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From sign to design: The role of domain transfer in redefining architecture locality

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p><i>Article history:</i> Received March 25, 2025 Received in revised form May 14, 2025 Accepted June 21, 2025 Available online August 01, 2025</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Concept Culture Design Locality Transformation</p> <p>*Corresponding author: Bramasta Putra Redyantanu Department of Architecture, Petra Christian University, Surabaya, Indonesia Email: bramasta@petra.ac.id ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0993-1234</p> | <p><i>This research examines the design process using conceptual frameworks based on domain transfer to suggest a new model for architecture based on local contexts. Plowright's conceptual framework is a way of developing new ideas, in which architecture may or may not be subverted with concepts that are significant; meanings may also be redefined with 'big ideas' (concepts), analogy, metaphor or significant questions from inside and outside the realms of architecture. This research utilizes case study method through design and reflects on the design process within the context of the West Java Cultural Center design competition. This analysis deconstructed and explained the design process using the conceptual framework, identifying unique representations of cross-cultural and West Java culture as the basis for an architectural program. The case was used to understand the transformational architectural syntax occurring from local signs and symbols as evidence of innovation. The results of the case study fell within three areas: concepts as a way to achieve a place of innovation (hypothesis), transferring ideas based on locality into elements and syntax (transfer), and bringing them all together into a coherent design (coherence). Domain transfer was redefined in this case study as the translation of symbolic values and cultural attributes from non-architecture into architectural form and elements in pursuit of contextual design innovation.</i></p> |

Introduction

Symbolic design as contextual knowledge

This research study will seek to unveil multi-faceted areas of potential innovation in architecture through investigating symbols and their locality. The use of symbolism, metaphors and analogy within an architectural design is particularly interesting. This allows designers to look beyond the confines of the field of architecture, thus allowing for opportunities for uniquely and wonderfully innovative designs. Domain transfer (Plowright 2014) enables the mapping of conceptual attributes of cultural symbols into

physical attributes, as such the innovation is culturally integrated. In addition, symbols and metaphors enhance the aesthetic of buildings while at the same time gives the buildings meaning that connects users and culturally and historically embed values in a contemporary context (Adiputra and Salura 2021; Idedhyana and Rijasa 2022).

Design isn't simply a process of individual judgment. Rather, it can be characterized as a structured process with methods that can be thoughtfully reflected upon as 'knowledge'. In this case design can be examined, studied and replicated as a process. Design based on the methodology previously framed by Plowright



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(2014) emphasizes that design occurs based on a series of decisions made, not on a haphazard manner; thus, a decorative mode of design should have each design decision made based on a logical reason; it could and should be able to be articulated and possibly evaluated as a knowledge production process.

Research through design is a reflective way of knowing in research and can generate particular and useful knowledge (Schön 1984). This allows designers to investigate and reflect on their design process and produce usable knowledge for other contexts. Reflection allows the designer to better understand how design research can be developed as a research tool between theory and practice that furthers the discipline of architecture.

The design process is a complex, interweaving method with many layers and levels (Newell, Rosenbloom, and Laird 1989). Therefore, the aim of this research is to dissect the design process as knowledge that can be analyzed and taught. This will be a way to deepen our understanding of what knowledge designer can learn about each step in the process to understand how innovation happens, and how designers can create more relevant and responsive solutions in the context of complexity (Venturi, Stierli, and Brownlee 1977).

As a design case study, the West Java Cultural Center demonstrates the potential for implementing ideas arising from symbols and locality. This endeavor attempts to generate innovation while being also respectful and integrating cultural embodiment (Redyantanu 2021; Yatmo and Atmodiwirjo 2021). Local symbols, appropriate materials, and awareness to the cultural context used are certain to lead to designs that are desirable and pertinent in a sustainable manner.

Previous studies, such as those conducted by Mardian and Aditya (2023); Vindya, Saladin, and Siswanto (2018); Abdurrahman (2023) have undertaken studies that, for the most part, focused on using local materials and adjusting traditional typologies. This study provides an alternative paradigm in that it utilizes domain transfer to rethink how cultural symbols are interpreted into architectural form thus offering a groundbreaking contribution to contemporary design.

To conclude this introduction, the study would like to emphasize once more that research is vitally important to the design process. Designing should not only be considered a form of making; design is knowledge construction (Buchanan

1992; Jones 1992). Research-based designing can result in significant design solutions that are more informative and innovative, and ultimately relevant to society. I hope this research will help to contribute to the architectural discipline as a whole, and to the practice and theory of design with a conceptual framework where analogy and metaphor are depicted from symbols and locality.

Symbols and meaning in architecture

Analogy and metaphor provide strong means of understanding complex ideas by finding a parallel with something designer already know. Analogy relies on linking two domains that exhibit structural similarity (L. Van Schaik 2015), whereas a metaphor may involve describing something in a non-literal way that embodies an abstract idea or deeper meaning (Antoniades 1990). Designers may be using these tools to link abstract theories with practical applications, to encourage innovation and originality in their designs.

The tools of analogy and metaphor in design can be applied through a conceptual framework approach (Plowright 2014). This can be especially valuable when exploring objects associated with identity and cultures of representation. Following a systematic process provides designers with new avenues to develop ideas while also connecting with the vision and objectives for the project. Analogies and metaphors also afford the designer the means to create signifiers that may add meaning to the project if the intended meaning gets expressed visually and functionally (Watkins 2006). For example, incorporating natural elements as analogies in building design could encourage emotional and cultural connections with users.

