

Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space, and Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Routledge: London and New York, 2000.

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While researching in Jakarta in the summer of 1997, I encountered a city divided into AC and non-AC zones, resulting in what amounted to a class-based apartheid. The very poor were relegated to hot, dusty streets, and stuffy living and work spaces while the very wealthy enjoyed door-to-door service between cool, hushed interiors in SUVs with darkened windows. Used to race-based prejudice in the US, I was intrigued by Jakarta's more nuanced system of division, upheld through codes based on differences in speech styles, clothing and shoes, and general demeanor. Gradually it also became clear that between these two extremes there was a realm of flexibility in which the service class gained access to AC zones by virtue of their work as domestics and drivers, and that an upwardly mobile lower-middle class moved between the zones at their professional jobs, public transportation, and in their *kampung* homes. I also met many members of the elite who refused their privilege. But the zones themselves were absolute in their spatial division, which was so normalized that they did not seem to garner much public notice. It was only during the riots of May of 1998, that the barriers of this apartheid were overridden, at least for several days.

Abidin Kusno's book *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space, and Political Cultures in Indonesia*, is the first I've seen to address these issues of space and class in a comprehensive and clear manner. As he explains in his preface to the book, Kusno was in the process of revising his dissertation on architecture, urban design, and national identity in Indonesia when the May 1998 riots occurred, forcing him to integrate the events into his overall argument. The resulting text demonstrates the merits of a cross-disciplinary, genealogical approach to current urban issues in Indonesia as well as in the larger postcolonial context. As he examines how Indonesians "inherited" the colonial city and began to invest it with its own "symbolic meaning," Kusno describes the various historical developments and social constructs that helped create the conditions in which the riots could occur. This analysis is both informed by, and informs, the surrounding chapters, in which the author gives detailed analyses of the colonial theories behind the Indies Architecture movement and its subsequent influence on postcolonial building and urban planning, as well as the possibilities of the more current Tropical Architecture movement in Southeast Asia. As such, the book has relevance for several distinct audiences.

Kusno examines how "imagined community" takes "concrete form and substance in the 'real' spaces of the city" in order to understand "the ways in which postcolonial cities alter the space and form of the built environment for themselves, in the process, forming a dialogue with their colonial past." His premise here is that Jakarta is a manifestation of just such a dialogue, but that the dialogue has not been adequately self-conscious or critical. In terms of urban design, this has meant that architects and planners have struggled with legacies of the colonial mindset, particularly the confining tradition/modernity construct. This construct has been used by both the Old and New

Order governments in a quest for power and authority in contradictory ways, and with disastrous results for Jakarta's *kampung* classes.

Using changing mosque styles as his point of comparison, Kusno demonstrates that, while Sukarno promoted himself as the great "modernist," his design for the downtown area "complete with a modern-style Friday mosque, national monument, boulevard, hotel, and sports stadium" was discreetly modeled on notions of aristocratic Javanese cosmic power and grandeur. Here, Kusno lends support to scholars like James T. Siegel and Benedict Anderson who have stressed Sukarno's traditionalism and have argued that "modernity," overshadowed by nationalism, barely penetrated the surfaces on which it was articulated. However, Sukarno's stated purpose—to create a blend of modernist and monumental architecture that would draw Indonesians out of their collective "cringe"—suggests that the categories of the modern, the traditional, and nationalism take on new meanings when made manifest in architecture and urban planning. In his discussion of Sukarno's refashioning of Jakarta, Kusno also revisits the work of historian Susan Abeyaskere, and expands upon it to reflect on contemporary effects of early colonial and postcolonial urban planning. Significantly he points out (in a footnote) that the display models of the city's master plan simply erased the *kampung*, to demonstrate that Sukarno associated modernity with what was "supposed to be in contrast to the reality which existed outside the exhibition hall." Colonial influence is inherent both in the actual marginalizing/erasure of the *kampung* in city planning and in the sense of modernity as ultimately utopian in nature.

