

# CULTURAL ACCULTURATION IN INTERIOR AND ARCHITECTURE OF OLD STRAITS-BORN CHINESE LASEM HOUSE

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## ABSTRACT

*The long-term goal of this research was to make variety ornament documentation on architecture and the interior of Indonesian historical buildings, especially for buildings having the combination between western and eastern. The original plan of this research was to achieve some cultural preservation efforts, they were (1) to find various styles of design art, including the variety of native straits-born Chinese ornaments, Art Deco, and Neoclassical, or found that there are any acculturations among the ornaments in an interior. (2) To understand characteristics of each style and applied it appropriately in the interior space. (3) To find on how the building functioned and how to preserve as cultural heritage. The method began with a survey, interviews, and observations by documenting the application of Indonesia art and culture for cultural conservation, especially on interior design. The case study was straits-born Chinese buildings in Lasem, Central Java. The observation and research concerned with design styles applied in architecture, interior, and home decoration. The observation and research were followed by summarizing and analyzing the material obtained from field surveys result by comparing two samples of Chinese houses in Lasem that also supported with literature research. Researchers find several differences of art styles which had been applied. The styles are original Chinese decorations, Art Deco, and Neoclassical decorations.*

**Keywords:** *acculturation, interior, architecture straits-born Chinese, Lasem, cultural preservation*

## INTRODUCTION

The diversity of Indonesian culture is shaped and formed by other major culture, such as India, Chinese, and Arab. India influences developed together with the dispersion of Hindu and Buddhist culture, followed by Islamic culture in the 12th century and Western culture in the 16th century. Chinese culture has also played an important role in shaping Indonesian culture identity. The effect of these major cultures influences throughout the century is acculturation processes. Acculturation process can be defined as a process where a group of people with strikingly different culture comes together resulting in a new culture without completely changing the identity or characteristics of the original culture. Acculturation occurs in many areas, and one of them is architecture.

An example of acculturation in architecture can be seen in straits-born Chinese (*Cina Peranakan*) architecture. In Indonesia, straits-born Chinese architectures are rarely spoken or discussed. Thus, these types of traditional architecture remain in the darkness. However, straits-born Chinese architecture in Indonesia is truly existed, not only giving character to the cities to which they belong but also take part in enriching Indonesian architecture. Commonly, straits-born Chinese architecture consists of various important buildings, such as *Klenteng*, a religious building which functions not only as a ritual place for the Chinese straits descents but also as a physical expression of the supporters (Salmon & Lombard, 2003). Shop houses, which can be considered as a distinctive Chinese architecture. Port cities (under cities) in Guandong provinces and Fujian as well as South East

Asia coastal area are filled with these shop houses and even become the landmark of these cities. However, Viaro (as cited in Handinoto, 2008) has argued that shop houses are the combination of architecture as a result of trades along the China and South East Asia coastline between the Westerners, Chinese, and the natives. In the past, shop houses were solutions for the dense Chinese settlements. It has functioned as business space on the ground floor and living space on the upper floors and it is considered as the best solutions for the dense and compact Chinese settlements (Handinoto, 2009). Last straits-born Chinese architecture is the dwelling house. Seen from the characteristics, these dwelling houses are similar with the houses in mainland China, which can be found extensively in the mainland and known as the four-sided courtyard. Similar with the riches of traditional as well as modern Indonesian architecture with various foreign influences that need to be preserved, straits-born Chinese architecture also needs to be preserved and protected. However, there is not much has been done to preserve these unique and valuable buildings. Many of these heritage buildings are neglected, under maintenance as if waiting for these buildings to deteriorate and collapse on its own. Johana, as cited in Kurniawan *et al.* (2017) agrees that heritage buildings can shape local value which can shape the distinctive image of a city, thus need to be preserved. Preservation can be done through various ways, such as change or transform the use of space, renovation, and one of the most basic and easy ways is documentation. Unfortunately, only several of these buildings are well documented. Thus a proper and accurate documentation is urgently needed to be then properly published and studied further.

