

Transformations of Vernacular Buildings: Chinatown in Bandung City, Indonesia

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Abstract

In many big cities in the West exists a district known as the Chinatown. Same can be said about cities in Asian countries and this includes Indonesia. Chinatown in Indonesia refers to a district in the city center with the majority Chinese inhabitants, often living in shop house buildings. Their main activity is trading in keeping with the activities of the Central Business District (CBD).

The emergence of Chinatown in Indonesia cannot be separated from the Dutch colonialism in the first decade of the 19th century. At that time, with their persistence and perseverance, the Chinese replaced the natives in trading, increasing their economic share of the city. This was troubling for the Dutch government which believed that the Chinese shouldn't live among the natives. Thus a supervised and guarded habitation for the Chinese, called Chinesewijk or Chinatown was established.

In this restricted area, the Chinese built their residences based on their common traditions and habits: trading, leading to the buildings and use of the shop houses as their living places. The influence of their customs, culture and faith are reflected in their shop houses. In fact, elements such as ornaments, roof ridges and inner spaces and spatial arrangements similar to the houses in China have emerged in Indonesia too.

At present, there are no restrictions in the Chinatown and therefore the buildings are undergoing transformations. However, the area could still be recognized from the remaining Chinese shop houses. Parts of the shop houses have been transformed into modern ones but some old buildings still exist. This paper presents how the shop houses in the ex-Chinatown have adapted and acculturated to the present conditions. It answers the question if the present Chinatown is still built according to the Chinese customs, culture and faith.

Key words: transformation, shophouse, Chinatown .

Introduction

Change is common and contribute to the new buildings and practices to a city. Such change is often most visible in the city centers of old cities because of the remains of historical urban artifacts. As Rossi (1984) points out, residential buildings or dwellings that remain there give character different to the mercantile character that usually dominates city centres. Older cities often had their character derived from individual dwellings and their changes are visible in the architectural styles and are easier to be recognized. As Rossi (1984) says, dwellings are amorphous and are easily and quickly transformable.

Bandung is a rapidly growing city in Indonesia. The city was founded in line with the construction of a highway that stretches from Anyer in the western part of Java to Panarukan in the eastern part. At that time, the place which later become the city centre was already made up of a collection of scattered hamlets or *babakan*. The Chinese settlement emerged very early but where the first Chinese settlement was located is not clear. The most probable location might have been in the western part of *alun-alun* (city centre) (Siregar et al, 1990) where the *Pasar Baru* market is now located. Although initially residential, this area later became the commercial area of the city.

Pasar Baru is the oldest commercial area in the city that evolved from a residential quarter with a market as the centre. Later on, the residential areas changed as the growth of activities caused the changing of the building functions and forms. Often, residential buildings changed into shop houses which are more suitable for both living and trading. Shop houses in the city centre area are more specific in shape and style because of several influences such as customs, culture, economy and government regulations. These influences are reflected in the architectural styles making the city centre non-homogeneous (Siregar et al, 1990) but have various ones; one of the notable ones is the Chinese architectural style (Soewarno,2002).

The presence of the Chinese architectural styles in Indonesia is connected with the Dutch colonial era. The Chinese communities at that time were required to stay in a restricted area separated from the indigenous and were called *Chinesewijk* or Chinatown. Chinatown In Bandung is different from the ones found in Batavia and Semarang because the Chinese traders settled relatively late in Bandung (late 19th century) (Siregar et al, 1990). The one which could be called the Chinatown is Jap Loen quater, which was built by Jap Loen in 1920's and is located in the western part of Bandung. The present condition of some of the shop houses reflect the transformations they have undergone to adjust to the new functions and the evolution of the architectural styles. This paper investigates these transformations to discover the causes of such transformations.

The Transformation at Chinatown in Bandung

According to Ching (1979), transformation requires first that the ordering system of the prior or prototypical model be perceived and understood so that through a series of finite changes and permutations, the original design concept can be clarified, strengthened and built upon, rather than destroyed. According to Antoniades (1990) transformation is a slowly changing process until it reaches its peak. Changes are responses to external and internal influences that direct the changing from known shapes before, through repeatedly reduplicating or doubling the object. Alexander (1987) describes transformation as a slow and unpredictable process with the beginning and end shifting, depending on the influencing factors. The nature is comprehensive and sustainable and has connections with social values in the society. In the presence of various forces, architecture of physical forms, mainly buildings, transform through changes to their shapes. Those changes carry with them significant influences to shaped spaces, through either inner space formations, outer formation or space formations in between.

