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Reviews

Abidin Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia*

Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010.

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Bibliographical reference

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Full text

- ¹ In 2000 Abidin Kusno, currently an associate professor at the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia, published his first book in English: *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, urban space and political cultures in Indonesia* (Routledge ISBN 0415236150). In this publication, Kusno surveys architecture and urbanism in Indonesia's colonial and postcolonial era through a political and historical analysis of various case studies. In 2010, Kusno published a second English book, *The Appearances of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia*. In his words, the aim of this latter work is to explore "the roles that architecture and urban space play in the making and unmaking of a history still in formation" in order to tease out "some layers of the spatial history of Indonesia where techniques of power became the bases for modes and processes of identity formation on the one hand and the breaking of that formation on the other." To achieve this objective, Kusno applies the cross-disciplinary methodology he used in his first book: a series of case studies chosen because,

according to the author, they represent architecture and urban developments that are characteristic of postcolonial, colonial and pre-colonial Indonesia. These examples are then analysed and interpreted in order to illustrate their impact on Indonesian culture and politics. By thus presenting and contextualising an array of architectural and urban developments, Kusno attempts to sketch the many societal and political interconnections influencing their realization. In doing so, he hopes to outline “the roles of cities in shaping the political cultures of decolonization, nation building, and development”.

- 2 To describe “how perceptions of the past, anxieties about the rapid pace of change in the present, and hopes for the future have been embodied in architecture and urban space at different historical moments” and to argue that “built environment serves as a reminder of the practices of the past and an instantiation of the desire to remake oneself within, as well as beyond one’s particular time and place”, Kusno presents his argument in four sections. Each section consists of two to three essays aimed at illustrating the different facets and connections between architecture, urbanism, history, society and politics within different periods in Indonesian history.

- 3 The first section, titled “Governmentality”, aims at contributing “to the study of the post-Suharto era in two ways: by focussing on the role of architecture and urban space in defining social changes associated with the new Indonesia and by examining the role such spaces play in the formation of social and political identities.” Kusno looks to achieve this by describing several architectural and urban developments in Jakarta in the period following the economic and political unrest of 1997-1998: the “superblocks”, the introduction of separate bus lanes, and the work of a local architect. In the second section of the book, “Remembering and Forgetting”, Kusno suggests the refashioning of the physical environment and the thus emerging new space can be and is being used as a tool to continue to link the past with the present. To substantiate his argument, Kusno describes the cultural and architectural presence of the Chinese in Indonesia, the absence of any reference to the socially, physically and spatially destructive 1998 May riots in Jakarta in the architecture that was built after 1998, and the continued application in Indonesia today of the three architectural styles that were dominant during the late colonial period: Empire Style, *Indische Architectuur* and Art Deco. The third section, “Reminiscences”, addresses “how today’s political consciousness carries the mark of the early twentieth century’s struggles with the idea and value of the construction ‘a new time’ – a historical relationship that [according to Kusno] constitutes the long revolution of Indonesian modernity.” By connecting the emergence of Indonesian nationalism and the development and spatial organisation of the late colonial Indonesian cities, notably the period between 1926 and 1942, and by linking these developments with developments after 1998, Kusno contends that Indonesia’s present “preoccupation with redefining memory [...] is not in opposition to similar efforts of the early twentieth century” when the Dutch ruled over the archipelago. The fourth and final section is titled “Mental Nebulae” in reference to the voluminous 1990 study *Carrefour Javanais* by French Asian expert Denys Lombard - which might be an indication of Kusno’s central influence. Here, Kusno sets out to ‘move beyond the nexus of East and West that has characterized much of colonial and postcolonial studies’ by demonstrating that ruptures and crises in Indonesia not only required “the making of new space, time, and identity, but also [required] a confrontation with the ‘mental nebulae’ that demands, as well as resists, the call for different representations”. The examples Kusno presents to support this argument are

the different mosques and gatehouses that have been produced in Java, the way they were perceived “through several layers of social memories and how they were involved in the making of the new times”. By describing historical as well as current architectural and urban developments from a sociological, anthropological, political and visual perspective, Kusno explores “the historical and contemporary conditions of urban politics and city life in Indonesia.” It is this cross-disciplinary approach to the study of space, power, and culture that, according to Kusno, allows him to examine the roles of cities in shaping the political cultures of decolonization, nation building, and development in Indonesia and consequently contribute to urban advocacy.