Straits-born Chinese architecture in Indonesia has many influences from Southern China where the Chinese had actually sailed to Java before the arrival of the Portuguese in Nusantara in 1511 and even far before the Europe even started to explore to the east. In Chinese documents and literature, during the 15th century many references about Nanyang, were often found as a term referring to the South East Asia region. The immigration phases to Nanyang were done by traders and fisherman from the Southern China, in unison with Han's clan expedition to the tropical area. They arrived in Java as traders carrying porcelain and silk to be exchanged with rice and other agriculture commodities. These Chinese traders were the loyal follower of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. From just trading, the Chinese started to live semi-permanently and build settlements. The shop houses and with trading areas were the beginning of Chinese villages and towns. The term shop houses signify the double function of the space, first as a space to live, usually in the upper floors and second as a space of trades in the lower floors. The Chinese had the strategic location and spatial design, thus make Chinatown became an ideal area of trades.

However, infamous with their shop houses, not all Chinese settlers build them. The City of Lasem in Central Java is a fine example of straits-born Chinese architecture which does not adopt shop houses style (Darmawan, 2012). Instead, they build houses and many of these straits-born Chinese dwellings are 100 to 150 years old and have not experienced any major change. Lasem is chosen as a study case not only because the houses have distinct characteristics, but the city itself plays an important role in straits-born Chinese history in Indonesia. It was the 13th century when the Chinese first arrived and settled in Lasem, far before Dutch colonial started in Java. In the 15th century, they built the permanent settlement in the lowland eastern part of Lasem river, where a port was located as the center of trades (Pratiwo, 2010). Covering an area of 1.226 hectares, with approximately 24.065 population and 11% of that population are straits-born Chinese descents. Almost 4% of the city population migrates or moves to another city every year, most of them are the younger generations of straits-born Chinese leaving Lasem with mostly older generations.

The acculturation of the straits-born Chinese architecture in Lasem is a long process of transformation in which the architecture eventually finds a distinctive feature from its origin. That means that the straits-born Chinese architecture in Lasem has gone through such a long process of trial and error to a valid and high-value strait-born architecture. They build bigger houses completed with a courtyard which is more comfortable than the shop houses in Chinatown. Pratiwo (2010) explains further that straits-born Chinese house in Lasem consists of the gate, main house, and side and back

house. Two types of gates are gatehouses and small gates located in the middle of brick fences. Gatehouses exist in bigger houses belongs to wealthy Chinese that are divided into three areas; entryway located in between two rooms that are provided for house guards. The main houses consist of the front, middle, and back area. The front area is the porch, while the middle area is the offering tables or altar for ancestors' worship that is located in between two bedrooms and the back area consists of the dining room, another two bedrooms on each side of the dining room and the back porch. The center of external social activities usually is the front porch complete with a set of coffee table and chairs. This area can be considered as the multifunction area because not only it is used to receive guests, but it is also used to discuss lottery number with the neighbors, family gathering, or just a place to relax and to have some fresh air. On the contrary, the center of a more private social activity is the back porch, where women sit and talk while preparing dishes. The back house is a one-floor building consists of three areas; the foremost area located in the front yard can be used as barn, bedrooms, seating rooms as well as the altar for the gods, the center usually functions as bedrooms or seating area, and the back are areas for domestic helpers. Not all the houses have side houses on the left and right side of the main house. Some houses only have one side house or the pair of side house but smaller one only as long as the front yard area. There are types of back houses; one or two floors are used as pavilions, hall, and bedrooms.

Straits-born Chinese architecture in Java, including Lasem, is continuously developed and transformed, especially in the 20th century. Many of these dwelling houses undergo the various transformation, for example in the front porch area; it usually occurs when the original wood partition is damaged, then the new partition is built in between the ancestor's altar room and the front porch. Thus, the front porch area becomes more private that is showed in Figure 1. Interior and exterior also transform. Interior transformation usually occurs parallel with the modification from the gable plan roof to pyramid plan roof and also happens when the house owner is adding bedrooms in the back area of the main house. Another exterior transformation occurs especially when the Dutch Colonial style started to influence straits-born Chinese architecture, for example, some Chinese change their solid and block fences into a more transparent model with neoclassic columns and even some birds ornament on top of it. Some of them also add neoclassic pillars in the front porch; two favored pillars are Tuscan and Roman Doric style (Figure 2). The dimension and proportion of these pillars are various from one house to the other, some of them are built from brick, some other with wood complete with capital and pedestal.

