

## Almost Famous Church

*A review of the 1<sup>st</sup> winner of Bintaro Church Competition 2001*

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Architects have long complained that public buildings design are too often suffocated by endless public meetings, community consultation process, design-review boards, or even sometimes an undisclosed process of appointing certain architect to do the design work.

But these days architects should feel relieve since more and more public buildings design are chosen from a competition process.

If the competition jury board manage to avoid having the process ambushed by unidentified concerns or red-herring issues raised by project opponents, then people could expect more of the competition design product. More of it, the jury board also need to take the responsible of rationalizing public input into the projects and making sure design integrity does not fall victim to politics surrounding a site or project.



Vegetation found in the site (photo by Adi Purnomo)

By natural predisposition, I have always put a high expectation of public building competitions.

Though citizen involvement in the design of public community projects can be frustrating, but more competitions are a good process to find the most expressive and responsive architecture.

So, even the Bintaro Church project was aborted due to political reasons, when asked to review the 1<sup>st</sup> winner of the Church Design competition 2001, I got all excited and have my critic's blades sharpened. My big question was: Could this one worth the polemic?

The church, as it turned out, puts up a good fight in rationalizing the arduous load of its namesake. A slope-like building with generous green view contain 3 blocks of main-events, Pastorate, Function-Hall, and the main worship space. It is crafted with utmost specification to the demands of a tight, irregular shaped site whilst maintaining the clarity of spatial intention.

Architect Adi Purnomo in explaining the scheme, discusses the complexity of the site and the surrounding area.

A 25 meters height steel structure tower stands with its high voltage transmission cable stretch out above ground all along the front side of the site. The site itself sloped upward to almost 6 meters high from the street level to the back of the site

Medium class of housing and a kindergarten -playground enclose the existing site.

A careful thought about the intricacy of the site created a positive response.

A dialogue between what has to be inserted and what is there, making new relationships possible between the spaces of The Church and the 'wasted' space below the high voltage transmission cable.

In each move, it is this sense of conversation between architecture and another – the site, the landscape, and the spaces in between- that raises potentials of this project.



A high transmission cable stretch out above the site ground. (photo by Adi Purnomo)



A panoramic view of the site. (photo by Adi Purnomo)



The Plan (image by Adi Purnomo)

The Ubiquitous look and characters of Church building has been avoided by the architects' creative handling of site issues. The attitude towards the high voltage cable-tower was set up first, to maximize the use of the site. The roof was designed to slope upwards towards the back of the site acting as a barrier to the building.

Viewed from the ground level, the grass grows above the building roof made the church looks as if it bleeds into its environment. The grass provides a hairy green texture against the sky, softening the concrete, stones, and red brick, pulling the pieces together.



View from the street, a generous greenery (image by Adi Purnomo)

The massive looking roofs is cut into several planes by creating openings that acts as entrance door every 10 meters intervals along the *Maleo* street side. Adi reminds that the surrounding environment site is such a dry green-less area, which could use a community park provided by the generous greenery of the church.

With this scheme, the church doesn't act merely as a worship place but becoming a public building that could cause positive ripple effects to the surrounding.



An entrance, fractured opening in the slope  
(image by Adi Purnomo)

Although The building looks like a continuous mass across the site, actually the site make it unable to dictate a real continuous mass, the configuration is fractured according to function needed following diagonal shaped of the site. Breaking into three smaller programs, the first red-brick block is a daily function building for the pastoral staff.

Another two is the multi-function hall and the main worship hall bifurcated by a 12 meters opening with a natural stone texture.

Adi, who placed a cross structure (as a catholic Christian symbol) in the most strategic part of the building between the 12 meters opening, is optimistic that when these decided it will give a figurative spirit of the church building whilst shunning replacement of cross symbol everywhere in the building just to emphasize that it's a church.

In fact, the cross could be seen from almost every corner of the building.



