

Postmodernism and Commercialization of Vernacular Architecture: Spatial Hierarchy in Indonesian Traditional Houses

Aryasatya Rafa Prayitno*

Department of Philosophy, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Correspondence*:

E-mail: aryasatya.rafa.prayitno@mail.ugm.ac.id

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Abstract

Societies continuously move toward what is perceived as a “better” condition. From myth to reason, from geocentrism to heliocentrism, and from colonization to revolution, these shifts mark fundamental changes in how societies construct knowledge and meaning. This study examines the influence of postmodernism and commercialization on vernacular architecture in Indonesia, with a specific focus on the transformation of spatial hierarchy within traditional houses. Using a qualitative and interpretative approach, the research analyzes how postmodern architectural ideals, such as plurality, symbolism, and contextual expression interact with market-driven pressures in shaping contemporary adaptations of vernacular forms. The study focuses on Indonesian traditional houses, particularly *Joglo* and *Batak Toba* dwellings, while selected postmodern architectural works are employed as a theoretical framework rather than primary objects of analysis. The findings indicate that commercialization not only affects architectural form and materiality but also reconfigures spatial hierarchy, altering traditional distinctions between sacred and profane, public and private, and central and peripheral spaces. This study argues that understanding changes in spatial hierarchy is crucial for critically assessing the impact of postmodernism and commercialization on vernacular architecture, and for addressing the challenges of preserving cultural meaning within evolving urban and socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: *architectural criticism; postmodernism; rumah adat; spatial hierarchy; vernacular architecture*

Introduction

As human knowledge evolves, societies continuously move toward what is perceived as a “better” condition. From myth to reason, from geocentrism to heliocentrism, and from colonization to revolution, these shifts mark fundamental changes in how societies construct knowledge and meaning. These transitions reveal not linear progress, but ongoing negotiations of meaning and authority. Architecture, situated at the intersection of culture and knowledge, reflects these negotiations. Postmodernism emerges as a critical moment in this process, signaling a

paradigm shift that reshapes architectural meaning and practice. In the Indonesian context, this paradigm shift becomes particularly significant when it intersects with vernacular architecture and its spatial organization.

Within the shifting knowledge landscape of architecture, postmodernism promised diversity and inclusivity. The concept of postmodern architecture has a significant impact on the emergence of building forms that exhibit a diversity of shapes (Ariotejo, Thahir, & Tundono, 2020: 165). Yet in practice, it often homogenized cultures under a veneer of stylistic play. A nation like Indonesia—rooted in rich resources, also diverse traditions—this poses a challenge. This condition highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and the growing dominance of globalized aesthetics detached from local meaning.

Postmodern architecture seeks to blend traditional and non-traditional elements, as well as modern and non-modern components (Usman, Trumansyahjaya, & Djailani, 2024: 107). During the early stages of modernization, architectural aesthetics evolved into what became known as the International Style, characterized by a visual uniformity and a strong emphasis on function, encapsulated in the maxim "form follows function" (Widawati, 2025: 28). In contrast, postmodern architecture deliberately challenges this functionalist orthodoxy. It aims to create architectural forms that "tell stories," not merely through their utility, but through the cultivation of imagined worlds and symbolic expression (Baidhowi & Paryoko, 2025: 261). At its core, postmodernism represents an intellectual climate—a conceptual "ism"—rather than a fixed style (Aritonang, 2024: 166).

This theoretical framework becomes particularly relevant when applied to the Indonesian context. According to a 2023 report by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Indonesia currently has 63 officially registered cultural heritage buildings (2023: 5). Other sources indicate that the country has over 20 traditional dwellings, known locally as *rumah adat*.

Before the spatial space of Jakarta-Indonesia was dominated by skyscrapers and modern-postmodern structures, traditional dwellings (*rumah adat*) shaped the architectural and cultural landscape of Indonesia. *Rumah adat* were not merely places of residence but also serve as centers for social and religious activities (Lestari et al, 2025: 111). These functions are structured through a clear spatial hierarchy that regulates access, social relations, and symbolic meaning within the house. *Rumah adat* embody deep philosophical values related to communal life. One of research profound philosophical meanings that reflected the community's way of life. For example, *Rumah Lontioik* from Riau, Indonesia, exemplifies cultural depth. The curved roof, arching toward the sky, symbolizes humanity's reverence for God as the Supreme Creator (Lestari et al., 2025: 114). Such symbolism is embedded within a hierarchical spatial order, where architectural elements differentiate sacred and profane zones. This clear point that *rumah adat* was architectural design not solely for aesthetics but with a deeper purpose connected to life and value.

On the other hand, beginning in the late 1960s, architects began to return to the question of context, history, traditions, and form as a way to revitalize the purpose and meaning of their profession, the protest against modernism began in the United States but quickly morphed into a global movement that eventually dampened the spread of international modernism (Ching, Jarzombek, & Prakash, 2017: 780). The primary objective of postmodernism was to break free from the rigid framework of modern architecture, which was often seen as utopian in its pursuit of universality and efficiency.

