



Jurnal Arsitektur Zonasi

Journal homepage:
<https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/jaz>



The Architectural Philosophy of the Forms and Ornaments of GPIB Bethel in Bandung City

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ABSTRACT

GPIB Bethel Bandung is a cultural heritage building with profound historical and philosophical values, reflecting the influence of Dutch colonial architecture and spiritual symbolism. Built in 1925 by architect W.C.P. Schoemaker, this church combines Art Deco and Indische Empire Style architecture, evident in its decorative and structural elements rich in meaning. This study aims to examine the philosophy and meaning behind the design of GPIB Bethel Bandung's building, as well as to explore the spiritual symbolism contained in its forms and architectural ornaments. The methodology used is a qualitative-interpretative approach, with data collected through observation, literature study, and text analysis. The findings reveal that each element of the building, such as the mass form resembling a cross, the façade, tower, and columns, carries theological meaning closely related to Christian teachings. This building serves not only as a place of worship but also as a symbol of life, unity of faith, and cultural preservation. GPIB Bethel Bandung is an important example of preserving cultural heritage, which not only has architectural value but also spiritual significance that can continue to inspire and enrich the lives of the people of Bandung. This study emphasizes the importance of preserving historical buildings as part of local identity and valuable culture, as well as understanding the meaning and philosophy behind GPIB Bethel Bandung.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 9 Nov 2024
First Revised 24 Desember 2024
Accepted 25 Januari 2025
First Available online 1 Feb 2025
Publication Date 1 Feb 2025

Keyword:

Church,
GPIB Bethel,
From,
Philosophy,
Symbol,
art deco architecture

Kata Kunci:

Greja,
GPIB Bethel,
Bentuk,
Filosofi,
Simbol,
Arsitektur Art Deco

1. INTRODUCTION

Bandung is a city rich in historical heritage, particularly from the Dutch East Indies colonial period, which remains evident in various parts of the city. These cultural heritage buildings constitute an important aspect of the physical heritage, reflecting the values and behaviors of past societies while providing insight into cultural and historical development. The preservation of this cultural heritage is essential due to its significance in the fields of history, knowledge, education, religion, and culture.



Figure 1. GPIB Bethel Bandung Location Map
(Source: Processed from Google Earth)

The elements of this church are the result of adaptations to developments during the Dutch East Indies era. The design of the massing and spatial arrangement, along with the enclosing elements, embody spiritual meanings that reflect Christian values. Similarly, the decorative features are products of the Art Deco architectural era, which was also popular and influential at the time. GPIB Bethel Bandung is classified as an 'A'-quality building and has undergone a conservation process that preserves its form and function without significant alterations (Adinda Leoni Osami Musa et al., 2023).

Originally built as a simple place of worship, this church played a significant role in the spread of Christianity in the Sunda region during the 19th century. Its architecture incorporates theological symbols that reference biblical teachings. In the modern era, the historical value of buildings such as this is often overlooked. Therefore, this study aims to explore the philosophy and meaning behind the forms and ornamental motifs of the GPIB Bethel Bandung building as an effort to preserve this valuable cultural heritage.



Figure 2. GPIB Bethel Bandung in 1981

(Source: <https://x.com/infobdg/status/1087210326662144000/photo/1>)

This study aims to understand the idea or philosophy of ornaments and other forms of ornaments found in the architectural design of GPIB Bethel Bandung. From this research objective, the philosophy of the ornaments of the GPIB Bethel Bandung building is explained, how the ornaments were created and the meaning of the ornaments.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

GPIB Bethel Bandung is a church with an iconic architectural style and philosophical meanings embedded in each form and ornament. Therefore, this research was conducted to examine the meaning and philosophy behind the building's design. The qualitative-interpretive method is a research approach aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups regarding a particular phenomenon. This approach typically utilizes descriptive data, such as interviews, observations, or text documents, which are analyzed interpretively to identify themes and patterns. The qualitative-interpretive method was chosen because it is well-suited to the interpretative needs of this study. In the realm of qualitative research, which is part of the social sciences, an expansion of the textual interpretation-based approach known as the interpretative qualitative approach is necessary (Arifin, 2024). This research was carried out through the following steps:

- First, observing the research object by reviewing images available online.
- Second, collecting various theories and data through literature studies, including articles, journals, and books accessed online.
- Third, analyzing the data from the observation results and drawing conclusions based on existing theories while expanding insights through related literature studies such as books and journals.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this research analysis, the context refers to the interconnected philosophies of the GPIB Bethel Bandung building, from spirituality and community to cultural and environmental preservation. This creates a place that serves as a place of worship, while also serving as a symbol of life, faith, and sustainability for the Bandung community.

