

# Land as the Key to Urban Development

## Housing in Indonesian Cities, 1930-1960

Land is a key asset in urban development everywhere and Indonesia is no exception. Plots of urban land have been highly contested during the New Order regime and again with the current Reformasi. Real estate developers, in collusion with politicians, the military, and civil servants, have bought land under market-conform price. At the same time squatters have been evicted from their land by arson, as burning down a ward was a quicker and surer way to clear a plot than going through a legal procedure. By no means, however, were battles about urban land restricted to the New Order; they also occurred in Dutch colonial times. A new historical research project into urban change in Indonesian cities highlights the contested nature of land.

Research >  
Southeast Asia

By Freek Colombijn

The main focus of this project, which deals with the changes in a number of selected Indonesian towns and cities during the period 1930-1960, is on housing. Shelter is a basic need, a truism which has been underscored at two UN Habitat Conferences. Adequate housing, or shelter, gives people a degree of real, physical security, but just as important is the feeling of being secure; the existential importance of housing is expressed in the saying 'home is where the heart is'. In Indonesian, the word house (*rumah*) is associated with essential matters of life, such as in the expression *berumah tangga* ('to be married'). In practice, feelings of security and insecurity manifest themselves in ethnic and social residential segregation, gated communities, neighbourhood patrols, and so forth. The main analytical tool in studying housing is the 'housing delivery system' concept (Prins 1994), which deems housing not as a final state, but as a social process. Housing is not merely construction it is also the distribution of dwellings. Steps taken in a housing delivery system are: the initiation of the housing project; the provision of land; financing, planning and designing, authorization, construction, access mediation, rights of occupancy, and management. Different housing delivery systems usually exist side by side in one city, and any one system often combines inputs provided by actors from the public, from the commercial, and from the subsistence domain.

It is safe to say that different groups generally compete to control a city (or town) and that housing is one of the contested issues in this struggle for dominance. Behind the question of housing in the period here examined, looms a larger

A *kampung* in Batavia before and after a renovation project. The pair of photographs served a propagandistic purpose of the colonial government.



Both photos courtesy of Netherlands Institute for War Documentation

research question, namely which actor (or coalition of actors) dominated any one city. Among the main actors were ethnic or social groups (distinguished on the basis of the contemporary definitions), companies, and state departments. The competition between these actors focused on the control of urban space, access to utilities and facilities, and the claim to symbolic ownership of the street.

### Urban land

The provision of land is one of the steps in a housing delivery system. Land is a key resource for almost every human activity. Therefore, many groups compete for control of land, in both rural and urban settings. A multitude of tactics can be used to control a plot of land, examples of which are: registering land on a title deed, squatting, referring to customary (*adat*) rules, or employing gangs of vigilantes to guard the land. These tactics can result in contradictory claims on land, which in turn may lead to conflicts. State regulations mediate between competing groups in order to prevent or diminish violent conflicts over land. Adopting a Marxist view of the state, one will expect the state to protect the interests of the dominant group. If this expectation is correct, the hypothesis should hold true that a change of regime will be followed by a change in state regulations pertaining to (urban) land ownership. Indonesia does not, it seems, bear this hypothesis out. New agrarian laws may have followed the British Interregnum (early nineteenth century), and Sukarno's dictatorship (dubbed 'Guided Democracy', 1959), but the most consequential political change, the decolonization (from Dutch to Japanese rule, and from Japanese rule to independence) was not followed by a new agrarian law. The question is why decolonization did not change the state agrarian regulations.

### Medan

Medan may serve as an example of the complexities of urban landownership systems. Medan developed as the heart of the plantation belt in northern Sumatra. The town provided services to the plantations, such as banking, medical care, entertainment, and education. In late colonial times, people held land under either one of four titles. A *controleur's* grant was land registered at the land registration office. (The *controleur* was the local civil servant). People with a *controleur's* grant enjoyed full ownership of their plot of land, which continued after independence. The second type was the Deli Maatschappij grant. The Deli Maatschappij was the most potent tobacco company, which controlled large tracts of land in the environs of Medan. The company also controlled land in town. Part of this land was used for housing of its employees, but it seems that others also occupied this land. It is not clear what happened to it after the company was nationalized in the 1950s. The third type was the so-called sultan's grant. The sultan nominally claimed a considerable part of the town as his ancestral domain. In practice, it seems, many people could live on the sultan's land, if they acknowledged his sovereign rights. No substantial payment was required to obtain a sultan's grant. This kind of land tenure seems to have been registered less meticulously than the *controleur's* grant and Deli Maatschappij grant, so that conflicts about a sultan's grant regularly emerged. Municipal regulations were not valid on sultan's land, unless the sultan explicitly issued the same regulation. The loss of royal power after independence may have

eroded the value of a sultan's grant. The fourth type was land controlled by the municipal government. This land consisted of land for municipal buildings (market halls, schools, and so forth). It also consisted of village land (*kampung*) that had been incorporated by the city during the process of urban growth. The municipality claimed this land, but it is a matter for research whether the inhabitants knew about the state claims, and if they did, whether they acknowledged, ignored, or contested those municipal claims. It is likely that the local residents had their own ways for claiming land (actually constituting a fifth type of title).

The question of why decolonization did not change state agrarian regulations is currently being explored by employing data on land used for housing in Indonesian towns. Attention will be paid to general state laws pertaining to land, customary land rights in Padang, company land in Medan, agricultural estates in the environs of Jakarta and Surabaya, the land of aristocrats in Medan, Bandung, and Yogyakarta, and squatters. Initial research into the case of Medan has prompted the preliminary conclusion that land tenure in the city was far more complex than is suggested by the transfer from the old, colonial law to the new, agrarian law of 1960. This is a partial answer to the question of why decolonization was not immediately followed by agrarian change. The question that this, prompts, in turn, is what the complexity of land tenure meant for the smoothness of urban development. <

### Reference

- Prins, Wil J.M., *Urban growth and housing delivery past and present: A comparative analysis of nineteenth-century London and contemporary Delhi*, Leiden: Institute of Cultural and Social Studies (1994).

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### Information >

The above research project is a constituent of the NIOD (Netherlands Institute for War Documentation) programme 'Indonesia across Orders: The reorganization of Indonesian society'. This programme tries to transcend the conventional distinction between the colonial period and independence. By shifting the focus from the conventional, political *histoire événementielle* to long-term social, economic, and cultural change, the rifts will appear far less dramatic and, apart from change, continuity also becomes apparent. The key focus of the NIOD programme is the impact of the changes of political regime on social and economic conditions of the different groups in the Indonesian archipelago. For this research Freek Colombijn is attached to the KITLV (Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies in Leiden) for two days a week. The research is to result in a monograph ready for publication by August 2006, which will focus on the issue of housing.