However, instead of entirely rejecting the utopian—that created by modernism—ideals, postmodernism inadvertently became entangled in its own ambitions, leading to a dystopian outcome. The contemporary practice of postmodernism has shifted its focus toward the exploration of form, color, and material, overshadowing its initial aim of reorganizing key concepts in architecture. James Stevens Curl, a historian and architect from the United Kingdom, underscores this in his book *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (2018). Curl argues that the emphasis on aesthetics and commercial interests in both modern and postmodern architecture often results in buildings that fail to meet users' needs, thereby fostering dissatisfaction and a sense of disconnection.

Attempts to move beyond utopian ideals have led postmodernism into a paradoxical condition, where the pursuit of plurality and freedom is increasingly shaped by pragmatic and commercial considerations. This condition poses a significant challenge to the continuity of vernacular architecture, particularly *rumah adat*, whose values are deeply rooted in cultural meaning and spatial order. The detachment from meaning is often reflected in processes of

modernization. Modernization, at its core, represents a rational and efficient organization of life, where social roles are specialized and regulated through institutional systems (Yuhasnil, 2019: 227). Within this framework, cultural elements such as *rumah adat* undergo transformations to align with efficiency-driven values.

For instance, a media feature in 2018 documented the modernization of a *Joglo* house designed for economic and temporal efficiency. Key modifications included replacing the traditional pulley lamp (*lampu katrol*) with LED lighting and removing intricate wooden carvings. These interventions indicate a reconfiguration of spatial hierarchy, in which symbolic distinctions are increasingly subordinated to functional efficiency. As previously noted, every spatial element in *rumah adat* carries embedded cultural meaning; even minor alterations can disrupt the integrity of the overall spatial system.

However, while postmodernism and vernacular architecture have been widely discussed, existing studies tend to emphasize stylistic transformation or symbolic representation. Limited attention has been given to how commercialization reshapes spatial hierarchy in Indonesian traditional houses. This study addresses this gap by employing spatial hierarchy as an analytical lens to examine the impact of postmodernism and commercialization on vernacular architecture.

By focusing on *rumah adat*, this research critically situates postmodern architectural discourse within a vernacular context, highlighting how spatial hierarchy mediates cultural, social, and philosophical values. Through qualitative and reflective analysis, the study demonstrates that examining changes in spatial hierarchy provides a more nuanced understanding of how postmodernism operates within market-driven transformations of traditional architecture.

Literature Review

This section aims to clarify the key theoretical concepts employed in this paper by situating them within existing scholarly discourse. The discussion begins with the concept of paradigm and paradigm shift, followed by an examination of postmodernism and its implications for architectural thought. Subsequently, the review addresses traditional dwellings as cultural and spatial constructs, with particular attention to spatial hierarchy. Finally, selected architectural cases are discussed as practical references that help contextualize the theoretical discussion.

The term *paradigm shift* was first introduced by the philosopher Thomas Kuhn in 1962 to describe a condition in which a dominant conceptual framework encounters anomalies that it can no longer accommodate or explain, leading to its eventual replacement. Kuhn (1996: 66) defines a paradigm shift as both a process and a result of fundamental changes in the basic assumptions underlying a scientific theory. Classic examples include the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican model of the universe and the shift from Newtonian physics to Einstein's theory of relativity. Since its introduction, the concept of paradigm shift has been widely applied across disciplines. In psychology, it has been used to analyze transformations in scientific interventions (Collins et al., 2024: 24), while in medicine and healthcare, paradigm shifts are observed in changes to diagnostic and treatment frameworks (Chakraborty et al., 2024). Within the humanities, paradigm shifts are frequently examined through epistemological perspectives (Riziq, Vazrin, & Prayitno, 2023), and communication studies have also explored shifts in disciplinary paradigms (Herman, 2024: 154). Importantly, paradigm shifts are not confined to scientific inquiry alone; they have also occurred in architecture, particularly in the transition from modernism to postmodernism.

Postmodernism emerged as a critical response to the epistemological, ideological, and aesthetic foundations of modernity. While postmodernism refers to a philosophical and cultural critique, *postmodernity* denotes the broader socio-economic condition characterized by technological acceleration, globalization, fragmented lifestyles, consumerism, deregulation of public institutions, the declining authority of the nation-state, and a renewed interest in historical narratives through the revival of suppressed traditions (Ryadi, 2004: 91). Featherstone (2008: 2) interprets postmodernism as a reflective reaction to rapid social change, often operating in a mechanical and reactive manner. Anita (2022) further argues that postmodernism positions itself in opposition to modernity by critiquing its unfulfilled promises. Despite its widespread use, the concept of postmodernism remains ambiguous and contested (Ilham, 2018: 2). In architectural discourse, this paradigm shift is most clearly observed in the movement away from the universal, functionalist ideals of modernism toward more pluralistic, symbolic, and context-sensitive approaches.

