



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

The End of Urban Involution and the Cultural Construction of Urbanism in Indonesia

Evers, Hans-Dieter

Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn,
Germany

2007

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/7566/>
MPRA Paper No. 7566, posted 08 Mar 2008 02:19 UTC

The End of Urban Involution and the Cultural Construction of Urbanism in Indonesia

HANS-DIETER EVERS

1. Introduction

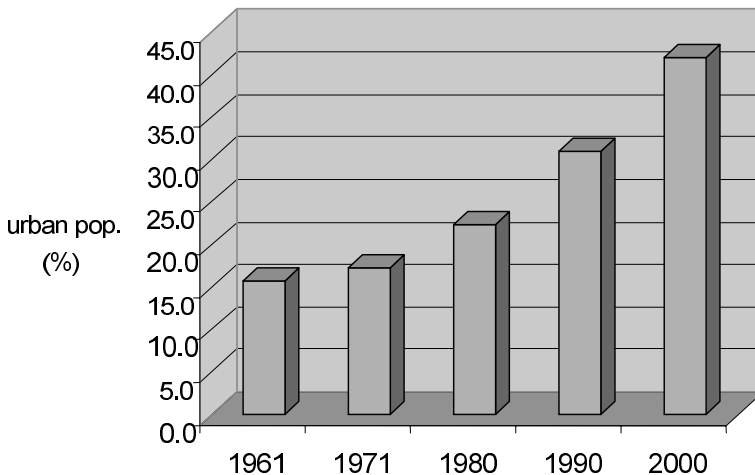
This paper, focused on Indonesia, deals with the relationship between material and symbolic culture, between the forces of globalization and the reaction of urban players or, to quote Gottdiener (1995), with the “disappearance of the real and its replacement by simulation, hyper-reality and models”.

The paper is also concerned with a very practical, economic aspect of urban development. The age of globalization has created a number of processes which lead to increasingly complex roles for Asian city, regional and national governments. With foreign investments and the resulting inter-city competition, local governments of large Asian cities have increasingly understood the need to remain competitive by implementing policies and projects to enhance the attractiveness of cities for potential investors. In order to attract foreign investment and integrate a city into the global economy, its image has to be polished. The case of Singapore shows that it was deemed necessary to build a concert hall, improve tourist spots like the zoo or the bird park, market its culinary delights, build world-class research institutes and universities and enable gambling in two state-of-the-art casinos. The government of Singapore, like that of other large Asian cities, has realized that nobody is eager to live and invest in a city without urbanism. Urbanism and the image of a city are essential points for city development. Building on this insight a hypothesis about urban development in Indonesia is proposed.

2. A Hypothesis of Urban Development

The rate of urbanization in Indonesia, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, was low up to the 1970s and early 1980s. Urbanization has since been accelerated and a giant mega-city has developed around Jakarta, known as Jabotabek (Jakarta-Bogor-Tangerang-Bekasi), and other cities like Surabaya, Bandung and Medan have grown to metropolitan proportions.

Diagram 1: Urbanization in Indonesia, 1961-2000



Source: BPS Census data

The pattern of urbanization in Indonesia during the 1960s and 1970s has been described as one of “urban involution” (Evers 1972), i.e. intricate patterns of an informal urban economy developed without leading to the modernization of built structures, modes of transport, industries and occupations. Involution – in contrast to evolution – designates a process in which structures, patterns and forms become more and more intricate and complex without reaching a new stage of evolution. According to Geertz, involution, an “inward overelaboration of detail” (Geertz 1963), leads to stagnation and underdevelopment. For most towns and cities the growing bureaucracy (Evers 1987) and informal sector trade were the major driving forces of urbanization rather than industrialization or the development of a modern service sector.

