

Building Paradise

Radit Mahindro's Paras traces Bali's architectural transformation through a century of tourism development
By Jennifer Choo. Photography courtesy of Atelier International



The steamship service connecting Bali to major Dutch East Indies cities in 1924 marked more than a transportation milestone—it initiated a transformation that would reshape the island's architecture, economy, and cultural identity. Four years later, the Bali Hotel opened in Denpasar as the island's first international accommodation, establishing patterns of development that continue to define one of the world's most visited destinations.

The chronicler of this evolution brings an unusual perspective to architectural history. Radit Mahindro spent fifteen years navigating Bali's hospitality landscape, holding senior marketing and revenue roles across properties from Tandjung Sari, one of the island's earliest beachfront hotels, to global luxury groups like Aman and design-driven establishments like Potato Head. His expertise spans pre-opening strategies, brand positioning, and revenue optimisation—experience



that provides uncommon insight into how commercial imperatives shape architectural decisions.

During the pandemic's devastation of Bali's tourism sector, Mahindro began documenting his observations about the island's architectural evolution and its economic dependence on hospitality. What started as personal research evolved into a comprehensive examination of how external forces have shaped Bali's built environment over the past century.

The resulting volume traces how colonial ambitions, nation-building projects, and globalisation have successively reshaped Bali's built environment. Through eleven chapters and sixteen interviews with architects and hospitality pioneers, it reveals the complex negotiations between cultural preservation and commercial demands that continue to define the island's development trajectory.

Tatler Homes speaks with Mahindro about the story behind Paras.

Your book is titled "Paras," a word you explain has multiple relevant meanings: 'face' or

'surface,' 'equal' or 'balanced,' and the 'decorative limestone' or sandstone used in Balinese construction. What is your personal connection to this term, and why did it feel like the perfect encapsulation for a century of Balinese hospitality architecture?

Krisna Sudharma, my partner in Paras, and I were on the hunt for a suitable Bahasa Indonesia name for our project documenting the evolution of Bali's tourism and hospitality sector. We needed something easily spelled by non-Indonesians. 'Paras' became our strongest contender, appealing to us due to its meanings of 'face/'

surface' and 'sandstone/limestone' – materials frequently used in Balinese and Javanese hotels and resorts, and concepts familiar through our backgrounds in art, design, and hospitality. We later discovered its additional meaning of 'balanced,' a fortunate coincidence that adds even greater depth to the essence of Paras.

You've transitioned from being a hotelier to chronicling Bali's architectural history. What was the pivotal moment or driving force behind your decision to write "Paras"?

My fascination with hotel history began in 2010 when I started my hospitality career at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Majapahit in my hometown of Surabaya. This hotel, opened in 1910, was established by the Sarkies family, Farsi-Armenian immigrants who also created iconic Southeast Asian hotels like Singapore's Raffles Hotel, the Eastern & Oriental in Penang, and The Strand in Yangon. This early experience laid the groundwork for my later exploration into the history of hotel architecture.

The Covid-19 pandemic, with its devastating impact on Bali's tourism sector, became the catalyst for a more focused exploration of this interest. Witnessing the widespread job losses in Bali, a place so reliant on tourism and hospitality, prompted me to delve into the historical roots of this dependence. My resulting research took the form of a ten-chapter series published





Clockwise from top left: Hotel Tjampuhan is a historic hotel in Ubud; Alila Villas Uluwatu was designed by WOHA as an ecologically sustainable development; Wantilan Lama in Sanur was designed by Geoffrey Bawa; Tanah Gajah in Ubud was the former estate of Hendra Hadiprana, one of Indonesia's most respected art collectors

Previous spread, clockwise from top left: Radit Mahindro; Katamama now Potato Head Suites embodies Balinese craftsmanship through contemporary design; Paras: Documenting 100 Years of Hospitality and Hotel Architecture in Bali traces the island's transformation; The Apurva Kempinski Bali, designed by Budiman Hendropurnomo of the UK-based Denton Corker Marshall, was influenced by the Majapahit Kingdom and Bali's iconic terracing system

on my Medium page, which would ultimately serve as the core material for the Paras book.

