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Visual Character Study of Bung Karno's Exile House in Bengkulu

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ABSTRACT

Bung Karno's Exile House in Bengkulu is a nationally protected cultural heritage site that served as the temporary residence of Indonesia's first president during his political exile from 1938 to 1942. Despite its historical significance, no comprehensive documentation currently exists of the building's visual and spatial character, even though such documentation is essential for guiding ongoing conservation efforts. This study aims to identify the building's visual character through its scale, proportion, architectural style, and detailing, with particular attention to the spatial elements that constitute these dimensions. A qualitative approach was employed, combining direct field observation, photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews with the site manager, conservation experts, and tourism officials, supported by relevant literature on the visual dimension of the built environment. The findings indicate that Bung Karno's Exile House exhibits an Indische Empire architectural style, characterized by the integration of European spatial proportion and symmetry with Chinese decorative elements—most notably geometric vent ornaments and door motifs. This stylistic blend reflects the building's layered historical use and underscores its significance as a site warranting continued conservation attention.

KEYWORDS

Bung Karno's Exile House;
Indische Empire Style;
Visual Character;
Heritage Conservation.

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1. Introduction

Bung Karno's Exile House in Bengkulu, the temporary residence of Indonesia's first president during his political exile from 1938 to 1942, was designated a National Level Cultural Heritage site in 2017 under the legal framework established by Undang-Undang No. 11 Tahun 2010 tentang Cagar Budaya, which sets the criteria, classification, and conservation obligations governing cultural heritage buildings in Indonesia. following decades of adaptive reuse as a party headquarters, military residence, and broadcasting office (Kurniawan et al., 2022; *UU No. 11 Tahun 2010*, n.d.). Despite this status, no systematic documentation currently records the building's visual character—its scale, proportion, style, and detailing—even though such documentation is a prerequisite for informed conservation decisions, particularly as the Burra Charter's conservation principles require minimal intervention guided by clear understanding of a building's original characteristics (Truscott, 2014). The building's significance is further amplified by its occupant's own engagement with architecture and design: Soekarno, trained as a civil engineer and later recognized for his direct involvement in shaping Indonesia's architectural and urban landscape (Ardhiati, 2005), lived in this house during a period that immediately preceded his most prominent architectural contributions as president.

This study addresses that gap by documenting and analyzing the visual character of Bung Karno's Exile House through its spatial defining elements—floors, walls, ceilings, ventilation, doors, and windows—using the visual dimension framework developed by Carmona, Heath, Oc, and Tiesdell, which positions scale, proportion, style, and detail as the constituent components of a building's visual identity. This study aims to identify how these elements together produce the building's distinctive architectural character and to determine its specific stylistic classification. Indonesian colonial heritage buildings have increasingly been classified through such element-by-element identification, particularly to verify whether

a structure qualifies as an example of the Indische Empire Style—a hybrid colonial idiom combining European spatial symmetry with localized decorative adaptation (Muhsin et al., 2023).

By systematically documenting these elements, this study is expected to provide a verifiable visual-character record that can directly support the site's ongoing conservation and museum management, while contributing a methodological reference for similar visual documentation of other colonial-era heritage buildings in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach combining literature review, direct field observation, photographic documentation, and interviews. The literature review draws on academic sources—journal articles, books, and other relevant documents related to the research topic—to construct the study's theoretical and conceptual basis (Creswell, 2013).. The primary theoretical framework applied is the visual dimension of urban design which identifies scale, proportion, style, and detail as the four interrelated components constituting a building's visual character (Carmona, 2021). This framework forms the analytical basis for examining the spatial defining elements of Bung Karno's Exile House in Bengkulu.

Direct field observation was conducted at the research site to examine the building's architectural style and spatial defining elements, including floors, walls, ceilings, ventilation panels, doors, and windows. This observation was supported by photographic and video documentation, producing a visual record cross-referenced during analysis.