Chinatown in the past

Before the Dutch colonial era, the Chinese community generally lived side by side with the indigenous community and their house building practices adopted the native house styles. During the Dutch colonial era however, the Chinese communities were required to stay in a restricted area separated from the indigenous areas and were called *Chinesewijk*. In this area, they built their houses using knowledge inherited from their ancestors and the vernacular

Indonesian Chinese building style emerged. However, they were not like the typical Chinese shop houses in Batavia or Semarang. Shop house is a multi-purpose building in which the outer part is used for commercial activities (shops) and the area behind or beside and upper floor are principally used for residential purposes (Widodo,1990). The Chinese built shop houses like the natives did but added some Chinese elements such as roof shape, ornament, courtyard (Soewarno,2002) and some modern European elements such as the fake attic windows (Siregar et al, 1990).

The Chinatown at present

In the meantime, the city kept on changing and the changes occurred also in the ex-Chinatown. At present however almost all of the shop houses are occupied by Indonesian-Chinese descendants. Some of the buildings are already used for non-residential functions such as Banks, offices, and hotels. These changes in functions have been followed by physical changes necessary for their adaptations. In fact, many buildings have been rebuilt and transformed into 2 to 5 storey shop houses in modern styles (Fig.1)

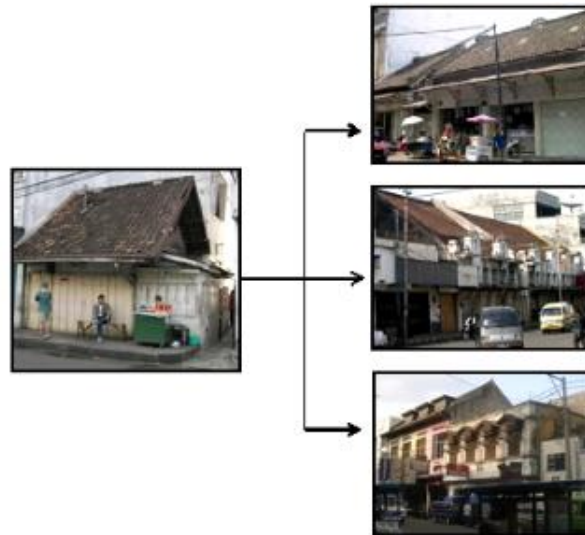


Fig. 1: The transformation of a Chinese shophouse.

Jap Loen Quater as a case study

Location

Bandung is located in the Java Island and constitutes the capital of the West Java Province. It lies 140 km South East of Jakarta and is approx. 167.3 Square km in extent (Fig. 2). The Jap Loen quarter lies to the West of the Alun-alun or the Bandung City center.