3.1 Art Deco Architecture

Art Deco is a design style that emerged between 1920 and 1939, after World War I and before World War II. The term Art Deco was first introduced in 1925 at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris, France, to describe the prevailing art style of the time. The Art Deco style was regarded as elegant, practical, and reflective of modernity. Consequently, it played a significant role and exerted considerable influence during its era, making it one of the most impactful art movements of the period (Dywastanto & Hermono, 2021).

Art Deco is a design style that developed in Europe, particularly in France, during the 1920s and 1930s. This style gained significant popularity after the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris in 1925. Art Deco evolved by combining elements from various art movements and expressing them through distinctive geometric forms (Nofiyani et al., 2024).

The Art Deco architectural style has distinctive and easily recognizable characteristics. The main features of this style include (Safitri & Nugrahaini, 2022):

- **Geometric Shapes:** Art Deco frequently employs geometric forms such as triangles, zigzags, circles, and straight lines.
- **Decorative Motifs:** The decorative elements are often inspired by ancient Egyptian, African, and Aztec art.
- **Symmetry and Order:** Art Deco designs emphasize symmetry and order, creating an elegant and balanced appearance.
- **Bright and Contrasting Colors:** The color schemes tend to be vibrant and contrasting, often combined with geometric motifs to create a striking visual effect.
- **Vertical Lines:** The use of pronounced vertical lines gives buildings a sense of height and grandeur.

3.2 Indische Empire Style Architecture

The Indische Empire Style, a sophisticated architectural style developed during the reign of Governor-General Daendels in Java, was an adaptation of European architectural styles from the mid-18th century. This style was intended to replace *landhuizen*-style houses with Neo-Classical elements. Over time, the Indische Empire Style evolved to suit local geographic and climatic conditions. Its main characteristics include the use of verandas at the front and back, as well as spacious courtyards. This architectural style spread alongside the colonization process, reaching cities in the interior of Java, where empire-style residential buildings with Neo-Classical characteristics, known as *landhuizen*, were constructed (Alkautsar & Rabani, 2022).

The architectural style of the Indische Empire is influenced by a blend of Dutch, Indonesian, and Chinese cultures. Some of the distinctive features of Indische Empire architecture include the following (Zuhdi & Dewi Siregar, 2024):

- A fully symmetrical floor plan, with a central space containing the master bedroom and additional bedrooms.
- A spacious terrace supported by columns featuring Greek motifs or styles, such as Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

- Bathrooms, storage areas, and other auxiliary spaces separated from the main structure and located at the rear.
- A pavilion used as a guest bedroom.

3.3 Spiritual Symbolism

Spiritual symbolism profoundly influences architecture by incorporating symbols and design elements that reflect religious values and spirituality while conveying religious messages to those who view or use the building. The following are some characteristics of spiritual symbolism in architecture (Lake et al., 2019).

- Facade Design and Ornamentation: Elements such as reliefs, statues, and carvings often reflect biblical stories or religious symbols. For example, Gothic churches frequently feature gargoyles and holy figures on their facades.
- Geometric Symbolism: Geometric shapes often carry spiritual meaning. For instance, the circle symbolizes eternity and divinity, while the triangle can represent the Trinity in Christianity.
- Natural Lighting: The use of natural light through stained glass windows or skylights is intended to create a sacred atmosphere and draw attention to key areas such as the altar or mihrab.
- Color and Materials: The choice of color and materials may also have spiritual significance. Gold is often used to represent nobility and majesty, while blue and white symbolize purity.
- Layout and Space: The spatial arrangement of religious buildings is frequently designed to create a specific spiritual experience. For example, the layout of a Christian basilica directs the congregation's attention toward the main altar.

3.4 GPIB Bethel Bandung Building Shape

GPIB Bethel has a building mass that resembles the shape of a cross, with larger proportions at the head of the cross, which functions as the reception area. This cross-shaped layout is commonly found in ancient or classical churches. The cross itself is a significant symbol of Christian identity, serving as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice and the salvation offered to humanity. The death of Christ on the cross reflects His sincere love and willingness to sacrifice for the salvation of humankind. Furthermore, the cross symbolizes victory over sin and serves as a reminder for Christians to avoid worldly temptations and remain close to God (Mega Sari, 2018).