Understanding the design process as a way of building knowledge may help designers better understand their practice. Reflection may give awareness of the strategies that are truly effective, find patterns in events, and even assess their past successes or failures. The designer's know-how is better served, but this may also add to the architectural field as a whole. By reflecting systematically, designers can hone their practices and pose critical questions, and generate new hypotheses perhaps related to design innovation.

Design as cross-disciplinary knowledge

Design isn't just about creating something; it's a process rich with reflection and theoretical understanding (Alexander 1964; Plowright 2014).

Reflecting on this competition work, the study hopes to find things that are both practical and applicable, yet firmly rooted in a clear theoretical framework, much like Plowright explained in his conceptual framework. This way of thinking emphasizes that this study also can analyze and explore design as a form of knowledge, which allows us to develop more meaningful solutions within architecture.

The idea of design as a domain-transfer activity really opens doors, allowing us to turn elements from outside of architecture into architectural components or syntax. This process lets designers pull inspiration from all sorts of disciplines and weave it into their work. So, design becomes more than just a creative product; it also turns into a source of practical knowledge that designer can apply in the real world. This method understands that ideas from outside design (Forty 2004) can provide new and creative insights that really improve the design process (Vidler 1996; 2003).

Various architectural design studies have certainly tried to ground the concept of locality in architectural design (Mardian and Aditya 2023; Nugraha Putra, Budiarti, and Puspatarini 2019; Vindya, Saladin, and Siswanto 2018; Akbar et al. 2024). However, it seems none have really explored how local symbols from outside architecture could be transformed into architectural syntax or elements through domain transfer. Most studies have aimed at using local resources or fitting into culture and environment. Still, employing symbols as the starting point for design ideas potentially reveal interesting new paths for producing architecture that more meaningful and particularly contextual. This approach could allow designers to delve deeper into cultural and historical aspects, really connecting buildings to their local identities.

Contemporary architectural design often highlights integrating symbolism and locality as crucial for sparking innovation and contextual relevance. Plowright (2014) emphasizes how important conceptual frameworks are for embedding symbolic elements into designs, essentially turning abstract ideas into meaningful

architectural features. Adiputra and Salura (2021) show us how sacred symbols can enhance the cultural and aesthetic values of architecture, while Redyantanu (2021) explores the potential of locality within metaphorical design approaches. Yatmo and Atmodiwirjo (2021) emphasize how socio-cultural perspectives may play a crucial role in shaping architectural innovation, particularly when locality becomes a foundation for design thinking. Despite significant advancements, practical applications of these theories in innovative design methods can still feel somewhat disconnected. This research intends to fill this gap by researching the locally symbolic and locally derived aspects of architectural programming, specifically in West Java. In this way perhaps theory can be tied back to practice, to inform both a more in-depth understanding of cross-cultural identity and architectural practices that might be innovative.

Methods

West Java as a context for symbols of locality and culture

This research aims to examine the design process of the West Java Cultural Center competition within its specific environment. West Java's symbols reflect the richness and distinctiveness of the province's culture and identity (Abdurrahman 2023). Elements such as the kujang, rice and cotton, hills and mountains, and the oval form can hold significant symbolic value. The kujang, a traditional weapon of the West Java is a symbol of courage, bravery, and resilience. Other elements, like rice and cotton, universally in Indonesia symbolize the hope of prosperity. The hills and mountains are actually West Java's beautiful natural character of environment. The overall oval shape is representing balance and harmony, potentially reflecting flexibility in societal life. West Java's region and culture spirit are shown in figure 1.



Figure 1. Local symbols of West Java as a source of inspiration

Symbols provide great possibilities as projections of a society's vision, goals, dreams, and characters. This possibility can be turned into architectonic features full of meaning and practicality (Hale and Macdonald 2005). The kujang element, for example, can show itself in the form of ornaments or building projections, perhaps symbolizing fortitude and resilience. Rice, cotton, and the mountainous hills may become landscape or facade elements, perhaps representing fertility, gracing buildings with meaning beyond mere ornamental significance. One might suggest that a performing arts building, in its functional design, has the capacity to draw upon elements from West Java's symbols, thereby potentially giving rise to unique architectural innovations. A performing arts building can capture these symbols by working closely with the symbolic elements mentioned (Sidiq, Rukayah, and Prabowo 2016). This building can be a place of gathering and representing cultural identity. As an example, one can apply the flexible oval shape by capturing the flexibility of an auditorium as well as acoustics. By incorporating these emblematic elements, the performing arts building may offer visitors a richer and more meaningful experience.

Design process framework analysis

This study is qualitative research (Groat and Wang 2013) through design process. It is focusing on the reflection of that process within the context of West Java symbol. This method enables

researchers to explore the depth of meaning and symbolism embedded in local elements, and integrate them into knowledge production (Raymond Lucas 2016). Such a reflective approach is expected to produce findings that are not only practical and applicable but also grounded in strong and relevant theories.

