Appadurai terms "decontextualization", wherein cultural artifacts and practices are extracted from their original matrix of meaning and inserted into commodified logics of aesthetic reproduction [9]. The use of concrete to replicate traditional forms *saka* 'pillar' and *pementang* 'structural beam' preserves visual familiarity while severing ontological and ceremonial ties. In this way, architectural elements become simulacra, echoing Baudrillard's notion of the copy without origin, a surface without the depth of spiritual context.

Further, this trend aligns with Escobar's critique of the "modernist ontology", in which local knowledge systems and ritual economies are subordinated to the imperatives of development and material standardization [13]. The traditional architect (*undagi*), once a figure of ritual-architectural synthesis, is increasingly reduced to a mere contractor, disembodied from the spiritual economy of building. This shift mirrors Comaroff's analysis of how cultural labor is commodified and depersonalized under neoliberal conditions [14].

In this sense, the preference for concrete is not simply a matter of durability or affordability, it reflects a deeper restructuring of architectural meaning in Bali. It signals a departure from an architecture of ritual, meaning, and ecological balance, toward an architecture of performance, efficiency, and surface aesthetics. What is at stake is not merely the form of buildings, but the cosmological coherence and cultural integrity of Balinese built space in the face of modernity and commodification.

Discursive Struggles in the Architectural Field

The contemporary Balinese architectural landscape is increasingly shaped by a discursive struggle between actors embedded in traditional ritual systems and those aligned with entrepreneurial, capitalist logics. On one side are traditionalist figures, including *undagi* (traditional architects), *pemangku* (priests), and cultural custodians who view architecture as a sacred medium to align the human realm with cosmological principles. On the other side are market-driven agents, such as developers, contractors, and villa investors who emphasize flexibility, cost-efficiency, and visual appeal for tourism consumption.

From the perspective of Bourdieu's field theory, these actors operate within a shared architectural field, yet bring with them divergent forms of capital: symbolic and ritual capital versus economic and visual capital [12]. However, the conflict extends beyond economic pragmatism it reflects a semiotic shift, where the meanings and functions of architectural elements are redefined by market pressures and visual regimes.

This redefinition aligns closely with what Piliang terms the emergence of "hyperreality" and "hyper semiotics" conditions in which signs (in this case, architectural forms) are detached from their traditional referents, becoming free-floating symbols within a cultural system dominated by simulation [15][16]. In Piliang's words, architecture in such a regime no longer carries ontological depth, but becomes aesthetic surface, where the visual predominates over the metaphysical. The bale 'traditional Balinese pavilion, which was originally built with a certain wooden structure with a certain meaning for its occupants, was replaced by a reinforced concrete structure so that it lost the meaning of originality and spirituality that wood naturally contains.

The proliferation of villa resorts that mimic sacred Balinese architectural elements such as *angkul-angkul* 'gateways', *pelinggih* 'shrines', or *wantilan* 'community pavilion' is a vivid manifestation of this aestheticized simulation. As Hitchcock [7] and Piliang [16] both argue, these structures are often built not to fulfill spiritual functions, but to signal "Balineseness" as a marketable style. The result is a semiotic hollowing out: *pelinggih* 'shrine' no longer serve as sites of offering or ritual, but as decorative nodes in garden landscapes or Instagram backgrounds. The appearance of Bale 'Balinese traditional pavilion' only prioritizes visuals and loses its essential meaning.

According to Piliang, this process can be understood as a movement from representation to simulation [15]. The architectural symbols of traditional Bali no longer refer to lived ritual systems *desa, kala, patra* or place, time, and condition, but to their own images a self-replicating cycle of signifiers serving tourism economies. In this condition of simulacra, the distinction between sacred and profane, original and imitation, real and staged, collapses into a flattened symbolic order.

Moreover, Piliang's idea of "aesthetic regime of capitalism" is especially relevant here: traditional architectural forms are repurposed within an economy of signs, in which beauty and authenticity become assets for profit extraction. This aestheticization not only transforms the appearance of Balinese spaces but also reshapes the cultural logic of their production. The *undagi*, once revered for sacred knowledge and cosmological alignment, is increasingly marginalized in favor of contractors who can deliver faster, cheaper, and visually recognizable products.

