

Tourism and Architectural Design In The Toraja Highlands



The selection, shaping, and recombination of physical elements of centuries-old, exquisitely developed local design traditions into forms which match contemporary uses, satisfy emerging desires, and resonate with while not replicating the values of the past, is a problem not only for changing societies, but also for students of contemporary architecture and design.

Among the 330,000 Toraja people of highland Sulawesi (formerly Celebes), Indonesia's oddly-shaped island situated between Kalimantan and the Moluccas, such issues are being debated in language, ritual, architecture, and related arts.¹ We consider here some of the design experiments that have been occurring in these highlands: in part collage, in part reproduction, in part repudiation of aspects of the past, stimulated both by changes within the society and the nation, and by the rise of international tourism.

When Dutch troops first penetrated the Toraja highlands in 1906, they found a cultivated landscape of unsurpassed beauty. On the lower slopes of forested mountains, water-holding terraces of the wet-rice landscape cascaded down to the Sa'dan River valley. Above the terraces, on isolated ridges and knolls, houses nestled beneath stands of cultivated bamboo which rose a hundred feet or more. Clusters of houses were strategically located for protection against local enemies and armed bands from coastal kingdoms, who periodically raided the highlands for slaves and coffee in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

¹ Volkman, Toby Alice. *Feasts of Honour: Ritual and Change in the Toraja Highlands*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

Today, as then, a village consists of a row of several imposing wooden houses, oriented toward the north. A traditional house, *tongkonan*, is raised on stilts several metres high, with a dramatically swooping boat-shaped roof fashioned of layers of split bamboo. The wooden panels on the facade of an elaborate *tongkonan* are incised with intricate, geometric designs representing buffalo, rice, insects, and other symbols of prosperity, painted red, black, and yellow. To the north of each house stands a granary where sheaves of rice are stored. Like a smaller version of the house, the granary too has a spectacularly carved and painted exterior, and an arched roof of lashed and layered bamboo. Below the rice-storage area, the granary platform offers a comfortable resting place. It is common at twilight to find the owners sitting on this platform smoking, chewing betel nut, and relaxing after a day's labour.

The rhythms of village life are oriented outward. In the early morning, after a breakfast of boiled cassava, most able-bodied men and women have left the village to work in rice fields or in gardens where they raise cassava, chilli peppers, squash, and coffee. For most of the day, the village yard is almost deserted, except for grandparents, young children, and a population of perennially pecking chickens. Late in the afternoon, men and women return from fields and gardens and the village comes to life again. Women light cooking fires, while men sit and smoke on house porches and under granaries.

The ornamented, sun-lit exterior of a *tongkonan*, emblazoned with incised, hand-painted carvings, forms a startling contrast to the dark, nearly windowless

Below: Terraced Toraja rice-fields.

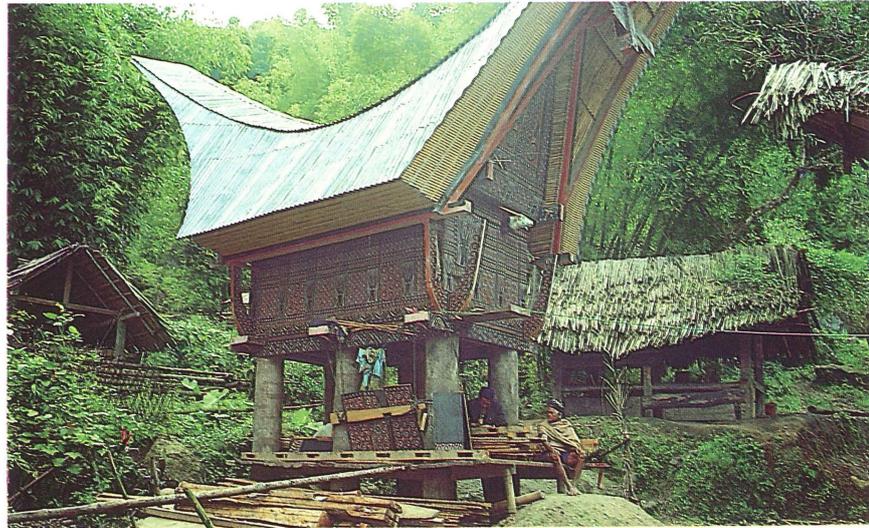


Text and photographs
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Above: In a relatively poor village, granaries and houses are unadorned. A rice seed-bed is visible in the foreground.