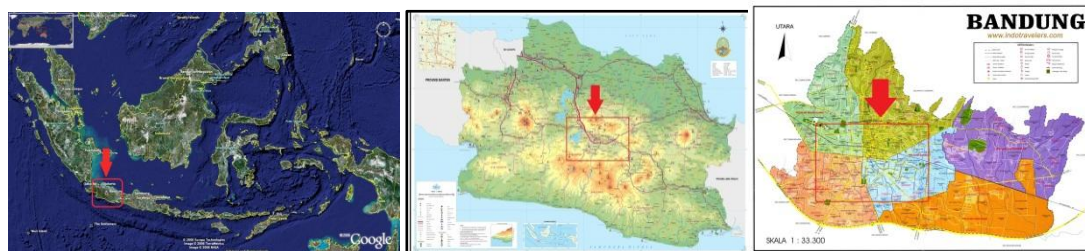


Fig. 2: Location of Bandung City in the Java Island

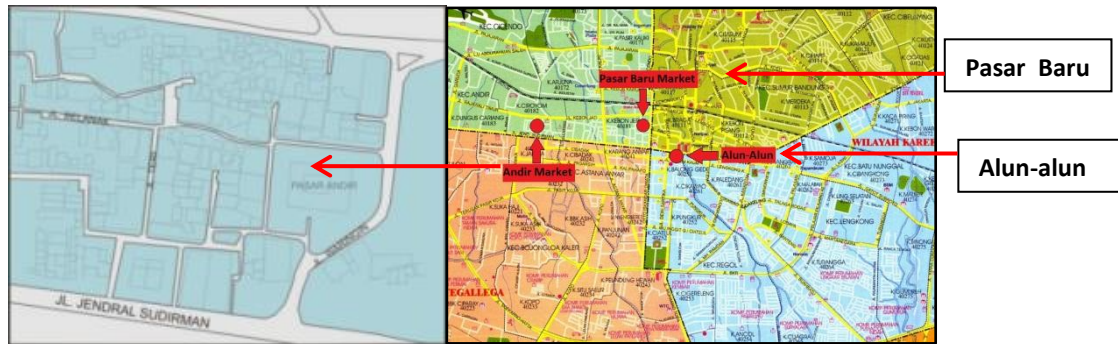


Fig. 3: Jap Loen district in the city centre of Bandung

Historical Background

There was no specific boundary of Chinese quarter in Bandung because they lived together with native people in a native village. There was a housing complex close to Andir market which had been developed by Jap Loen. Jap Loen was apparently the wealthy trader and land lord in the 1930s (Tunas,2007). The complex could be called the first Chinese settlement in Bandung which had been planned. At present, this housing complex still exists as a busy commercial area with specific merchandises such as dry sea food, salt fish, dry prawn, and prawn chip etc. These merchandises are transported from some coastal towns in West Java or other provinces (Soewarno,2001).

The Previous Block and Building Type

The housing complex under study consisted of a number of blocks where each block had been designed for one row of shop houses encircling the block. The principal of block design had been such that the outer part of the block was developed as shop houses to enclose and maintain the inner space empty as a courtyard. This served as the service area and social space for the inhabitants. Unfortunately, only two such blocks could be occupied by Jap Loen and designed as encircling row of shop houses (Fig.4). He could not occupy all the land in the other blocks that were still occupied by natives as a village. This has continued in this form to date.

This housing complex was designed for 'low-class' Chinese traders in a simple architecture style, design and material. The original house had been made from planks as wall and palm fiber as roof. The roof shape had used gable construction with the exception at the corner. The shop houses are very simple and therefore no decorative elements exist in these buildings and no specific meaning can be attributed to their building's colour (Soewarno,2001).

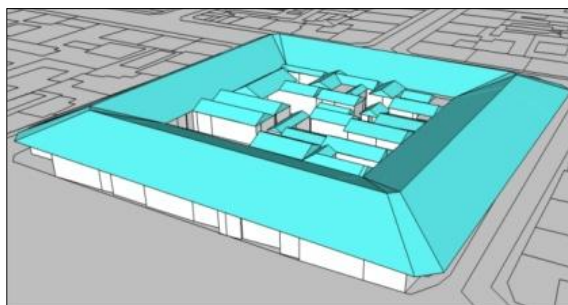




Figure 4 : The encircling row of shop houses

The Present Block and Building Type

At present, the entire block has already undergone change; the courtyard does not exist anymore. At the two blocks which were designed according to Jap Loen's ideas, the courtyard has already been turned into buildings. The shop's owner needed more space for the shop and storage and the building was thus expanded. The limitation of land caused the building to expand only inwards, and hence the courtyard has been consumed. The successful shop owners could buy the land (ex-courtyard) for expanding the shop for further residential activities (Fig.5) while some of the unsuccessful shop owners sold their building parts and moved out. Tight competition could be seen from the way the building expansion had caused the density of the block and there is almost no more space between building and the courtyard.