According to *A Global History of Architecture* (2017), postmodern architecture emerged as a critique of

modernism, which was often associated with capitalism, bureaucratic rationality, and the failures of mass social housing. Martin (2010) notes that postmodernism blurs the boundaries between high art and popular culture, allowing architecture to draw freely from historical references and popular symbolism. One of the defining characteristics of postmodern architecture is pluralism, a condition in which multiple styles and references coexist within a single architectural work (Curl, 2018: 459). Ching, Jarzombek, and Prakash (2017: 781) highlight irony as a central feature of postmodernism, enabling architects to experiment with cultural and historical imagery with unprecedented freedom. Through these characteristics, postmodernism challenges the homogenizing tendencies of modernist architecture and opens space for diversity and contextual expression.

Postmodernism is closely intertwined with globalization. While globalization often produces cultural homogenization, postmodernism simultaneously emphasizes heterogeneity and difference. This tension is particularly relevant in Indonesia, a country marked by profound cultural diversity. Culture can be understood as a collective mindset or system of ideas developed by a group to address shared problems, which is transmitted to subsequent generations (2025: 4). Within this framework, the revival and reinterpretation of traditional dwellings become a significant application of postmodern thought, as such dwellings embody cultural plurality, historical continuity, and sustainable spatial practices.

Koentjaraningrat (1980) identifies seven core elements of culture: language, knowledge systems, social organization, tools and technology, livelihood systems, religious systems, and the arts. Housing is a cultural product that integrates several of these elements, particularly technology, social organization, and symbolic meaning. Said (2004: 47) defines a traditional house as a structure characterized by distinctive construction methods, forms, functions, and decorative elements that are inherited across generations and support the daily activities of the community. Arimbi (2017) further emphasizes that traditional houses represent one of the highest expressions of cultural identity within a tribal or communal society. Gustiawan AS (2016) elaborates that a traditional house encompasses the entire architectural structure—from roof and body to pillars and stairs—each featuring unique forms and ornamental expressions. From a spatial perspective, traditional houses function as cultural artifacts that integrate aesthetics, environmental adaptation, social hierarchy, and sustainability.

Spatial organization within traditional dwellings is not static but evolves in response to social change. The spatial arrangement of houses continues to transform as societies adjust to shifting temporal, economic, and cultural conditions (Azmi, Wulandari, & Yusran, 2022: 139). One key concept for understanding these transformations is spatial hierarchy. Laurens (2005) conceptualizes spatial hierarchy as a system of differentiated access and use, consisting of public, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces. Public space is accessible to anyone at any time and is collectively maintained, facilitating interaction among unfamiliar individuals. Semi-public space functions as a transitional zone between public and private realms, regulating interaction and privacy. Semi-private space allows interaction among specific groups while restricting access to others, whereas private space is controlled by individuals or groups with defined authority over its use. In traditional architecture, such hierarchical spatial arrangements embody social relations, cultural values, and symbolic meanings. Alterations to these hierarchies often driven by modernization and commercialization can therefore significantly affect the cultural integrity of traditional dwellings.

To contextualize these theoretical discussions, several architectural cases are frequently cited in architectural discourse as manifestations of postmodern principles. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (GMB) by Frank Gehry exemplifies how postmodern architecture leverages iconic form and media visibility, with its effectiveness closely tied to sustained attention from influential publications such as *The New York Times* (Plaza, Aranburu, & Esteban, 2022: 51). In Indonesia, Soekarno–Hatta International Airport represents an attempt to resist modernist homogenization by incorporating pluralistic architectural expressions that reflect national cultural diversity. Similarly, Green School Bali demonstrates a contemporary reinterpretation of traditional architectural principles through the use of natural materials such as bamboo, *alang-alang* grass, and clay, as well as an open, partition-free spatial configuration (Sabila, 2025: 2). These examples illustrate how postmodernism operates in practice by reconfiguring spatial form, symbolism, and cultural references, thereby providing a comparative backdrop for examining the commercialization and spatial transformation of Indonesian traditional houses.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative–descriptive approach, drawing on secondary data obtained from open-access journals, architectural critiques, and documented case studies published between 2016 and 2025. Qualitative data—including textual interpretation, spatial reading, and socio-cultural contextualization—allow for an in-depth examination of the relationship between architectural form, meaning, and use (Ashadi, Anisa, & Nur'aini, 2018: 133). The selected sources were curated to ensure both thematic relevance and temporal variation, as summarized in Table 1.

To organize the analytical process, the study employs a binary scoring framework across five indicators: (1) project purpose, (2) function, (3) location, (4) space utilization, and (5) design orientation. Each indicator is assigned a score of 0 (non-commercial orientation) or 1 (commercial orientation), resulting in a cumulative score ranging from 0 to 5. Importantly, this scoring system does not function as a definitive measurement of architectural value, nor does it claim to represent the full complexity of architectural meaning. Rather, it serves as an analytical device to identify dominant tendencies in the interaction between commercial forces and architectural intent.