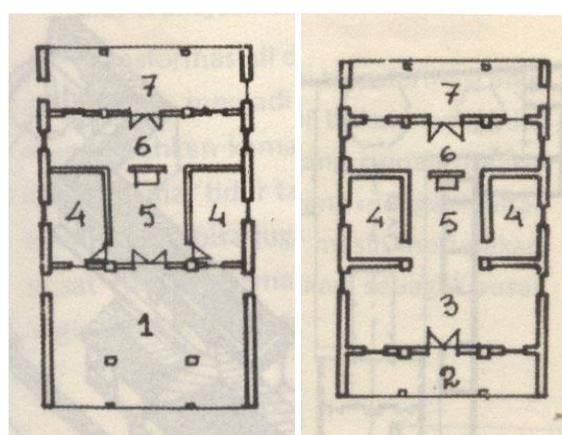


Figure 1 Transformation of the front porch: original house layout (left), transformation house layout (right)  
 (Legend: (1) Front porch, (2) Porch, (3) Guest room, (4) Bedrooms, (5) Ancestor altar,  
 (6) Dining room, (7) Back porch)  
 (Source: Pratiwo, 2010)



Figure 2 Neoclassic Pillars and Columns in Lasem  
(Source: Pratiwo, 2010)

Straits-born Lasem house is based on two styles; the straits-born Chinese house with the original Chinese (straits-born) and the straits-born Chinese style with a mixture of Dutch Colonial style. This is done to facilitate researchers in sorting out the use of styles and different styles in every home, and more easily to find the characteristics of the original straits-born Chinese with characteristics that have been combined or acculturated with Dutch colonial style. Documentation and discussion of architectural interior details and decoration in each sample will be divided into four parts, namely the front porch, ancestral altar and room, back porch, and side house.

## METHODS

The research applies qualitative method that begins with a survey, interviews, and observations by researchers' team. The first step is by documenting the architecture and interior house, study the application of art, design styles and culture of Indonesia according to conservation issues in Lasem straits-born Chinese house, Central Java. The observation compares architecture, interior design styles, the home decoration that is applied in two different straits-born Chinese houses in Lasem.

In relation to research conducted on a design object, the straits-born Chinese architecture in Lasem City can be categorized in a cultural theme with a historical study approach. In this approach the research is carried out by looking at the changes as well as the outside influencing elements, then propose this projection forward (Sachari, 2005). In this case, a design review or documentation of the object of straits-born Chinese architecture in Lasem is not used to compile history, but to observe the history of an object critically so that it can provide input, correction, analysis, or describe certain historical fragments for the study of design science.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Khol (1984) has said that it provides a kind of clue, especially to the layman, how to look at the characteristics of Chinese architecture that exists especially in Southeast Asia. The characteristics are (1) the courtyard, is an open space in Chinese homes that are more private and it has combination with gardens, (2) emphasis on typical roof shape, (3) open structural elements (sometimes accompanied with the ornament of decoration), and (4) use of distinctive colors. Origin Chinese

Indonesian' courtyard is narrower because the width of the house is not too large (Khol, 1984). The Chinese Indonesians homes in Chinatown area rarely have the courtyard. Even if there is more function to enter natural light during the day or for ventilation. Courtyard on Chinese architecture in Indonesia is usually replaced with wide terraces or porch.

The first sample of original straits-born Chinese is taken from straits-born Chinese architecture documentation with native Chinese styles where this straits-born house that is located on Babagan street 5. The house is over 150 years old, and there is little transformation found. This is evident from the wide front porch with tables and seating as the social function at the center of the house. The interior of the house does not change significantly. The altar table in the center of the room as the central hall of the main house is flanked by four bedrooms, more private family area such as the dining room, and the kitchen located on the back porch. In addition to the main house, in this sample, there is also a side house that is used as the bedroom for the whole big family and the back house that serves as a *batik* area. But this area is no longer producing *batik*. The main structure and materials of the house are still using teak wood that very strong and sturdy. There are some variety of original straits-born and ornamental styles, some added modern wrought iron ornamental to the main house side pillars. The possibility of this decoration was added in the 20th century. The first house sample layout can be seen in Figure 3.

