

# DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE KERATON SURAKARTA ARCHITECTURE

Titis S. Pitana<sup>1</sup>, I Gde Semadi Astra<sup>2</sup>,  
I Made Suastika<sup>2</sup>, I. B. Gde Yudha Triguna<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postgraduate Program, Udayana University

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Letters, Udayana University

<sup>3</sup>Hindu University of Indonesia

Email: [titis\\_pitana@yahoo.com](mailto:titis_pitana@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the result of a study entitled "Deconstruction of the Symbolic Meaning of the Keraton Surakarta Architecture." This study is intended not to understand the Keraton Surakarta architecture as a physical materialization of architectural planning and design. Rather, in this study, the Keraton Surakarta is the material object of a study on the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning which focuses on three main problems: (1) the cause of the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning toward the Keraton Surakarta architecture; (2) the deconstruction process of the symbolic meaning; and (3) the implication of the deconstruction toward the social-cultural life of the keraton people and Surakarta society.

**Key words:** deconstruction, symbol, architecture, Keraton Surakarta

## INTRODUCTION

When Javanese people's spirit is eroded deep in the cycle of history, the word 'culture' can not mean "belief" as so far understood by most experts. For the symbolic meaning of the keraton as an effort to explore the newness and nowness meaning, it seems that "belief" is not a compromise to understand culture at present. "Belief" as the peak of thoughts has not so far been achieved by rational minds in scientific traditions, both positivistic and interpretive. It is because the word "belief" in the study of Eastern mysticism has been understood better as a spiritual discourse than a rational idea which is applicable for social-cultural practices. It is from this dimension that the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture is directed to go beyond

the paradox of truths of rationalism-realism and criticism as well as intuitionism to come to what is called 'epistemology' in science, particularly in cultural studies.

Physically, the Keraton Surakarta architecture can be regarded as an indigeneous work of Javanese culture which has symbols implying messages and advice for the next generation. However, the messages and advice behind the symbols have no meanings if they are not understood. The symbols available in the Keraton Surakarta are expressions that can not be signed only by physical materialization. Because of this, the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta should always be searched suitable with its interpreter's space and time. In other words, interpretation into the symbols of the Keraton Surakarta will never stop or will keep on deconstructing. Therefore, to interpret the symbols of the space design patterns and construction elements in the Keraton Surakarta, it is necessary to understand the background history and process of its establishment.

The sustainable deconstruction of the symbolic meaning here should be taken as a never-stop process so that the new meaning should be always "becoming" and fragmented by the interpreter's space and time. Although history has tried to make a periodization of human activities since thousands of years ago, as a totality view of life, it is basic that in the history of mankind there has never been an absolute separation between thoughts, actions, spaces, and time as a moment. It is thus not simple to find out an absolute separation between thoughts and their results in life space which are not tied up to time contextually, just like humans who can not be separated from their culture and social life.

This study is intended not to understand the Keraton Surakarta architecture as a physical materialization of architectural planning and design. Instead, in this study, the Keraton Surakarta architecture is regarded as the material object of a study on the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning focused on three issues: (1) the cause of the symbolic deconstruction meaning of Keraton Surakarta architecture; (2), the process of deconstruction, and (3) implications of such deconstruction towards socio-cultural life and Keraton Surakarta's society

Generally, this study is intended to describe the construction and deconstruction of Javanese culture rooted in the Keraton Surakarta with its local genius reflected in the Keraton Surakarta architecture. In turn the study is aimed to reveal and explain the

cultural reconstruction in purpose to enrich national culture as part of scientific works to develop knowledge and science. Specifically, this study has three purposes: (1) to know and understand the causes of the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta; (2) to know and understand the processes of the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta; and (3) to know and understand the implication of the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta towards the social-cultural life of the keraton people and Surakarta society.

This study has two significances. Firstly, theoretical significance, this study is expected to give significant contributions to the development of knowledge and science, particularly architecture and cultural studies. Besides, it is hoped to add and complete the previous studies on Javanese architecture and National architecture. Moreover, for academics, this study can be used as a reference to find out possible areas for further studies which can not yet be covered by this study. Secondly, practical significance, this study is expected to broaden people's mind and widen their views on the local genius contained in their local cultures in the face of the impacts of global culture. Besides, this study can be used by public decision makers in relation to social-cultural life.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study is a Cultural Studies study which uses qualitative method, and qualitative-descriptive and hermeneutics-based interpretive data analysis. In general a study with qualitative analysis is defined as a study that produces descriptive data in the form of words, idioms, and/or expressions, including observable actions—by emphasizing on the concept and pattern development of the data; paying attention to both setting and subject holistically so that they are inseparable variables; being humanistic; understanding the meaning as the basis for participant's actions; understanding the limited scope of situation; and being a crafting art that prioritizes mastery and feeling involvement (Bungin, 2003:147).

In this study Derrida's theory of deconstruction is positioned as the grand theory to answer three study problems which is in its application supported by three other theories used eclectively, namely (1) Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, (2) Eco's visual communication semiotics, and (3) Jauss' theory of reception.

The deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture is not an event that happens naturally; instead, it originates from the resistance or objection to logocentrism created on the basis of the keraton metaphysics. This means that the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture is an event caused by the metaphysical death of the Keraton Surakarta. The “death” here can probably happen because of being made dead by those outside the logocentrism creators of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture and/or because of its own death due to the keraton members’ metaphysical refusal against the logocentrism they have created.