For interpretative clarity, the analysis applies Boolean logic as a heuristic model, rather than as a formal or deterministic evaluative tool. Drawing on George Boole's foundational formulation— $xy = 0$ and $x(1 - y) = 0$ —the model is used to conceptualize the relationship between commercial orientation (x) and architectural integrity or symbolic coherence (y) (Boole, 1854: 66–129). Within this framework, the presence of commercial intent ($x = 1$) does not automatically negate architectural meaning; instead, the model highlights conceptual tensions that emerge when commercial priorities dominate without corresponding attention to cultural, spatial, and symbolic considerations ($y = 0$).

Crucially, the Boolean framework is employed as a conceptual lens, not as an ontological claim about architectural reality. The binary formulation functions to clarify patterns and contrasts within the dataset, while the interpretation of results remains grounded in qualitative spatial analysis, particularly the examination of spatial hierarchy and its cultural implications. In this sense, numerical indicators operate as entry points for interpretation, rather than as conclusions in themselves.

Through this integrated methodological approach, the study critically assesses how postmodern architectural ideals such as pluralism, contextuality, and symbolic expression are negotiated, sustained, or diminished within market-driven architectural practices. By combining heuristic modeling with qualitative interpretation, the research avoids reductive conclusions while enabling a structured examination of commercialization's impact on vernacular architectural space.

Table 1. Distribution of Used Journal by Year Publication.

Year Publication	Total
2016	1
2018	2
2020	1
2021	1
2022	2
2023	3
2024	6
2025	7
Used Journal by Year Publication	23

Source: Author's compilation from open-access journals, 2025

Result and Discussion

Stagnation in Postmodern Architecture

The original spirit of postmodernism, characterized by irony, pluralism, and a critical stance toward modernist

rigidity, has gradually weakened over time. Instead of developing into new experimental trajectories, postmodern architecture in the twenty first century tends to exhibit stagnation, frequently reproducing commercial formulas that prioritize profitability over cultural or artistic innovation.

To examine the shifting orientation of postmodern architectural projects, this study evaluates fifteen buildings constructed between 1962 and 2024 as presented in Table 2. The evaluation is structured around five criteria, namely project purpose, function, location, space utilization, and planning strategy. Each criterion is assessed using a binary scale, where a value of 1 indicates commercial orientation and a value of 0 indicates non commercial orientation.

Table 2. Architecture Project Postmodernism

Year	Project	Postmodern Feature
1962	Vanna Venturi House	Asymmetry, historical references, irony, symbolic gable façade
1978	Piazza d'Italia	Pastiche of classical elements, bold colors, theatrical spatial arrangement
1985	James R. Thompson center	Atrium transparency, expressive form, vibrant color palette
1990	Dolphin and Swan Hotels at Walt Disney Resort	Playful form, eclectic motifs, oversized decorative elements
1994	M16 Building	High-tech aesthetic with postmodern layering, urban symbolism
1991	M2 Building	Hybrid of sculpture and office form, ironic classical stylization
2010	The Shard	Fragmented glass façade, symbolic spire form, vertical hybridity
2015	A House for Essex	Ornate ornamentation, folklore references, eclectic personal narrative
2021	The Spiral	Green spiral terraces, expressive geometry, symbolic environmental form
2023	The National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre	Symbolic spatial sequences, emphasis on memory and historical reflection
2024	The Line (<i>under development</i>)	Futuristic linear urbanism, rejection of traditional city grid, monumental form.

Source: Google Arts & Culture (2025)

Operational definitions of each criterion are as follows:

- Purpose: Whether the building was intended to generate revenue (e.g., commercial office, hospitality, retail).
- Function: Whether its main activities involve economic exchange or profit-driven services.
- Location: Whether the site is situated in an economic hub or high-value urban area.
- Space Utilization: Whether the design includes rentable components (e.g., offices, exhibition halls, retail spaces).
- Planning Strategy: Whether architectural decisions were influenced by market logic, brand identity, or financial optimization.

Based on this framework, buildings such as The Shard constructed in 2010, The Spiral completed in 2021, and The Line currently under development in 2024 received a total score of five, indicating a high degree of commercial orientation across all evaluated dimensions. The Shard, for example, operates as a vertical mixed use development that includes premium office spaces, restaurants, a luxury hotel, and observation decks. Its location in the London Bridge area, one of the most economically strategic zones in Europe, reinforces its commercial intent. The building's spatial planning reflects lease driven priorities and corporate partnerships that explicitly align architectural form with market objectives.

In contrast, buildings such as the Vanna Venturi House completed in 1962, Piazza d'Italia completed in 1978, and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao completed in 1997 received a total score of zero. These projects prioritize

symbolic, artistic, or civic objectives rather than commercial profitability. The Vanna Venturi House, for instance, was conceived as a personal architectural statement that directly responded to modernist minimalism. It serves no commercial function, is located within a residential context, and contains no rentable or revenue generating spatial elements.

