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Thesis Eleven 2003; 73; 113

DOI: 10.1177/0725513603073001008

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REVIEW ESSAY

POSTCOLONIAL CITIES:
A VIEW FROM JAKARTA

A review of Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Routledge, 2000)

Trevor Hogan

Once in a while a book comes along that reveals an informing intelligence on every line. Such books make a mockery of the intertextual, 'death of the author' manifestoes of the past three decades. The authorial presence in *Behind the Postcolonial* is immediately apparent in the title itself. Kusno's 'behind' is a cheeky pisstake on the hubris of the many 'posts' and 'beyonds' found in contemporary social and political theory publishing catalogues. The range of punning meanings is left implicit by the author but might include the refusal of the depth imagery of structuralism ('beneath the postcolonial'). 'Behind' certainly raises again the temporal anxiety that is associated with the breathless search for more, faster, bigger and longer in the uneven development of modern capitalism as a world system of competing nation-states and regional blocs.

Kusno doesn't claim to provide a historical sociology, but it is one of sorts. The book appears as part of the excellent 'Architext' series with its manifesto to bring 'the social' back into the discussion of architecture and the built environment, to treat them as more than artistic and technological expressions of human culture. Kusno's approach reinserts the importance of space and the built environment to the social sciences and humanities as well. The language of sexuality and the body, gender, race and identity politics is that of contemporary social and cultural theory but history lurks in

Thesis Eleven, Number 73, May 2003: 113–121
SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
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[0725-5136(200305)73;113–121;035969

the margins of the book's postcolonial discourses. Kusno links together interrogations of discourses, communities (political, ideal and professional), theories and imaginaries that not only educate neophytes about modern Indonesia but provide a comparative sense of global and regional controversies, themes and problems. For this reader at least, it is this latter dimension of *Behind the Postcolonial* that is so fascinating and informative. It is Kusno, the historical sociologist and self-reflexive biographer of his own part in the story, who makes this book more than an interesting case study of a particular time and place. Kusno's narrative of the Indonesian colonial and postcolonial struggles to nationhood – to be expressed in built form – contributes, in a wider sense, to universal themes and concerns in contemporary social theory. Kusno's mastery of contemporary discourses, theoretical and otherwise, is revealed in his ability to use fashionable jargon whilst still staying 'behind' it.

Kusno provides autobiographical traces in the text but always these serve a higher purpose than any pretensions to identity politics or the narcissistic self-advertising of an endlessly regressive self-reflexivity. A professional architect whose public life, training and practice coincides with the New Order years of Suharto, Kusno travels to upstate New York to work with his doctoral supervisor, Anthony D. King in the History and Theory of Art and Architecture Graduate Program, State University of New York, Binghamton. King (1931–), long-time Professor of Art History and Sociology in the Department of Art and Art History at SUNY also works with the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economics, Historical Systems, and Civilizations. Wallerstein's brand of world-system theory marks some of King's own investigations in the changing forms and meanings of the urban built environment across empires and colonies since European global expansion in the 17th century (1976, 1989, 1990). In more recent times, King has extended this approach to worry about culture, identity formation and representing the city (1991, 1996). He is justly renowned, however, for his work on the comparative and historical sociology of buildings and societies, especially of the quintessential expression of modern suburbia and its global spread, *The Bungalow* ([1984]1995). Kusno's own globetrotting not only immerses him in cosmopolitan debates about globalization and the production of global cultures but more importantly provides him with critical distance from his own cultural formation and identity. New York has provided a location for Kusno to reinterpret Jakarta – to explore the changing meanings and reconstructions of his own national political cultures and their relation to architecture, built environment and urban space in Jakarta.

Behind the Postcolonial has three parts. Part 1 recounts the rise of modern Indonesian architectural history and theory. In part 2, Kusno moves from a genealogical account to the problem of urban space and design in the emergent nation-state. He then opens his discussion up to 'the spectre of

comparisons' with a critical analysis of '(trans)national imaginings', regional and global (part 3).