Quite detached from the reality of shared poverty, stagnation and underdevelopment the capital city of Jakarta was symbolically created as an exemplary centre of culture, national identity and power. A unitary post-colonial nation-state had to have an “exemplary centre”, a capital. It was therefore necessary to develop a central capital city at least as a symbolic representation. “Virtual urbanism” was essential to gloss over the harsh reality of a large urban sprawl of squatters and semi-rural *kampungs*. It had to be demonstrated to the world that Indonesia was a unified nation and a leader of the “newly emerging forces” of the Third World. For the “imagined community” of the Indonesian nation-state Jakarta developed a symbolic universe of meaning, a virtual world of monuments, parade grounds and significant buildings following a pattern of cultural, rather than material urbanization.

For Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung and Medan and some of the other larger provincial capitals the process of involution has now come to an end and – in the words of Terry McGhee – a “true urban revolution” is under way (McGee 1967). Less than half of the Indonesian population makes a living from agriculture and an urban middle class, following global patterns of consumption, changes the cityscape (Evers and Gerke 1997; Gerke 2000; Clammer 2003). Open markets still exist, but shopping centres and malls have been constructed to cater for the new consumers and high-rise buildings mark the new CBD (Central Business District) with an ICT (Information and Communication Technology) infrastructure that enables world-wide networking. This process has far-reaching consequences, which we shall explore.

Having outlined my hypothesis, let me elaborate the argument point by point.

3. Weak Nusantara Urbanism

In contrast to China, Japan, Vietnam or Thailand, which had strong traditions of urban centres, Indonesia and the Malay world have a weak base in urbanism. In fact, it has been argued that the Nusantara cultural area (island Southeast Asia) had no cultural concept of the city before the arrival of the Dutch (Yeung and Lo 1976; Evers 1984a). Going back to the earlier Nusantara empires it can be shown that the centre of the realm was a palace (*kraton, istana*) rather than a town. Unlike Beijing or Ayuthia, which were surrounded by a wall and a moat, the capital of Majapahit or later on Yogyakarta had none of these attributes of urbanism. Linguistically there was no

concept of a city with a bourgeoisie, as found in mediaeval Europe. *Bandar* (port) and *kota* (fort) had to be used to designate places which, during colonial times, became cities with a city government.

In accordance with my earlier arguments (Evers 1984a) that there were no urban institutions and no conceptions of an urban area, Peter Nas uses the term “focal urbanism” to stress the importance of the palace (*kraton, istana*) surrounded by retainers, craftsmen and peasants (Nas and Boeder 2004:4). These areas surrounding the palace could hardly be called cities in the Weberian sense. They lacked most institutions of urbanism. Whatever the terminology, after the interlude of Dutch colonial urbanization, the first phase of urbanization occurred after Indonesian independence. It was, and this is my thesis, “urbanization without urbanism”. What was the case for the larger cities of Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung and Medan until the early 1990s still holds true today for many of the small provincial or district capitals of Indonesia.

This concept of urbanism and the city was reflected in the administrative setup of independent Indonesia after 1945. Though settlements could be elevated to the status of *kota raya*, *kota madya* or *kota administratif*, the head of the city administration, the *wali kota*, had more or less the same rights and obligations as a *bupati* or district head. Up to now there is no Lord Mayor of Jakarta, but a Governor as in any other province with four *wali kota*, or heads of the four districts that form the special capital region (or actually province) of DKI Jakarta.

4. Urban Involution

“Weak Nusantara urbanism” was further weakened by “urban involution”. Involution means “more of the same”, i.e. complexity increases without evolutionary change, let alone revolutionary change (Evers and Korff 2004). During the 1960s and 70s the occupational structure of Indonesia’s urban population did not change much in terms of economic sectors (Evers 1972). The service sector remained solidly petty-trade-dominated. More markets were opened and more small-scale trades thronged into the cities. More and more goods of the same type were sold by more and more small traders and more government servants were housed in government housing estates of the same type. Involution also hampered the development of a clearly demarkated social structure. Gavin Jones alleges that despite urban sprawl and the growth of mega-cities, no “real urban proletariat” has evolved (Jones 2002) and Solvay Gerke shows that the emerging middle-class in Indonesia

was based on middle class symbols rather than on solid wage incomes or accumulated wealth (Gerke 2000).