The scoring system employed in this study follows a simplified Boolean logic framework. While this approach provides a clear analytical lens for identifying the presence of commercialization in architectural projects, it does not imply that highly commercial buildings are devoid of artistic or cultural value. Instead, the scoring highlights a tendency in which commercial imperatives increasingly dominate architectural decision making, potentially overshadowing the pluralistic and critical ethos that originally defined postmodernism. In this context, buildings that achieve a score of five reflect a strong alignment between ideological intent and physical commercial form, while buildings that achieve a score of zero demonstrate resistance to such alignment and reaffirm the experimental orientation of early postmodern architecture.

Table 3. Calculation on Project Postmodernism Architecture

Project	Purpose	Function	Location	Space Use	Planning	Total Score	Commercial (Yes/No)
Vanna Venturi House	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
Piazza d'Italia	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
The Portland Building	1	1	1	1	1	5	Yes
The Neue Staatsgalerie	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
James R. Thompson Center	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
Dolphin and Swan Hotels at Walt Disney Resort	1	1	1	1	1	5	Yes
M16 Building	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
M2 Building	1	1	1	1	1	5	Yes
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
Museum of Modern Art	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
The Shard	1	1	1	1	1	5	Yes
A House for Essex	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
The Spiral	1	1	1	1	1	5	Yes
The National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre	0	0	0	0	0	0	No
The Line (<i>under development</i>)	1	1	1	1	1	5	Yes

Source: Author (2025)

The juxtaposition of these projects illustrates the broad spectrum of postmodern architectural expression. The Vanna Venturi House represents early postmodernism through its ironic rejection of modernist minimalism, which is evident in its symbolic gable, asymmetrical composition, and emphasis on human scale. Designed without commercial intent, the building functions primarily as a conceptual critique that prioritizes meaning and architectural discourse over utility.



Figure 1. Vanna Venturi House and The Shard

Source: Google Images (2025)

In contrast, The Shard exemplifies a contemporary shift toward hyper commercialized architecture. Its glass façade and monumental verticality reflect market driven priorities such as maximization of leasable space, luxury branding, and real estate profitability. This visual and functional contrast reinforces the findings of the scoring analysis, in which buildings that receive a full commercial score prioritize economic performance, while buildings with a zero score preserve symbolic and expressive dimensions associated with early postmodernism.

The application of binary logic in this analysis serves to structure qualitative interpretation and enable consistent comparison across diverse case studies. The results reveal a clear polarization between earlier postmodern projects that emphasized ideological and aesthetic experimentation and more recent projects that are increasingly shaped by commercial imperatives. This shift suggests a stagnation of postmodernism, wherein the radical pluralism that once defined the movement is progressively subordinated to market driven architectural agendas. As architectural practice becomes increasingly aligned with economic demands, its capacity for cultural autonomy and symbolic richness faces significant constraints.

Dangerous Commercialism

Commercialization can be defined as an act aimed at generating profit. In the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, commercialization is defined as the act of turning something into a commodity. According to Siregar and Azmi (2022: 55), commercialization means commercializing, which refers to the act of making something a commodity.

From a pragmatic perspective, commercialization may appear beneficial, particularly in architectural practice, where economic investment can contribute to improvements in infrastructure and quality of life. Architecture, as a discipline, has the potential to enhance human well being through spatial design and technological advancement. However, commercialization also raises critical concerns related to scientific integrity, aesthetic autonomy, and cultural meaning. These concerns directly intersect with the original objectives of postmodernism, which emerged as a critique of modernist hegemony and its rigid, universalizing tendencies.

One of the most explicit critiques of this condition is articulated by James Steven Curl. In his book *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (2018), Curl addresses the failures of architectural movements that prioritize ideological abstraction and market logic over humanistic and cultural considerations.

Table 4. James Steven Curl's Critique of Postmodernism

Aspect	Curl Perspective
Definition of Postmodernism	Curl defines postmodernism as a movement that rejects grand narratives and belief in objective truth.

Identity Crisis	Argues that postmodernism leads to an identity crisis, where individuals feel a loss of meaning and purpose in life.
Cultural Fragmentation	Postmodernism contributes to cultural fragmentation, resulting in a loss of social cohesion and shared values
Relativistic Morality	Postmodernism emphasizes relativistic morality, undermining ethical norms and creating a sense of moral ambiguity
Dystopian Consequences	Principles of postmodernism have led to dystopian consequences in society, including increased alienation and disconnection among individual

Source: James Steven Curl (2017)

Within Curl’s critique, commercialization becomes a central problem. The commodification of architecture accelerates the loss of meaning, weakens ethical orientation, and intensifies cultural fragmentation. These processes, according to Curl, contribute to the formation of dystopian urban environments characterized by alienation rather than social cohesion.