The analytical pattern in this study involves deconstructing design transformation through a conceptual framework (Plowright 2014). The first action is identifying the core ideas derived from local symbols and icons. This is followed by the domain transfer to translate these aspects into tangible architectural syntax and elements. The design element then analyzed in depth to understand how symbolism and locality can be integrated into meaningful and useful design (Ray Lucas 2019). A concept-based design framework is employed as a tool to decipher the structured design process. Figure 2 represents the conceptual framework as an analytical tool for deconstructing the design object or architectural ideas.

Design research as a scientific procedure highlights the importance of a structured and systematic design process (Verbeke 2013; Till 2011). Through this approach, design is expected to be viewed not just as a creative activity. But also, it is a reflective action in the production of knowledge. A structured design process allows researchers to pose critical questions, develop hypotheses, and objectively evaluate outcomes. Consequently, this research will not only enrich the theoretical understanding of design but also

make a significant contribution to innovative and contextual architectural practice.

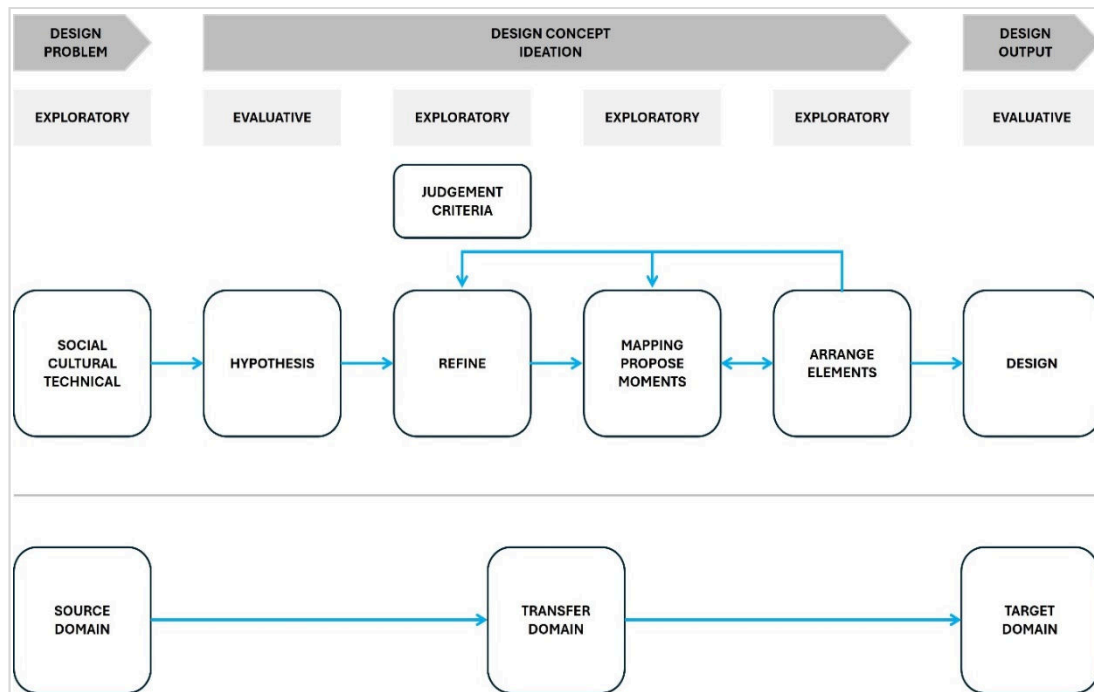


Figure 2. Concept framework as the basis for analyzing design objects

Results and discussion

Design stages: Exploration of symbols and locality

The architectural design of the cultural-performing art integrate key elements from West Java's emblem, potentially reflecting the province's cultural value. For starter, the oval shape from the emblem serves as the primary building layout, perhaps symbolizing flexibility within the performance spaces. Rice and cotton, which traditionally represent prosperity, translated into inclusive design principles of spaces, ensuring accessibility for all society and the wider community through open and welcoming interior and exterior areas. Furthermore, the kujang a traditional weapon symbolizing bravery and resilience could inform the concept of a protective facade. Symbols of hills and water feature in landscape also inspire the landscaped outdoor areas, possibly creating spaces that encourage interaction with nature. Material selections also support cultural continuity and sustainability. Taking cues from vernacular Sundanese

architecture, the use of passive thermal comfort through natural air ventilation and daylighting could provide comfort and energy efficiency. At the same time, using locally derived wood industrial materials can add a human level of thermal comfort and sustainability. The openings and carefully designed passive ventilation systems will increase ventilation and air movement, and may reduce the need for mechanical cooling while giving the experience of spatial continuity in nature.

Utilizing a stilted pilotic form derived from the saung building this design may be appropriate to the rural West Java local community vernaculars. This may also mean harmonizing the construction with the natural environment. Using iconic symbols as architectural elements, this strategy could provide new concepts for not-for-profit community and inclusive performance venues. This design, could create not only a functional design, but be a way to communicate cultural identity to larger audiences. By continuing to strengthen the relationship between the built environment, tradition, and modern requirements, by fostering genuine engagement

and reciprocity within local ideology, it is possible to generate flourishing architectural innovation. These epic ideas are expressed

through figure 3, and its sleeker architectural form.