Interviews were used to gather information not obtainable through observation alone, consistent with established practice in heritage-site research, where in-depth interviews with site caretakers and managers serve as a primary method for assessing a building's condition, history, and management (Nursyamsu & Marcillia, 2022), and where a semi-structured format balances thematic guidance with the flexibility to explore unanticipated insights raised by respondents (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In this study, interviews were conducted with the manager of Bung Karno's Exile House, building conservation experts, and representatives of the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office, to obtain information regarding the site's history, preservation practices, and management as a historical tourist destination.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Building Style



(a) (b)

Fig. 1. The Exile House – west side (a) and east side (b) (Sunu, 2023)

Bung Karno's Exile House exhibits a hybrid architectural style combining European spatial organization with Chinese decorative ornamentation (Figure 1). The term Indische Empire Style itself originates from foundational scholarship identifying this hybrid colonial idiom as the dominant residential architecture of the Dutch East Indies from the late 18th to 19th century, characterized by symmetrical massing, broad terraces, and climate-adapted ventilation. This combination of European spatial symmetry with hybridized decorative treatment recurs across other Indonesian colonial residential buildings as well, including documented facades along Yogyakarta's Jalan Malioboro corridor that similarly combine classical European proportion with locally adapted ornamental

detailing (Wardani, 2025). Read against recent identification criteria for Indonesian colonial heritage buildings—symmetrical floor plan, separated rear service areas, broad shaded terraces, and hybridized ornamentation—this combination is consistent with the Indische Empire Style (Muhsin et al., 2023), the dominant architectural idiom applied to Dutch colonial residential buildings in Indonesia between the 18th and 19th centuries.

3.2 Spatial Defining Elements

3.2.1 Floor

All rooms in Bung Karno's Exile House use floor plaster (*plur lantai*)—a smooth, flat surface produced from a mixture of cement and sand—which provides a cooling effect that keeps the interior comfortable despite Bengkulu's hot exterior climate (Table 1). This uniform use of plaster across all seven spaces (front terrace, living room, Bung Karno's workspace, guest bedroom, children's bedroom, Soekarno and Inggit's bedroom, and back terrace) reflects a consistent material choice rather than room-specific variation, consistent with broader findings on colonial-building material strategy in Indonesia's tropical climate (Rahmah et al., 2024).

Table 1. Floor elements of Bung Karno's Exile House (Sunu, 2023)

Location	Element	Note
Front Terrace		Using floor plaster which is a mixture of materials such as cement and sand that is mashed until smooth.
Living Room		
Bung Karno's workspace		
Guest Bedroom		
Children's Bedroom		

Soekarno and Inggit's Bedroom	
Back Terrace	

3.2.2 Wall

The walls are constructed from large-sized brick coated with white paint, supplemented by long timber elements finished in cream-colored wood paint that add aesthetic detailing while preserving the building's historical authenticity (Table 2). The walls are deliberately built tall, a design choice consistent with passive cooling strategies documented in other Indonesian colonial buildings, where increased wall height and thick brick construction were used to withstand tropical heat, humidity, and heavy rainfall without mechanical cooling (Rahmah et al., 2024).

Table 2. Wall elements of Bung Karno's Exile House (Sunu, 2023)

Location	Element	Note
Front Terrace		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint.
Living Room		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint. There are additional long timbers finished with cream-colored wood paint.

Bung Karno's workspace		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint. There are additional long timbers finished with cream-colored wood paint.
Guest Bedroom		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint. There are additional long timbers finished with cream-colored wood paint.
Children's Bedroom		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint. There are additional long timbers finished with cream-colored wood paint.
Soekarno and Inggit's Bedroom		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint. There are additional long timbers finished with cream-colored wood paint.
Back Terrace		Using large-sized brick material, then coated with white wall paint.

3.2.3 Ceiling

The ceiling uses polyvinyl chloride (PVC) panels designed to visually resemble long wooden beams, finished with a glossy surface (Table 3). This raises a conservation question worth flagging explicitly rather than passing over: PVC is a modern synthetic substitute, not the building's original material. Under the Burra Charter's conservation principles, the use of a compatible new material is acceptable practice when it maintains a structure's visual and cultural significance without misrepresenting its history (Truscott, 2014)—but this is only justifiable if the substitution is documented and disclosed, not presented as if it were original fabric. This paper's role as documentation makes that disclosure important: future readers and conservators should know the ceiling's "wood-beam" appearance is a contemporary reconstruction, not a surviving original element.

Table 3. Ceiling elements of Bung Karno's Exile House (Sunu, 2023)

Location	Element	Note
Front Terrace		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.
Living Room		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.
Bung Karno's workspace		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.
Guest Bedroom		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.
Children's Bedroom		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.
Soekarno and Inggit's Bedroom		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.
Back Terrace		Using PVC material designed to resemble long wooden beams in rows with a glossy finish.

