

# Understanding the City from Below

## Kampung Peneleh, Surabaya

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Being involved in the SEANNET program brings many privileges for the present writer. Trained as an historian in the undergraduate level, I have an opportunity to leave the parochialism of this discipline. When enrolled in a course called *Indonesian Urban History*, I was only reading the perspective usually taken by urban planners, governments, or the authorities on the city. In general, they tend to view the urban, especially its settlement, as in need of development, improvement, and even demolition to give new space for more modern forms. On the other hand, having lived in several cities in Indonesia, I hold an understanding that there is something beyond that perspective.



Fig. 1: The Old Photo Competition of Kampung Peneleh. The exhibition was held during the celebration of the Independence Day of Indonesia. Many national emblems such as the red-and-white flag surrounding the reprinted photographs (Photo by Kurnia Manis, Community Architect of Surabaya, 2018).

With the community-engaged research model in SEANNET, our group explores different approaches to study urbanism, especially in the neighborhood context. Work with the urban sketchers to draw meaningful spaces and activities in local residents' everyday lives is one example. This activity actually ignited from the idea of the youth who got involved with our research team. However, the sketch drawing program was not only conveying the image of the neighborhood as an important part of the city and inviting more residents to participate; methodologically, drawing itself has potential to be a way of describing the lives we observe and with which we participate. This essay seeks to explore the advantages (and challenges) of the community-engaged research model from our team's experience studying the urban from the neighborhood. Finally, it suggests that the flexible research model, which accommodated the ideas from below, will be more beneficial for the residents than a rigid, structured, and top-down research model.

### What we read before

Kuntowijoyo, a prominent Indonesian historian, wrote in the 1990s on the importance of urban history in Indonesia. In his day, almost all of the professional historians in Indonesia paid more attention to rural regions than urban areas. However, he believed that

there are abundant historical sources to write urban history. And these will be upsurging as the cities develop. He also pointed out that the historian could capture the process of urbanism to differentiate his or her works with other scholars studying the city. There are at least five major topics in urban history to study: the city's ecology, socio-economic transformation, social system, social issues, and social mobility.<sup>1</sup>

The most important reading for the course was *Surabaya, City of Work: A Socioeconomic History, 1900-2000* by Howard Dick. Naturally, it is essential because our university is located in that city. Compared to other works on the history of Surabaya, this book enjoyed popularity not only in urban history courses, but also among students in sociology and urban planning departments. For a historian or someone who loves history, Dick recounts the ups and downs of Surabaya's 20th-century destiny in a series of lengthy, comprehensive, analytic chapters on government, industry, land usage, and commerce.

He characterizes Surabaya's birth and expansion against the background of its hinterland, giving particular attention to the physical and historical conditions that favored the city over other metropolitan centers on Java. He contends that by the end of the 19th century, Surabaya had emerged as the leading port and most populous city of Java, owing to its privileged access to the interior via the Brantas and Bengawan Solo rivers, as well as

to its uniquely sheltered harbor, which made Surabaya far more appealing a port than either Batavia or Semarang. Surabaya evolved into Indonesia's leading commercial center and one of Asia's most vibrant and cosmopolitan ports. This was the result of Dutch Colonial policies, particularly the Cultivation System, the Agrarian Law, and the railways built in the second half of the 19th century, which tightened links between the city and its hinterland.