This series then took an unexpected turn when I received an invitation from Ng Sek San, a retired Malaysian landscape artist, and his friend Dr. Tan Loke Mun, a Malaysian architect and art collector. They co-own Atelier International, an independent book publishing house based in Kuala Lumpur, and were interested in transforming my online work into a book. I later discovered their deep connection to Bali – they had spent years living and working on the island and were friends with notable figures in design like Made Wijaya and Nyoman Miyoga.

In Paras, you state, “Hospitality is fundamentally about creating a feeling of welcome and safety... hospitality itself doesn’t require a hotel. Conversely, a hotel desperately needs hospitality to be more than just an empty building.” Could you share a specific architectural element or design approach in Bali that masterfully achieves this intangible sense of welcome?

The traditional Balinese house features the Bale Dauh as a particularly versatile space. Serving simultaneously as the family’s living room, dining area, and guest reception room, the Bale Dauh fosters a welcoming environment. This inherent combination makes it highly probable that guests will be offered food and refreshments as a gesture of Balinese hospitality. Furthermore, by sharing this central space, visitors are presented with a significant chance to interact with and build relationships with all members of the household.

You discuss the “homogenisation” seen in many tourist destinations. What are core principles from traditional Balinese architecture that you believe are essential to countering this trend?

The traditional Balinese architectural guideline, Asta Bumi and Asta Kosala Kosali, emphasises the principle of constructing in





harmony with the surrounding environment, encompassing jungles, mountains, rivers, and all other natural elements including those that are invisible. While the fundamental structure and design of buildings might share similarities, their specific orientation and material choices will invariably differ, adapting to the unique characteristics of each location. The ultimate goal is to create structures that effectively serve human needs while simultaneously complementing and respecting their natural context.

Paras mentions architects like Peter Muller, Geoffrey Bawa, and landscape artist Made Wijaya as having “birthed brand new ‘schools of design’ in Bali.” Could you elaborate on their distinct legacy?

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed significant apprehension regarding Bali’s future development, sparked by the 1966 inauguration of the towering modernist Bali Beach Hotel in Sanur. Wija Waworuntu, the visionary owner of Tandang Sari hotel, vehemently opposed the hotel’s foreign architectural style, which he felt disregarded the island’s rich culture and natural landscape. In response, Wija, along with his then-business partner Donald Friend, directly invited Bawa and Muller to Bali. Their

collaboration aimed to create the Batujimbar Estate and Hotel Matahari (which ultimately became Amandari), conceived as Bali’s first authentic hotel built with traditional techniques and local materials.

Made Wijaya was a former Australian backpacker deeply enamoured with Balinese culture. He embraced Bali fully, adopting a Balinese name and identity, and dedicated his life to championing traditional Balinese design in buildings and landscapes. His involvement in projects like the Batujimbar Estate, Bali Hyatt, and Amandari solidified his influence.

These pioneering designers championed a design philosophy that sought to project the essence of ‘Bali-ness’ onto the global stage, a direct contrast to the inward imposition of foreign styles exemplified by the Bali Beach Hotel. This concept became known as the ‘Bali Style’, gaining popularity through projects led by hotelier Adrian Zecha, including iconic resorts like Amanusa, Amankila, and The Legian.

The book traces how colonialism, nation-building, and globalisation have shaped “destination Bali.” Can you point to specific buildings that embody these historical shifts?

The emergence of Bali as an ‘exotic’ destination was gradual. The

inauguration of a weekly steamship service connecting Singapore, Batavia and Surabaya with Bali in 1931 spurred construction of the island’s first formal hotel, the Bali Hotel. The Dutch colonial administration’s decision to feature Balinese culture at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale in Paris elevated Bali’s cultural profile, leading to the formation of the Pita Maha art collective in 1936. The establishment of the Kuta Beach Hotel in the 1930s by American surfer Bob Koke showcased Bali’s beaches and palm-fringed landscapes.

