

**Refiguring Tradition : Aesthetic Experience, Built Environment  
and The Roots of Cultural Heritage**  
Comprehension Through Bagas Godang Mandailing  
as A Case Study

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**Abstract**

This study contains basic concepts which form the background of issues related to the built environment and aesthetic experience that are experienced by humans in the phenomenological and socio-cultural point of view. Aesthetics is related to the identification and comprehension of factors giving contributions to perception of an object or a process considered beautiful or giving pleasant experience. Aesthetics is also related to the comprehension of human's ability to create or enjoy the arrangement which is pleasant and created aesthetically.

The comprehension of the relation among humans, aesthetic experience, and the built environment is actually rooted in the comprehension of cultural aspect. How humans and their culture influence perception and aesthetic experience towards the built environment and how the built environment influences perception and human's aesthetic experience in certain cultural context are the main approaches serving as the basis for all premises revealed by the writer.

Interrelation among the three aspects is described by using examples from Bagas Godang Mandailing as a built environment and aesthetic experience that is experienced by Mandailing's people in their environment. The most important aspect in this explanation is the culture that influences human's aesthetic experience. As a part of a sub system of behaviour in psychology, environment must be viewed as an important aspect in planning an architectural environment and environment is no longer regarded as physical shapes only.

Keywords : humans, aesthetics, culture, built environment

## **Environmental Perception and The Built Environment**

Some functions of architectural environment proposed by Barker (1968) are to keep and maintain physical conditions needed to continue behaviour, to provide needed behaviour settings and to support physical conditions by using symbols. That statement can be interpreted as a reality that actually architectural environment must be able to give perception of its ability to support certain behaviour (that is needed by humans as users). Therefore, users not only realize but but also know how to use the environment. Environmental perception is a process to comprehend physical environment through a sense input from stimuli that have just happened or existed. Various physical environment stimuli that spread are organized by processing perception to become a complete and arranged environmental description. The theoretical framework about environmental perception above constitutes a basic approach to reveal how a psychological factor has a role in space design. Physical limits in the built environment refer to the result of architectural design whereas human's perception towards the stimuli of the built environment refers to processes of psychological relationship between humans and their environment. Furthermore, human's spatial behaviour in a territory ia a real human's action supported by their motivation to fulfil their life needs, An important aspect highlighted in this context is that human's aesthetic experience is actually very interrelated to its environmental perception. This premise is also supported by Altman and Chemers (1984).

Approaches used to define 'the built environment' are :

1. An objective approach. It is an approach that views environment purely for the physical meaning and the objects in it;
2. A phenomenological approach. It is an approach that views environment by using phenomenological orientation. Built environment is phenomena or events that happen in the environment.
3. A socio-cultural approach. It is an approach that views environment by using socio-cultural views to describe the phenomena that happen in the environment.

The approach used in this study is a phenomenological and socio-cultural approach by describing a case object and phenomena happening in the environment.

Perception is interrelated to a mental concept and its impact on human's life. Transactional theory is Ittelson's theory (1996) that examines explanation about perception determined by a process of experience and dynamic relationship between human's and his environment. Another perceptual theory proposed by Nieser

(1970) in Conventional Theory is that perception constitutes a process based on experience, learning and memory that involve a cognitive process. Perception consists of information processed inference and construction of meaning from the present and the past stimuli. It is very important to understand it because environment provides information and messages that must be perceived actively by humans and they need to have experience to understand and recognize their environment (Ittelson, 1974).

At the beginning, a definition of aesthetic perception about space emerged in 1893 with a shape theory by Hildebrand. His knowledge about perceptual psychology enabled him to develop a thesis of kinetic vision that inspired other figures such as Lipps, Riegl, and Welfflin. These aesthetic perception have a great impact on perceptual system and towards some theorists such as Paul Frankl and Dagobart Frey. The aesthetics of perceptual space was elaborated by Lissitzky (1925) when he formulated four ways to look at space so that an image could be obtained. From the thesis proposed by him, it can be concluded that all possible aspects of spatial perception can be reduced into four aspects :

- a. Planimetric space or two dimensional space
- b. One-point-perspective space or three dimensional space
- c. Irrational-time space or four dimensional space
- d. Imaginary space that is produced by moving films

Our perception towards architectural space is a synthesis from the four phenomena with one or other ways (Van de Ven, 1995).

In a level of relationship among humans in every place, every condition and every culture, responses of each individual are not directed to physical conditions of the environment such as light, sound, shapes, structures and space but are directed to other individuals related to specific activities, places and purposes (Holahan, 1982). A setting or physical environment makes humans give complex responses in the form of feelings, attitudes, values, interests and desires that particularly constitute their perceptual and cognitive processes towards the built environment.

