English summary

From ancestral shrine to souvenir

House symbolism in the Indonesian archipelago

Ancestral shrines and souvenirs at first sight would appear to belong to completely different spheres. At closer inspection, however, a rather telling relationship is made manifest. At least in the Indonesian archipelago, where the traditional dwelling and its central role in the way the built environment of old is symbolically dealt with as well as experienced are seen to relate the sphere of the ancestral shrine to that of the souvenir. This particular way of symbolically dealing with the built environment and of experiencing it, are here, in this Ph.D. thesis, defined as house symbolism and constitute the starting-point of an investigation into the traditional vernacular architecture of some ten ethnic groups living in the archipelago.

The principal results of this investigation in many ways are linked as well. While the relationship with the ancestors proves to be of crucial importance to the central role and fundamental significance of the traditional dwelling within almost all societies of the Indonesian archipelago, house symbolism proves to be the pre-eminent means to depict this relationship most succinctly and most eloquently. And whereas the first and foremost demonstration of house symbolism, consequently, almost certainly coincides with the ancestral shrine, the present souvenir in the shape of a house model in many respects may be perceived as the latest and perhaps even the ultimate expression of house symbolism. In the many centuries spanning both extremes historically, two sets or complexes may be discerned. Starting or, as one might also put it, ending with the ancestral shrine, the first of these complexes basically centers on the transitional rites that every human being in the archipelago traditionally had to pass through in order to become a fully fledged member of society. Ranging from teeth filing and circumcision rites, through wedding ceremonies and
coronation rites, to death ceremonies, cremations and secondary burials, these rituals as a rule all have tended, and for a considerable part still tend to be characterized by forms of house symbolism. By means of this tradition of house symbolism the lasting presence of the ancestors is made felt, is made tangible as it were, not just by the dwelling as such, but also by the ceremonial pavilions, bridal beds, palanquins, grave houses and ancestral shrines used in the course of transitional rites. Just like the traditional dwelling by way of its ornamentation, its *pusaka*, and its house altar is made to serve as a point of reference for ancestral presence and involvement, these more or less temporary structures basically do the same by mirroring the shape and structure of the dwelling. It is, consequently, due largely to the traditional dwelling and its various derivative structures used during transitional rites, that human existence in the Indonesian archipelago from cradle to grave and from time immemorial has been encapsulated by a meaningful and at the same time rather compulsive architectural framework. And it is this framework which, basically, has enabled the built environment to function as a cohesive whole, which has drawn the ancestors into the notion of a home, and which by doing so almost self-evidently has sublimated the link with the supernatural and with the gods.

The second of these sets or complexes centers on a more temporal aspect, in that it concerns numerous instances at which rather divergent cultures and distinctive periods in the course of history have been brought into contact, have been made to interact, as it were, precisely by means of house symbolism. Such instances are embodied among others in the candi’s of Central and East Java, in the rather meru-like structures of the Karo Batak, in the even more meru-like pavilions of Majapahit, and in today's *meru's* of the island of Bali. As conspicuous elements of the built environment, these structures all adhere to definite forms of house symbolism which, basically, should be interpreted as the more or less direct translation into material form of hindu-buddhist notions introduced among the hitherto animistic inhabitants of Sumatra, Java and Bali. Similar hindu-buddhist notions accompanied by obvious traditions of house symbolism have indirectly also determined the shape of the Javanese mosque and of numerous mosques and prayer-houses among the Minangkabau. The transition from a hindu-buddhist to an islamic faith, rather than in the introduction of completely new building types, indeed, would appear to have resulted mainly in shifts of content leading not only to mosques with layered roofs but also to structures like the *mimbar* (pulpit) or the *langgar* (prayer-house) of Java, both of which in their house symbolism would seem to hark back to the meditation pavilions of Majapahit. The main exception to this apparent rule of content shifting and cultural borrowing, exemplified in more or less ostentatious forms of house symbolism, is most likely to be found in the traditional Javanese dwelling, or rather in the dwelling type now considered to be the quintessence of Javanese vernacular architecture. Especially in its aristocratic version this dwelling type does not appear to predate the second
half of the 18th century, and though in its main constituent parts it clearly is inspired by the Javanese mosque, as an architectural creation it would also just as clearly seem to be instigated by the extension of power on the part of the VOC.