- 4 Reading *The Appearances of Memory* was a renewed acquaintance with Kusno’s approach. As in his previous book, the case studies themselves are interesting, informative, and articulate. Their interpretation however, is, again, considerably more difficult to grasp. Not so much because of the interpretation itself, but because of the phrasing of the interpretation. Long sentences and unnecessarily complicated vocabulary do not enhance the understanding of Kusno’s argument, especially if one is less familiar with the methodology and vocabulary of political history, anthropology and sociology. What also concerned me is Kusno’s biased interpretation. Whether it is the introduction of separate bus lanes in Jakarta intended to improve the quality and the flow of Jakarta’s (public) transport – which they do – or the architecture of 19th-century Dutch guards’ houses in Java, to name just two examples, Kusno always finds a way to interpret spatial developments as contributing to political agendas aimed at steering and controlling the Indonesian population. However, he provides little in the way of supporting evidence. For example, he interprets the “bus way” as a carefully orchestrated shock therapy of the Jakarta government to regain control over and restrict its citizens after the economic and political turmoil in the late 1990s, but this is conjecture, in the absence of proof. Similarly unsupported is his assertion that the Dutch applied traditional Javanese architecture for guard houses to express their administrative and economic dominance over Java. Interpretations, though interesting as a line of thought and intelligently constructed, are also eclectic and rhetorical. The “bus way” is, after all, an efficient intervention to partially overcome Jakarta’s sometimes complete and often lengthy traffic gridlock – an aspect Kusno acknowledges – but also an intervention implemented after many years of debate regarding the city’s traffic problems. Likewise, whereas Kusno’s interpretation of the application of indigenous architecture for the guard houses in itself is interesting (despite the fact that Kusno provides very little evidence to support his interpretation), it took me by surprise. Elsewhere in the book, Kusno states the Dutch applied Empire architecture to emphasize their administrative and economic dominance over Java. Reading these and other interpretations, I could not help but think that Kusno wants to have his cake and eat it too, a thought that ultimately led me to conclude that although Kusno’s line of reasoning is interesting and clever, his arguments and interpretations are insufficiently supported by the evidence provided and as such, for me, not entirely convincing.

- 5 On a positive note, it is good to see that among Kusno’s sources are Indonesian sources from the Dutch colonial period. These sources have often been neglected by Indonesian scholars interested in architectural and urban developments in this period. These references, supplemented by numerous eminent studies on Indonesia, including printed primary and secondary Dutch sources, suggest that Kusno is widely and well informed about the various

topics he describes. The only (minor) doubt I have in this regard is to what extent Kusno understands his Dutch references. The frequent errors when using or referring to Dutch vocabulary and references made me slightly dubious about Kusno's fluency with them.

- 6 For those interested in or familiar with Kusno's previous work, it is probably worth mentioning that, as Kusno notes in his introduction, six out of the nine chapters have already been published in English or within Indonesian journals and as chapters in other collections between 2003 and 2007. This is not a negative, of course, but something to be aware of when contemplating purchasing the book. Despite this, there is added value in having the essays in a single volume because it enables the reader to follow various aspects of Kusno's line of reasoning through the case studies he presents. As such, the essays provide the framework for Kusno's central thesis that cities shape the political cultures of decolonization, nation building, and development. Although I do not necessarily agree with this interpretation – as I believe the reverse to be equally true and that over and above political and societal contexts, architecture and urbanism are also autonomous disciplines – Kusno's book is relevant for anybody interested in pre, colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. If only for its cross-disciplinary methodology, *The Appearances of Memory* is worth the effort of deciphering Kusno's at times complex and self-referential prose.

References

Electronic reference

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