Surabaya was the biggest city in Indonesia at the beginning of the 20th century. With a population of about 150,000 people, it was even bigger than Jakarta. Surabaya rose to prominence in the early 20th century as a result of the processing and transportation of sugar and other agricultural commodities from East Java. The worldwide market was undercut by the 1930s crisis, sending the city into an economic and demographic depression. The city's economic slump was exacerbated by Japanese occupation, followed by a revolutionary struggle for freedom during the 1940s. In the decolonization period (1960s), Jakarta thrived as Indonesia's political capital, while Surabaya remained stagnant as a commercial center.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, in some chapters, Dick also discusses the existence of *kampung*s (neighborhoods) to some extent. He explains how the *kampung* residents rejected the ideas of the Surabaya municipal government in the 1920s. The government aimed to introduce

several improvement projects, such as waste disposal regulation and the installment of clean water facilities. The residents disapproved of the city government's interventions, which they felt were very burdensome. Although this disapproval was not shown in the form of a physical contact or a clash between the residents and the government, it still needed to be settled. *Kampung* people even called the municipal government (*gemeente* in Dutch), *gua minta*: a pun in Indonesian that literally means the "cave" that "begs" because their only job is to beg or take money from the people.

Dick's narrative on that issue sparked me to conduct research in 2017. Compared to the *kampung* improvement program, which was initiated in the post-independence period (1945-), the people in several Surabaya *kampung*s felt the improvement projects in the colonial period were better and more beneficial. Many such projects are still in use today. For example, many *kampung* people still use public bathrooms that were constructed during the colonial period. The closed gutters or sewage systems built on each side of *kampung* roads were considered another positive outcome. The residents believe that the system could prevent their *kampung*s from flooding. In addition to that, they saw that the colonial intervention paid more respect to the several sacred sites in the *kampung*s, while the post-independence projects tended to neglect their existence.<sup>3</sup>

Collecting historical sources related to *kampung* improvement programs was the first and most crucial step. In doing this, we relied on oral history of the *kampung* residents. Oral history, the interviewing of live people about their previous experiences, is one of the most important tools in the historian's toolbox for researching the very recent past. In principle, there is no better way to acquire an understanding of events in living memory than to speak with those who saw or participated in them. People interviewed, unlike written sources, may be asked precise follow-up questions about their experiences and opinions, depending on what the historian wants to investigate or uncover. Interviewing live historical participants may help us remember a critical truth that underpins all excellent works of history: history is a narrative about real people, with all the depth and nuance that human reality implies.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, many urban planners found Dick's *Surabaya* more useful for them perhaps because it is in line with Louis Wirth's idea on the history of the city. Wirth believed that history is a linear and progressive unfolding of the liberating power of reason and science. According to Wirth, at the beginning, there was a neighborhood or a community before the emergence of a society. Moreover, the neighborhood as a traditional type of social organization would go away as society became increasingly secular, impersonal, and metropolitan.<sup>5</sup> The narrative of Surabaya history provided by Dick is similarly written in a linear way and gives no place for the role of

men nor women in it.<sup>6</sup> The urban planners of Surabaya treated historical facts in this book somewhat like physicians use medical records to cure their patients.

Indeed, Wirth's ideas on urban planning remain influential in urban studies research. According to Wirth, the urban mosaic (e.g., personal and social disorganization, role conflict, and the lack of consensual values in the city) can be cured by rational planning. Thus, Wirth argued that planners are the best analysts of empirical reality and logical consistency. Wirth is also well-known for his advice on planning at the regional, metropolitan scale rather than the small-scale, neighborhood level. He advised planners to investigate the area over which such urban institutions as hospitals, schools, churches, theaters, and clubs are patronized by the people of the hinterland. According to Wirth, "Some believe that the hope of our social order lies in the return to the local ties of neighborhood. The trend of our civilization, however, has generally been sensed to lead in the opposite direction. There can be no return to the local self-contained neighborly community except by giving up the technological and cultural advantages of this shifting, insecure, and interdependent, though intensely interesting and far-flung, community life, which few would be willing to do."<sup>7</sup>

### What we are doing in SEANNET (2017-Present)

Almost all of the SEANNET project objectives are opposite to Wirth's basic assumptions. In its proposed methodology, the program sets out to question the everyday nature of urbanization processes in Southeast Asia from the specific perspective of its cities' neighborhoods. The notion of neighborhood refers to both built and social environments. If the city at its smallest, most local level disappears, this will have profound consequences for Southeast Asian societies as a whole, not just for their cities but more broadly for their national and regional developments as well. Careful study and engagement with the local residences of neighborhoods are therefore necessary to better understand the current urbanization processes at work and the ways in which local populations are resisting urban "supersizing." Such supersizing effectively leads to the destruction of local social fabric. In addition to that, the story of neighborhoods in several cities in Southeast Asia (including Surabaya) will not only consider resistance and resilience among communities and their residents, but also how bottom-up innovations can impact and effectively change policy strategies at the top.