3.2.4 Ventilation Panel

Seven ventilation panels are located on the front and back terraces, finished with geometric ornamentation forming symmetrical, interlocking patterns of squares and curved lines (Table 4). This treatment is consistent with broader colonial-architecture practice in Indonesia, where motif ventilation panels positioned above doors and windows function as a recurring facade element of the Indis style, alongside classical cornice profiles and Tuscan or Doric columns at the terrace (Dafrina et al., 2021). This pattern of recurring geometric, floral, and figurative ornamentation as a facade element with cultural significance is consistent with broader documentation of decorative motif use on Indonesian heritage buildings more generally (Wulanningrum, 2018).

Table 4. Ventilation panel elements of Bung Karno's Exile House (Sunu, 2023)

Element	Picture	Note
Front Terrace		There are 3 ventilation panel on the front side and 1 wind on the right side. All of these winds use ornamentation in the form of typical Chinese architectural patterns that form symmetrical, firm lines, and harmonious square or circular ornaments.
Living Room	-	The living room does not have a ventilation panel
Bung Karno's workspace	-	The Bung Karno's workspace does not have a ventilation panel
Guest Bedroom	-	The guest bedroom does not have a ventilation panel
Children's Bedroom	-	The children's bedroom does not have a ventilation panel
Soekarno and Inggit's Bedroom	-	The Soekarno and Inggit's bedroom does not have a ventilation panel
Back Terrace		There are 3 ventilation panel on the front side and 1 wind on the right side. All of these winds use ornamentation in the form of typical Chinese architectural patterns that form symmetrical, firm lines, and harmonious square or circular ornaments.

3.2.5 Doors

The building's doors vary by room according to function, encompassing four distinct types: two-layer double-leaf doors, single-leaf doors, one-layer double-leaf doors, and single-leaf connecting doors (Tables 5–6). Most doors incorporate wooden vents bearing the same Chinese-pattern geometric ornamentation found on the ventilation panels. The *krepyak* (louvered) double-leaf type—used in the living room, guest bedroom, and both bedrooms—combines an exterior louvered layer for ventilation with an interior stained-glass layer for both light admission and privacy, a configuration documented as a recurring feature of Indonesian colonial residential doors designed to balance airflow with enclosure (Dafrina et al., 2021).

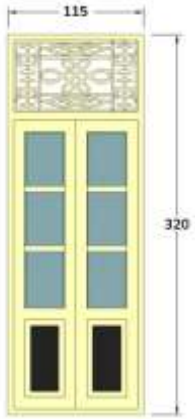
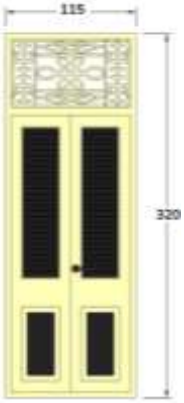
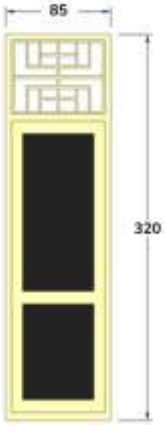
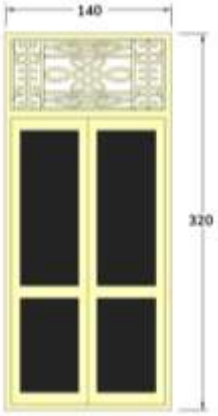
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Table 5. Bung Karno's Exile House doors (Sunu, 2023)

Location	Element	Note
Front Terrace		The front terrace does not have a door
Living Room		The right side uses a double-leaf *krepyak* doors or louvered doors with two layers that have different shapes on each side. Meanwhile, the left side uses a single-leaf door. The size of each living room door is 320 x 115 cm on the right side and 320 x 86 cm on the left side. This door material uses wood with beige and black paint finishing.
Bung Karno's workspace		There is 1 double-leaf doors with two layers that have different shapes on each side with a size of 320 x 115 cm and also 1 connecting door with a size of 205 x 90 cm. the material of this door is wood with beige and black paint finishing.
Guest Bedroom		There are 2 double-leaf *krepyak* doors or louvered doors with two layers that have different shapes on each side with the same size of 320 x 115 cm. on the outside using jalousies on the four boxes while on the inside using stained glass material. The material of this door is wood with black beige paint finishing.
Children's Bedroom	 	There is 1 double-leaf crepe-type door connecting to the living room hallway with a size of 320 x 140 cm and 1 single-leaf door. The material of this door is wood with beige and black paint finishing.
Soekarno and Inggit's Bedroom		There is 1 double-leaf *krepyak* doors or louvered doors with two layers that have different shapes on each side On the outside using jalousies on the four boxes, while on the inside using stained glass material with beige and black paint finishing with a size of 240 x 130 cm.