### **Aesthetic Values and Its Relation to The Built Environment**

Jon Lang (1987) proposed his thought about aesthetic values and its relations to the built environment. This discussion is proposed contextually because it is directly interrelated to architectural forms. By using aesthetic theories formally or symbolically, Lang revealed how human's aesthetic experience is obtained. The

premise proposed by Lang is that human's aesthetic experience is interrelated to how humans perceive environment. Through symbolic aesthetic aspects, Lang related the perceptive processes with semiology that once was revealed by Broadbent, Bunt, and Jencks. Lang's comprehension towards semiology was rooted on a theory proposed by Charles Morris (1983) about three perceptual levels, they are syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. The main aspect that can be comprehended in Lang's thought is that symbolic aesthetic values constitute fundamental components of human's environmental experience. In certain cultural structures, choice of home's location, as an example, is mainly based on certain associational perception. One of the examples is a home perception that is interrelated to human's aesthetic experience of cultural structures in Batak Mandailing in Hutana Godang Panyabungan area. Mandailing is one of the six Batak tribes that inhabits southern area in North Sumatera, particularly in South Tapanuli Regency. They live side by side with Angkola society that lives in more northern area. Its southern area is adjacent to West Sumatera inhabited by Minangkabau tribe. Because of that, it has such strong Islamic influence among Batak Mandailing and Angkola societies. Geographically, the natural setting in Mandailing is similar to that in West Sumatera but its different from that in Batak Toba and Karo inhabiting in North Tapanuli. Most Mandailing society tills the soil in a wet rice field whereas most Toba, Simalungun, and Karo societies till the soil in a field as well as plant some hard pants such as coffee trees.

Mandailing society divides its residency into two parts, they are Mandailing Julu and Mandailing Godang. The former covers areas that lie in the slope of Bukit Barisan mountain range such as Muarasipongi and Kotanopan. The latter is lowlands such as Panyabungan. Mandailing Godang is called as the rice barn of South Tapanuli.

Most Mandailing inhabitants still live in small villages called huta in traditional houses. The houses are called bagas and customary homes are named bagas godang. Each village has a village meeting hall and sopo godang that is used to discuss some problems. A bagas godang is usually occupied by a small village chief (a king) who is elected from one generation to others. Generally, a person who inherits the wealth is the oldest son of the small village chief and then, he will be the small village chief. In the past, huta's area was not so large that every huta only had one customary house. After Indonesian's independence, some hutas are merged

into one customary house. Therefore, there are some customary houses in the village. One of the examples is Botung village (that lies at the edge of Sumatera thruway) consisting of three small villages previously. They are Botung Dolok, Botung Jolu, and Botung Lombang. Like other places in Tapanuli, the small village of Mandailing society is inhabited by the descent of relative groups of the small village founder which governs. The two relative groups are a relative group that gives women (mora) and one that accept womwn (anak boru). Those three small villages from a chart of social structures in Mandailing society like Batak society in general, and its called Dalihan Na Tolu. In the past, the king or the small village chief in performing his government was helped by his anak boru and the advisor in his mora. He is helped by the small village's old people who are called hatobangon in making decisions. Thus, huta is basically a corporate group because it arranges its affairs autonomically, has ulayat's rights of some land, arranges social relationship among relative groups in accordance to the custom and it is also an identity for its inhabitants.

For Panyabungan society, "Bagas Godang", a customary house, as a case object, is an ideal form of expression of their asesthetic experience toward nature. The site conditions of the customary houses is surrounded by the natural forms such as mountains, rivers and pools.

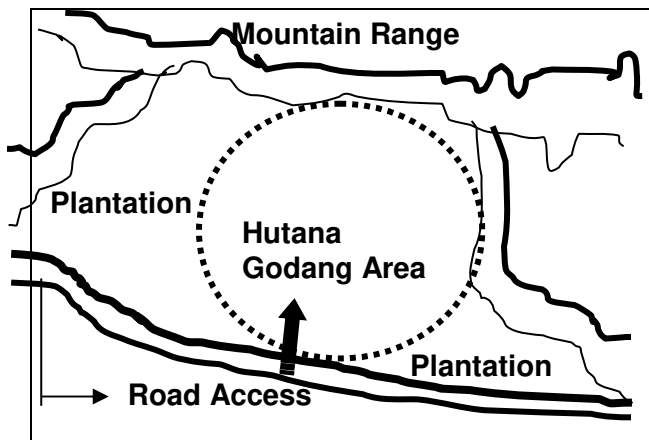


Figure 1. The Sketch of The Situation

These natural forms are closed to Hutana Godang society. Hutana Godang's spatial pattern is mainly linear where each house unit is built in rows in the right and the left of the small village's main street. Each house unit's orientation goes in the direction of the main street (see the picture in appendix). In each bagas Godang house unit, there are three main masses. They are 1). Bagas Godang, 2). Sopo Godang, 3). Sopo Eme/Hopuk. These masses are arranged in such a way that Bagas Godang faces Sopo godang and Sopo Eme is beside Sopo Godang. There is an embankment used to intercept and retain sewage and to breed fish behind Sopo Godang and Eme, look at the sketch below.