The first house sample is a house that still original and has not undergone a transformation. The evidence from the vast front porch can be seen in Figure 4. In the middle area, there are tables and chairs for guests that functions as the lounge. Between the front porch and the altar room, there is a partition with three openings. In the middle, it can be found the entrance to the altar room and two other openings on the right and left side in shape of the window that flanking the altar space. On the right and left of the porch, there are also openings about 100 cm wide and 210 cm high without the door with the curve at the top. This opening separates the daily activities and praying activities in the ancestral altars that are called *pringgitan*. In accordance to the straits-born Chinese community conviction, to drive out evil spirits, *Sha*, the pair of mirrors (Figure 5) is installed in the *pringgitan* area, precisely on the dividing partition of the veranda with the altar space, between the opening of the door and the right and left windows. This mirror can be oval or square. At the bottom of the mirror is usually placed a small table for various objects such as flowers, photographs, or ashtrays. Sometimes next to this mirror are also hung photographs of the ancestors, like the great grandfather and great grandmother of the house owner. The supporting structure of the roof on the first house sample is made of dark brown wood. There is no decoration that is too fancy and striking, just simple cloud motifs on the right and left end of each beam block, from the top of the beam to the lowest beam.

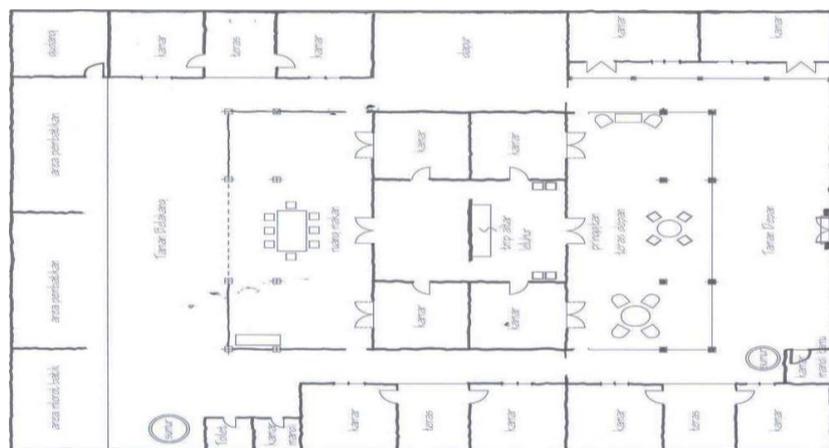


Figure 3 The First House Sample Layout  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 4 Front Porch  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

Ancestral altar and rooms are the center of the main house flanked by four rooms, two on the right and two on the left (Figure 6). The altar table itself is located in front of the wood panel with openings on the right and left as the entrance to the next room. The altar table is placed facing the main door as the place for lighting. Above the table, there are various praying tools, including statues of gods and goddesses and *Hio Low* (incense stick). There are also photographs of good ancestors that are placed on tables and hanging around the praying table. Besides praying table, they usually place a few seats on the right and left of the room.



Figure 5 Mirror and Console Table  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 6 Ancestral Altar Table  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

Just like in the porch, in this room, the shade of mint color is very dominant with dark brown accents as the wooden frames. The atmosphere in this room is very sacred and spiritual. The existence of *Shen Thai*/ancestral altar prayers at every Chinese home is believed to provide protection and blessing for homeowners; avoid crime, theft, and fire. Ritual prayer itself is done to honor the god/goddess and to respect the ancestors. In Chinese prayer events, some equipment such as incense and candles, paper money, food, and beverages must be placed on the altar. Incense and candles signify prosperity, and for descendants remember the tendrils. Paper money is the eternity money, while food and drink are evidence of devotion to the ancestors that are provided by the descendants who are still alive.

The back porch and side house, in a sample of these transformed straits-born houses, has functioned as a more private center for social activities such as kitchens and dining rooms. There are two kinds of kitchens; the clean kitchen is located right on the back veranda next to the dining table, and the dirty kitchen is located in the side house (Figure 7). The color schemes the same as the previous spaces, mint color, and white. The supporting structure of the roof (Figure 8) is the same as on the front porch that consists of wooden beams arrangement. But if the ones on the front porch are dark brown, so on the back porch is in mint color schemes with simple decorative curved shape form on the right and left the end of the beam. Curved openings on the right and left of the roof buffer wall also look alike as opening in the *pringgitan* area on the front porch. On the right and left comprises several rooms and one altar table is in between of bedrooms. At the end of adjacent to the back porch, there are some bathrooms and also a wheel, where on the other side is the dirty kitchen and kitchen utensil storage and appliances.