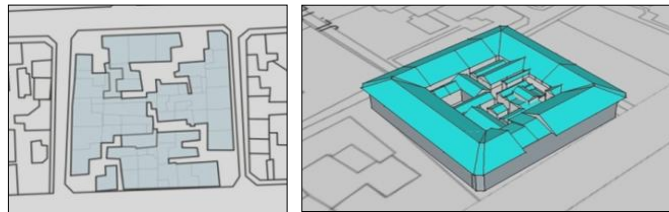


Fig. 5: The present situation of one of the blocks

In some other blocks which could not be designed as Jap Loen's original idea, the land which was allocated for the courtyard and for continuing the circular shop house is still occupied by the natives. At present however, the block is fully built. The buildings are mixed between the shop house extensions and the native houses. One example is in the Teri Street block. According to data, in 1988, there were still vacant land at the Teri Street while at present all the blocks have been developed including the inner parts. The present situation represents an unplanned development especially in the inner part (Fig.6 and 7).



Fig. 6: The situation of Teri block at year 1988 and at present

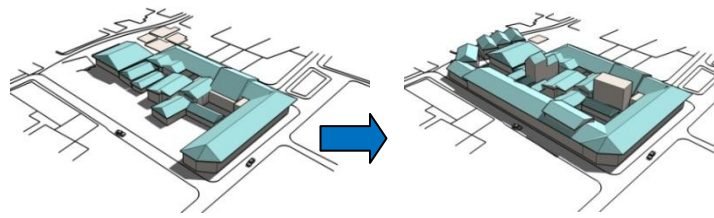


Figure 7: The morphology of shophouses

Building Transformations

Some of the shop owners who could not buy land at the inner block still needed more space to enlarge the buildings. Since space was limited, more space has been added only by adding floors vertically. This has transformed the horizontal shop house buildings to become vertically developed. Besides, most of the building materials have already changed, such as roof material into tile roofs as well as walls, most often presently use brick (Fig.8).

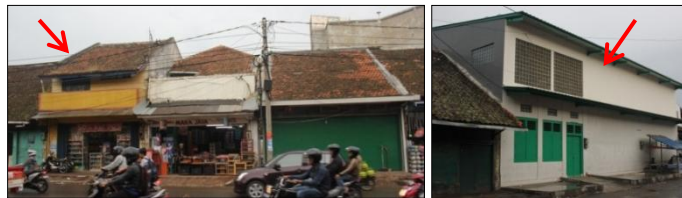


Figure 8 : Vertical shophouses and vertical storage building

The successful traders have continued to enlarge the shop houses both horizontally and vertically. They were able to buy land or the shop next door even if the price was high. The emerging pattern of transformation could be classified into 3 groups:

Horizontally: In this case, horizontal expansions have been done by merging two or more shop houses. Initially, the common size of a shop was one door with three windows, but now there are some shops much wider. Moreover, horizontal expansions could be also seen from the visible differences of shop colours (Fig.9); older parts are clearly seen differently from the newly added. In this case, most shop's owner had not been able to live in the building anymore because of lack of space. Thus, most of the buildings functioned only for nonresidential purposes such as a shop and storage or only for storage.

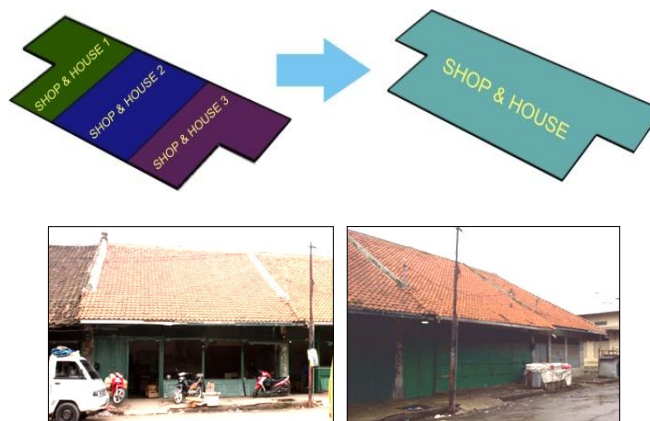


Fig. 9: The expanded of shop house by lots addition

Vertically: Vertical expansion of the shop houses have been done by adding floors if the structures were able to withstand the loads. In this case, the building function still remains as residential with the upper floor extensions specially providing further residential accommodation. Shops are located at the lower ground levels and residential activities are confined to the upper levels (Fig.10).

