Domenig Gaudenz


Gaudenz Domenig is one of the few experts on Indonesia’s vernacular architecture. He co-edited and contributed to a few of the most prominent contemporary references on the topic (Schefold, Nas, and Domenig 2003; 2008; Oliver 1997; Sparkes and Howell 2003). This new analysis comes as an important addition to Roxana Waterson’s pioneering book, The Living House (1991) that has stood as the main reference on vernacular architecture in Indonesia since the 1990s. The book contains twelve thematic chapters divided into three parts. The first part deals with the wider scope: landscape and sacred groves. The two other parts address more specific issues on built structures. The geographical scope of the study encompasses many regions of maritime Southeast Asia, but five ethnic groups are the primary focus: the Karo Batak, Toba Batak, Besemah, Sa’adan Toraja, and the Tanimbarese. His study is enriched with extensive field experience with the first three ethnic groups, whereas the latter two draw largely from available ethnographic literature.

The author’s simple and clear writing style (no jargon) makes the book a comfortable read for all audiences. Non-specialists will also find much pleasure browsing through it. Its compact size makes it rather easy to carry despite its encyclopaedic format. Its rich iconography, colour photographs, clear graphics —some especially created for the book— make the technical topic appreciably accessible to non-experts.

Whereas both Waterson and Domenig contributed to understanding rites and symbolic meanings associated with built forms, Religion and Architecture in premodern Indonesia emphasises the relation between architecture and landscape as its main contribution. Domenig’s ‘spatial anthropology’ approach brings a new dimension to understanding the dwelling house as part of a wider system of correspondences between sophisticated built forms (temporary altars, offering houses, offering stands, festive decorations, etc.) and landscape features (sacred groves, agricultural land, the horizon, etc.). In this approach, the house is not considered an isolated entity; rather, it is viewed as part of a rationalised landscape, both tangible (surface, earth, mountains, groves, etc.) and intangible (the underground, a place close to the horizon for the ‘soul land’, etc.). Furthermore, the author manages to demonstrate through a broad range of examples how dwelling houses are not strictly habitations or spaces to perform rituals. In fact, elements of the house are sometimes consid-
This heuristic approach grounded on a close observation of the relation between built forms and landscape results in a more thorough and accurate understanding of indigenous religious practices. For example, his descriptions of land-taking rituals, often neglected in scholarship, are essential for understanding various rites related to architecture and the living space. Furthermore, the analytical efforts given to identifying the nature of spirits and the type of relationships established between builders and spirits are important strengths of the study. Domenig emphasises and extends the question of agency. He addresses not only the human imaginary but also the spirits’ imaginary. Thus, built forms are not only made to please the living, but also the spirits’ sense of aesthetics and practicality. The ‘idea of spirit movement’ also guides builders to make decisions on construction.

The author’s multidisciplinary approach is an important asset to the book (e.g., architectural history, landscape history, anthropology, spatial anthropology, religion). His aesthetic sensitivity to forms and motifs seldom dealt with, such as the architecture and aesthetics of leave shrines or lines of a roof ridge, give the book a sense of rare exhaustiveness. The book sheds new light on architectural aspects that have frequently been neglected in scholarship, such as the significance of the bent ridge or the projecting gable—unique features of ancient wooden architecture in Indonesia and various parts of Asia and the Pacific.

Domenig’s attention to various types of data sources also deserves praise. He admirably incorporates photographs and models from various institutions (and private collections) throughout his analysis. Models provide details on certain types of décor that can no longer be seen in the field. The reader will especially appreciate the author’s critical reading of first-hand sources and interviews. He cautiously approached information from present day informants; and preferred older sources from colonial and precolonial times. He systematically compared the accounts and then extended the comparative approach to personal observations and more recent ethnographic literature. The results provide greater historical depth and more holistic interpretations.

However, readers should be aware that the study does not necessarily represent all of Indonesia, although the title suggests a comprehensive coverage of ‘Premodern Indonesia’. In defense of the author, this is a relatively impossible task given Indonesia’s incredible diversity. The examples treated can be taken as objects of comparison, and his methodology as a model, to address premodern architecture from other parts of the archipelago.