Right and below: With remittances from abroad, some villagers build new, elegant granaries in the classical style. Here the many-layered bamboo roof is covered by an additional layer of corrugated tin. The owner, a traditional ritual priest, watches the carver at work.



interior. Once one has entered the *tongkonan*, the focus of life is inward, toward the raised hearth at its centre. Here, on three rocks, sit cooking pots containing rice, vegetables, and occasional gifts of meat. Suspended from roof rafters by rattan ties, and blackened with the soot and smoke of countless cooking fires, hangs a bamboo rack holding utensils, newly gathered vegetables, and rice-winnowing baskets. Around the hearth people gather after dark, when the village closes down, and only occasional laughter and sounds of conversation emerge from the battened hatches of the hearth-centred house.

It is at rituals that the social and religious meanings of both house and granary are emphasised. The branches of the extended family who trace their ties through common ancestors associated with a house assemble at rituals. Like these family branches, the materials of temporary ritual architecture establish a symbolic web of communications.² Ropes, vines, bamboo, fruits, palm leaves, batik cloths, and bird of paradise plumes are deployed to establish connections between society, spirits, and ancestors. The links may be quite literal and visible, if ephemeral. At one ritual, for example, in celebration of a *tongkonan's* descendants' prosperity, priests sit inside the house beating a drum attached to a rattan vine; the vine is tied to the rafters; from the roof it traverses the yard outside and is tied to the granary; from there it leads to a bamboo offering stand on which betel nut is placed for the spirits.

Mortuary ceremonies lead to another



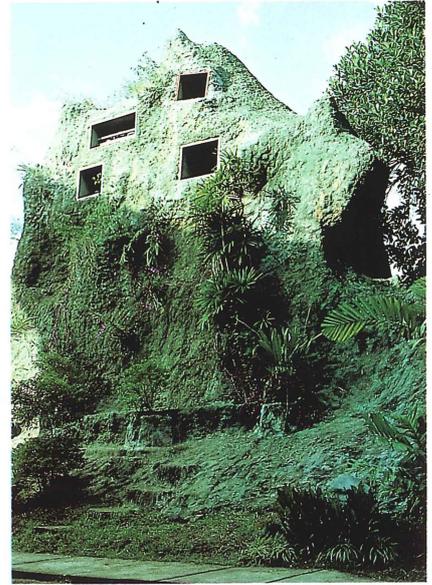
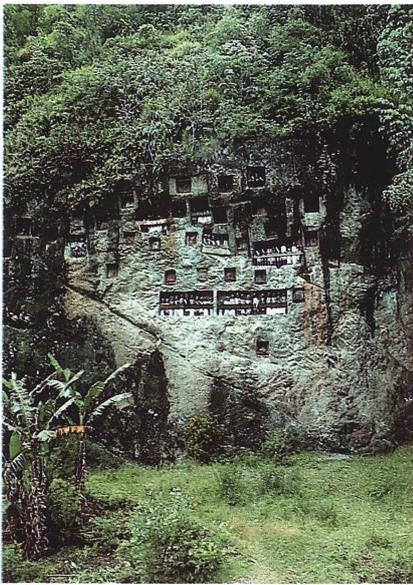
form of indigenous architecture, the tomb. The dead were traditionally buried within niches hollowed out of volcanic boulders and high limestone cliffs. On ledges in front of burial niches of noble men and women, carved wooden figures were placed, representing the deceased. Since the early twentieth century, Western travellers have remarked upon such mortuary cliffs in passages ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. One magnificent site, Lemo, where a cliff is graced by scores of austere-eyed effigies with arms outstretched, has been the object of almost nine decades of description by Western travellers, and more recently by anthropologists and tourist promoters. Since international tourism began in the highlands in the early 1970s, many of these effigies have been stolen and are now in private art collections in Europe and America. Where once-powerful fi-

gures guarded ancestral tombs, now empty ledges gape.

Tourists, primarily from Western Europe, have been "discovering" Toraja for nearly two decades. In the same period, many Toraja have begun to move away, leaving the highlands in search of further education and work. In Makassar, the old emporium of the East Indies spice trade, whose tree-lined streets and broad avenues are a Dutch colonial legacy, homes of affluent Toraja are marked by entranceways topped with *tongkonan*-shaped and painted roofs. The same roof shape appears on occasional Toraja tombs near the vast Chinese cemetery on the outskirts of the city.