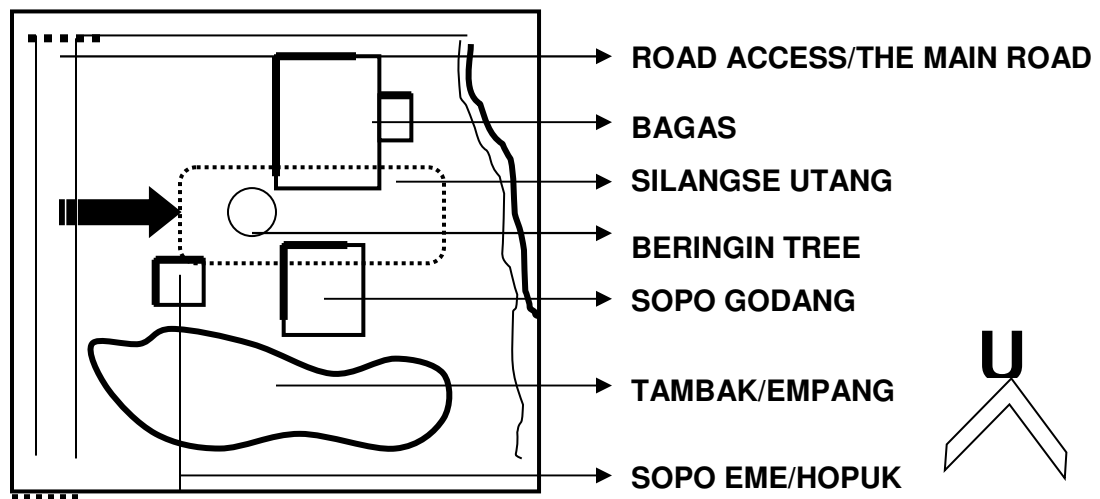


Figure 2. The Sketch of The Lay Out

The sketch above describes the building masses that are arranged with the main orientation going in the direction of 'alaman silangse utang', that is open space which lies between Bagas Godang and Sopo Godang functioning as binding space. This open space in terms of its function is the space used to do some customary or spiritual activities, where there was beringin tree in the middle of it. Mandailing society believes that the tree is the protector. Bagas Godang is the residential building of the tribal chief (the king) and his family. Sopo Godang functions as the ceremonial hall and Sopo Eme or Hopuk functions as the rice barn ( a place to store rice and foodstuffs).

There is no certain effort done by Hutana Godang society to make the nature as a commodity or a competitor but the people try to be united with nature. This condition is similar to Norman Crowe's (1995) statement that "They are seeing their presence as integral with nature...These people tend to see their existence as a part of preordained natural order, and not in opposition to or in competition with this order..."

A word "ideal" in aesthetic experience terminology among the built environment, humans, and nature must be used in a large thinking framework. The reason is that because the meaning of "ideal" has different meanings and nuances for everyone or society in accordance with his cultural background. The pattern of an ideal relation among humans, the built environment, and nature is materialized in an architectural work. Houses are known as the first architectural work of humans after shelters, so it is very natural if responses of an ideal relation pattern between humans and nature is materialized in this first architectural work. The human responses towards the ideal relation pattern between himself and the nature are different from and depend on his sociocultural. It is very necessary to have this limitation because this study is related to human's perception towards his environment.

Although it is a bit different from Crowe's statement (because his explanation is for primitive people whereas Hutana Godang society lives in current attributes, including technology), it can be drawn a comprehension that human aesthetic experience in Hutana Godang with nature through the built environment is united with nature which is revealed in the form of their architectural houses symbolically and formally. It cannot be drawn the same conclusion between an example revealed by Crowe in "Nature and The Idea of Man-Made World", that was Villa Fallingwater whose architect was Frank Lloyd Wright and Bagas Godang in Hutana Godang Mandailing. The reason is that because both of them- although they are stated as the result of aesthetic experience and emerge a concept of "*united with nature*" – are from different cultural treasure and interests. The Fallingwater is architectural work that is united with nature by providing strong impression towards the environment around it (mimesis). This work is an ideal relation between humans and nature. Furthermore, according to Frank Lloyd Wright, it is in accordance with its cultural perception towards the environment around it.