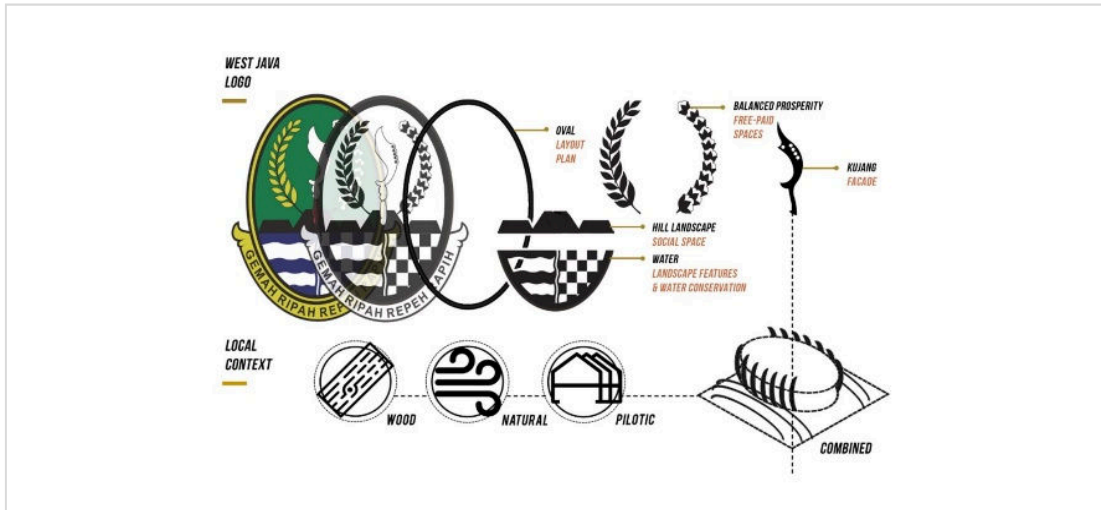


Figure 3. Exploration of West Java symbols as design inspirations

Design stages: Programming and transformation

Using programming of a performing arts facility provides a starting point for developing a non-exclusive and inclusive public architectural solution. The goal is to make this built scenario open to all and to serve as a venue for artists to interact with the society and open community. Therefore, the performance arts complex is more than just a location for events; it is also a vibrant center of creativity that enables cooperation and

innovation among several artistic communities. The design approach starts with the construction of a hilly terrain creating dynamic and interactive outdoor areas. The bottom portion of the building is designed as an open stage offering a adaptable venue for public events and performances. The oval design of the building's main structure represents openness and equality. Transformed into a modern face, the kujang component serves as a symbol of courage and protection that blends with contemporary design.

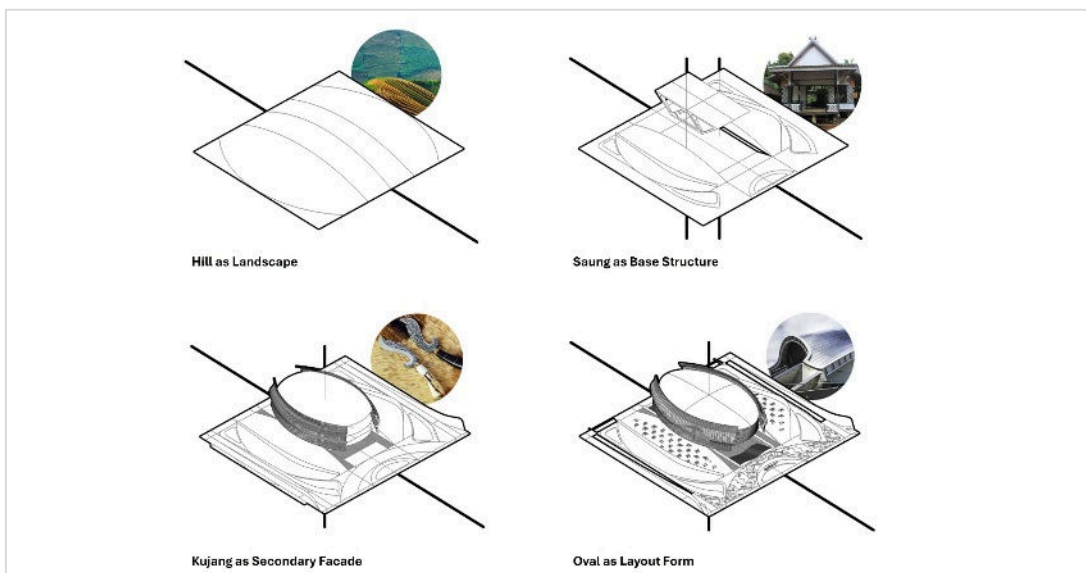


Figure 4. Programming transformation in design

From this whole design mixing symbolic elements with the West Java environment results an open and inclusive performing arts structure. Along with enhancing the visual appeal of the structure, this method also enhances its cultural relevance and character. As a result, the performing arts building is anticipated to be a new

prototype of public architectural design that offers a venue that stimulates creativity and community while integrating icons and locality as necessary parts of a contextual and relevant design. Figure 4 demonstrates the design shift from the surroundings and the interior programming of the building.