Kusno dedicates two chapters each to Sukarno's (1950–65) and Suharto's (1965–98) regimes. These chapters pay particular attention to the development of Jakarta, first by comparing their respective architectural theories and practices, and then by analysing their contrasting approaches to the politics of urban space. In each case, Kusno shows the enduring presence of colonial legacies in the discursive and spatial reimagining of Indonesia and its built environments. For both leaders and their regimes, Jakarta was central to the wider task of building Indonesia as a modern nation-state. For Sukarno, Jakarta was to be the 'portal of the country' and a 'beacon of the emerging nations' of Asia and Africa. He wanted to put Jakarta 'on the map of world cities' so he demanded a city beautiful, international and modern, full of grand statements in stone: sports stadia, monuments, grand boulevards and vast public spaces at the geographical and symbolic heart. He got his monuments and grand statements but not the beauty that he wanted.

As a young architectural student of the *Bandoeng Technische Hoogeschool*, Sukarno was exposed to the formative arguments of his Dutch teachers who advocated a 'colonial integrative modernism', and as president of a revolutionary nationalist generation of state makers, he needed a built form of the city both to symbolize the aspirations of the new nation – its participation in the world of nation-states – and to secure and centralize his power against internal and external political enemies. Kusno argues that Sukarno's preference for high modernist architecture in the 'international style' was not only a sign of his embrace of western modernist ideology, science and technology but also the only architectural form to hand that could legitimate his 'guided democracy' regime to his people. Sukarno showed that his reign was rooted in the ancient Javanese court societies but not in a way that might have been expected of him. Historic Indic-Javanese architectural traditions and their canonization by 'late colonial Dutch orientalist' enthusiasts could not do the job for Sukarno because tradition suggested underdevelopment while their appropriation by the Dutch colonial architects made them unusable for a revolutionary populist wishing to posit a new independent and modern nation-state. International modernism therefore pointed to Sukarno as simultaneously both a 'progressive nation unifier' and a 'reinforcer of traditional values'.

If Sukarno was the smasher of colonial constraints and the romantic revolutionary embodiment of the new polity, continuously renewing the nation's promise to be a 'beacon of the new emergent forces' of the world, Suharto's architectural vision for his 'new order' regime was historicist in style and traditionalist in intent. Suharto had not so much to proclaim the emergence of the postcolonial nation-state as to assert his difference from his charismatic predecessor. After the chaos of unruly passions and contesting interests

that he claimed had been the hallmarks of the Sukarno era, Suharto presents himself as the *paterfamilias* or *pater patriae*, father of a 'new order' that institutes a rule of reason and harmony. The renewed emphasis on traditional and regional architectural styles then is not only a recovery of precolonial heritage but paradoxically is both 'enabled as well as haunted by its earlier colonial construction'. The celebration of cultural pluralism of the nation-state's regional provinces and the archiving of regional traditional architectural forms mimic Europe's colonial museum and ethnography. In both cases, the Dutch and Suharto regimes seek to depoliticize the subject peoples. Suharto's goals were largely achieved for three decades, and show remarkable similarities to the Marcos regime's tactics in the Philippines: the documentation, celebration and development of regional architecture reinforces patriotic nationalism, encourages international tourism and reduces potential threats of regional social and political disintegration and disobedience to nation-state sovereignty.

Jakarta as the primate city of the nation-state and as emergent world city is the theatre of national politics. It is the performance space and the enactment of the postcolonial politics of the two regimes. Both Sukarno and Suharto needed Jakarta but used it in radically different ways and for very different ends. Sukarno, as revolutionary populist, is the supreme commander, leader and embodiment of the national subject, still in emergent form. As a latter-day Robespierre, Sukarno needs the people to be constantly acting out the body politic on the grand monumental stage of Jakarta. As Thomas Carlyle once described with reference to the French Revolution, this was 'when pit was on stage'. Because Sukarno perceived himself to be the mouthpiece of his people, he incessantly called them forth out on the streets:

With the idea of integrating together, in one place, 'the whole Indonesian people,' a central part of Jakarta was to become a symbolic representation of the state, a medium through which a singular body of a 'national subject' was to be formed. The building of Jakarta is also the metaphorical forming of a collective national subject with whom Sukarno could communicate and who would become the 'extension of the tongue of the people.' He did so in the context of his belief that, through the city he built, the people would be able to identify themselves with him. In this sense, Sukarno was himself embodied in the modern buildings. It was he, indeed, that had built them. And like the buildings, he understood himself as a container of the collective body and will of the people. (p. 103)

The body politics of Sukarno is substituted by the patriarchal familial politics of Suharto. Suharto is not so much the mouthpiece and embodiment of the collective national subject as the paternal overseer who must watch over and order his subjects for the good of the whole nation. This not only requires a depoliticizing and privatization of most realms of everyday and public life but a reaffirmation of the traditional and regional values of 'Indonesians'. Insofar as Indonesians give up on the dream of participating

in the political ordering of Indonesia, and seek only to affirm their cultural identity, they paradoxically are rewarded by their Father and commended as patriotic citizens.