Ethnicity constitutes another element of involution. Ethnic diversity increased with urbanization, funnelled by in-migration. Though rural areas can also have an ethnically diverse population, ethnic groups tend to claim distinct territories. In cities we can also observe tendencies towards segregation in ethnic quarters, like China town or little India. On the whole there is a tendency for a city to have more ethnic groups within its boundaries than surrounding rural areas. Segregated areas reproduce elements of each group, creating an involuted ethnic mosaic of distinct, but similarly patterned areas, organised by language group, ethnicity, occupation and district or even village of origin. As Bruner (1961) has shown in his classic study of Medan, North Sumatra, there was even an intensification of Batak *adat* and of the sense of Batak ethnic identity in the city during the Sukarno period.

Table 1: Major Ethnic Groups in Jakarta, Census 2000

Ethnic Group	Number	Percentage
Javanese	2,927,340	35.16
Betawi	2,301,587	27.65
Sundanese	1,271,531	15.27
Chinese	460,002	5.53
Batak	300,562	3.61
Minangkabau	264,639	3.18
Malay	134,477	1.62
Buginese	49,426	0.59
Madurese	47,055	0.57
Bantenese	20,582	0.25
Bajarese	7,977	0.1
Others	539,529	6.48
Total	8,324,707	100.01

Source: Suryadinata et al. 2003

With the end of involution ethnic and regional separatism declines, larger areas evolve and class may become more important than ethnicity as a principle of structuring urban areas, as I have shown in an earlier paper (Evers 1984b). At the time of the census of 2000, the first occasion ethnicity

was listed, Jakarta still had ten ethnic groups each claiming a membership of more than 20,000 inhabitants (see Table 1) and many other smaller groups.

Though the population of Jakarta still professes membership in a multitude of ethnic groups, there appears to be a growing identification with Jakarta as the home city. This new trend will be discussed below.

5. The Cultural Construction of Urbanism

Urbanization and the construction of virtual urbanism are reflected in buildings, monuments, places, street names and other architectural artefacts. Only some have meaning for the urban population or its rulers. These artefacts often remain even during urban renewal when the process of urbanization continues. Looking back, we have, therefore, to engage in a sort of “archaeology of meaning”.

Table 2: The Growth of Urbanism in Indonesia

	Urban Involution		Growth of Urbanism	
National Level	Independence: Nation-building	Unity in diversity	Globalisation and rapid urbanization	Reform and decentralization
Urban and local level	Jakarta: Nationalist, Third World symbols and monuments	Jakarta: Sanscritization. Local urbanism: standardized cultural symbols	Jabotabek: Mega city development	Re-invention of local traditions

The legacy of weak Nusantara urbanism, urban involution, the post-colonial state and the general decline of economic conditions after independence prevented the growth of genuine urbanism. Faced with the task of nation-building and of becoming acknowledged as leader of the non-aligned movement, President Sukarno needed an urban centre of power, a capital city of the new, independent, centralised state. It was plainly unthinkable to have a capital city without urbanism, without the institution of a world city! Lacking the knowledge and economic resources to physically construct a

new capital, Sukarno and his political elite opted for a “theatre state”¹ solution, building what Peter Nas (1993) has called a “city full of symbols”. As Abeyasekere puts it in her history of Jakarta, the Sukarno government was good at symbolism but rather poor at providing the facilities necessary to run a world class city (Abeyasekere 1987).



Figure 1: National Monument, Jakarta

Jakarta became, as I should like to call it, a “city without urbanism”. By placing monuments at significant intersections or places, “virtual urbanism” was created. The capital of Indonesia was symbolically constructed by huge monuments, like the freedom fighter carrying the flame of liberating Irian from colonial rule, or a high tower with a golden flame (National Monu-

¹ Clifford Geertz used the term to describe the pre-colonial Balinese state. Other authors have used the term to refer to Old Order Indonesia.

ment, Monas, see Figure 1), housing a museum at its base (MacDonald 1995, Nas 2004).