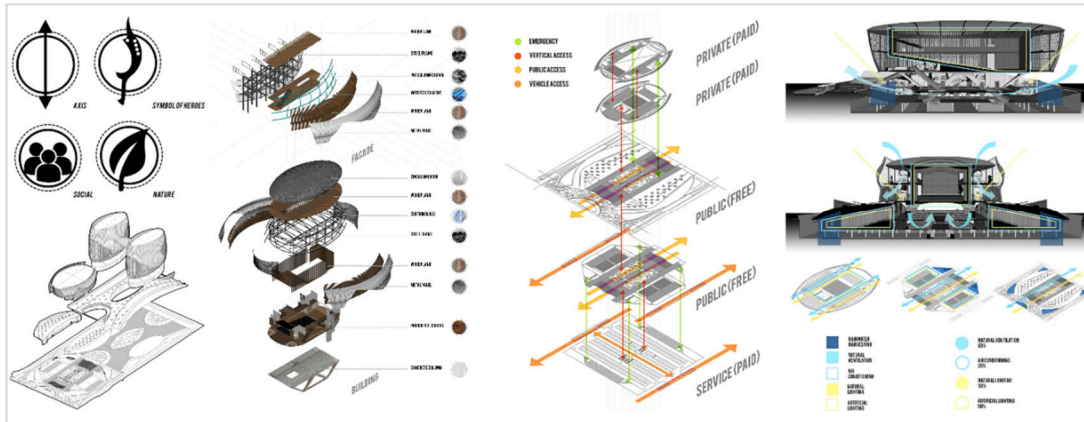


Figure 5. Syntax and architectural elements in holistic design planning

Design stages: Architectural elements and syntax integration

The use of industrial and synthetic materials in an oval form using kujang items created an intriguing mixture of concrete, steel framing, and panels that appear to be wooden, but are made of recycled plastic and aluminum cladding. The oval form created a strong base, a sense of modernity and dynamism while the kujang formed items dispersed across the façade provided a local culture and aesthetic appeal to the structure. The varied materials and industrial design not only supported the structure but also provided a refined, bespoke aesthetic unique to West Java.

The exploration of the private and public area was focused on the challenges of balancing exclusivity of the performances, with inclusivity for community-society based artists and their performances and creations. The private areas were meant to offer the artists spaces to work and recharge their energy, while the public zone offered guests as much comfort as possible. Protection and privacy were offered, while the contrast of the contemporary architectural elements inspired by the kujang on the façade and paired with a creative area would be beneficial for the artist. This layout guarantees that everyone engaged finds the performing arts building a welcoming and practical environment.

The design concept incorporates natural elements and syntax, including hilly landscapes, natural lighting, and ventilation, all achieved through a cohesive design approach. The hilly terrain encourages dynamic and interesting outside areas, hence connecting the building with its surroundings without interruption. While natural lighting is best used to let sunlight permeate the interior, good ventilation improves ideal air movement. Including these elements, the design enhances comfort and energy efficiency and so produces a delightful and rejuvenating atmosphere for customers. Figure 5 illustrates a number of architectural aspects inspired by West Java's essence and local symbol research.

Domain transfer refers to the process of taking symbolic values and cultural local element from areas outside of architecture, and translating them into tangible elements and design feature. This study introduces a conceptual framework that consists of three main stages:

- Identification of cultural symbols and attributes: Filtering and identifying key symbols from local culture (e.g., icons, weapons, motifs, etc.) along with their associated value attributes.
- Transformation through domain transfer: Applying the domain transfer framework to analyze the identified cultural values and attributes. Mapping these attributes onto architectural design parameters, thereby

establishing domain transfer as a bridge between cultural symbols and physical building elements.

- Integration and synthesis of design elements: Unifying the transformed elements into a cohesive and innovative design for an arts

performance venue. Ensuring the final design not only meets functional and aesthetic needs but also authentically reflects the local cultural identity.