The metaphysical death of the Keraton Surakarta which is the accumulation of resistance and/or objection to the metaphysics itself is triggered by three aspects: (1) Status and role changes of the Keraton Surakarta, from being the Company’s power dolls in the colonialization era up to the *swa-praja* (autonomy) status and becoming the cultural heritage in the era of the Indonesian republic; (2) the Keraton Surakarta in the global constellation, in which there is the pressure of the modern rationality on the keraton morality that makes the keraton as a victim of capitalism and a means of tourism commodification so that the keraton no longer has a space to articulate its own existence; and (3) coup d’etat for power, in which there came two kings after the coup d’etat incident over the Keraton Surakarta that refuse the existential metaphysics of the keraton as the cosmos center and the model of Javanese culture.

In Derridian logic, the interpretation of symbols in the keraton Surakarta architecture is a sustainable process. The architectural materialization is a means of visual communication in which, to Umberto Eco, in the interpretation of symbols there happen *semiosis* and *canon* process, that is a process of uniting or combining an entity (*representamen*) with another entity called ‘object’. This process results in a never-ending relation chain. This never-ending movement is then formulated by Eco and Derrida as the unlimited semiosis process (Broadbent, 1980:382-383).

This process is then used to know and understand the deconstruction tracks of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta where its clarity can be understood through the following processes. *First*, the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the “design and building patterns” that happen through three processes, namely (1) from the teaching on life to the cultural heritage; (2) from sacred to profane; and (3) from the

symbol of feudalistic bureaucracy to domestic family institution. *Second*, the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the “materialization of the Keraton Surakarta architecture” that happen through four processes, namely (1) building form: from the symbol of greatness/glory to that of apprehension; (2) relating building: from the symbol of space consciousness to that of communication; (3) limiting building: from the symbol of the maintenance of sacredness to that of geographical limit; and (4) accessories: from moral message to construction accessories. *Third*, the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the “King and Keraton Surakarta” that happen through three processes, namely (1) Javanese King: from the symbol of god-kings to the duty-carrier of Javanese culture; (2) Keraton Surakarta: from the symbol of cosmic centers to that of tourism attraction; and (3) the symbol of Keraton Surakarta: from the symbol of the cosmic unity to that of commodified accessories.

The metaphysical death of the Keraton Surakarta as the causing factor of the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture, and explained by the discussion on the deconstruction tracks eventually give some implications toward the social-cultural life of the keraton community and Surakarta society. *First*, toward the social structure of the keraton and Surakarta society which can be identified from two social facts, namely (1) the Keraton Surakarta is today part of the local (*kelurahan*) administration; and (2) the Keraton Surakarta community is now part of the Surakarta society. *Second*, toward the social intitution which can be identified from two social facts, namely: (1) the Keraton Surakarta has become the society’s cultural affinity; and (2) the Keraton Surakarta has become a legitimating institution for modern aristocrats. *Third*, toward the kinship system and value formation process which can be identified through two social facts, namely (1) the Keraton Surakarta community has become ”ajur-ajer” aristocrats (immersed with ordinary people); and (2) the Keraton Surakarta struggle for becoming the model of Javanese culture. *Fourth*, toward the space formation for new consciousness established by the Keraton Surakarta in response to various changes due to global modernism.

## **FINDINGS**

*First*, there are three sides acting as the subjects that perform the the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture: the authority, the Keraton Surakarta community, and people outside the Keraton Surakarta.

- (1) Authority, which can historically be distinguished into two, i.e. the colonial authority during the colonization era and the government authority during the Republic Indonesia era. In this case both the colonial authority and the government authority serve as the key holders of capitalistic logocentrism that have killed the metaphysics of the Keraton Surakarta and replaced it with that of modernist rationality.
- (2) The Keraton Surakarta community, i.e. the keraton internal members who intentionally or unintentionally have done a metaphysical (cosmological) isolation of the Keraton Surakarta by changing the keraton sacredness into a cultural parody. Even, the limited material dimension originating from economic problems has a more significant correlation to the cognitive dimension of the Keraton Surakarta community so as to let the keraton architectural spaces become uncared hollow spaces which eventually lead to the metaphysical refusal of the keraton itself.
- (3) People outside the Keraton Surakarta who have spontaneous body responses towards the hollow architectural spaces of the Keraton Surakarta. The spaces which used to be used as a forum of activities (representation of events) are considered worth to be “benefited” by ignoring the metaphysics of the Keraton Surakarta through cultural improvisation.

*Second*, in carrying out its function as a cultural institution (the duty-carrier of Javanese culture), the Keraton Surakarta is faced with three main obstacles: economically, psychologically, and socially.

- (1) Economic obstacle, that is the limitedness of the keraton’s financial condition just to support its own existence.
- (2) Psychological obstacle, that is the psychological burden suffered by the Keraton Surakarta as the impact of having no political autonomy.
- (3) Social obstacle, that is the historical destiny that has stigmatized the Keraton Surakarta as the one accused of being the feudalistic followers which are opposed against the democratic principle practiced in the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).

## V. CONCLUSSION

The deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta architecture is an event caused by the metaphysical death of the Keraton Surakarta as an accumulation of resistance and/or objection to the metaphysics itself. *Second*, the deconstruction tracks of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta are the deconstruction processes which happen to three deconstructions of the symbolic meaning: (1) deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the “design and building patterns”; (2) deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the “materialization of the Keraton Surakarta architecture”; (3) deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the “King and Keraton Surakarta”. *Third*, the deconstruction of the symbolic meaning of the Keraton Surakarta has four implications toward the social-cultural life of the keraton and Surakarta people: (1) toward the social structure of the keraton and Surakarta people; (2) toward the social insitution of the keraton and Surakarta people; (3) toward the kinship system and value formation process; and (4) toward the space formation for new consciousness established by the Keraton Surakarta in response to various changes due to global modernism.

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