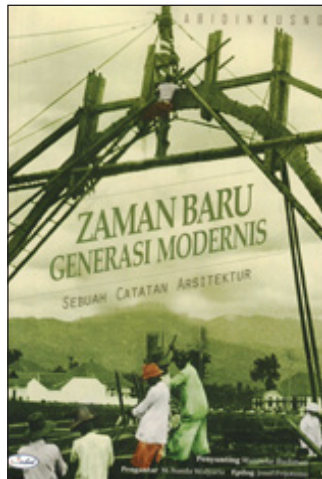


## REVIEW ESSAY

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Abidin Kusno, *Zaman baru generasi modernis; Sebuah catatan arsitektur*. Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2012, xxv + 164 pp. ISBN: 6027544775/9786027544772. Price: IDR 45,000 (soft cover).

Abidin Kusno, *Politik ekonomi perumahan rakyat dan utopia Jakarta*. Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2012, xxix, 152 pp. + illustrations. ISBN: 6027544783/9786027544789. Price: IDR 45,000 (soft cover).



The two books of Abidin Kusno are part of the *Kota, kata, dan kuasa* series, edited by Manneke Budiman. In his introduction to *Zaman baru generasi modernis*, Mohammad Nanda Widyarta said that architecture and urban planning are often misunderstood. These two closely tied disciplines are more than technical studies, a policy, or administrative concern. Buildings and urban spaces also participate in creating the symbolic order and an integral part of social and cultural systems. Abidin, formerly lecturer of Universitas Tarumanagara and currently at the University of British Columbia, explores meeting points between urban spaces, power, and culture through the historic context of public housing policy and modernist architecture.

*Politik ekonomi perumahan rakyat dan utopia Jakarta* arises out of discussions between Abidin Kusno, Suryono Herlambang, Kemal Taruc, and Jo Santoso; scholars and lecturers at Universitas Tarumanagara, or “Grogol School of Planning”.

It is perhaps misleading to put Abidin Kusno as the author of this book, as his arguments, by his own admission, are incomplete and meant to serve as a “provocation” for discussions and responses from the other contributors. The section written by Abidin Kusno makes up only about half of the book. The rest consists of essays which introduce, contextualize, and theoretically frame his arguments.

The starting point for Abidin’s exploration of public housing is a new funding scheme launched in 2009 called the Secondary Mortgage Finance (SMF). The joint efforts of Bank Indonesia and the Ministries of Finance and Public Housing created a financial security out of bundled mortgage certificates which were then traded in the global capital market. The proceeds of the sale of the SMF would then be used to fund more mortgages and finance public housing projects.

In the first two chapters, Abidin explains concisely the mechanism of this financial instrument and discusses the historical context and socio-political significance of this policy. From the Dutch colonial era up to SBY’s administration, none of Indonesia’s successive governments had neither the resource nor willpower to do anything significant to provide housing for the poor. The 2009 decision promised to turn this around. It also marked a shift in the role of the government in regards to housing provision; from a subsidy-based ethic carried over from the founding fathers’ utopian vision (although it was in principle only, as it was never truly realized) to investment, or market-led approach.

From here, Abidin goes on to introduce the issue of dual land status in Jakarta. Only about twenty-five per cent of land in Jakarta is certified through the National Land Registry. The rest have an “informal status”. These spaces are the domain of the informal economy – that of street food vendors, motorcycle taxis, boarding houses, and low-income service workers.

The newly introduced SMF and the paradigm shift from subsidy to investment entailed a campaign to formalize land, the better to create land and mortgages as a tradable commodity. However not everyone could afford to do so. So ownership was limited to those with the means to pay the costs of administration and meet the land and building regulations. Moreover, access to mortgage facilities required a steady income and other kinds of papers relating to citizenship and residency status, which most of those in the informal sector did not have. Thus, according to Abidin, the new public housing financing policy and its inclusion in the global capital market effectively resulted in population selection and control (p. 46).

In the third chapter, Abidin reflects critically on the “1000 towers” project, initiated by then-vice-president Jusuf Kalla. He explains how power struggle and system inadequacy resulted in *penunggang kelas* ‘class piggybacking’, in

which developers used the public housing scheme to snap up lucrative land in the city, which was then sold to middle and upper income buyers.

