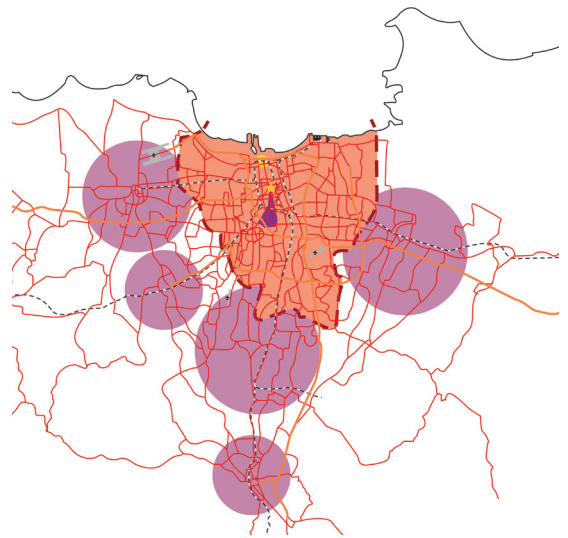


Private Appropriation of Public Space: 'Informal' Settlements in Jakarta

Mario Wilhelm

In today's mega-cities space is a scarce resource and its use is heavily contested. The visible expression of these negotiation processes is evident in the constant transformation of space. It can be observed that public space has to give way to high rise office and apartment towers, government buildings, monuments, five star hotels, shopping malls and transport infrastructure. Another interesting phenomenon that can be observed in most mega-cities is what is often referred to as slums. The high prices on the property markets push a large part of city dwellers into vulnerable urban pockets. These settlements are often described as informal because the communities, which settle in these locations, do not hold legal land titles. But the label informal is not only used to describe the living space of low-income people, it is attached to other aspects of everyday life, as well. For instance, people are engaged in informal sector activities and social life is organized in informal groups.



Space is increasingly getting contested within the poly-nuclear mega urban region of Greater Jakarta



Source of all pictures: Mario Wilhelm, Map Design: Martin Kaiser 2011

That way, the label 'informal' separates the everyday life situation of low-income households from everything that is formal and thus receives a negative connotation. As a consequence, slums are in many cases targeted by a hostile policy environment. Yet, it is often neglected that low-income households fulfill an important function in the urban economy. The competitive advantage of many developing countries as well as low cost services provided to the urban economy is only made possible because of the cheap reproduction of labor. Low-income employees, maids, office boys, guards, drivers, small scale traders, gardeners, day laborers in the construction sector and so forth are very much needed.

Moreover, in the informal sphere low cost services and goods are offered to low-income households. This is an essential aspect in insuring their livelihoods. In order to be able to establish everyday life in a mega-urban environment, low-income households have to make use of all the resources that are accessible. One of the most important resources – space – is often only available in public places. As

a result, it can be observed that public spaces are used for everyday life. Therefore, it can be argued that the private appropriation of public space has two sides. On the one hand, it is illegal as it conflicts with existing laws and regulations; on the other hand, it is an important strategy for a large number of megacity dwellers to make a living in the city for the benefit of all. Keeping this contradiction in mind, the pictures provided here have to be carefully interpreted.

The pictures show different ways of private appropriation of public space in the Indonesian capital city Jakarta. Jakarta has a population of around 9.5 million. However, urbanization spilled over to neighboring cities with the effect that Greater Jakarta currently comprises about 24 mill. people. Over time, the city transformed from a small harbor town to a mega city. In the past, a major part of the city dwellers lived in a village-type of settlement; the so-called 'kampung'. With urban development these kampungs and their initial meaning altered. The term now refers to informal settlements. The most visible once are the dwellings

that are developed along riverbanks and railway tracks or on public land, e.g. under overhead power lines. In addition to housing, public space is also used for gardening activities and aquaculture. Another commercial activity for which public space is appropriated is small scale trade either in the form of mobile vendors or small shops that are established on the sidewalk. Less visible is the use of rivers for washing, waste disposal and so on.

It is important to point out here that not only low-income people are appropriating public space. In many cities, public space is or was constantly redeveloped and transformed into privately owned space, such as offices or apartments. Yet, this thought will not be further discussed here. What becomes evident is that public space increasingly disappears. Today, there are few public places where people can meet and interact, such as soccer fields, parks or playgrounds. These spheres are again privatized so that recreational activities which people living in most European and North American cities take for granted have a price tag attached to it.



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