In his discussion of Suharto's approach to urban space, Kusno also revisits familiar terrain—namely Suharto's contradictory valorization of "traditionalism"—but here again offers crucial analysis of the manifestation of these goals and their impact on the current context. Scholars of architecture and art history will appreciate his discussion of the development of the Javanese *pendopo* style, not only in mosques but also official buildings under the New Order, and the link Kusno makes between this architectural style and the colonial "Indies" style developed in the 1930s.

Paradoxically, even as "traditionalism" was conflated with nationalism, Jakarta saw the emergence of a cosmopolitan urban elite which claimed a nationalist (upper-middle class) identity for itself, to the exclusion of the majority masses, which were disdained as, in local parlance, "*etnis*." As Kusno explains, the rising middle class was elevated, literally, through the creation of the elevated highways or "fly-overs" that would "build up confidence" through the experience of "flying over the top of the city," and "leaving behind the 'lower' classes who are routed through the crowded street at ground level." Motivated by a "fear of falling" in status, the elite did its best to separate itself from the underclass, even as the former so obviously relied on the latter not only as a source of cheap labor for manufacturing, building, and domestic service, but also, Kusno points out with humor, for cheap lunch at the street vendors that set up outside office buildings. He argues that in transforming urban space in this way, "the primary concern of the New Order was neither to side with the 'middle class' nor the 'underclass' as such, but rather to initiate a form of social and political violence which would eliminate their potentially revolutionary unification."

And indeed, none of this would have been possible without an under-emphasized stage in this development, namely the 1980s, during which the New Order regime revived the colonial policy of *transmigrasi* and, at the same time, transformed "the street"—including the *kampung*—into a site of "disturbance" and "criminality" under the *Petrus* ("mysterious killings") and *becak*-removal programs. The effects were not only to institutionalize the gap between the elite and the "masses," but also to displace revolutionary politics that had been located in the street under Sukarno.

One reason that these developments have not been discussed or analyzed in any great depth in Indonesia is that, under the New Order, politics "entered into the public imagination as something suspicious, distrustful, dirty and ideological." Kusno notes that, until now, "architecture, as a discipline in Indonesia, still finds it difficult to acknowledge, let alone engage critically with, its relation to power." In the absence of such discussion, architects and urban planners limited their discourse to familiar categories that have elsewhere been the subject of interrogation, such as traditionalism, nationalism, and purity. At the time of his writing, according to Kusno, the question of whether nationalism = the traditional/local or nationalism = development was still hotly debated among architecture professors at Indonesia's major universities.

While updated during the New Order, this discursive trap has its antecedents in the colonial period, and here is where Kusno's discussion of the Indies architecture, identified in theoretical terms as "colonial third culture," informs his discussion on the current context. As "mediators" between local and colonial cultures, the Indies architects of the 1930s mined "traditional" styles for elements to add to the kinds of "modernist collages" that appeared at the highly praised Dutch exhibit at the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931. Convinced that the Indonesians did not adequately respect their own artistry, the Indies architects recreated them in more sophisticated forms. As he examines the achievements of Thomas Karsten and Henri Maclaine Pont, whose early innovations in "tropical architecture" are detailed in the text (the People's Theater at Semarang, the Javanese house and the Bandoeng Technische Hoogeschool), Kusno argues that the Dutch gradually "displaced" indigenous authority in their eagerness to infuse local architecture with a new sense of "modern traditionalism." From an aesthetic as well as a practical standpoint, Kusno respects these achievements, but he suggests that their contribution to architectural debates can only be understood within the political context in which they were imagined.