Urban anthropologists have speculated that this depiction of the sacrifice of national heroes during the independence struggle could be linked to ancestor worship, or to the world axis (*paku alam*) of Hindu-Javanese mythology (Nas 1993). A more far-fetched argument might suggest a connection to the sacrifice of a slave under the town pillar (*lak muang*) in Bangkok through which the city was established and safeguarded against otherworldly attacks.



Figure 2: Revolutionary Hero, Denpasar

Later a pleasure garden (Taman Mini), depicting the whole of Indonesia, was built by Suharto's wife to symbolise the unity of culturally diverse Indonesia. The details of this process have been aptly documented by Dutch urban sociologist Peter Nas (1993, 1995), who studied the urban symbolic ecology of Jakarta and other Indonesian towns. He showed, among other things, that the nationally most significant monument (Monas) was put in the centre, the next assembly of monuments of national significance encircled

Monas and the Medan Merdeka (Freedom Square), while lesser symbols formed an outer ring. This pattern resembled the concentric model of the classical Javanese state. In other words, the symbolic ecology of Jakarta was a sign or indicator, linking the new, centralised state of Indonesia with the glorious pre-colonial state of Majapahit. Other cities constructed similar meaningful monuments, ranging from pistol-waving national heroes (see Figure 2) to urban monuments connected to local incidences during the struggle for independence.

6. The End of Involution and the Growth of Urbanism

During the 1980s the four large Indonesian cities started to change together with many other cities in Asia (Marcotullio 2003). Industrialisation got slowly under way in Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya and Medan. The fruits of New Order capitalism became visible in new housing estates for the emerging middle strata of Indonesian society (Gerke 2001), elite quarters with heavily guarded enclaves and shopping centres, malls and department stores catering for the new tastes of the upper and middle classes and their demand for upmarket local and international goods. In Jakarta a new shopping belt extended from the old Chinese area of Glodok to Blok M in Kebayoran Baru. International Hotels and new business towers formed the new CBD (central business district) of Jakarta.

During the very early stages of this globalization, the new urbanism was glossed over by a symbolism of the pre-colonial past, as if the elite were afraid to face the challenges of globalization whilst losing the connection to the Javanese past that had hitherto been the source of their aspiration. Modern buildings were given names derived from Sanskrit or old Javanese: Arthaloka, Bina Graha, Ariyaduta, Graha Purna Yudha, Devi Ruji are some such names found in “neo-classical” Jakarta (Evers and Korff 2004). Actually the change of name from Batavia to Jakarta, derived from Jayakarta was the beginning of the “Sanskritization” of the Indonesian capital. The last Hindu-Javanese monument that was built in Jakarta was a large figure of Arjuna (Figure 3) riding in a chariot and obstructing traffic on the eastern side of Jakarta’s Medan Merdeka.

In the provincial capitals this symbolic return to local traditions created a strange marriage between modern architecture and traditional forms of art.

A modern-looking cone houses a museum to commemorate the capture of Yogyakarta by the revolutionary troops under General Sudirman (Monumen Yogy Kembali, see Figure 4). Suharto, a rather insignificant officer is given a

prominent place in the museum, which in turn is locally interpreted as a modern version of mount Meru, the global mountain of Hindu-Javanese mythology, surrounded by the oceans in the guise of several ponds. Furthermore the museum building is aligned with the mythical volcano Merapi, the *tugu* (end of the ritual road of procession) and the palace of the Sultan of Yogyakarta (see Nas/Sluis 2002). After all, Yogyakarta was the first short-lived capital of independent Indonesia and is, like Jakarta, a “special region” (*daerah istimewa*).



Figure 3: Arjuna Monument, Jakarta

In Padang, capital of West-Sumatra, modern buildings were topped with rural Minangkabau roofs (Columbijn 1994; Evers 1993, Evers/Korff 2004) (Figure 5).