Figure 7 The Dirty Kitchen and Kitchen Utensil Storage  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 8 The Supporting Structure of the Roof  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

Variety ornamental on the back porch and side house are very simple (Figure 9). There is no fancy variety of ornament details. The interesting one is there are some column and canopy details (Figure 10) that are made of wrought iron with modern form and more west nuance than Chinese. The details like this possibly were added in the 20th century.



Figure 9 The Side House  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 10 Iron Canopy Details  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

The second sample house is a straits-born Chinese house that has influenced of Dutch colonial style. It is located at Babagan Street 4 number 7; this house is also approximately 150 years old (Figure 11). The interesting thing is the architecture appearance of the house is not seen as usual straits-born Chinese house. There are a lot of transformations from the layout the arrangement and the styles that are used in this straits-born Chinese house. This styles or decorative performances that appear in Western Art Deco style. This Art Deco style begins to develop in Indonesia in the 1920s (Sachari, 2007). That is why until the 1900s, Chinese architecture in the archipelago is generally located in Chinatown. Until the 1900s, it can be still seen many Chinese-style architectures in the Chinatown area of Java. But after 1900s era, there is a significant development in the straits-born Chinese community in Java. After the abolition of the law of *Wijkenstelsel*, Chinatown that is located in the strategic area close to Chinese merchant settlements occupies strategic trade areas throughout the city.

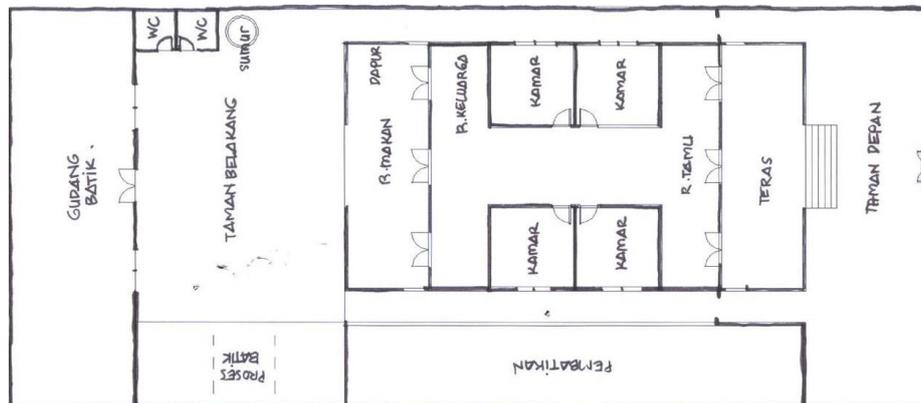


Figure 11 The Second House Sample Layout  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

Some of the local elites built modern houses outside the area that was once famous as Chinatown. Changes in the renewal have a direct impact on the architecture. Therefore lots of Dutch schools were opened that entered by a small number of Chinese people such as HCS, MULO, and AMS. The construction of the modern houses of Chinese people indirectly results in depletion of architectural elements. Traditional Chinese little by little lost its originality when acculturated with

local or Dutch culture. Acculturation like this continued even after independence in the year 1945. According to Safeyah (2006), colonial architecture is an architecture that combines Western and Eastern cultures. This architecture is presented through the work of Dutch architects and is destined for the Dutch people who lived in Indonesia at the period before independence. The architecture that was presented at the beginning of the period after independence was influenced by colonial architecture as well as the influence of the architects itself. It desires to be different from the colonial architecture that already exists (Jengki architecture).

After 1900, the architecture development in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's was directly related to the development of colonial architecture in Dutch East Indies. The revival of Dutch architecture starts from a Neo-Gothic architect of P. J. H. Cuypers (1827-1921), which was later followed by the architect of the Nieuwe Kunst HP stream and Berlage (1856-1927). Nieuwe Kunst architectural movement (Art Nouveau Dutch style) is what will develop into a flow of modern architecture of the famous Dutch such as The Amsterdam School and the flow of De Stijl. The Dutch colonial architecture development in Indonesia has a special characteristic that is not the same as the parent architecture in the Netherlands. Modern architectural ideas in Europe are transferred to Indonesia in accordance with Indonesia's climate and environment. Adjustment is in the use of *gevel* (gable) on the front of the building, there are towers and dormer, the building is slim made (easy cross ventilation) for air flow, the number of openings, there is a gallery of the building to anticipate the rain and sun that often called double *gevel*, at the north-south area to avoid direct sunlight. During this period, other styles such as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Art and Craft, and De Stijl also developed. Art Nouveau flourished in 1890-1905 in Western Europe.