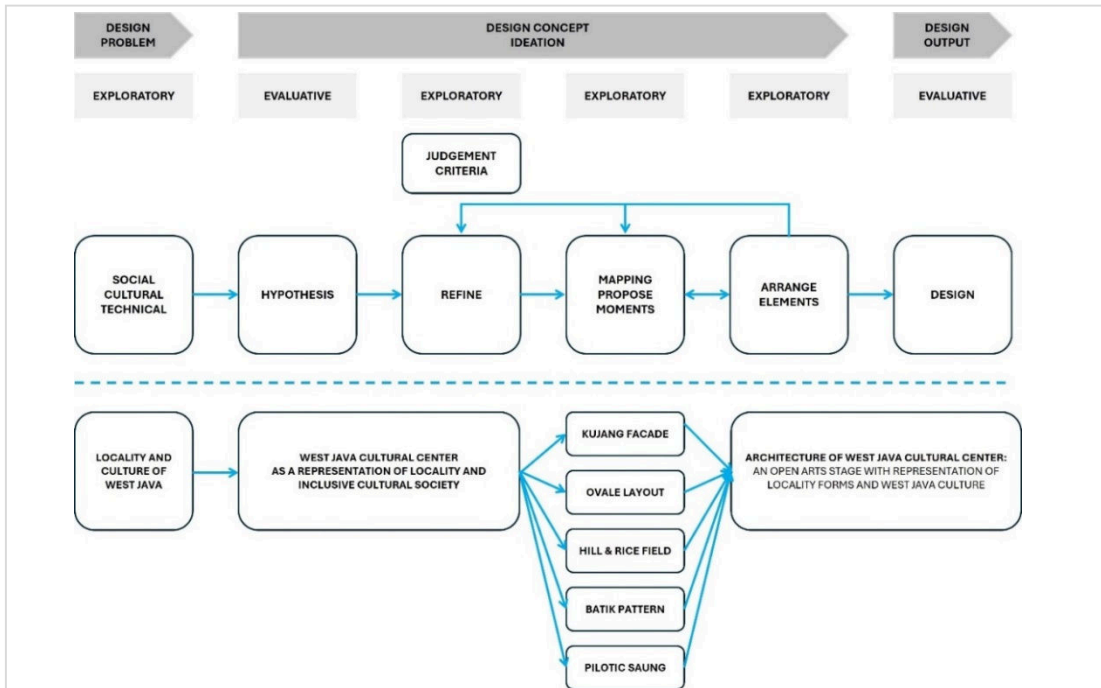


Figure 6. Proposition and design framework

Hypothesis: Concept as innovation framework

If a designing approach were to be guided by Plowright’s conceptual construct, then there may be an initial pursuit of architectural and related issues of West Java identity that can embody cultural symbols and traditional aspects which may show different aspects of locality state. Originally this exploratory design phase may identify some basic aspects that might be part of the individual aspects of the study. These may include the kujang, rice and cotton, hills, and its oval circle as cultural and spatial references that may help inform design investigation.

The conceptual hypothesis in this study can focus on elements from some ways a cultural centre may be reconstructed from a transformative symbolic representation related to inclusion through a space for artistic activities. This may indicate through inclusion of locality and symbolic features that create a welcomed, opened, and supported creative representations by artists. Designers can aid in the understanding for

developing environments that contribute through cultural identity and collaboration of artists.

Another step may involve the transition from conceptual design to strategy for deployment of design ideas; and transition design ideas to form, including, but not limited to, kujang facades, oval forms and layouts, rolling hill patterns, large "batik" particulars, and/or saung stages on stilts. Each representing some symbols may be employed as structural or visible elements of built elements. For instance, kujang shapes could act as a prominent fin on the front elevation that serves as feature and provides a protective element; the oval as a prominent shape and as layout form could offer spatial integration. The visible aspects of rolling grass landscapes and batik patterns can greatly complement and enhance the visual experience of the phenomena being designed and layered to provide additional meaning from the original design ideas.

The different components shape a design proposal which ultimately seeks to develop a

holistic and flexible sustainable approach. By Leveraging Plowright's framework, the design process is shifted from simply designing objects, to a more engaging journey about what designer understand and produce knowledge as a design method. The researcher's and designer's paths may be to explore architectural solutions that could reach deeper than mere buildings, connected to its context, enriching cultural narratives, enabling artistic expression. This platform of structured work can lead toward meaningful and great explorations of innovative design strategies and to a dynamic relationship with tradition and how designer understand it in the present.

Domain transfer: Sign to element

Representing locality in the context of architectural design can serve as a very substantial way for creating contextual, appropriate, and meaningful designs derived from contextually meaningfully emblem signs like Advanced West Java, representation from kujang emblem, rice and cotton emblem, shape of mountain and hilly contour and oval shape, may have significant meaning or culture. By referring to various representations of locality depicted in these various assortments of emblems as a means to indicated reference locality, may not only affirmed local identity, but also could have indicative of some closer connections between the building and the community of which the place used to symbolize or reference the local identity.

Representation of locality as part of the various symbolizations serves as an excellent mechanism to portray the cultural identity of provincial identity to those who make use of.

Representation locality and tropicity as evidenced in the saung pilotic stage gives inspiration to have architectural element that is functional, local inspired, stake visually aesthetic.

More specifically, the saung architectural stage, has an elevated stage that promotes good air circulation and ventilation. Natural elements such as good lighting and ventilation, which all derived from natural features is a key part of the design of the inclusive design. At the same time providing user experience of comfort and in overall adherence to sustainability principles and ultimately produced environmentally sustainable energy-efficient buildings.

Domains outside architecture such as symbols, emblems, graphics, can be turned into design elements with their encoded properties and attributes abstracted away. These abstractions also negotiate the values and meanings embedded in the symbols into concrete architectural syntaxes, for instance the kujang could be included as a facade as an element conveying bravery and protection. In this case, the domain transfer could add visual richness to the design by referring to and fragmenting those meanings culturally and socially to architecture. Figure 7 illustrates that cultural and local value from domain transfer can translate into an architecture element.