A view of the cross from the corridor. (image by Adi Purnomo)

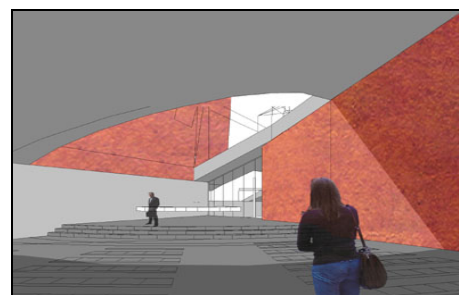
One could see it from the multi-function hall, the inside corridor, and of course from the worship hall.

The cross is placed right at the tip-end of the red-brick wall, outside the main worship hall so that people inside could only see it behind the priest-altar and outside the transparent glass. The position is peculiarly ingenious since it allow people inside the main worship hall to focus only to the cross and not seeing people walking outside in the corridor.

As the site stands right below the high voltage transmission cable, the use of slope shape concrete filled with grass roof was not only a necessity but also an aesthetic question that had to be re-examined. These front walls, or should I say a grass-concrete-roof, for me is the most poetic and original design elements on site. They are perhaps a breakthrough idea to make roof act as wall in unison as a way to cut cost of the building.

As a main visual feature, I forecast that these treatment would successfully reduced the actual scale of the building by alluring the eye with its attractive slanted grass-concrete-roof and by accentuating it horizontally with the red-brick sculptural box acts as the altar's roof.

Another sensible decision to be tropically responsible for letting natural light and ventilation come in to the building is by allowing it come from the backside of the



Shadow play at the main worship hall, look towards the altar. (image by Adi Purnomo)

site which is made almost 2 floor height glass-window wall.

This merges the idea of having maximal light and air without unnecessary opening at the other wall-roof facing the main street, by then would probably operate as a public community park.

Distinctive natural light comes into the altar through one transparent side of the red brick sculptural-like roof box, creating a dynamic shadow play.

Unlike the widespread layout of a catholic church that could be find in Indonesia, the Worship Hall is accessible from all side including from parallel side of the Altar. Isn't it romantic to see the idea of entrance as a manifesto that the Church is open for everyone regardless where they come?

The worship hall could have a total of 838 people sitting properly inside while another 297 possibly will occupy the outer side of the hall.

It is not particularly revolutionary in layout although they are tectonically articulated by a catchy planar geometry of red brick wall and a restrained set of glass.

And yet for all the great effort to achieve such transparency, the design itself aware that it is after all a worship building and need some level of privacy. For this, it has made some condition. The large degree of transparency achieved is balanced by the tectonic play of solid contrast of gray-washed surfaces with red brick surface for the interior of the worship hall.

Another significant attribute is the decision to consciously work on one continuous ground plane. The sloped roof is almost four meters high. This decision can be said to have several consequences.

First, in preserving the actual contour of the site, the slanted roof that act as wall on one side of the building create a visual and experimental difference between the church and other building in the area.

The vertical cut used for entry doors to the building every 10 meters segregate the continuous ground plane as if a vocalist need to catch their breath every once in a while.

Second, a differentiated slope increases the levels of privacy otherwise difficult for such a tight and inward-looking site.

Third and last of all, it's arguably that the continuous ground plane produces a modest human scale building, and could encourage tighter communal interaction through the user of the building with their surrounding community (which is not all Christian).

The church building, I learnt, was being defined in a new way out of the ordinary typology. The design has expanded the perspective of a catholic-church building design in an innovative humble-social human oriented.

It works hard to understand the specific shape of the land, the trees, and the spaces between buildings. I wonder, studying the plan again, had not such strategy been taken would the outcome be just as fascinating. By the instinct, designers usually try to conquer a site with 'artistic' force. To judge architecture as "good" or "bad" by merely eyeing it as if one could categorize prepared by an education of theories, forms and their geometries, is a shallow conception. Architecture, as this short review tries to describe, is not the result of a genius – the architect- nor is it just about the building. it should come as a verb associated with a process. In certain ways, the Bintaro Church has taken this unpredictable route. It has arrived by negotiation and conversation through a design competition. It is special not for the conscious forms it has adopted but for the processes that have deliver these forms. It is special because it is somewhere between those trees and the slope. It is a pity that one would be able to enjoy the church only on one's mind.

It is a pity that it is an almost famous church.

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