

Reciprocity: an attempt to open up the global debate on urbanism and architecture

“Although Jakarta plays an important role in the exhibition, the exhibition is not about Jakarta”, says curator Daliana Suryawinata when she refers to ‘Reciprocity. Transactions for a City in Flux’, one of the six thematic exhibitions presented at the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam Open City: Designing coexistence.

The reason to choose ‘reciprocity’ as the theme for one of the exhibitions at the IABR was that in the traditional socioeconomic interpretation of reciprocity (doing something in return) and in the wider interpretation (the relation between the social and the technical, the material and the spatial), reciprocity offers a framework and a set of resources to rethink architecture and urbanism. To find out what new approaches of urbanism and architecture might lead to, the curators of this exhibition Daliana Suryawinata and Stephan Cairns use Jakarta as a case-study. An obvious choice, according to curators, for two reasons. Firstly reciprocity is an inherent part of Indonesian socio-economic and cultural society and because consequently Jakarta is a compelling example to explore reciprocity as a concept. Secondly because Jakarta challenges long-established urban theories and understandings of what a city might be.

The projects, or ‘scenario’s, presented at ‘Reciprocity’ exhibition illustrate what new approaches can accomplish with regard to urban planning and architecture. ‘Social Mall’ for example, departs from the notion that shopping malls to a large degree function as public space. The project consequently shows how the functionality of malls and their social and physical relationship with the surrounding community can be improved. Firstly by adding, for example, libraries, schools, sports facilities and hospitals. Secondly by improving the infrastructure between malls.

To illustrate what good infrastructure can be and can achieve, the project team worked on the neighbouring but physically separated malls around Bunderan HI. ‘Social Mall’ suggests to improve infrastructure on two levels: locally and urban. On a local level the separate malls will be connected by an intricate network of pedestrian ramps and fly-overs. On an urban level improvement implies the realisation of good (public) transport connections between the various new local ‘Social Malls’ that thus will emerge all over Jakarta, for example in Taman Anggrek-Ciputra, Blok M, Senayan and Kelapa Gading. By thus improving connections on a local and an urban scale, malls will no longer be exclusive entities that turn away from the community in which they are situated, but instead become integrated parts of the urban fabric and truly start to function as public spaces.

‘Soft Gate’, another project at the exhibition, deals with another exclusive urban space that is common to Jakarta: gated communities. ‘Soft Gate’ starts with an investigation of the subtle reciprocal relationships between inhabitants of gated suburbs and inhabitants of the kampungs and villages surrounding these suburbs. What the inventory indicates is that, despite the defensive way in which gated communities turn their back towards the rest of the city, the walls and gates surrounding gated suburbs are quite permeable. It is this conclusion that inspired the ‘Soft Gate’ team, to search for architectural and material forms that respond to, support and encourage this existing informal reciprocities – and thus contribute to diminishing the social and spatial divide between gated and non-gated communities.

Thanks to these two and the other nine equally exciting, inventive, visionary and enterprising projects, 'Reciprocity' is fascinating. For Indonesia, obviously, because it addresses Indonesian urban planning and architectural issues. But also for an international audience: reciprocity concerns, after all, everybody worldwide. Presenting 'Reciprocity' to the international audience of the IABR is therefore very extremely opportune. Whether and to what extent 'Reciprocity' will succeed in opening up today's urban theory by illustrating that the orthodox model 'in which the non-West is the site of disorder and chaos while mediation and constructive powers are the exclusive prerogative of the West' is outdated, as the curators hope, is hard to tell. What the exhibition might very well be able to achieve though, is to further the debate on urban planning and architecture in Indonesia. As this would by now mean be a minor accomplishment, I fervently hope that 'Reciprocity' will be shown in Indonesia in the near future.

Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen

The exhibition *Reciprocity* runs until until January 11, 2010 at the NAI, Museumpark, Rotterdam. For more information on *Open City: Designing Coexistence*, visit the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam website: [www.iabr.nl](http://www.iabr.nl).