Suharto, then, combined ultramodernizing development strategies – perfectly in accord with the stipulations of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the Pentagon until their sudden policy backflips of 1998 – with ultraconservative cultural and political ends. Suharto was a card-carrying nationalist but antirevolutionary. He practised modernist economics but antidemocratic politics, and used the latest in political technologies of surveillance and violence to discipline his national subjects but reinstated Islamic, and Javanese, traditional values as the heart of his cultural policies. Jakarta, then, continued to be a performance stage of national politics but a different class was called forth to be the practitioners of Suharto's nationalism. The poor were pushed off the streets and out of the public squares. The new emergent professional middle class were called forth to serve the state as its apolitical technocrats and were seduced by the promise of the material and imaginary worlds of consumer capitalism. They were reeducated to fear the underclasses who previously had shared the same neighbourhoods and streets but were now 'criminalized', gated by new city zones, barred by night curfews, and brutalized and 'salvaged' by the military (most notoriously in the 1980s). The rich became the beneficiaries of the newly constructed elevated highways and flyovers, office towers, super-shopping malls, 'dream houses', 'gated communities' and 'self-contained cities'.

Kusno's careful renarration of these reconstructed collective subjectivities and reformations of urban space of Jakarta contests the discourses of globalization of contemporary cities made popular by such theorists as Castells and Sassen and accepted at face value in many urban geography, political economy and sociology discussions at present. Southeast Asian cities are different from the global hegemonic cities of America even as they may take on analogous material forms. Kusno's historical sociology of Jakarta under Sukarno and Suharto deconstructs the local/global dichotomy of globalization theory by inserting the layers of cultural meanings, historic contingency, subjective agency, and regional and national political power into an understanding of the built environment.

From a repositioning of the too glib generalizations of globalization discourses via a refocusing on national discourses and nation-state reformations in Indonesia, Kusno opens the optic onto regional and civilizational concerns recalling Benedict Anderson's 'spectre of comparisons'. Kusno uses the cultural and social theories of contemporary Southeast Asian architects in order to rethink the postcolonial possibilities of architecture and urban design in the region. In these arguments, it would seem that the circle of colonial/postcolonial has been completed. The Dutch modernists of colonial Indonesia in the 1920s and 1930s sought to excavate and praise indigenous traditions of architecture for the attainment of a fusion of east-west in

integrative modernist styles and purposes. In contrast, some contemporary Southeast Asian architectural theorists and practitioners are arguing for the radical difference of indigenous traditions and perspectives which can now be celebrated in a global, postnationalist environment, by and through the use of global tools of modern science and technologies. Kusno's survey of 'Southeast Asian' theorists includes Singaporeans, Malays and Thais but alas no Filipinos – an unfortunate omission, reproducing a colonial blindness that mars a wider sense of the plurality of Southeast Asia. It is also a missed opportunity, as Filipinos are well placed to speak of the postcolonial condition in this region, especially in relation to the politics of architecture and urban space in Manila which makes for an interesting point of comparison to Jakarta. Putting aside this carp, the significant point of difference of indigenous traditions that is identified and celebrated in each of these arguments is not the political space of nation-state territories defined by European colonial authorities and their maps but something more ineffable – viz. 'civilization' and 'region'. It is worth discussing each of these two concepts and arguments in turn.