In the absence of open dialogue about these categories and their historical antecedents, the Indonesian government was able to use them in an uncontested way to justify atrocities as well as, paradoxically, integration into the global economy. Kusno points out that this required the people's embrace of a contorted logic. While the New Order government conflated "traditionalism," "development," and "nationalism," the upper-middle class was increasingly sold on the kind of transnational lifestyle they encountered in their travels and in the media. The mass media played a significant role in smoothing these contradictions by promoting a rhetoric of development and "First World" living in conjunction with the birth of an "ideal middle-class subject of the nation." The *kampung* was once again erased in brochures for suburbia-inspired "real estate" (housing developments), "self-contained cities," and suburban "satellite

towns," as the middle class strengthened its sense of nationalism through the creation of a common enemy, the underclass. However, there was some discomfort with the primary developers of the new real estate, Chinese-Indonesian businessmen. Controversially, Kusno argues that these businessmen were in fact promoting their own "spatial and temporal imagination of Indonesia," which was increasingly transnational in scope, as a way to find a place for themselves in the Indonesian context.

While Indonesians were willing to embrace this vision to a point, the 1997 economic crisis brought a fear of being unduly influenced and even owned by "foreigners." This was a fear felt most acutely in Jakarta, a city of commodification and upward mobility, but very little sense of community. (To this end, it would be very interesting to hear more of Kusno's analysis of Jakarta's architecture, in particular, the Gotham-esque skyscrapers featuring the names of multinational corporations. What is it in their structural and formal elements that make them so intimidating, and who is behind their design?) Kusno quotes Gunawan Mohamad's view that the people of Jakarta feel just as alienated in their capital city now as they did in the 1950s. The 1998 riots were a result of urban planning and socio-economic policies that were "constructed to define and regulate both the privileged and the poor" and thus promoted separation and exclusionism between as well as among people of various classes and ethnicities, to the extent that everyone was in fact a "foreigner." Here, Kusno accentuates one of his main contentions that "behind the postcolonial can lurk the spectre of a future more sinister than the colonial past itself."

Because Kusno has inserted analysis of the riots into the center of his original manuscript, the book does not end on this point, but rather shifts course to a discussion of the Tropical Architecture movement of the 1980s. The movement's primary contribution is its critique of the viability of modern/western architecture in the Southeast Asian urban environment. Architects like Sumet Jumsei, Tay Kheng Soon, and Ken Yeang imagine the transformation of the skyscraper through the incorporation of elements of environmentally conscious design and aesthetically engaging celebrations of local culture.

Applying the tenets of postcolonial critique to this movement, Kusno notes the shift from the national to the regional in this new movement, a shift facilitated in part by Sumet Jumsai's inspiring and provocative text, *Naga: Cultural origins in Siam and West Pacific*. The validity of *Naga's* conclusions is not at issue here. Rather, Kusno is interested in text's promotion of a regional identity that revolves around the concept of "water-based civilization," which in turn encourages the impulse of "strategic essentialism" among some Southeast Asian architects. *Naga* shifts focus from the "East-West" opposition to one of "water-based" vs. "land-based" civilizations, and gives architects a new way to think about the intrusion of "foreign land-based structures" into a water-based environment and subsequent loss of "the fluidity of aquatic culture." Ultimately, Kusno sees in this discussion the beginnings of a reversal of Orientalism as architects "disturb the idea of the simple dissemination of 'western' knowledge as a system of total control."

Thus far, in Kusno's estimation, Tropical Architecture is still constrained by a reliance on the "modernist box" only partly modified by devices aimed at climactic

filtering, including wind-shields, louvred screens, and vegetation. As such, the modernist paradigm is not sufficiently critiqued, but only "masked." However, the masks enable "post-colonial nation states to speak of their own 'regional' authority," even if, on the level of architecture at least, regionalism is denoted in a non-political way as "climatic." A more politicized approach would require a contestation of modernism on a deeper, more structural level. Thus, Kusno extols contemporary architects to "include a critique of late capitalist expansion in their search for a localized, popular, and typically unbounded regional experience."

It remains to be seen how these new visionaries might transform postcolonial cities into viable living spaces for everyone, including the people of the *kampung*, but Kusno has "uneasy" hope for alternative visions in this area. Indeed, the book is generally hopeful, reflecting the *reformasi* sensibility of the late 1990s. The relevance of the text is still considerable, however, in the post-9/11 world, even as nuances of theory and history are eclipsed by realist politics. This text reminds us to keep our focus on the root causes of current events and their physical manifestation in time and space.