This condition mirrors what Piliang calls the crisis of meaning, where cultural heritage becomes a visual cliché, emptied of sacred time and replaced by the logic of consumer temporality. In this logic, villas must be completed before high season, not before a *dewasa ayu* (auspicious day); offerings are symbolic gestures for tourists, not dialogical acts between humans and the unseen.

The result is not simply commodification, but what Piliang identifies as "cultural virtualization": the transformation of tangible, lived traditions into digitized, mediated, and aestheticized representations, accessible to the global gaze. Balinese architecture thus becomes trapped in a hyperreality, where its surface simulates tradition while disconnecting from the epistemological core of Balinese cosmology.

In this context, the discursive struggle is not just between two economic camps, but between two ontological worldviews: one grounded in ritual temporality, sacred space, and metaphysical ethics; the other in instant production, image circulation, and aesthetic capital. The built environment becomes a field of tension in which authenticity is contested, performed, and re-commodified, aligning with Piliang's [16] view that culture in the age of signs is both hyper-visible and structurally hollowed.

Commodification and the De-Sacralization of Space

The substitution of organic, ritually sanctified materials such as wood with industrial products like reinforced concrete signifies not merely a change in construction technique, but a profound epistemological rupture a shift from a sacred, cosmologically embedded architecture to a commodified spatial regime. In this context, traditional Balinese architecture no longer functions solely as a medium for ritual expression and cosmological alignment, but increasingly as a reproducible aesthetic commodity within the circuits of tourism, real estate, and visual consumption.

Drawing on Appadurai's theory of "the social life of things" [9], the transformation reflects a process of decontextualization, wherein cultural forms such as architectural motifs, spatial layouts, or sacred thresholds are abstracted from their ritual foundations and reinserted into commercial systems of value. This disembodiment not only redefines the meaning of the forms but also alters the social relations that sustain them, transforming sacred structures into cultural surfaces optimized for visual pleasure, not spiritual function.

Commodification in this sense is not neutral; it carries with it a logic of abstraction and simplification that fragments the holistic unity between material, belief, and place. In Balinese traditional thought, as articulated in the *Asta Kosala Kosali* and *Aji Janantaka* texts, materials like wood are not inert but possess spiritual agency, requiring purification rituals (*mecaru, nasarin, memakuh, pengurip-urip, pedagingan, and melaspas*) to mediate their transition from nature into culture [1][2]. This sacred ecology of materials, where spiritual cosmology, ecological ethics, and artisanal knowledge converge, is systematically displaced by market-driven pragmatism that privileges cost, durability, and replicability.

From the perspective of cultural studies, this transformation signals what Piliang [15][16] theorizes as a move toward hyper-aestheticization and simulation, wherein signs of tradition are emptied of ontological depth and repurposed as image-objects in the global economy of spectacle. The concrete replica of a sacred wooden *pelinggih* is no longer a site of divine inhabitation (*sthana dewa*), but a symbolic placeholder designed not for ritual efficacy, but for visual familiarity and market legitimacy.

This is consistent with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, wherein cultural signs (e.g., traditional architectural forms) persist in surface appearance while losing connection to their original referents [17]. In the context of Balinese architecture, the sacred becomes stylized, aestheticized, and serialized reproduced in villas, cafes, and resorts with only superficial adherence to ritual protocols. What was once embedded in cycles of sacred time (*padewasan*) and spiritual labor is now subject to the cycles of tourist seasons and Airbnb ratings.

Moreover, this process implicates deeper transformations in cultural identity formation. Stuart Hall argues that identity is not fixed but constructed through historical and discursive practices [18]. When traditional architecture is commodified, it risks becoming a curated identity artifact a token of cultural continuity projected for external validation rather than internal coherence. As Balinese communities navigate the tension between sacred legacy and economic necessity, identity becomes a negotiated space, shaped as much by global consumer expectations as by ancestral knowledge.