Thousands of Toraja have gone not only to Makassar, on Sulawesi's southwestern coast, but to Jakarta, where some find work as sailors and others move into government positions; and,

² Zerner, Charles. "Animate Architecture of the Toraja," *Arts of Asia*. September-October 1983.



perhaps the majority, to the logging operations and oil fields of Kalimantan, and the immense copper mines of Tembaga-pura, Irian Jaya. Abroad, many are jogged into recognising the losses they have sustained. Two parallel processes are occurring: one, of outward movement, economic growth, and assimilation of (and into) a national culture; the other, a self-conscious assessment of cultural roots and identity. Toraja often now reflect upon which cultural materials and symbolic forms are worthy of representation, recollection or reconstruction. These forces within Toraja and Indonesian society are at least as significant as the rise of Western tourism in invigorating and shaping debate about the design of dwellings, tombs, and ritual. In a sense the Toraja are both tourists and the toured in their own land.

The house, once a symbol and locus of family history and worth, has in recent years been charged with new meanings. As lived-in architecture, the monumental, ritually significant *tongkonan* has been increasingly replaced within the last few decades by houses built either in the style of lowland Bugis dwellings — spacious, plain, wooden houses on piles with plenty of doors and windows — or what are simply known as rumah batu, “stone” (concrete) houses, admired for their associations with prosperity, modernity, and the West.

Many people say they prefer Bugis-style or concrete houses for several reasons. They are less expensive and more quickly constructed than *tongkonan*, of which the roof alone requires vast quantities of bamboo, time, and

Above, left: The grave site of Lemo in 1977. Eight years later, all the effigies had been stolen from the lower left ledge, and several from the lower right. Top: A wooden Bugis-style house adjoining a “traditional village” of tongkonan. Above: Most new construction in villages consists of wooden Bugis-style houses such as these.

labour (no longer readily accessible to the elite). And, as interior domestic space assumes more functions (especially in towns, or where electricity and television have become available), the airy, spacious interiors of Bugis or concrete houses are experienced as more comfortable and pleasant than the rather dark, windowless, confining interiors of the *tongkonan*. The *tongkonan* was classically more a protective fortress and a bold facade than a space to dwell within.

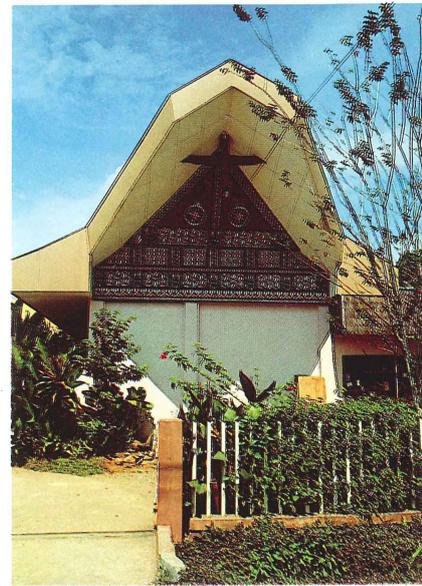
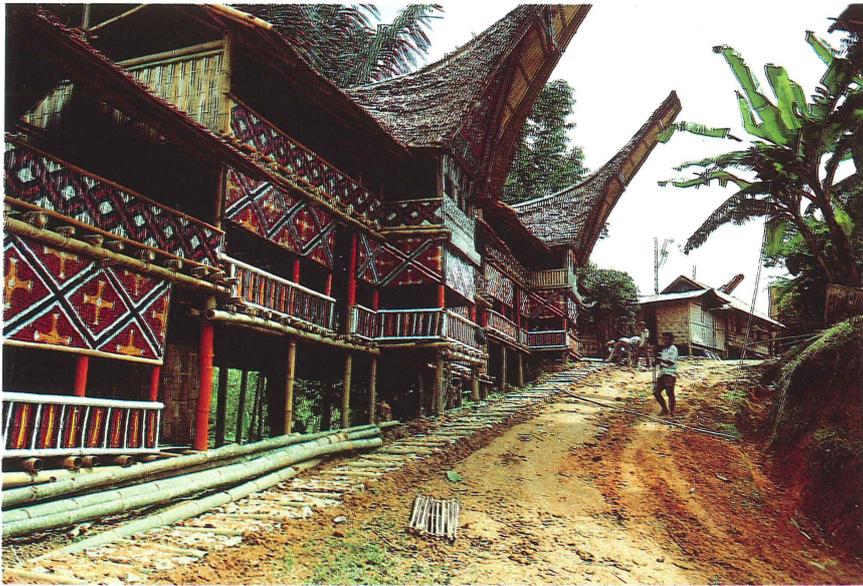
In spite of the popularity of new house-styles, there is at the same time a fascination with, even revival of, traditional Toraja houses. For both out-migrating Toraja and temporarily in-migrating tourists, the *tongkonan* is often now constructed as an icon of Toraja identity. As both government and individuals struggle to articulate “Torajanness”, a variety of architectural approaches have emerged. Official strategies have yielded rather inert solutions. For example, a row of *tongkonan* was built (with national government support) near Lemo, the cliff grave-site frequented by tourists. There, finely carved and crafted, superbly roofed *tongkonan* stand empty. They are, like the adjacent graves which Toraja describe as “houses without smoke”, smokeless houses. Elsewhere formerly inhabited houses have