Embarking on this research, we first delved into archival sources to gather any information about Kampung Peneleh, the neighborhood in Surabaya selected as a SEANNET case study. However, it was not an easy task to collect documents related to that neighborhood in the archive offices. In most countries, an extensive archive service makes the historian's job much easier. Actually, this is a relatively new

phenomenon, and the survival of records from the distant past has often depended on chance rather than competent management. The situation is exacerbated in the case of personal and ephemeral documents in the hands of ordinary people, such as small company account books, neighborhood associations' minute books, daily personal communications, and the like. Neither municipal record offices nor national archives cast as broad a net as this, but the recovery of daily material is critical if historians are ever to fulfill their frequent goal of giving voice to the people rather than the authorities. This is a job for historians with a local emphasis everywhere, and interesting discoveries are sometimes discovered by trainee researchers.<sup>8</sup> Because most individuals are unaware that they have material that may be historically important, historians cannot wait for papers to be brought forward; instead, they must engage directly with the community and go out in search of them.

Owing to those circumstances, we followed the new urban pedagogy for South-east Asia, which is mentioned in the SEANNET proposal. This is a methodology that is experiential, dialogical, and ethnographic. At the experiential level, we tried to dig up any historical sources in Kampung Peneleh by responding to the residents' needs and aspirations. The first moment when we could assist them was during their *kampung's* celebration of Indonesian Independence Day. Indonesian Independence Day is celebrated from the big cities to the tiniest towns and villages throughout the archipelago's more than 16,000 islands. Across the nation, vibrant parades, ceremonial military processions, and many patriotic, flag-waving rituals take place. Schools begin preparing weeks ahead of time with marching practice to fine-tune the military-style processions that will eventually jam all major roadways. Shopping malls provide special seasonal discounts and festivities. Each town and community creates its own outdoor music, games, racing, and eating competitions by erecting tiny stages. Besides participating in several contests in Kampung Peneleh, we also introduced a brand-new competition in this neighborhood, the Old Photo Competition [Fig. 1].

Photographs are more often found as illustrations in historians' writings than as cultural products needing critical analysis in their own right. In the Old Photo Competition of Peneleh, we only began this initiative with the intention to create a sort of community archive through the collection and compilation of old photographs from local residents. We define "old" as any photograph produced at least five years ago. There were 55 images submitted in total, and most of them were created around the 1960s and 1970s. The contents of the photographs were diverse. They included the renovation of the main mosque in the neighborhood, family events (e.g., weddings, children's circumcision, etc.), and more. Copyrights of the photographs remain with the owners, and we only asked permission to reprint the photographs for an exhibition during the celebration of Independence Day.

Other activities our team did with the local residents were mapping and sketching. For the former, we collaborated with the Arsitek Komunitas (ARKOM/Community Architects) in Surabaya to conduct participatory mapping with Kampung Peneleh residents. For the latter, Urban Sketchers Surabaya was the main partner of our team. They helped conduct public sketching sessions. As suggested by a number of works, drawing serves many purposes as it differentiates and helps us in comprehending our multifaceted environment. It may also allow us to discover – either through our personal experience of seeing, observing, and documenting or through the shared experience of looking at another's drawn record of an event – by using signs and symbols, mapping and labeling our experience [Fig. 2 & 3].