In the fourth chapter, Abidin presents his vision for the future. If this situation continues, those who cannot afford to live in Jakarta will be pushed to the city margins. A sense of disenfranchisement and growing inequality will be a breeding ground for moral politics and anti-urban sentiments. Using a spatial metaphor, Jakarta will be "surrounded" by anti-urban sentiments, strongly related to Islamist fundamentalists and often violent or anarchic measures to implement the shariah law.

Throughout his section, Abidin Kusno provides insightful, clearly presented, and easy to follow arguments. He also contextualizes events in the present with broader histories of national and local politics. However, cause-and-effect relationships and the attribution of agency and responsibility are a bit cursory at times, and could use a more detailed justification.

The following article by Kemal Taruc immediately addresses the framing of Abidin's arguments and problematizes his assumptions. He directs the reader towards framing and political position which Abidin implied in his arguments. For example, his thesis that "both the state and capital market are taking advantage of the public housing market for their own interest [...] eventually disadvantaging the people" (p. 83) seems too general. The reader is left with more questions: Who is the capital market? Is it that straightforward? He raises several points that, although critical in nature, does not diminish Abidin's arguments, but prompts the reader to think about the situation as more than "people versus state and market". Kemal invites consideration that all the actors in the public housing saga also carry ambiguities, paradoxes, and contradictions, which he calls the "split personality" syndrome.

For example, Kemal expresses wariness of simplification of market dynamics. He comments that Abidin's thesis which states that the market aims to maximize its own profit is redundant - because that is its job. Instead, his suggestion is to consider what is implied in the suggestion that it should be otherwise, and to also examine the systems and conditions that are in place that allow the market to "take over" social concerns.

In that regard, Kemal points to further complications in practice, offering a more pragmatic, though devastating explanation that the city, although planned with utopian concept and dreams, has become a site for under-the-table transactions, for the convenience of local apparatuses, to be "adjusted" accordingly (p. 113). Furthermore, he problematizes Abidin's tendency to portray the "informal", "the poor" or "the people" as homogenously repressed and disadvantaged. As well as contributing significantly to the city's economy, they are also involved in underground networks, often linked to formal ones. They also served a political purpose, as support to be rallied and appealed to in times of political contest.

Jo Santoso, another member of the "Grogol School", was involved in planning and development of several large commercial projects and also as a consultant on housing and urban reform research. His article provides a more

detailed historical context to the events outlined by Abidin and also further addresses and expands on the questions raised by Kemal. When Abidin talks of “the challenge for public housing,” Kemal Taruc wonders, what is the challenge here? Jo Santoso’s account completes the picture by providing an on-the-ground account of the mechanism of the challenge. Throughout Indonesian history, and all through the present conflict, and power struggles have made it impossible to have a national independent body with enough authority, means, and concern to carry out any serious action. He cynically points out that the SMF scheme may be a political move to a mass political support from wealthy developers.

This book does not provide solutions, and neither does it set out to do so. If the purpose of this book is to stimulate critical thought and discussions, it has succeeded. The structuring of the book as a discussion between experts, each balancing and complementing each other and invites the reader to also get into a critical engagement with the issue. It results in a nuanced and dialogical approach to an otherwise bricks-and-mortar issue. By the time one reaches the end of these articles, public housing is not just an issue of political economy, but also takes on an ideological and cultural dimension.

Its contribution, I believe, goes beyond public housing policy, but comments on other kinds of spatial interventions in Jakarta. The changes that the city has gone through in the past few years are bewildering, even for its native residents like myself. Superblocks, malls, and upscale apartments pop up seemingly unchecked, while basic infrastructures such as public transportation or housing are sorely lacking. These are easily dismissible as incompetence, selfishness, and greed from both the city administrators and property developers, but such conclusion hinders understanding to the actual mechanism and power struggles behind it, which this book helps illuminate.

There are different ways through which global capitalism and the state are implicated in shaping social class and culture in urban Indonesia. This book also shows that urban and spatial dimensions are also important aspects to be considered in social and cultural studies.

*Zaman baru generasi modernis* was launched in tandem with *Politik ekonomi perumahan rakyat*. While *Perumahan rakyat* deals with the present, *Generasi modernis* deals more with the past. Although both can stand alone, the two books complement and enrich the arguments, and become much more useful when read in tandem.