Above: At Taman Mini, “Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature Park”, the concrete pseudo-grave.

Below: A two-storey concrete house. A tongkonan-shaped roof is painted minimally but suggestively to evoke traditional house devotion.

Bottom: A split-level: concrete house below, tongkonan above.





Above, left: Temporary shelters are built for guests at a funeral.

Above: The Hotel Indra, with Toraja "motifs".
Left: "Motif" panels are installed at a new wing of the Missiliana Hotel, under construction in 1985.



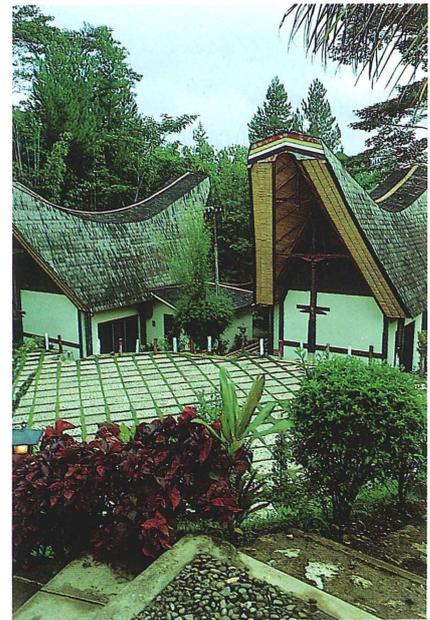
been restored with government funds and are now labelled "traditional villages" along the tourist route. Behind these refurbished houses with souvenirs for sale, people live in Bugis-style dwellings. At Taman Mini, or "Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature Park" in Jakarta, beside a Toraja *tongkonan* rises a concrete pseudo-cliff grave, with replicas of effigies lining its ledges.

In contrast to government strategies, individual attempts to resolve the split between contemporary preferences and symbols of tradition are more lively. Sometimes architectural styles are combined in a single structure: above a concrete or Bugis-style building, where people live, is another level, consisting of a *tongkonan*-shaped roof. Elsewhere there are true split-levels: concrete or Bugis below, and an actual *tongkonan* above. This innovation creates a second-storey terrace, while providing both comfort

and symbol. Occasionally the *tongkonan* itself is modernised: in one case, to become a hotel designed to evoke "authenticity", with added plumbing; in another, to achieve a prestige-laden combination of traditional architecture with modern engineering. The latter is epitomized in a house designed by a wealthy Toraja engineer, which from a distance appears to be a classic *tongkonan*. On closer examination, however, one sees that between the wooden piles elegant glass walls have been installed, and a linoleum floor creates, in effect, a ground-floor (and quite modern) room (in the area that formerly was used for pigs or buffalo). Upstairs the form is indeed traditional, if immaculate. This museum-like space is not likely to be disturbed since no one intends to inhabit this luxurious structure. The engineer works in Bali, and all his siblings also live outside the Toraja highlands. Only his elderly mother re-

mains, and she prefers the large, single-storey concrete house adjacent to the new *tongkonan*. That the new house would not be inhabited seemed irrelevant; its completion in 1985 occasioned a splendid celebration, with thousands of guests and otherwise dispersed relatives.

Ritual, which always strove to be on a grand scale in Toraja, had its own design logic necessitating the creation of architectural structures to house guests who might stay as long as seven days. The Toraja developed an ingenious system of temporary ritual architecture, elevated structures of split, woven, and lashed bamboo with painted decorations, in which guests were sheltered and fed. But when tourism began in the area in the early 1970s, such guest housing did not provide a model for hotels. The earliest hotels were simple unadorned concrete buildings in the town of Rantepao, the regional market centre. As tourism developed later in the decade, and Toraja became increasingly self-conscious about questions of cultural identity and its visible forms, attempts were made to build hotels that evoked "Torajanness". By 1978 this was formalised in a government decree that declared all hotels must use Toraja "motifs" in their design. "Motif" has been interpreted to mean the shape (though not the elaborate construction) of the traditional roof, or some of the patterns used in house carvings. Even if just



a decorated door or mirror frame, there must be some indication that the traveller is in (unique) Toraja-land.