Back Terrace		There is 1 double-leaf *krepyak* doors or louvered doors with two layers that have different shapes on each side On the outside using jalousies on the four boxes, while on the inside using stained glass material with beige and black paint finishing with a size of 240 x 130 cm.

Table 6. Types of door at Bung Karno's Exile House building (Sunu, 2023)

Inner 2-layer double-leaf door	**External 2-layer double-leaf *krepyak* doors or louvered doors**	**Single-leaf door**	**1-layer double-leaf door**
			

3.2.6 Windows

The windows maintain uniform size and material across the building while varying in form, characterized by wide openings typical of colonial architecture that maximize both daylight and interior spaciousness (Tables 7–8). Two distinct ventilation-pattern types appear across the window vents: a symmetrical knotted-line geometric pattern, and a six-square stained-glass grid. As with the door vents, this dual-layer *krepyak* window configuration—an outer louvered layer paired with an inner stained-glass layer—reflects the same climate-responsive, hybrid-ornamentation logic documented elsewhere in Indonesian colonial residential architecture (Dafrina et al., 2021). The stained-glass component of this configuration follows a broader Indonesian decorative tradition in which colored glass panels combine a light-admitting function with compositional principles of unity, balance, and proportion (Siregar, 2021).

Table 7. Window elements of Bung Karno's Exile House

Location	**Element**	**Note**
Front Terrace		The front terrace does not have a window
Living Room	  	There are 3 windows with wood material and cream wood paint finishing with two sizes, 230 x 85 cm on the left and 240 x 140 cm on the right. The windows are double-leaf krepyak type windows with two different layers on each side. The outside uses jalousies on the four boxes while the inside uses stained glass material.

Bung Karno's workspace		There are 6 krepyak windows or louvered windows with wood material and beige wood paint finishing with two sizes, 230 x 85 cm on the front and 240 x 140 cm on the right. The windows have different shapes on each side. The outside uses jalousies on the four boxes while the inside uses stained glass material.
Guest Bedroom		The guest bedroom does not have a window
Children's Bedroom	 	There are 2 windows of the same size, 240 x 130, of the double-leaf krepyak or louvered windows with two layers that have different shapes on each side. The outside uses jalousies on all four boxes, while the inside uses stained glass material.
Soekarno and Inggit's Bedroom		There are 2 windows of the same size, 240 x 130, of the double-leaf krepyak or louvered windows with two layers that have different shapes on each side. The outside uses jalousies on all four boxes, while the inside uses stained glass material.
Back Terrace		The back terrace does not have a window

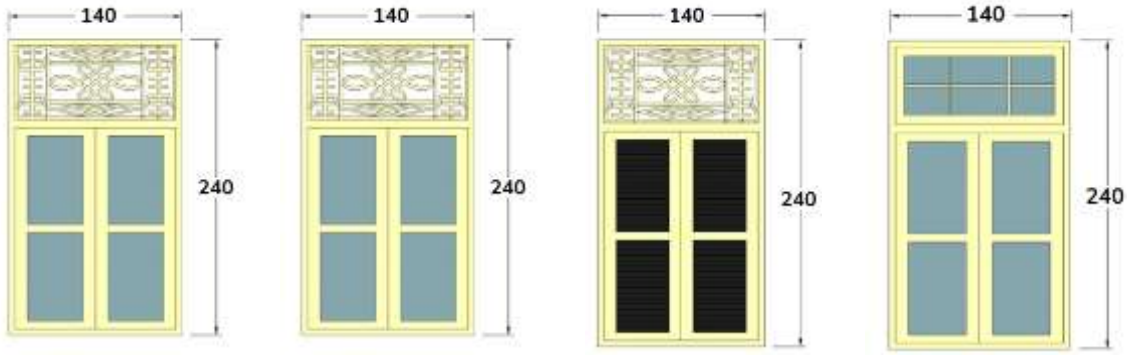


Fig. 2. Types of windows at Bung Karno's Exile House: (a) 2-layer window with a six-square vent pattern; (b) 2-layer window with a Chinese-style geometric vent seen from the outside; (c) window with a Chinese-style geometric vent seen from the inside; (d) the same type as (c). (Source: Sunu, 2023)