A somewhat long-term strategy is critical in obtaining information from local people. The presence of the research team in the field on a regular basis, as well as participation in community events, is critical as a sign of sincerity in gaining a better knowledge of the *kampung*. As time passed, the study team understood how important it was to recognize the individuality of each sub-neighborhood. The strategy for each Rukun Tetangga (RT) and each Rukun Warga (RW, a region made up of multiple RT) must be carefully considered, depending on the requirements and characteristics of each RW and RT. RT and RW are sub-neighborhoods, although they may have distinct personalities depending on resident groupings, *kampung* location, historic places, access, and facilities.

Sincerity and compassion are the most essential characteristics that each team member must possess and exhibit while doing community-engaged research. The study team must really care about the well-being of the area and be honest in their desire to learn about it. This is not about romanticizing community-engaged research; rather, concern for the well-being of the area and the genuineness of researchers are fundamental requirements for long-term engagement in the community. Intense contacts with community members need reciprocity of intents, which is returned by the community comprehending the study. Such connections allow for the expansion of knowledge-building from and by communities.<sup>9</sup>

### What we (tentatively) conclude

At this point, we are inclined to repeat the historian Theodore Roszak's ideas on the failure of technocracy or top-down approaches in studying urbanism. Roszak coined a term that he called "citadel of expertise."<sup>10</sup> In their citadel, the experts, including urban studies scholars, have created a new mythology in the name of science. They have a sophisticated methodology called systems analysis. According to Roszak, systems analysis represents an extension of scientific techniques into the essentially spontaneous realms of

community development. This analysis distracts people's attention from their real problems of existence. In the guise of liberating urban community from myth, religion, and ritual, the urban technocracy just replaces the old ones with a new set of quasi-religious symbols and rituals. These act as masks, concealing the real purpose of life. Forcing people out of town, for example, becomes an urban renewal project.

In the perspective of urban history, we are in line with Richard Sennet's idea on the non-linear narrative of cities. According to Sennet, cities do not build linearly over time: their shapes twist and turn as historical events alter the ways people live in them. Urban studies scholars can learn from numerous spontaneous growths in small-scale urban units. In small projects, the researchers can work reflexively.<sup>11</sup> We, as a group of researchers at SEANNET in Kampung Peneleh, always try to explore the unforeseen. We engage with local residents about what is to be done in the near future. We carefully evaluate our steps to prevent the dangers of research blueprints that serve only our side rather than serving the local interests.

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#### Notes

- 1 Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2003), pp. 62-64.
- 2 Howard Dick, *Surabaya, City of Work: A Socioeconomic History, 1900-2000* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000)
- 3 Adrian Perkasa, *Kampung Improvement Program during the Colonial era and Post-Independence Indonesia* in Muhammad Cahyo Novianto, *Surabaya: City Within Kampung Universe*, Lecture Series in Europalia Arts Festival 2017.
- 4 Robert C. Williams, *The Historian's Toolbox: A Student's Guide to the Theory and Craft of History* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007) p. 154.
- 5 Louis Wirth, *Consensus and Mass Communication*, *American Sociological Review*, 13 (February, 1958), p. 13.
- 6 For more critical review of this work see John Sidel, *Reviewed Work in Indonesia*, 76 (Oct, 2003), pp. 205-209.
- 7 Louis Wirth, *On Cities and Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 166.
- 8 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History Aims, methods and new directions in the study of history 6th edition* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 90-94.
- 9 Rita Padawangi, et. al. *Report of Research Findings and Pedagogical Activities SEANNET Surabaya Team*
- 10 Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973), pp. 26-36.
- 11 Richard Sennet & Pablo Sendra, *Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City* (London & New York: Verso, 2020), pp. 24-25.

Fig. 2 (right): The board members of the neighborhood association of Peneleh, senior residents, and youth discuss the plan to make a map of Kampung Peneleh together with the Universitas Airlangga's students and community architects and fig. 3 (far right): The resulting map.

(Both photos by Kurnia Manis, Community Architect of Surabaya).