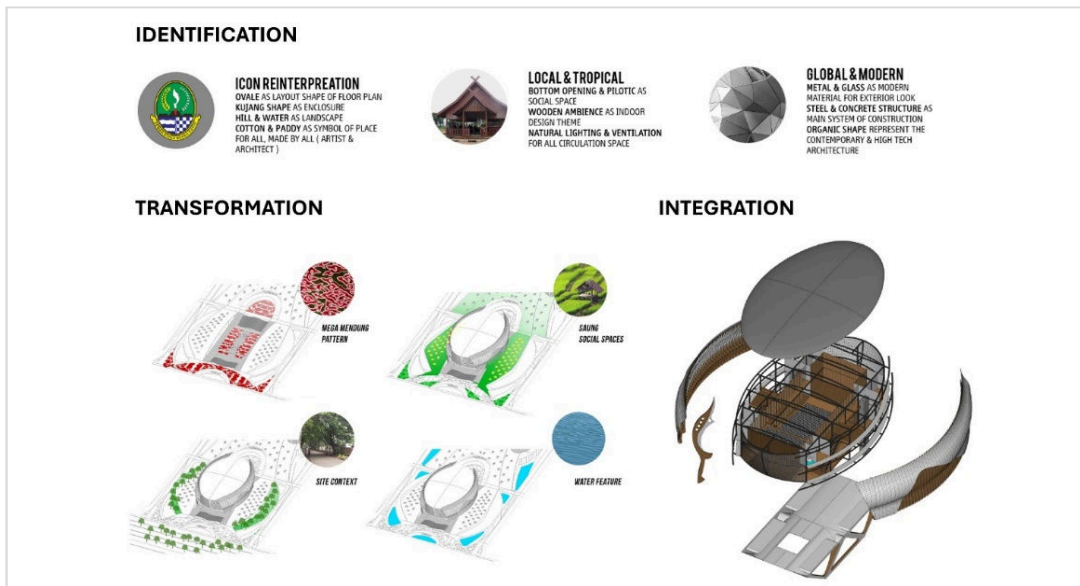


Figure 7. Domain transfer from locality into architectural syntax

Coherence: Design assembly and integration

Within the field of architectural design, the placement of elements within what could broadly be termed architectural syntax could be viewed as quintessential to the demonstration of locality. For example, Plowright notes that architectural syntax includes both physical components, i.e., materials, forms and structures, and the cultural and historical sense of story within architectural expression. In the performing arts building at West Java’s cultural center, synthetic industrial materials may be chosen to represent characteristics of wood. This approach can contribute to durability while potentially preserving the visual essence of traditional Sundanese motifs. The integration of local influences might aim to enhance ambiance, fostering a connection to cultural identity. Rather than depending on natural materials, this strategy may provide an alternative for reinforcing contextual ties.

Coherence may be perceived as a guiding aspect, enabling architectural components of the transformations to engage and integrate with one another in ways that can support functionality. In this particular project, spatial configuration responds to user movement, potentially influencing circulation dynamics. Plowright, for instance, suggest that coherence plays a crucial role in aligning individual elements toward a unified integration of purpose.

A successful proposal might demonstrate design unity, potentially integrating aesthetics, function, and local context. It could also offer innovative solutions to technical and artistic challenges. More than simply a technical guide, such a proposal may present a vision for architecture as a medium for cultural preservation and advancement. Figures 8 and 9, depict an effort to align the overall arrangement of elements into a coherent form of functionality and meaning.