Comparable patterns of commercialization are also evident in other cultural domains. The commodification of cultural practices has significantly influenced tourism development, environmental management, and socio cultural systems, often prioritizing economic gain over sustainability and cultural integrity (Claudea et al., 2024: 101). In religious discourse, commercialization of Islamic preaching may facilitate broader dissemination of messages, yet it simultaneously risks dysfunction when prophetic values such as humanization, liberation, and transcendence are marginalized (Yuwafik, Muslimin, and Mahmudi, 2025: 52). In the field of education, institutions can be considered commercialized when financial concerns such as registration fees and building funds take precedence over core educational responsibilities (Peramita et al., 2025: 97). Similarly, the commodification of Islamic practices reflects a broader trend of religious commercialization, where belief systems and symbolic expressions are transformed into marketable goods (Fealy, Greg, and White, 2008; Andini, Syarif, and Sulastrri, 2024: 259).

Within postmodern thought, the initial objective was to break away from modernist ideologies that promoted singular truths and homogeneous cultural expressions. However, the increasing entanglement of postmodernism with market forces has altered this critical orientation. Architectural practice has increasingly adopted a marketplace driven approach, where profitability often takes precedence over authenticity, social relevance, and contextual sensitivity. As a result, architectural spaces are frequently designed to satisfy consumer demands rather than to foster meaningful relationships between people, place, and culture. Instead of encouraging diverse and locally grounded expressions, commercialization promotes the repetition of generic forms that lack a clear sense of identity.

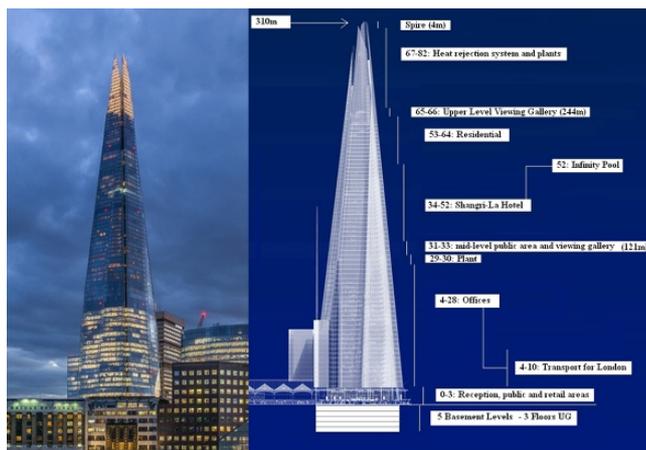


Figure 2. The Shard
Source: The Year Zero (2009)



Figure 3. The Line Project

Source: PetaPixel (2025)

This condition is clearly illustrated by contemporary architectural projects such as The Shard and The Line. The Shard exemplifies how vertical mixed use developments prioritize profitability through high end offices, luxury hotels, and observation decks. Its architectural language is shaped by commercial imperatives rather than symbolic or cultural narratives, positioning the building as a material expression of hyper commercialized architecture. Likewise, The Line, a large scale linear megastructure currently under development, represents the commodification of urban space on an unprecedented scale. Despite its visionary rhetoric, the project lacks grounding in vernacular context or lived tradition, reflecting a top down planning model driven primarily by spectacle, investment appeal, and global market visibility rather than community oriented values.

These examples reinforce Curl's warning that commercialization in architecture leads not only to aesthetic flattening, but also to deeper cultural consequences. The erosion of symbolic meaning, the fragmentation of cultural identity, and the prioritization of economic logic over human experience collectively contribute to the emergence of dystopian urban environments.

Vernacular Architecture and the Narratives of Local Identity

The digitalization era has intensified the competition between traditional and modern artists. This technological shift has significantly affected local creators, who often receive insufficient recognition, resulting in economic vulnerability (Prayitno et al., 2023: 93). Such structural disadvantages also extend to local architectural practices. Among Indonesia's distinctive spatial typologies, traditional houses—alongside styles such as *Jengki*—stand as physical representations of cultural identity.

In an attempt to respond to contemporary demands, many traditional house craftsmen have begun adapting their techniques, pricing, and structural decisions. For example, modifications to the Batak Toba house include significant structural alterations to accommodate modern lifestyles (Nufrani et al., 2024: 165). Similar transformations are also observed in *Joglo* houses. Table 5 presents the transformation of *Joglo* elements interpreted through a spatial and symbolic lens. A YouTube channel called The Project uploaded a video in 2018 showcasing the modifications made to *Joglo* houses, illustrating the evolving nature of traditional architecture:

Table 5. Modification *Rumah Joglo*

Element	Traditional	Modernized
Visual Ambience & Zoning	<i>Lampu Katrol</i> (traditional hangings lamp)	LED Lighting (Energy-efficient)
Symbolic Articulation	Intricate Wooden Carvings and Decorative element	Minimalist Design (Removal of Carvings)
Spatial Configuration	Raised floor of wood or compacted earth/semen (non-ceramic, breathable)	Ceramic tiles (Elimination of vertical hierarchy/umpak, creating a flat, uniform profan space)

Aesthetics

Classic Javanese Architectural Style

Contemporary Javanese Style

Source: Youtube - The Project (2018)



Figure 4. Modernized and Traditional Lighting for *Rumah Joglo*

Source: Youtube - The Project (2018)