Schoemaker's choice of a cruciform design for this church was influenced by the designs of most European churches, which at the time largely adopted the cross as their archetypal pattern. Contemporary churches, on the other hand, tend to abandon the use of the cross in their structures, although this does not diminish the significance of the cross symbol itself.



Figure 3. GPIB Bethel Bandung Building
(Source: Processed from Google Earth)

3.5 GPIB Bethel Bandung Tower

The Bethel GPIB building features a tower that serves as a visual orientation for the surrounding public spaces. The tower is designed to be tall and deliberately exposed to serve as a landmark and focal point in the area. Symbolically, the church tower serves as a warning sign and an invitation for worshippers. The addition of a bell to the tower, often used in various religious celebrations, reinforces this function. Psychologically, the tower's location to the left of the entrance also provides a sense of security, as humans instinctively tend to feel more vulnerable on the left side of their bodies. With the tall, sturdy tower on the left, worshippers feel protected and more comfortable.

The placement of the tower on the left side of the building has deep symbolic meaning, depicting God's protection of His people through His right hand. In this interpretation, the altar or pulpit of the church is seen as a place where God is present and watches over the congregation who come to worship. Meanwhile, the tower located on the left side is interpreted as a representation of God's right hand providing protection to the congregation. Therefore, this tower serves not merely as an architectural element, but as a symbol of Divine protection that always protects His people (Rahmawati & Curcahyo, 2017).



Figure 4. GPIB Bethel Tower Bandung
(Source: Processed from Google Earth)

3.6 GPIB Bethel Facade

At the Bethel GPIB Church, the triangular peak serves as a proportional reference for the building's facade. The shape of the peak refers to the culmination of the work of salvation in Christian teachings, namely the crucifixion of Christ and His resurrection on the third day. The concept of the Trinity, which explains that the one God consists of three distinct Persons, is also linked to the symbolism of this peak. Each Person in the Trinity perfectly complements the other, and when referring to one Person, it means we have encompassed the presence of God as a whole (Saputro, 2021).

The Trinity symbol can also be seen on the facade of the GPIB Bethel Church. The outer red line represents God the Father, the great God and creator of all things. This line serves as a container that encompasses the entire cosmos. Meanwhile, the second layer of yellow lines depicts Christ (God the Son) as the center or core of human life. The innermost green line represents God the Holy Spirit, symbolizing the close relationship between humans and God. Therefore, the line representing the Holy Spirit is placed on the innermost layer, indicating His close spiritual relationship with the congregation.



Figure 4. Facade of GPIB Bethel Bandung
(Source: bkppkutim.com)

3.7 Architectural Writing

At the entrance of GPIB Bethel there is a Latin inscription that indicates the name of the church "BETHEL" as well as several other phrases that have religious meaning, showing the identity and purpose of the church. Then there is the phrase "qvi habet avrem audiat quid spiritvs kucing ecclesiis- apoc. 3:22 "which means "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches - Revelation 3:22". The sentence in Latin located under the word "BETHEL", namely "christie tibi sit vota domvs qvi fine carentis vitae verba ferens aperis mortalibvs aegris", has the meaning "May God's blessings always be with you as you express words at the end of life in need, and open them to those who are seriously ill." (Sinambela et al., 2022).



Figure 5. Architectural Writing
(Source: Personal Documentation, 2024)

3.8 Pillars of GPIB Bethel Bandung

These pillars serve as structural supports, symbolizing the strength and stability of the church as a place of worship. They create a solid foundation for the entire building, reflecting the stability of the congregation's faith. The ornamental designs on the pillars depict natural elements, such as leaves and flowers, which symbolize life and growth. This reflects the philosophy that each congregation, despite its diversity, is united in its faith and purpose.



Figure 6. GPIB Bethel Bandung Pillars
(Source: Personal Documentation, 2024)

4. CONCLUSION

GPIB Bethel Bandung is a historic building with profound philosophical value, reflecting a blend of colonial architecture and distinctive spiritual elements. This building, designed by W.C.P. Schoemaker in 1925, reflects the influence of Art Deco and Indische Empire Style architecture, and has strong symbolic meaning in every element of its design. From the mass form resembling a cross to decorative elements depicting religious teachings, every part of this church contains deep theological and spiritual values. The presence of the tower as a spatial orientation, the facade that symbolizes the trinity, and the ornaments on the pillars that depict life and growth, further emphasize how important this church is not only as a place of worship, but also as a symbol of life and unity of faith. With the preservation carried out, GPIB Bethel Bandung not only testifies to the history of the spread of Christianity in Tatar Sunda, but also as a cultural heritage that is important to be preserved for future generations.

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