In Denpasar a new administrative district (Renon) was constructed in modernised Balinese architecture, including a huge multi-purpose building in the form of a Hindu-Balinese temple. In Yogyakarta street names were written in Javanese, exciting and baffling international tourists and in Jakarta the Governor promoted the “Betawiness of the local population” (Knorr 2002). This “manipulated symbolism” (Macdonald 1995), this marriage of

modernity and localism created “hybrid space” in many urban areas of Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Malay Middle Eastern symbolism of the new administrative capital of Putrajaya located in the modern Multimedia Super Corridor of Malaysia’s emerging knowledge society provides a vivid example of this trend (Boey 2002; Menkhoff/ Evers/ Chay 2005).



Figure 4: Monument “Yogya Kembali”, Yogyakarta

After the breakthrough of urbanism the construction of monuments more or less ceased. With a CBD, international banks, theatres, cocktail lounges and shopping malls, the new urbanism was sufficiently documented and symbolized. Instead of a withdrawal from reality and a virtual construction of a capital city, Jakarta had now joined the league of world cities (Sassen 1991). A recent event demonstrates this new role of Jakarta. On July 23, 2005 Monas (the national monument), the once powerful symbol of nationalism and national unity on Jakarta’s Medan Merdeka was changed into a symbol of a global city. The event was reported in the *Jakarta Post* (24-07-05) as follows:

A touch of glamour has been lent to the National Monument (Monas) park – already home to deer and coloured pigeons – with the opening on Saturday night of a fountain that emulates the Las Vegas Bellagio fountains. With

music and choreographed laser beams, the Rp 26 billion fountain... accompanies Monas, the city's principal landmark, a 132-meter-high column topped with a glittering flame.

It was further reported that the fountain uses German technology and features fourteen different songs of mainly Betawi origin, like *Kopi Dandut*, *Lenggak-lenggok Jakarta* and *Ampar-ampar Pisang* – rather than the national anthem, *Padamu Negeri* or other nationalist songs. Betawi songs, German technology, American-style fountain together symbolise the global city with a local touch, as opposed to the national capital of a struggling postcolonial nation.



Figure 5: Bank Building, Padang, West Sumatra

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Urbanism has arrived in Indonesia and is slowly pervading the urban hierarchy. Some provincial cities still have a long way to go. They are still

kotadesa (urban villages) rather than cities in their own right. Decentralisation is bringing local culture to the fore and defunct *rajas* and their nobility may re-emerge, demanding symbolic representation.

In the mega cities the *virtual* construction of urbanism and with it the *actual* construction of large symbolic urban monuments has come to an end. Of course urban symbolism will be continued, but in a different form. Multi-storeyed shopping centres and office blocks, high-rise office towers (like the twin towers in KL) and post-modern laser shows will suffice as symbols of “real urbanism”.

By instituting a policy of administrative and fiscal decentralisation the Indonesian government has transformed Jakarta from a symbol of national unity into the mere capital of a democratizing state. Foreign investment is flowing in, multinational corporations are setting up their offices and urban planning is starting to structure urban space. Jakarta has joined the rank of world cities whose CBDs are knowledge hubs connected world-wide by ICT. It shares the glory and the dark side of similar cities in Asia: the slums, poor infrastructure, rapid population growth and, as some observers claim, ungovernability.

References

- Abeyasekere, Susan (1987). *Jakarta, a History*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Armstrong, W. R. and T. McGee (1980). “A Theory of Urban Involution.” In *Sociology of Southeast Asia*, edited by H.-D. Evers: Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 220–234.
- Bruner, E. M. (1961). “Urbanization and Ethnic Identity in North Sumatra.” *American Anthropologist* 63: 508–521.
- Clammer, J. (2003). “Globalisation, Class, Consumption and Civil Society in South-East Asian Cities.” *Urban Studies* 40(2): 403–419.
- Colombijn, F. (1994). *Patches of Padang. The History of an Indonesian Town in the Twentieth Century and the Use of Urban Space*. Leiden: Research School CNWS, Leiden University.
- Evers, H.-D. (1972). *Urban Involution: the Social Development of Southeast Asian Towns*. Working Paper No. 2, Dept. of Sociology, University of Singapore. Singapore.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter (1974). “Involusi Kota: Struktur Sosial Kota-Kota Asia Tenggara-Suatu Kasus Kota Padang.” *PRISMA* 3:73–80.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter (1984a). “Cities as a ‘Field of Anthropological Studies’ in South-east Asia”. In *Unity in Diversity – Indonesia as a Field of Anthropological Study*, edited by P. E. d. Josselin de Jong. Dordrecht/ Cinnaminson: Foris Publications, pp. 143–151