Figure 5. Modernized and Traditional Floor for *Rumah Joglo*

Source: Youtube - The Project (2018)



Figure 6. Modernized and Traditional Ornamentation for *Rumah Joglo*

Source: Youtube - The Project (2018)

These modifications, while seemingly technical, point to deeper cultural shifts. For instance, changes in lighting—from the symbolic *lampu katrol* to LED fixtures—not only reflect efficiency concerns but also indicate a broader displacement of cultural meanings by utilitarian logic. Similarly, the replacement of traditional wooden floors, which were once elevated and breathable, with ceramic tiles in modernized versions illustrates a shift toward mass-produced materials that prioritize functionality over cultural resonance. Similarly, the shift toward open-plan layouts

and minimalist design underscores a growing alignment with globalized spatial norms. While functional, these changes may erode the pedagogical and symbolic functions embedded in vernacular spatiality.

Such trends raise concerns about the hegemonization of architectural aesthetics, where modern conventions are prioritized at the expense of local knowledge systems. This process often leads to the dilution of cultural narratives and the marginalization of spatial diversity. Nevertheless, the preservation of traditional architecture remains essential—not merely for heritage conservation, but as a form of resistance aligned with the original ethos of postmodernism. Postmodernism, in its foundational intent, critiques the universalizing tendencies of modernism, advocating instead for pluralism, expressive freedom, and contextual design (Jencks, 1977). It resists the notion of a singular architectural truth, instead supporting multiplicity and local specificity. Within this framework, traditional houses such as *Joglo* and *Batak Toba* structures serve as living repositories of cultural expression—embodying historical continuity, collective memory, and regional aesthetics.

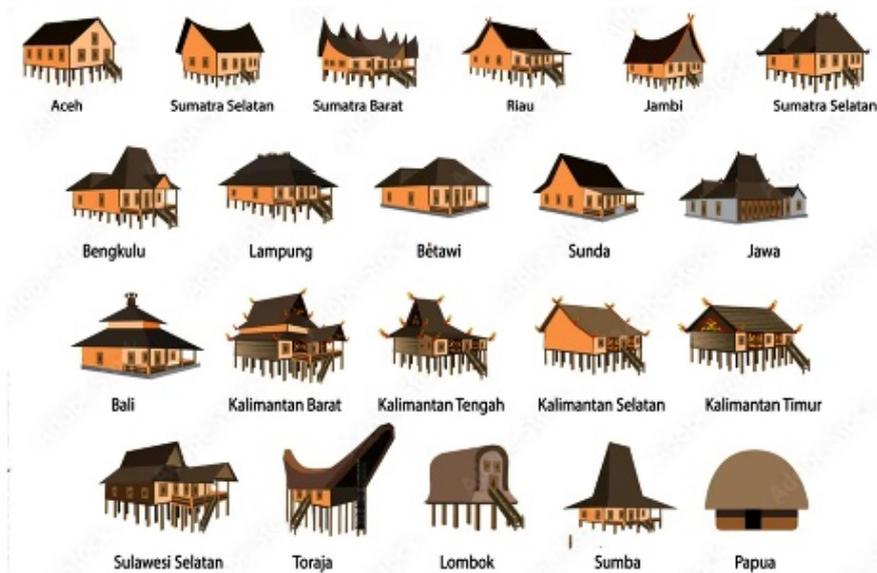


Figure 7. *Rumah Adat*: Cultural Heritage of Indonesia

Source: Brighton.co.id (2024)

The relationship between postmodernism and traditional architecture is therefore not incidental but intrinsic. Postmodern design principles open space for traditional forms to be reinterpreted and hybridized—preserving cultural essence while allowing formal innovation. By embracing vernacular typologies, architects and designers can recover lost narratives, subvert standardized aesthetics, and enrich the spatial experience with cultural specificity.

In this light, traditional houses should not be viewed as static relics but as dynamic frameworks that can be contemporized without losing their cultural soul. Their spatial elements—layout, materials, and ornamentation—can be adapted to modern needs while retaining their symbolic value. Each traditional structure carries with it a story: of land, of belief, of social order. By acknowledging and integrating these stories into current design paradigms, architecture can reclaim its role as a vessel of identity in an increasingly homogenized world.

These transformations do not merely indicate shifts in materials or visual styles, but reflect a deeper reconfiguration of spatial structure and social relations within traditional houses. Elements such as lighting, flooring, and ornamentation are not isolated components; they function as markers of spatial hierarchy that regulate distinctions between public, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces. When traditional symbols are replaced by modern elements oriented toward efficiency and urban standards, these hierarchical boundaries tend to weaken or undergo shifts in meaning. Spaces that previously carried symbolic, sacred, or communal significance risk being reduced to neutral and utilitarian functions. Consequently, the transformation of vernacular architecture under modernization and commercialization should be understood not only as aesthetic adaptation, but as a restructuring of spatial hierarchy that shapes how occupants interact with space, negotiate social relations, and sustain cultural identity.