In Bagas Godang- which is also an ideal relation between humans and nature in accordance with Hutana Godang Society- there are some efforts that have been done to associate itself and to make them closer in order to be in harmony with its environment. They observe their environment as accurately as possible so it will be in rhythm with them harmonically. Because Hutana Godang society depends its life on cultivating oranges and cinnamon, seasonal changes and biological cycles are very important. From the natural contact, humans know that nature can be dangerous and also generous if humans want to know its indications (Gunawan Tjahjono, 1999).

Bagas Godang is a reflection of Hutana Godang society's belief as a combination between ritual and artificial conditions. Nevertheless, Bagas Godang is different from the Walled Persian Garden although both of them are reflections of their society's belief. They have different work because of their different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. In terms of settlement, Hutana Godang society starts to determine a directional signal as a prospective settlement. They agree to build a building for gathering and doing worship around this signal. The occupied houses in Bagas Godang, Sopo Godang, Hopuk, and Alaman Na Balok (open space among customary occupied houses) surround the main domain and the general public occupies the houses in the outer domain. The existed developmental pattern is concentric.

This process of sorting seems to follow a natural selection hierarchy. When people want to build houses, they always follow the rules that all of them have already known. The buildings are always "in that position" in accordance with the public response towards the environment. They will not build houses and buildings or reside in Alaman Silangse Utang area because of the public response towards the environment. The response is that Alaman Silangse utang area is sacred space where it is in the King's house area. Therefore, it is not proper to build any buildings in that area.

Settlement and occupied building patterns are a reflection of the world in a different scale (Gunawan Tjahjono, 1999). In a smaller scale, Bagas Godang reflects the soul and body of its inhabitants. Thus, a measure standard has strong correlation with the body size of its inhabitants. By using the body size, the self-relation with buildings become real and interrelated. Humans determine the ratio between bodies and natural elements. Occupied experience in accordance with nature and self man makes humans think how to do some activities inside the buildings comfortably. It is also related to the protection from the intensity of the sunshine, rain, air flows and other thermal comfort.



However, the buildings define their existence by getting “blessing” from nature so they will be in harmony with nature.

One of the column shapes that is interesting is in Sopo Godang. It not only functions as an aesthetic element but also functions to restrain from the speed of rat's movement that will destruct the buildings. The structural formation of the roofs is also tectonically sensitive towards the environmental conditions around it. By using this roof formation, the thermal flows can work well and the roof is structurally very strong.

Hutana Godang society develops their responses in making contact with nature by using symbolic classifications based on bipolarity. Nature is comprehended in terminology as up-down, high-low, headwaters-downstream, etc. Symbolic classifications in the form of decoration diversity, specific construction whose materials do not damage environment and they can be found easily in Hutana Godang's environment (palm fiber from the sugar palm and bamboo) and its houses are an “ideal” response of Hutana Godang society towards nature. These symbolic classifications finally aim at “meanings” whose values are passed on from one generation to the others. The basic values remain maintained although some shifts have occurred. Rapoport (1994) also states this in his statement that shifts of meanings will remain maintained because their values can be accepted by next generations.

In one of theorems, Crowe (1995) states that humans in interacting with nature is ‘a great chain of being’. In Hutana Godang society, the view of “united with nature” is not parallel to Frank Lloyd Wright's view or other views that provide the basis for the examples of other work which are “united with nature”. Bagas Godang in Hutana Godang must be comprehended in Mandailing ethnic cultural framework that states the people and their built environment are *the real nature*. United with nature in Mandailing term is to become nature itself. Houses are the reflection of nature around them (the most obvious example is like what is described in various symbolic shapes in Sopo Godang and Bagas Godang). Thus, the terminology of “united with nature” must be comprehended as “to become itself”. This is an extraordinary response towards nature that *does not separate humans from nature* similar to Norman Crowe's statement. It can be regarded as a house concept that exists from the result of human aesthetic experience towards nature.

The view towards “Bagas Godang” as the result of human aesthetic experience in viewing environment is a testament to complete an expression of “the ideal relation between humans and the built environment”. Different views taken from different views

of cultural backgrounds and time cause various comprehension of the “ideal” relation between humans and nature. Nevertheless, comprehending the relation between humans and the built environment cannot be done only from scientific point of view. It is more important to comprehend it from a human approach so the “ideal” relation between humans and nature will be in deeper thought about a real thing and it is not only on a peripheral layer.

### **Conclusion**

An explanation using Bagas Godang Mandailing as an architectural objects constitutes a study towards how humans perceive their built environment so they will have aesthetic experience and finally, it can aim at perceiving the environment itself. Cultural framework in this case aims at the statement that aesthetic values have contexts in accordance with the framework. Through symbolic and formal aesthetics which are shown by using case objects, it is proven that both of them can give aesthetic experience which enriches human’s life. Aesthetic experience has dimensions and a scope which is untouchable and is not controlled by logical reasoning (Wiryomartono, 2001) so it is very subjective and personal.

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