In this context, the de-sacralization of space is not simply a loss of religious function, but a broader ontological disconnection a condition in which the built environment no longer serves as a conduit between the human and the divine, but as a stage for the performance of "authenticity" in the global arena. The consequence is a fragmentation of ritual knowledge, a marginalization of the *undagi's* symbolic role, and a redefinition of what it means for a building to be "Balinese."

Thus, commodification must be understood not merely as an economic process, but as a cultural re-coding one that reorders relationships between people, materials, meanings, and memory. In the face of this, the future of Balinese architecture depends not only on formal preservation but on cultural reflexivity a reengagement with the deep structures of meaning that have historically informed the island's-built environments.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This study has examined the material transformation and ideological contestation within traditional Balinese architecture, particularly the substitution of sacred wood with reinforced concrete in primary structural components such as *saka* 'pillar' and *pementang* 'structural beam'. Guided by the central research questions (1) What drives the shift from sacred to industrial materials in Balinese architecture? (2) How does this shift affect the ritual, symbolic, and ecological meanings embedded in traditional building practices? (3) What forms of contestation emerge in the architectural field as a result? the findings reveal a complex entanglement of economic pragmatism, symbolic displacement, and cultural commodification.

At the core of this transformation lies a shift in architectural ontology: from a worldview in which building materials are cosmologically charged and spiritually mediated, to one in which materials are seen as functional, neutral, and commodifiable. As interviews and field observations show, motivations such as cost-efficiency, resistance to environmental degradation, and time-saving construction processes have redefined material preferences. The result is a departure from *desa-kala-patra*-based ritual design to a logic of production rooted in technocratic and capitalist values.

Applying Bourdieu's field theory, the architectural domain in Bali today is a contested social field, where traditional actors *undagi*, *pemangku*, and cultural scholars struggle to maintain symbolic capital amidst the rise of developers and contractors driven by economic capital. This contestation is most visibly played out in the proliferation of tourism-oriented buildings that adopt traditional forms as aesthetic symbols devoid of ritual depth.

Simultaneously, the study demonstrates that this phenomenon is not merely a technical or stylistic development, but a case of cultural commodification as theorized by Appadurai and expanded by Piliang. Balinese architectural elements are increasingly detached from their cosmological and ecological grounding and recontextualized within market-based systems of meaning. As Piliang suggests, what emerges is a form of hyperreality, where architecture simulates tradition through surface, while evacuating its spiritual and communal foundations.

Recommendation

Based on these findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

- a. For Cultural Practitioners and *Undagi* 'traditional architect':
 - Strengthen the intergenerational transmission of *tattwa* (spiritual principles), *dresta* (customs), and ritual knowledge related to architecture.
 - Advocate for hybrid practices that adapt modern materials while maintaining ritual integrity and cosmological alignment, ensuring continuity through adaptation rather than rupture.
- b. For Policy Makers and Local Governments:
 - Implement cultural zoning and building guidelines that distinguish between sacred and profane spaces, encouraging the use of appropriate materials in ritual buildings (*pura* 'public temple' and *sanggah/merajan* 'family temple').
 - Support incentives or subsidies for community-based construction projects that preserve ritual construction practices.
- c. For Architectural Education and Research:
 - Integrate critical cultural studies, heritage ethics, and material semiotics into the curricula of architecture and design schools in Bali and Indonesia more broadly.
 - Encourage further interdisciplinary research on the socio-cultural impact of material transformation in built environments, especially in post-traditional societies.
- d. For the Tourism and Hospitality Industry:
 - Promote responsible architectural representation, discouraging tokenistic use of sacred symbols in commercial architecture.
 - Engage with local communities and traditional authorities (*bendesa adat* 'custom leader' and *undagi*) in the planning and design of tourism facilities to avoid cultural misappropriation.

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How to cite/reference this article: I Putu Gede Suyoga, Ni Made Emmi Nutrisia Dewi, Aqza Zanna Surya Rabbani Al Kharimmi, Concrete and The Sacred: Material Transformation and Contestation of Meaning in Traditional Balinese Architecture, *Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.* 2026; 8(1): 95-103.