Spatial Hierarchy in Vernacular Architecture

Architectural space cannot be understood merely as a physical enclosure. It operates within an interconnected network of physical form, social relations, and environmental context, shaping how space is used, interpreted, and experienced (Karaagac, 2025). Spatial arrangements therefore function as carriers of meaning, structuring movement, interaction, and symbolic order. Space is not only constructed through material elements such as walls and roofs, but also through cultural norms and social hierarchies embedded within everyday practice.

Hierarchy plays a central role in enabling space to function as a meaningful system. As an organizing principle, hierarchy differentiates zones, regulates access, and establishes relational order within spatial structures. Without a hierarchical framework, spatial systems lose their capacity to articulate relationships, resulting in undifferentiated and inefficient interpretations of space. A comparable argument appears in spatial data studies, where the absence of hierarchy prevents coherent organization of spatial dimensions and undermines interpretability (Rao et al., 2003). This analogy does not equate architectural space with data systems, but highlights the structural necessity of hierarchy for meaningful interpretation.

From Laurens' perspective, spatial hierarchy is inseparable from cultural values and social behavior. Space is never neutral; it reflects norms, expectations, and power relations through gradations of accessibility and depth. Hierarchy, therefore, should not be reduced to monumental scale or vertical dominance, but understood as a sequence ranging from public to private, open to enclosed, and profane to sacred. This interpretation corresponds closely with vernacular architectural traditions, where hierarchy emerges organically through spatial practice rather than abstract formalization.



Figure 8. Illustration of spatial hierarchy in Indonesian vernacular architecture (*Joglo* as a representative case)

Source: Author, 2026

Traditional Indonesian houses, particularly the *Joglo*, exemplify this hierarchical logic with clarity. As shown in Figure 8, the spatial sequence of *Pendopo*, *Pringgitan*, and *Dalem* represents a gradual transition of accessibility and meaning. The *Pendopo* functions as a public domain for communal interaction, the *Pringgitan* acts as an intermediary or liminal zone, and the *Dalem* occupies the deepest position, associated with privacy, domestic life, and symbolic protection. This ordering is not arbitrary, but expresses Javanese social ethics, respect, and relational distance through spatial form.

What distinguishes vernacular spatial hierarchy is its non-coercive character. Rather than relying on rigid physical barriers, hierarchy is communicated through spatial sequencing, orientation, and culturally shared understandings among users. In contrast to contemporary commercial architecture, where hierarchy is frequently flattened into functional zoning driven by efficiency and profit, vernacular architecture employs hierarchy as a narrative structure. It guides movement, regulates social interaction, and preserves cultural meaning. Thus, spatial hierarchy in vernacular architecture functions as an embedded form of cultural intelligence. It demonstrates that hierarchy is not inherently exclusionary or rigid, but serves as a mechanism for clarity, order, and symbolic coherence.

Within the context of this study, the persistence of vernacular spatial hierarchies reinforces the findings that meaningful architectural space depends not solely on function or market logic, but on culturally grounded systems of spatial organization. The binary commercialization identified in global postmodern projects is reflected at the local scale through the gradual flattening of spatial hierarchy in vernacular architecture.

Conclusion

The examination of postmodern architecture in this study reveals a persistent tension between the movement's original critical aspirations and the growing dominance of commercialization. The findings demonstrate that while postmodernism initially emerged as a pluralistic and symbolic response to modernist rigidity, many contemporary architectural projects increasingly prioritize market viability over cultural articulation. This shift has resulted in a condition where architectural form often functions primarily as a commercial instrument, rather than as a medium of critique, narrative, or cultural expression.

The analysis shows that projects with strong commercial orientation tend to exhibit standardized spatial strategies and aesthetic repetition, leading to a gradual erosion of postmodernism's experimental and contextual ethos. As commercial imperatives intensify, architectural works risk becoming generic and detached from their socio-cultural foundations. This condition supports Curl's critique, which associates postmodern commercialization with cultural fragmentation, loss of meaning, and the emergence of alienating urban environments.

A similar pattern is observable in the modernization of traditional houses such as the *Joglo* and *Batak Toba*. Although adaptation to contemporary needs is inevitable, excessive modification driven by efficiency and aesthetic simplification often diminishes the pedagogical, symbolic, and hierarchical values embedded in vernacular spatial systems. Traditional architecture, which once functioned as a cultural text encoding social order, belief systems, and spatial ethics, increasingly risks being reduced to a stylistic reference rather than a living cultural framework.

Ultimately, commercialization poses a significant challenge to the continuity of postmodern architecture as a critical and culturally grounded practice. Rather than rejecting modernity outright, this study argues for a recalibration of architectural priorities—one that acknowledges economic realities while preserving cultural specificity, spatial hierarchy, and symbolic meaning. Re-engaging with vernacular principles and postmodern pluralism offers a pathway for architecture to resist stagnation and reclaim its role as a meaningful mediator between society, culture, and space.

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