The windows at the house fall into two main types, distinguished by the pattern in the vent above the window leaf (Fig. 1). All four examples share the same overall width of 140 cm and the same composition: a decorative vent panel above two casement leaves, each leaf divided into four panes. The first type carries a vent with symmetrical, knotted geometric lines typical of Chinese architectural ornament. It appears in three views. Seen from the inside, the window shows the ornamented vent above stained-glass panes (Fig. 1c, 1d). Seen from the outside, the same window is fitted with a second layer of louvered jalousie leaves, painted dark, below the ornamented vent (Fig. 1b). This two-layer arrangement lets the louvers control light and airflow while the stained glass sits behind them. The second type replaces the ornamented vent with a plain grid of six

rectangular squares, and it is also built with two layers (Fig. 1a). The two vent patterns give the windows some variety in appearance without changing their size or construction.

3.3 Discussion

Read together through the visual dimension framework established in Method—scale, proportion, style, and detail (Carmona, 2021)—the building's visual character emerges from a consistent logic rather than a list of disconnected features. *Proportion and scale* are expressed through symmetrical massing and uniformly tall, thick-walled rooms calibrated to passive cooling. *Style* is expressed through the Indis hybridization of European spatial order with Chinese ornamentation, consistent with established Indische Empire Style criteria (Muhsin et al., 2023). *Detail* is expressed at the smallest scale through the repeated geometric vent motif, which recurs across ventilation panels, doors, and windows alike—suggesting this motif functioned as a unifying ornamental signature applied consistently throughout the building, rather than as an isolated decorative flourish on any single element.

This consistency carries a conservation implication that the original draft did not address. The Burra Charter's principle of minimal intervention assumes that conservation decisions are made with full understanding of which elements are original and which are later interventions (Truscott, 2014). This study's findings suggest the building's spatial and decorative logic is well-preserved and internally coherent—but at least one element, the PVC ceiling, is a modern material standing in for an original one. This does not necessarily indicate poor conservation; replacing deteriorated material with a visually faithful substitute is an accepted practice. What it does indicate is that visual coherence alone cannot be taken as evidence of physical originality. Future conservation work and documentation at this site should distinguish explicitly between original fabric and later faithful reconstruction, rather than presenting the building's current appearance as uniformly authentic.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the visual character of Bung Karno's Exile House in Bengkulu through scale, proportion, style, and detail (Carmona, 2021), applied to its spatial defining elements: floors, walls, ceilings, ventilation panels, doors, and windows. The findings show a building whose character is consistent with the Indische Empire Style. European spatial order, expressed in symmetrical massing, broad terraces, and tall rooms, is combined with Chinese decorative ornamentation, matching the criteria used to identify this style in other Indonesian colonial residences (Muhsin et al., 2023). That combination runs through the whole building. The geometric vent motif appears on the ventilation panels, doors, and windows, and the windows show it in two patterns: a knotted-line pattern and a six-square grid. Together these suggest the motif served as a unifying ornamental signature, not a decoration on any single element.

The materials point to a design logic suited to the tropics. Plastered floors, thick and tall brick walls, and two-layer louvered windows with stained glass all support cooling and ventilation without mechanical systems. This is consistent with strategies documented in other colonial buildings in Indonesia's hot, humid climate (Rahmah et al., 2024). The building's current appearance is therefore internally coherent, which gives the site a clear and documented visual identity.

Appearance alone is not proof of originality, however. The ceiling uses PVC panels made to resemble timber beams, a modern substitute for the original material. Substituting a compatible material can be accepted practice, but under the Burra Charter's principle of minimal intervention it needs to be documented and disclosed (Truscott, 2014). Future conservation records for this site should state which elements are original fabric and which are faithful reconstructions. This study is based on visual observation, documentation, and interviews, so it does not establish the physical age or provenance of each element. Further work that combines archival or material verification with this visual record would strengthen the site's management as a museum and historical destination. The documentation framework used here can also serve as a methodological reference for recording other colonial-era heritage buildings in Indonesia.

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