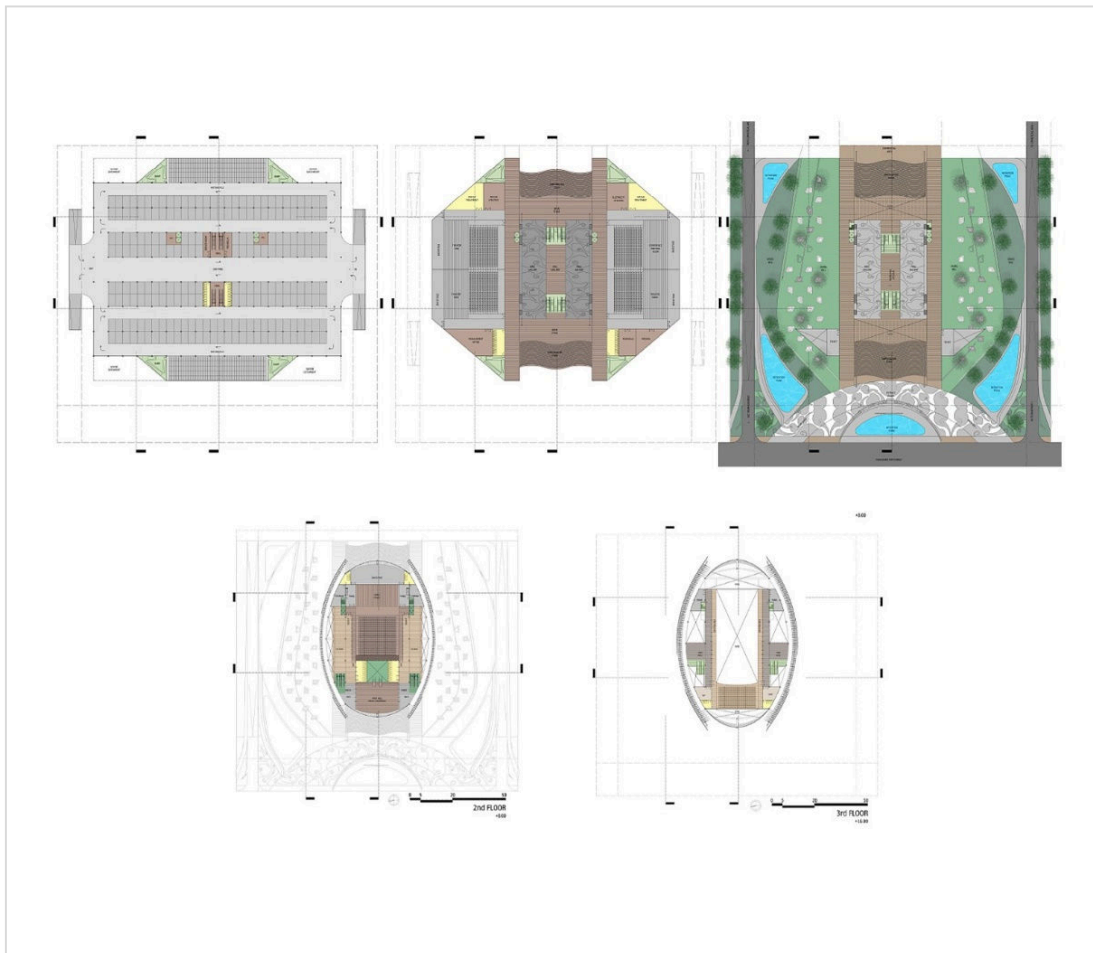


Figure 8. Coherence in spatial arrangements and activity programming

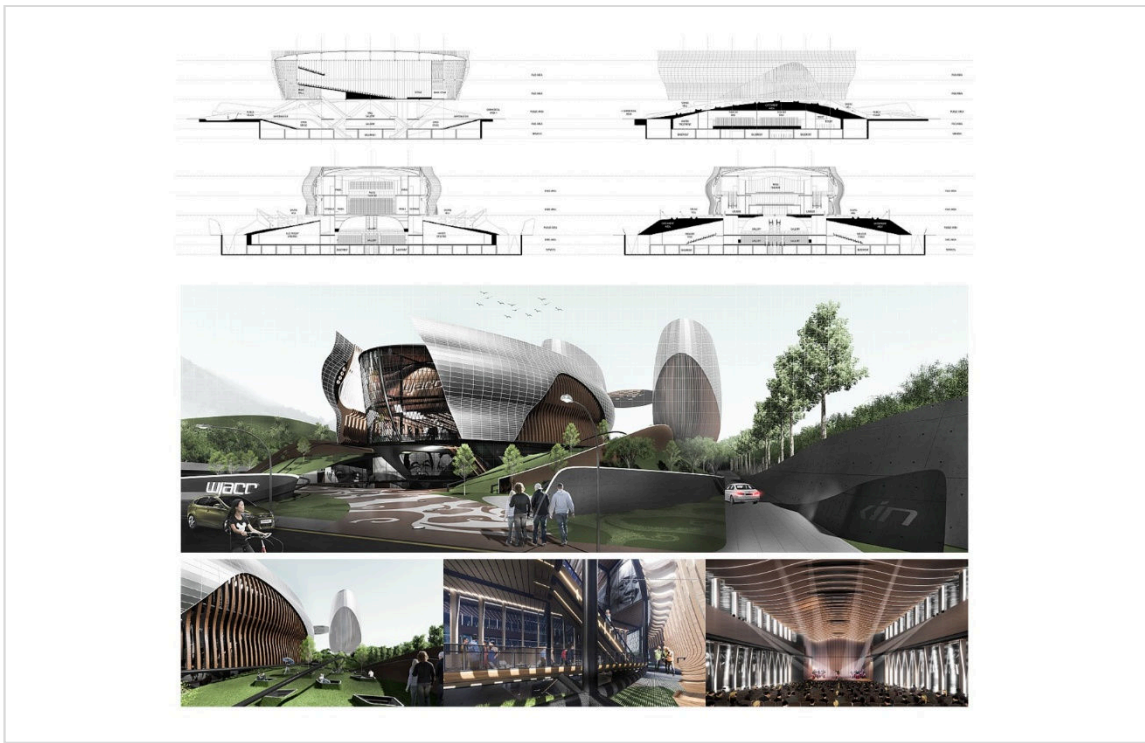


Figure 9. Coherence in architectural elements forming a comprehensive proposal

Locality redefined: Opportunity to concept-based design innovation

The design process, as one might observe, may unfold as a structured progression. This progression can incorporate analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in what might be considered a deliberate manner. Systematically identifying challenges may assist in exploring potential solutions. Furthermore, selecting an appropriate approach can contribute to maintaining clarity and logical flow. Design process documentation or framework investigation could ensure that the process itself remains accessible and adaptable.

Drawing inspiration from diverse fields such as art, literature, and science, analogies and symbolic metaphors could introduce alternative perspectives. This multi-dimensional approach may allow non-typological architectural or spatial elements to emerge in design. Connections across disciplines might stimulate innovation for instance, natural metaphors could inspire sustainability efforts, while biological analogies may influence structural efficiency. Recognizing design as a scientific endeavor can support decision-making that may be rooted in research

and data, potentially reinforcing architectural methodologies while encouraging broader interdisciplinary inquiry.

Conclusions

Domain transfer may function as a key method for shaping design intentions, allowing non-architectural ideas to aggregate form slowly as an architectural identity could allow loosely adhered, unnatural meanings to take shape into compositions of space, which, had more invite that also engage cultural and local identities. Viewing through this lens, architecture could go beyond its original function and give users a sensorial experience entangled in its context.

Domain transfer may also help to think about cultural symbols in terms of architectural and design elements, allowing for designs that intended to simultaneously engage local identity, as well as functional, contemporary identity. While exploring specific objects is a priority within this study, it is plausible that we could

facilitate broader thinking around identity and cultural readings through their application. It will be contextualized to not overextend its exploration, as representing something contextual could embed a freeze on inquiry, though conceptual based strategies may help architecture that is otherwise quickly losing the plurality and identity enveloped in relevance and inclusion.

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Author(s) contribution

Bramasta Putra Redyantanu contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.

Rony Gunawan Sunaryo contribute to the research concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.

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