Art Nouveau is derived from the name of an interior design gallery in Paris which was opened in 1896. The characteristics are (a) anti-historical and displaying styles that have not existed before, (b) using modern materials, like iron and color glass (c) using decorative elements, natural elements and organic shapes applied to floors, walls, ceilings, even columns and railing of stairs, (d) columns are geometrically shaped and dominated by curve lines in columns and ornaments, (e) flooring using wood material which is then covered by a floral-patterned carpet, (f) using built-in furniture on the wall system, as well as mass product furniture; and (g) the colors used are pastel colors (Pile, 2009). The beginnings of Art Deco style was developed in 1910 until 1930 that style is an adaptation of the historical form to modern form.

The second sample house is no longer used as the home, but for business and *batik* production house, so a lot of rooms have a different function. The ancestral altar room has now functioned as *batik* storage. The front porch of the second sample of straits-born Chinese house has a lot of transformations, both regarding the division of space, as well as styles and decorations. This house does not have a saddle roof like the original straits-born Chinese house but the *limasan* roof that has western style, Art Deco. It can be seen in Figure 12.

On this porch, the partition between the altar room and the front porch has been advanced so that the narrow front porch is smaller. There are three door openings on the partition wall between the front porch with room inside the house and do not have *Pringgitan*. The altar as the center of the main house lies more privately than the previous sample house because before entering the altar room, it has to go through a more private living room than the front porch. Art deco style found in facade details, which using art deco style stained glass on the column, floor, and doors details (Figure 13 and 14).



Figure 12 The Front View of the Second House with Art Deco Style  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 13 The Front Porch and Column Details  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 14 The Doors Details in Art Deco style  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

Different from the first sample house, this house has lots and unique detail ornament, not simple and less detail. But the house condition needs a lot of repairs like at the floor, the porch steps, and the wall painting. Because the spaces in this house have functioned changing, somewhat difficult to determine space and the original space form. The ancestral table room is a narrow space area with three door openings made of wood, the door itself made of wood and art deco ornamental design at glass details. This altar room is used as the sitting room and batik storage room where the buyer can choose and do the transaction here. In this house, it cannot be found the ancestral altar, since the house does not function as the home stay, but in the corridors at the place where the altar should be, there are some ancestors and family photos. Back porch and side house, like in the first sample, has functioned as kitchen and dining room for batik employees. At the back house, there is room for batik worker to do the nyanting process, rinse, dyeing, drying, and all the batik process. At the back porch, there is some art deco ornamental on the ceiling, balustrade, and doors detail.



Figure 15 The Back Porch as Kitchen  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)



Figure 16 The Art Deco detail  
(Source: Researcher Team, 2013)

## CONCLUSIONS

Lasem is one of the cities with Chinese population that has unique architectural and interior feature and still survive until now. In the 20th century, there was a massive transformation of the straits-born Chinese home, although the transformation only occurred in facades, decorations, and styles. Straits-born Chinese house still has the same spatial arrangement where the ancestral altar space is maintained as a home center, while the front porch and back porches remain functioning as social centers of both for private or for the public. The shape of the house plan is symmetrical and still holds the Yin Yang harmonization principle. This is very interesting because Chinese is a very strong society in maintaining customs and traditions. Similarly, in Architecture, it is very visible although in the early 20th century began to appear a lot of rich Chinese merchants and they do a lot of renovation and improvement of the house, so their house became more modern and had more western influence. But they still maintained the composition of space and the sacredness of space. The first sample house is still the original of straits-born Chinese house and has not transformed. The house was still used as residential, and all the rooms function were still the same. The house lay out still used original Chinese form that symmetry and also showed balanced and harmony. The second house shows some transformations. Front porch looks narrower, and the house is no longer function as residential. It now functions as batik production house and showroom. This house has so little conservation, and some details begin to damage such as front porch tiles start to decreased and broken, moldy wood canopy, and others.

In Lasem city, where Chinese community has unique heritage houses, unfortunately, that only a few of the young generation who want to stay. They leave the city to live in other big cities, leave their old homes, and some of them have sold and demolished or become other new buildings. Luckily some of the houses are still inhabited by grandparents' generations. But also lots of the houses are abandoned and unkempt. This is why cultural preservation research and documentation of original houses in Lasem is essential needed.

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