Several hotels have implemented the "motif" decree more fully. The Indra Hotel uses both surface design elements from traditional architecture and a full-size, fully carved rice-barn. This granary, however, contains not grain but water, which is piped to the bathrooms. The Missiliana Hotel also boasts a granary, but here it is pure display. The resonant image of wealth, plenitude, and sustenance is now an empty shell, containing neither rice nor water. The Missiliana, which caters to a more international group of tourists than the Indra, also has a strangely landscaped garden, probably reflecting Jakartan influence: artificially created small hills staked with orchids, interspersed with spindly concrete trees resembling withered milkweed on Mars. Beyond this is another garden of concrete sculptures of deciduous trees on a lawn, a concrete cliff, pools of water, red bougainvillea and tree ferns.

Outside of town is Toraja Cottage, the most luxurious Toraja hotel. Here both two-dimensional patterns and three-dimensional forms are successfully interwoven into an integrated design fabric: a proliferation of incised and painted surfaces; arching, *tongkonan*-like roofs; and grounds lushly planted with sacred plants. One finds stone paths lined with red cordyline, fan palms and unusual orchids from Makassar, and views of mountains and rice fields in the distance. Buildings and landscape combine to produce an environment recognisable as

Left, above: The meeting hall at Toraja Cottage fuses indigenous surface design and bamboo roof with a Javanese-style pendopo or verandah.

Top: The grounds at Toraja Cottage.

Above: Twin roofs of Makassar's most elegant hotel echo a Toraja theme, in a Bugis-Makassarese city on Sulawesi's coast.

Right, above: Paved plaza at Toraja Cottage, evoking Nias.

both international "hotelese" and distinctively Toraja. Although Torajanness is emphasised throughout, other Indonesian ethnic architectural styles have been incorporated as well: there is a Javanese-style *pendopo* or verandah conference centre, a Balinese-style gazebo at the pool and a Nias-style stone plaza. Toraja culture is itself carefully presented: guests spend their first evening watching a videotape of a Toraja funeral, in preparation for the rather bloody sacrifice of water buffalo and pigs that they will see (if they are "lucky") the next day, or that they may not see (if their three-day trip does not happen to coincide with a local funeral). In the event that they do not get to a real ritual, at least the hotel provides them with a reproduction.

But what is a "real ritual"? Like both domestic and hotel architecture, ritual itself is a pastiche of elements old and new. At a funeral we attended in 1985, a committee of theologians, family members, and bureaucrats self-consciously designed a ceremony according to the "rules of modern management", composed of elements of traditional Toraja "animist" mortuary ritual. These elements were edited, rearranged, and integrated to create an acceptably modern ceremony.

While many baroque details of a customary funeral were deleted, the elements that remained were greatly enlarged in scale: temporary shelters were provided for thousands of guests, the two coffins (for father and son) were extraordinarily large, as was the bamboo tower which accommodated them. The placement of this structure in the centre of a former rice field was also new, and would have been an unthinkable conjunction of rice and death according to traditional rules of spatial separation. Sound as well as space was amplified and newly regulated: instead of ceremonial oratory addressed to the spirits, an Indonesian-speaking narrator explained the significance of each event through a public address system, to an audience of tourists including not only Westerners but also other Indonesians and Toraja themselves.

In an era when bricolage and decoupage have become something of a metropolitan fashion among architects and designers, the Toraja are self-conscious editors of their own rich cultural legacy. Where once strict rules of custom governed the use of space, material, and sequence, now Toraja are free to travel, as it were, through their own environmental history: culling forms and patterns in an effort to compose a satisfying contemporary image of Toraja cultural identity, and of the past.

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Above: Preliminary construction of a bamboo tower for two corpses, on a former rice field now ringed with temporary guest housing.

Left: The completed mortuary tower, viewed from the side. On the day before the ceremony, Toraja of all ages, tourists, and water buffalo mingle.



Left, below: The corpses, red and gold cylinders on biers beneath arching roofs, are carried down from the village in a boisterous procession marked by a streaming red cloth.

Left, bottom: The corpse is carried across fields to the grave.



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