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Abidin Kusno has provided us with an anthology of well-explained essays on the urban life of Java, centering mostly on Jakarta, but with some examples drawn from other cities on the island as well. The opening series of three essays is especially topical, since it deals with Jakarta from 1997 to 2007, when Lieutenant General Sutiyoso was governor of metropolitan Jakarta. Governor Sutiyoso had the difficult task of restoring public confidence and overcoming public distrust of a government that had failed miserably to provide security during the unrest that marked the downfall of the New Order government in 1998. The governor regarded the population as being at “loose ends,” and needing government action to restore confidence. He attempted to meet the challenge by evicting hawkers and other street people from public land and restoring the public monuments, particularly those referring to the Indonesian Revolution of 1945, to their previous positions of honor and respect. While these moves had limited impact, two other developments proved to be more significant. One was sponsored by the government, the other was initiated and is being accomplished through private enterprise. Using architecture, both private and public, as his focus, Abidin traces some of the key developments of the period and provides insight into how the inhabitants responded.

The essay on city transportation, particularly the creation of bus lanes on the major streets of downtown Jakarta, serves as an example of a government project that had great significance. While moving people rapidly and safely were important considerations, the project actually took the form of an ostentatious display of sparkling new stations, visually pleasing buses, and highly apparent crime-prevention personnel. The author contends that the intention of the governor was to use “shock therapy,” so that citizens’ thinking about public problems would be dramatically changed. So, instead of feeling angst about security and gridlock problems, the public would perceive signs of progress and the prevalent mood of constant anxiety would thus be dispelled (or at least curtailed). The author specifically identifies such so-called shock therapy as a psychological technique put forward by neo-liberal economists to promote internationalization of national economic and political systems, and judges it as suspect, viewing the technique as promoted by outsiders to unduly influence Indonesian resource allocation and national direction. Still, Abidin judges Jakarta’s busway project as having greatly improved the city’s transportation options and commuters’ safety and convenience.

The trend promoted by private enterprise was just as significant as government action in addressing the reconstruction of the city and the mood of its inhabitants. Abidin explains that private developers started a “back-to-the-city” movement by claiming that transportation between the city and the suburbs was both time-consuming and dangerous due to street crime. New city development centered on the concept of the “superblock,” where self-contained centers of mixed-use buildings brought together shopping centers, apartments, offices, restaurants, and work areas for high-end businesses. Access to each superblock could be limited, and thus non-affluent
members of society could either be excluded altogether or allowed various degrees of limited access, such as for window-shopping. Abidin identifies and describes the new superblocks at key Jakarta sites, such as at Senayan and the Hotel Indonesia. Further, he details the styles of several key architects, such as the “green” approaches of Adi “Mamo” Purmono, who includes a template for low-income housing alongside middle-class and affluent housing; and Ridwan Kamil, who uses approaches already tried in Middle Eastern gulf states, where superblocks are “international” in design and are primarily identified with the affluent class and large-business interests. Abidin finds Indonesia’s recent concentration on such superblocks unnecessary, because of the worldwide economic downturn, but states that they were undertaken because of depressed real-estate values and in anticipation of making huge profits when the economy rights itself. Again, he views international forces at work and laments somewhat that interference. At the same time, he finds such projects dynamic and notes how they are promoting interesting architectural forms.

Abidin illustrates a second major theme in two selections that detail the late colonial history of Java, spanning the first half of the twentieth century. He follows the development of Indonesian nationalism, its suppression, and attempts to keep it suppressed. Most of all, he details how the Javanese world was transformed by the rise of modern clothing, houses, streets, and all sorts of mostly Western paraphernalia. He notes that Indonesian nationalists were the primary consumers of these “modern” goods, and discovering how to gain those goods on equal terms with the Dutch was part of their struggle. Abidin turns to symbols as well, noting that the locomotive had a tremendous influence on the Javanese as an emblem of power that threatened the traditional hierarchal order of the Javanese social system. The new world that modernism drew forth expressed itself in the ordering of the Javanese landscape into new patterns, particularly with the use of the open court (“commons” or town square) for public use, the lessened use of shrubbery and trees along streets, and, in new housing developments, the use of straight lines and patterns to accord with the mathematical precision of the ordered world that was emerging.

Finally, this collection includes three single pieces. The most important of these centers on the government, general public, and Chinese responses to the riots, looting, and gang rapes that occurred in the Chinese quarter of Glodok in 1988. All three actors had difficulty in dealing with an event that the author labels as shameful and tragic, yet is generally avoided in public discussion by all three parties. He finds such avoidance to be wrongheaded for a nation that prides itself on having strong principles of right and wrong. A second essay discusses the early adaptation of Islam on Java to already existing architectural styles that were highly reflective of Hindu and Buddhist forms imported earlier from India, while eschewing the Arabesque architecture more common to standard Islam. The author regards such acceptance as reflecting a desire to accommodate Islam to existing Indonesian culture, which is the usual interpretation of European scholarship. But that is not the view of the Indonesian Muslim writers of the twentieth century, who held that one faction in Indonesian Islam has historically been in synch with purist Islamic forms found in the central Islamic world. The author does not discuss this dispute. The last essay concentrates on the persistence of the guard house as a feature of urban (and rural) life in colonial and republican times. Of those three essays, only the guard-house article appears to be finished, while the other two appear to be preliminary in nature, awaiting fuller research and thought.
Overall, the essays are well-designed, their themes are carefully developed, and there is ample evidence to give credence to the conclusions that are drawn. The essays are scholarly, unambiguous, and meaningful to the reader. The use of examples from architecture are well-chosen and make the collection an especially good representative of this genre. The author’s two major themes described above are a strong contribution to the scholarly literature on the history and architecture of Java. Hence, in the main, the work is well done and worth reading.

However, there are a few shortcomings. The author relies heavily on the use of terminology, complex writing styles, and judgmental techniques developed by the post-structuralists. Hence, we get terms like “besiegement,” “spectacularity,” and “governmentality,” as well as sentences like “relies on the urban pedagogy associated with the disciplinary apparatus of the nation state” (p. 91). As far as judgments are concerned, there is a tendency to see all action and policy-making by government officials as self-serving, corrupt, and uninformed by any sense of the public good. Likewise, as noted earlier, neo-liberal economic thinking is viewed as highly suspect and as definitively counter to public interests. But those shortcomings are minor in comparison to the contributions of the two major themes discussed in the earlier essays in the book.

The book relates well with Smitri Srinivas’s book on Indian cities that are experiencing a technological revolution, except that Srinivas is more conventional in using a chronological approach, while Abidin is thematic in his presentations.1 The two books are on a par otherwise. John Friedman’s study on Chinese urban development likewise uses a chronological approach and outlines Chinese urban problems well, but lacks the strong scholarly insight that Abidin brings to his study of Jakarta and Java.2 Finally, the work is far superior in design and scholarly comment to the generalist approach Boyarsky and Lang use in their collection of essays on Asian urban developments, where scholarly depth is sacrificed for a wide, general view of the Asian scene.3

Abidin’s book seems designed for a scholarly audience, probably upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and specialists in the social sciences and architecture. They will find it a very rewarding book.

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