While *Perumahan rakyat* zones on a particular issue and explores the context surrounding it, *Generasi modernis* traces chronologically the political and intellectual movements in the twentieth century Indonesia and their corresponding urban and architectural manifestations.

Abidin explains that the purpose of this book is to give “modernity a place in Indonesian architectural history and to see modernity as an Indonesian tradition” (p. xiii). Through this, he proposes a new way of looking at Indonesian architecture, away from the conventional style development that is used in western historiography.

In the introduction, Abidin explores what he means by “modernism” and “modernity”. Somewhat tautologically, he states that “modernism is an artistic expression of modernity, a cultural movement shaped in a political process,” and that “Indonesian modernity is not the same, or even sometimes runs counter to European modernity” (p. 3).

For Abidin, modernism is something that shifts and changes in reaction to social political circumstances. He intends to show that modernity may evolve through the ages, but that its defining feature is always “a spirit of rebellion (against the established order) and the desire to embrace the new” (p. 3). “Modernity” is an expansive subject. Considering that the book is also intended for non-academic readers, he could provide a bit more context to clarify the concept.

The rest of the book, divided into five sections, plots chronologically the varying expression of the modernist spirit through the twentieth century Indonesia. Each section begins with a chapter which provides the social, political and intellectual backdrops, followed by a few chapters discussing a certain style or a particular building which exemplifies the modern spirit of the era.

Part one began in the early twentieth century, “the urban century” (p. 8). In the Dutch East Indies, the shift toward urban settlement also happened along with ethical policy, in which liberal voices, arising from thought movements in Europe at that time, advocated for the abandonment of violent and coercive methods in favour for a more “humane” and participatory relation between the colonizer and the colonized. The challenge for the administrators was to manage modernity, here in a sense of exposure to new ideas, yet at the same time maintain the status of colony.

How are these manifested through architecture? Through discussion of building styles, urban planning, literature, and popular culture, Abidin paints a vivid picture of the tension between the new ideas which modernity entails, and the old – feudal and traditional – values that was being replaced.

The second part builds on the rapid change in thinking and lifestyle of the generation, and links it with the growing sense of civic and nationalist sentiments. Changes in colonial social structure created groups of people, such as civil servants and the ethnic Chinese elite, for whom modernist architecture became a means for self-representation.

Meanwhile, exposure of Indonesian youth to education and liberal ideas led to civic and national activism, which culminated in several uprisings against the colonial rule. These were quickly and violently quashed, and its leaders banished from cities. Abidin discusses attempts of normalization and control from the administrators, reflected through urban and spatial planning.

Abidin also touches on two different approaches to address kampong by social reformist and urban planners of the day. Foreshadowing the issue dealt with in *Perumahan rakyat*, this chapter gives a historical context on how “the poor” or “the people” were imagined by the ruling power – as “the other” of prosperous, orderly cities, as the domain of the poor, and as, depending on

which point of view, political threat or potential.

The next section deals with the years following the Independence. Soekarno was a practicing architect before becoming a prominent figure in nationalist movements and eventually the first president of Indonesia. Abidin explores the strong link between architecture and his social and political visions in the scale and aesthetics of buildings and monuments of that era. He also draws a fascinating parallel between the theatrical and performative elements of Soekarno's personal style and the architecture he commissioned.

Soekarno actively shaped Jakarta as a site for expressing national and anti-colonial sentiments. His modernism had an international dimension, calling forth solidarity between newly independent nations to break free from western imperialism. Soekarno envisioned Indonesia as a supralocal utopia, transcending local traditions and affiliations. Modernist architecture thus served as "an education on how to be an Indonesian" (p. 88) - a crucible for transformation, in which ethnic particularities are melted to make way for a "new Indonesian person".

Architects of the era resounded with the vision: "Indonesian architecture should be created by Indonesians without following traditional architecture." They were active in new housing, commercial, and environmental projects, reflecting their "engagement with Indonesia's political and social struggle" (p. 91), that culminated in the 1950 congress on public housing. This, according to Abidin, is an ethos which will remain forgotten for another forty years, to be rearticulated again along with the 2009 SMF policy.

Abidin notes that the end of Soekarno's rule marked the shift from social to market modernism. In this new version of modernism, class is something created, not transcended. He draws as an example the creation of Bumi Serpong Damai, a self-sufficient middle class satellite city, "a new space to create a new class, as the main component of identity formation" (p. 100).