Following Indonesia’s independence, President Sukarno initiated monumental projects including the Bali Beach Hotel (1962-1966). These structures embodied a modernist architectural style representing Sukarno’s vision of synthesising Eastern and Western ideologies. The Hotel Indonesia in Jakarta, Bali Beach Hotel, and Hotel Borobudur were placed under InterContinental management, representing Indonesia’s first formal effort to cultivate Bali as a tourist destination.

The second major shift came with the Nusa Dua project under President Suharto – a purpose-built tourism enclave featuring international hotel chains, culminating in the Visit Indonesia Year 1991 campaign.



Looking back over the last 100 years, what do you consider the most significant transformation in Balinese hospitality architecture?

We are witnessing a distinct shift where outside influences are increasingly dictating design, with strong emphasis on aesthetics rather than celebrating the inherent beauty of local culture and natural surroundings. This echoes Malaysian architect Cheong Yew

Kuan's observation from the Paras book: 'too many buildings now are divorced from the site and from us... They are abstract manifestations of man's intellect and ego.'

When visiting Bali, what should a discerning traveller look for to identify truly authentic Balinese design?

The concept of 'authenticity' is one I've never embraced, as I see all sensory experiences

as interpretations. My recommendation is to move beyond aesthetics and instead emphasise contextual design. This includes adopting human scale, incorporating readily available local materials such as hand-pressed clay bricks, natural stones, bamboo, and leaves, and ensuring excellent natural ventilation and light through thoughtful orientation. Most importantly, spaces should encourage cultural connection, facilitating literacy, music, dance, and cultural discussions.

You've expressed objection to the term 'tourism' because it "inherently frames the world from the perspective of tourists." How could "destinationism" lead to more respectful architectural development?

I strongly object to 'tourism' because it frames the world from visitors' perspective, who often arrive with limited understanding of local cultures. This industry caters to outsiders, leading to societies and environments being drastically



altered to meet tourist demands. Bali illustrates this imbalance: locals frequently lack access to clean water, reliable transport, safe sidewalks, or adequate waste facilities, while the surge in villas for foreigners and 17,000 accommodations on Booking.com drive up costs to unaffordable levels.

When considering architectural 'destinationism,' Japan, particularly Kyoto, offers a compelling model with its *Ishō-hō* (Design Act). This legislation preserves identity by regulating visual elements of buildings – shape, colours, patterns, signage – ensuring distinct 'Japan-ness' and environmental harmony. It promotes dynamic evolution, allowing modern architectural expressions that are inherently Japanese and contextually fitting.

What is your personal definition of "luxury" in Balinese hospitality and architecture?

True luxury offers a unique duality: it's a feeling of being in a special, guilt-free environment – achieved through genuine hospitality, advanced craftsmanship, and minimal environmental impact – and it's about being in a place that encourages us to question our very definition of luxury. Without these elements, it's just mere indulgence.

What is your personal favourite architectural space in Bali that perfectly embodies the essence of Paras?

Tandjung Sari hotel. It began as the private family home of its owner, Wija Waworuntu, in 1962. Though Indonesian, he wasn't Balinese and possessed only limited architectural knowledge. Yet, driven by deep respect for Balinese culture and landscape, he personally designed Tandjung Sari without formal drawings, collaborating with two Balinese craftsmen to bring his visions to life. The buildings were crafted from readily available materials like palm trees, dried coral reefs, bamboo, and hand-pressed clay bricks.

What began as a single beachfront family house expanded into a cherished hotel with 30 bungalows, maintaining renowned intimacy and personal character. Waworuntu famously described it as his 'living room on the beach.' Tandjung Sari continues fostering community – guests can join dance lessons open to village children since 1987, and the sister establishment Batujimbar Cafe hosts a weekly Sunday market showcasing produce from the family's farm.

Paras was born in Tandjung Sari. ┘

Clockwise from top left: Moon house by Ibuku is a crescent-shaped house with a view of the Ayung river and open to the elements; Bali Hyatt now Hyatt Regency Bali was Kerry Hill's first project in Bali; Tandjung Sari is a boutique hotel located in Sanur and considered amongst the first boutique hotels to be established in South East Asia; Four Seasons Resort Bali At Jimbaran Bay is one of the first international chains to have arrived on the island