- Evers, Hans-Dieter (1984b). "Urban Landownership, Ethnicity and Class in Southeast Asian Cities." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 8:481–496.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter (1987). "The Bureaucratization of Southeast Asia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29(4): 666–685.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter (1993). "Images of a Sumatran Town: Padang and the Rise of Urban Symbolism In Indonesia." In *Urban Symbolism*, edited by P. J. M. Nas. Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 78–91.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter and S. Gerke (1997). "Global Market Cultures and the Construction of Modernity in Southeast Asia." *Thesis Eleven* 50: 1–14.
- Evers, Hans-Dieter and R. Korff (2004). *Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space*. 2nd edition. Münster/New York/Singapore: LIT / ISEAS.
- Geertz, C. (1963). *Agricultural Involution: Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.
- Gerke, S. (2000). "Global Lifestyles under Local Conditions: The New Indonesian Middle Class." In *Consumption in Asia. Lifestyles and Identities*, edited by B.-H. Chua. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 135–158.
- Gottdiener, M. (1995). *Postmodern Semiotics. Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jones, G. W. (2002). "Southeast Asian Urbanization and the Growth of Mega-Urban Regions." *Journal of Population Research* 19(2): 119–136.
- Knorr, J. (2002). "Tradition versus Modernity: The Orang Betawi and Betawi-ness in Jakarta." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 127:203–221.
- Marcotullio, P. J. (2003). "Globalisation, Urban Form and Environmental Conditions in Asia-Pacific Cities." *Urban Studies* 40(2): 219–247.
- Menkhoff, T., H.-D. Evers and Yue Wah Chay (2005). *Governing and Managing Knowledge in Asia*. Singapore/London: World Scientific.
- McGee, T. G. (1967). *The Southeast Asian City. A Social Geography of the Primate Cities of Southeast Asia*. London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd.
- Macdonald, G. M. (1995). "Indonesia's Medan Merdeka: National Identity and the Built Environment." *Antipode* 27(3): 270–293.
- Nas, Peter J.M. (1993). "Jakarta, City Full of Symbols. An Essay in Symbolic Ecology." In *Urban Symbolism*, edited by P. J. M. Nas. Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 13–37.
- Nas, Peter J.M. (1995). "The image of Denpasar: About urban symbolism between tradition and tourism". In P.J.M. Nas (ed.), *Issues in urban development. Case studies from Indonesia*. Research School CNWS, Leiden, pp. 164–192.
- Nas, Peter J.M. (2004). "De Bezielde stad. Urbane symboliek in Indonesie." Inaugurale rede bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van bijzonder hoogleraar. Leiden, unpublished manuscript.

- Nas, Peter J.M. and Rijnt Sluis (2002). "In Search of Meaning: Urban Orientation Principles in Indonesia." In *The Indonesian Town Revisited*, edited by P. J. M. Nas. Münster/Singapore: LIT Verlag/ISEAS, pp. 130–146
- Nas, Peter J.M. and Welmoet Boender (2004). "The Indonesian City in Urban Theory." Unpublished manuscript.
- Sassen, Saskia (1991). *The Global City*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Suryadinata, L., E. N. Arifin, et al. (2003). *Indonesia's Population: Ethnicity and Religion in a Changing Political Landscape*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Yeung, Y. M. and C. P. Lo, Eds. (1976). *Changing Southeast Asian Cities: Readings on Urbanization*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