In the following section, set in the New Order, a new kind of Indonesian architecture modernism emerged. Design became a purely autonomous activity - not corrupted nor appropriated by state ideology of 'development' and national identity championed by Suharto to consolidate his militaristic rule. It became dehistoricized, and architects distanced themselves from ideology and politics. Another disillusionment was expressed in the writings and thought of Y.B. Mangunwijaya, a notable architect, religious leader and social reformer, who lamented that "architecture will never be able to deal with poverty and suffering of majority of Indonesians" (p. 120).

The last section of the book touches on the attempts of a few architects to apply designs which pay attention to the landscape. But the primary focus of the section is on superblocks and privatized public spaces, which Abidin calls "piecemeal modernity" (p. 142), in which urban problems can be solved, although only for a certain class of people (p. 143). The final chapter draws on the example of *jongArsitek!* (an Indonesian young emergent architect community), noting that without oppressive regime to rebel against, or the social-political edge of Soekarno days, they are occupying a vacuum, "rebels

without a cause" (p. 148).

It is worth remembering that, as the subtitle states, this book was written as a collection of notes, not an academic thesis. Abidin's account, by his own admission, is by no means the most comprehensive. But the way Abidin relates his "collection of notes" (p. xiii), to broader social and political contexts and architecture reads well, and is informative and textured.

However, the book feels rather uneven. This is quite apparent in the quantity of discussion; the sections spanning 32 years of New Order and a decade of post-*Reformasi* takes only about fifty pages to cover. There is a marked shift in emphasis during the third section. While Abidin maintained a critical distance in the first two, the discussion on architecture from the end of Soekarno's era onwards becomes less informative and more polemical. Rather than supporting the link between modernism and architecture, the discussions on *ruko* (*rumah toko* 'shophouse'), the campus building of the University of Indonesia, and conservation efforts read like disparate, though interesting anecdotes.

Abidin rightly notes that the challenges faced by architects pre- and up to the end of the Soekarno era are relevant today. Implied in his arguments is Abidin's conviction that architecture should be carrying the spirit of struggle and nationalism, without which it then could flounder into the arms of capitalism.

But I argue that it does not mean that there is nothing much left to discuss. Furthermore, was the shift between social to market modernism that clear-cut and did it run parallel with transition in government? Are the relationships between politics, ideology, and capitalism really as simple as the book implies?

*Generasi modernis* could benefit from a balanced critical engagement involved in *Perumahan rakyat*. Most of Kemal Taruc's framing and problematizing of relationships between cause and effect could be applied here, as well as an additionally essay, similar to one written by Jo Santoso, of a complementary account of the dynamics between capitalism and politics. These would certainly take much longer than the space the book allows.

Thus, the questions provoked and issues left to be explored in both books are not shortcomings. Rather, they show the virtue and novelty of Abidin's arguments. As series editor, Manneke Budiman noted that, by embedding architecture in the broader social political context, both *Generasi modernis* and *Perumahan rakyat* encourage interdisciplinary approach to advocacy and research. As part and parcel of a broader interaction of historical, social, and political dynamics, architecture is an act of representation as much as literature or film with all the power issues implicated within, prompting the questions: by whom, under what circumstances, and for what ends? The books provide a thoughtful and illuminating approach to those questions, as well as proposing some of their own.

Finally, it is worth noting that the timing of the books is also highly appropriate, for although they do not directly address the present situation, provide the context for understanding popularity and media focus on the

policy and actions of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). The five months since they held office have been characterized by decisive actions never seen in previous governments. These involve further development of the issues outlined in *Perumahan rakyat*.

Jokowi and Ahok orchestrated relocations of residents in several areas to designated public housing apartments or commercial markets. So far, Rp. 235 billion has been allocated for the building of fourteen low-rent apartment blocks (*Kompas* 2013). The relocations have proceeded with relative success and minimum human rights transgressions.

It does seem that the situation is not as bleak as Abidin makes it out to be. Jokowi and Ahok have shown a clear vision and political will that may yet solve the housing and social crises as Abidin predicts will happen. Positive change has happened, but as the book has drawn attention to, considering the complex dynamics of social, political and economic interests, utopian vision as perhaps been replaced with pragmatism.

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