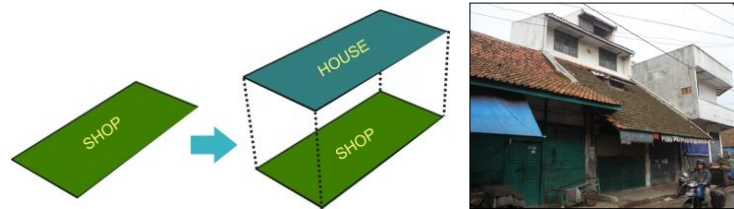


Fig. 10: The expanded of shop house by floor addition

Horizontally and vertically: Some of the inhabitants who still live in this area have attempted to enlarge their buildings and the potential location for residential was towards the inner part of the block. Horizontal and vertical expansions have been done by adding extra floor areas both ways. This has already happened in some blocks which have vertical residential parts at the inner part of the blocks. In this case, the building was still used as a shop and a house. Shops were located in front or at the outer block while the residential facilities were at the inner block (ex the location of courtyard) (Fig.11).

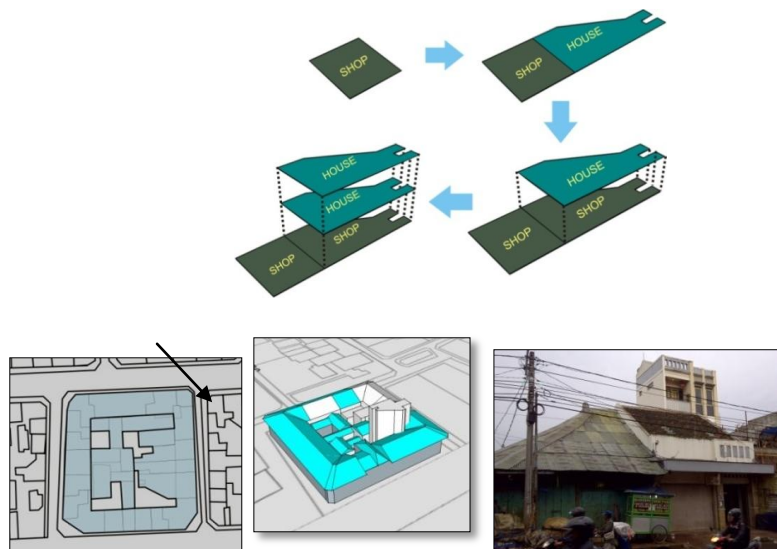


Fig. 11: The expanded of shop house by lot and floor addition

At the present time, the expanded shop houses exist mostly in the commercial areas of the city center of Bandung (Soewarno,2013). The other effects of this transformation is the loss of inhabitants of the shop houses, all having been used purely for commercial purposes forcing some of the shop owners to move out so that the buildings could be maximally used for commercial activities.

The buildings were only used during day time and left empty at night. Some of the shop houses have already been changed into storage or cold storage so that dry food could be kept longer than usual. This situation has caused neglect of maintenance of the buildings and the surroundings.

Conclusion

Land is considered very valuable particularly in cities where it is increasingly in short supply. Since the beginning, in Indonesia, land was an unsolvable problem, so the idea of Jap Loen was to plan residential complexes with the realization of only two blocks. At present, high competition to own land especially in the city with an increasing commercial sector has seriously transformed Jap Loen, as can be seen in its shop houses and their transformations.

Bandung presents a good case, where it demonstrates that background of historic, cultural and religious issues has little affects in the transformation of buildings in modern cities. One of the most crucial forces of such transformations is simply the need for quantifiable space to provide more room and space to accommodate more people and more activities. It is notable that city space is being expanded for storage while expelling people from the city thus diminishing its humanistic quality and unique character. The limited space and high demand for commerce forces them to use all the spaces more effectively and efficiently for business, rather than for residential activities. Shop houses which are unique cultural artifacts and places that retain the traditions seem no longer appropriate and able to withstand such force. Moreover, for some inhabitants they also represent the ancestor's tradition and culture which are more historical and irrelevant in the modern world. With these forces, both physical and social, the shop houses and their traditions are likely to be a 'thing of the past' unless life can be infused into them to be retained as relevant spaces of the city.

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