Kusno identifies two major regionalist arguments: the first by Thai architect Sumet Jumsai (1988), founded on an argument about civilization; and the second by two architects from Singapore (Tay, 1989) and Malaysia (Yeang, 1987, 1994) respectively, who argue for an eco-regionalist perspective on indigenous architecture and cities. Jumsai's argument in *Naga: Cultural Origins in Siam and West Pacific* (1988) is highly ambitious and therefore provocative for this reason alone. It has three steps. First, the spatial, visual and architectural imagination of the Southeast Asian region is water-based and has three components: rice agriculture, three-way weave basketry and, most importantly, the house on stilts. Second, Jumsai seeks to demonstrate that Southeast Asia is the *ur* civilization of all human societies, and is therefore not reducible to external civilizing or political forces, Sinic, Indic or European. Indeed, Jumsai goes as far as to argue that there are only two types of civilization on earth: the aforementioned water-based civilization that depends on tensile materials and a capacity to adapt to the water-based ecosystems through the production and use of lightweight, flexible and mobile technologies and cultures; and land-based civilizations that are dependent on compressive materials that enable monumental, static and sedentary cultures and cities to be constructed. The dominance of land-based societies into the modern era has led to the terms of definition and conceptualization of humanness in the hands of the Occident. Third, for Jumsai, a recovery of this originating water-civilizational logic can revitalize architectural and city building in the region today so long as urban designers are comfortable with the appropriation of the best of world scientific and technological knowledge and their application. Insofar as this quest is successful lies the fate of humankind in the face of global-scale ecological blight. The thesis is

overstated and relies on some overstretched visual associations regarding water-based technologies of the western Pacific region. Nevertheless, insofar as Jumsai repositions the dominant discourses regarding this marginalized region of the world – a region that yet contains a significant proportion of the world's population – it is a heroic gestural politics of rethinking civilization and city building, and human collective creativity and subject formation. For Kusno, Jumsai's history writing might be fictive but no more so than the social imaginaries of the colonizers and the revolutionary nationalists of the past century. Moreover, it serves a positive hermeneutical purpose in reimagining future possibilities for this region and its cities and peoples.

Less ambitious but equally thought provoking are the prognostications of what I hope to be an emergent 'school of tropical architecture'. These are concerned with building bioclimatic cities that ensure more ecologically sustainable cities that appropriate the best of modern scientific and technological expertise and adapt these to local conditions. Like Jumsai, Tay (1989) and Yeang (1987, 1994) independently but analogously develop a social ecological argument for cultural difference in the region that does not rest on dubious political discourses of ethnicity or 'Asian' essentialism. Tay and Yeang are not interested in finding pure forms of primordial, nativist, traditional or indigenous traditions. Neither are they intimidated by international styles of modernist and postmodernist architecture. 'Originality' and 'authenticity' it seems are to be found in responding to local conditions and local responses that negotiate the global by contextualizing, adapting, contesting and reinventing whatever comes to hand. For these architects, trafficking and eclectic mixing and matching are normal practices as they are normative goals. What is different is not just an aspiration to deprive metropolitan centres of cultural production their hegemonic position but to innovate in the tropics – an area of bioclimatic conditions never previously mastered in world history. In these two sets of arguments, Kusno seems to be suggesting that we have the first inklings of a creative (trans)national set of social imaginings for different and sustainable architecture and urban design. Better still, we have the potential contribution of spatial and architectural thought for rethinking social imaginaries of contemporary Southeast Asian urban cultures. This returns Kusno to his political agendas and cultural concerns.

Kusno claims that there is a 'major impasse in current postcolonial studies' – that of an 'understanding of the connection between the built environment and [collective] subject formation' (p. 20). *Behind the Post-colonial* goes a long way to overcoming this impasse, in an immanent critique of the discourses, to address the specific historical and social conditions of the Indonesian case. In opening the discussion to wider comparative studies and by asking searching questions of the relations between architecture, space and collective subject formation and cultural creativity, Kusno has also given social and political theorists, historical sociologists and practising

architects and urban planners the world over a book to think beyond, and not just behind, the postcolonial. Kusno explicitly wants to educate Indonesians to 'live with, rather than to suppress by means of "nationalism", the differences, gaps and contradictions of their condition, and thereby learn to live together, rigorously, but also with self reflection and understanding' (p. 206). Putting aside the problematic nature of the residually nationalist notion of 'Indonesian' used here, his book achieves more than this political goal, for Kusno's case study shows that we are all hybrid moderns now, living out, here and there, a complex labyrinth of competing, overlapping and alternative modernities. We are all different but none of our differences is essential. It is the mixing and the matching that matters and which needs defending against the avatars of identity and essentialism on the one hand and the hegemony of neoliberal globalization on the other. With more interpreters like Kusno emanating from this part of the world, we can begin to both understand and enjoy the difference of living behind the postcolonial.

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