In terms of its house symbolism the colonial era, as a whole, does appear to be equated above all with a gradual and rather steady process of de-ritualization and de-spiritualization. This is evidenced in numerous bridges, schools and other public and semi-public structures and buildings, which quite obviously and intentionally were meant as more or less straightforward allusions to the traditional vernacular architecture of a given locality or region, but which otherwise in all respects tended to follow a rather pragmatic program of demands and functions. Among ethnic groups like the Batak and the inhabitants of South Nias the very same era, however, has also given rise to the emergence of new forms of the age-old tradition of house symbolism, resulting in the creation of new dwelling types and sometimes of entire villages in which a truly dynamic reinterpretation of already existing vernacular building traditions is made manifest.

With the Sa'dan Toraja a somewhat comparable process of apparent revival and monumentalization of vernacular building traditions is shown to obtain specifically to the period after independence. A basically similar characterization would seem to be applicable as well with regard to the built environment of the Minangkabau and to that of the Balinese, while the introduction of present-day ancestral and essentially house-like monuments like the tambak and the tugu among the Toba Batak, likewise, may be related to this period. The process of de-ritualization and de-spiritualization of the built environment, initiated in the colonial era, basically was continued in this period. It has resulted both in a growing number of souvenirs in the form of house models, seen today in every Indonesian airport and almost every touristic hotspot, and in equally growing numbers of government buildings, banks and hotels which along with numerous monuments and 'monumental' gates, at present, tend to demonstrate a rather specific form of house symbolism in each and every province of the Indonesian nation.

As a cultural practice house symbolism, in short, constitutes not just a dynamic tradition but also an active instrument which historically has resulted in many remarkable developments in the built environment of the Indonesian archipelago. At present, it still continues to do so in many conspicuous ways, while for the future one may hope that it will eventually manifest itself even more dynamically in the urban sphere. In many Asian, southern European and Latin American countries basically comparable forms of house symbolism do constitute rather prominent features of religious processions in a predominantly urban context. As an integral part of such processions, shrines containing relics or images of gods or saints are moved along a prescribed
route. The ritual association with and the spiritual experience of the built environment and urban landscape these processions entail would in many ways seem to be mirrored by similar practices in the Indonesian archipelago, but in contrast to most other parts of the world here do not appear to actively or dynamically having reached into the urban sphere. While the Labuhan ceremony of Central Java does seem to point to a courtly and somewhat urban base, while the Naga-boats of the not too distant past apparently alluded to a tradition of house symbolism with a courtly and somewhat urban origin as well, while the Chinese of Indonesia in the context of their traditional religion, of old, have brought forms of house symbolism into play within a predominantly urban environment, and while the rather static architectural exploits of Suharto’s ‘New Order’-regime tend to manifest themselves in a predominantly urban context as well, truly urban forms of house symbolism aimed at symbolically and actively uniting an urban population in Indonesia appear to have stopped short at the theme park of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah.

This investigation clearly indicates that forms of house symbolism in the Indonesian archipelago since time immemorial have proven to be a well-tried means to come to terms with principal transitions both in a personal and in a more general sense. The investigation also clearly indicates that house symbolism as a cultural practice within the archipelago does constitute quite a wide-spread tradition which, as such, cannot be detached from a very similar, age-old, and extremely dynamic way of dealing with the built environment. As this concerns not just daily life but also the way life is lived in a ritual and spiritual capacity, there is every reason to assume that the chance of success with regard to the introduction of truly urban forms of house symbolism, aimed at actively uniting an ethnically diverse urban population, in the Indonesian archipelago is well above average. Since there is so much to gain in terms of social cohesion, public spirit, solidarity, and identification with a collective culture, with communal traditions, with shared norms and values, and since there is hardly anything to lose, it would seem imperative to start developing a policy centered on urban forms of house symbolism as soon as possible.