Wae Rebo is a remote village settled 17 generations ago (according to oral tradition), located deep within mountainous rainforest in the Manggarai area on the island of Flores in eastern Indonesia. The site is a grassy plateau some 1200 metres above sea level and is only accessible on foot. In the late 1960s, a development programme under the Suharto government forcibly relocated other nearby villages to the lowlands, pulling down traditional housing in the process. But the Wae Rebo community remained in its isolated site and successfully retained its traditional conical houses of “worok” wood, bamboo and thatch, known as mbaru niang, standing some 13 metres high. As symbols of unity in the family and community, these dwellings are the communal domestic and ceremonial space for an entire clan, sheltering up to eight families (35–45 people), their crops, food and ritual belongings over five storeys.

In 2008, a group of young Jakarta-based architects on a study trip to Flores arrived to find four – out of an original seven – of these houses remaining, two of which were in need of rebuilding. Eager to preserve this last example of Manggarai vernacular building, and in so doing the Wae Rebo culture and way of life, the architects initiated and facilitated the community-led renovation, but only after traditional skills lost over time had been relearnt by the community in reverse during the dismantling process of the older structures.

After this was successfully completed, the project expanded to rebuild three more mbaru niang on the footprint of the earlier houses, restoring the village to its original state of seven houses arranged in a U-shape around a simple open-air altar. All the materials are natural and were sourced locally, and the community provided all the labour, learning on the job.

A central column rises through the elaborate multi-storey frame in hardwood, braced by four diagonals that define the conical shape; the floors are tied into the structure and the whole is covered almost to ground level by bamboo and thatch. The ground-floor living area is divided by the central post into reception area at the front and cooking to the rear, with perimeter cubicles acting as bedrooms. The four upper storeys are for storage and ritual spaces.
Preservation of the Mbaru Niang
Wae Rebo Village, Flores Island, Indonesia

Client and Builder
Wae Rebo Community, Flores Island, Indonesia:
- Martinus Anggo, project leader and community representative
- Fransiskus Mudir, construction manager
- Alexander Ngadus, Isidorus Ingkul, Thomas Pakur, supervisors

Rumah Asuh, Jakarta, Indonesia:
- Yori Antar, founder
- Varani Kosasih, Paskal Khrisno Ayodyantoro, project managers
- Robin Hartanto, Faiiz Hamdi Suprahman, Ronaldiaz Hartantyo, Adi Reza Nugroho, Arya Wisnu Wardhana, students

Project Coordinator
Rumah Asuh, Jakarta, Indonesia:
- Yori Antar, founder

Project Data
- Site area: 6500 m²
- Footprint of each house: 101 m²
- Total combined floor area: 1005 m²
- Cost: 206,000 USD
- Study: August–December 2008
- Construction: May–October 2009 (phase 1); February–May 2010 (phase 2); November 2010–May 2011 (phase 3)
- Completion: May 2011

Rumah Asuh
Rumah Asuh, meaning “foster house”, is a Jakarta-based team of architects. The members of this team ordinarily work within the commercial practice of Han Awal & Partners, and, under the mentorship of the architect Yori Antar, Rumah Asuh also works voluntarily to understand, document and help preserve some of the endangered indigenous architectural traditions of Indonesia.

The collective was born out of the experience of the trip of 15 young Jakarta-based architects and students to the remote village of Wae Rebo in 2008. Back in Jakarta, the group – later to be known as Rumah Asuh – remained motivated to assist the Wae Rebo community. The conservation of Wae Rebo is their first on-site project. During the rebuilding phases, students on on-site placements actively participated in the construction through Rumah Asuh and became responsible for documenting, through different media, the entire rebuilding process.