

# **The Illusion of Grandeur: Jakarta as a City of Monuments, Lacking Substantive Development**

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**Abstract:** Jakarta epitomizes the tension between urban symbolism and substantive infrastructure. Iconic landmarks such as the National Monument (Monas) represent independence and progress, yet significant portions of the population still grapple with inadequate infrastructure and public services. This disparity underscores a pressing critique of urban development, wherein monumental projects like the Jakarta International Stadium (JIS) prioritize image over community needs. Despite attracting investment, these symbols often mask ongoing, such as poverty and chronic traffic congestion, thereby deepening social inequality. This dynamic mirrors historical colonial urban policies prioritizing the elite while sidelining the majority. As Jakarta confronts these ongoing challenges, a shift toward inclusive, equitable development becomes imperative. A genuine global city should not only showcase monuments but also ensure equitable access to infrastructure and resources, reflecting the ideals of social justice advocated by figures like Dr. Soetomo. The future of Jakarta must prioritize the well-being of all its residents, transforming urban spaces into inclusive environments that promote genuine livability.

## **Urban Symbolism vs Substantive Infrastructure**

Jakarta has long served as a center of national symbolism, especially since the era of President Sukarno. Among its most iconic landmarks is the National Monument (Monas), erected in 1961 to symbolize Indonesia's struggle and independence. In contemporary times, Jakarta continues to uphold its status as a hub of urban symbolism. Skyscrapers and luxury shopping malls have become symbols of modernity and economic development. However, in many parts of the city, basic infrastructure and the quality of life for residents still lag. Furthermore, criticism of Jakarta's development, which focuses too much on symbolism, has become increasingly prominent, especially due to the disparity between the construction of monuments and symbolic projects and the reality of urban infrastructure and public welfare.

The concept of urban symbolism refers to the strategic use of monuments, architecture, and other symbolic elements to shape and convey a city's identity. In Indonesia, particularly in Jakarta, landmarks like the National Monument (Monas) are pivotal in fostering a strong national image and drawing global attention. Virtual urbanism refers to a city's identity being shaped more through symbolism and imagery than substantive infrastructure. While it may project a positive image, this symbolic development often conceals underlying issues such as poverty and insufficient public services. Monuments attract attention and investment, but they do not necessarily translate into direct improvements in the well-being of residents or infrastructural development (MacDonald, 1995; Nas, 2004).

## **Critique of the Jakarta International Stadium (JIS)**

The construction of the Jakarta International Stadium (JIS), which also serves as a symbol of national pride, has faced significant criticism. One argument is that this development is largely theatrical and lacks substantive value, prioritizing image over addressing the basic needs of the public. (Abeyasekere, 1987). Jakarta's city center prominently features modern symbols like the Jakarta International Stadium (JIS), which has not been without controversy. The project consumed a substantial budget and emerged as a prestigious icon, but its limited utility and inadequate connectivity to public transportation have drawn criticism about development priorities.

Meanwhile, close to JIS, urban villages like Kampung Bayam and Kampung Luar Batang continue to struggle with basic infrastructure access such as clean water, proper sanitation, and well-maintained roads. This contrast underscores the disparity in priorities, wherein symbolic projects like JIS are favored while urgent infrastructural needs of residents in underdeveloped areas are neglected. Foreign investors are frequently drawn to monumental projects, such as the Jakarta International Stadium (JIS) and the revitalization of the Central Business District (CBD), which are strategically designed to convey the impression that Jakarta is poised to compete on a global scale. Nevertheless, the underlying reality is that these initiatives fail to address fundamental issues, including chronic traffic congestion, annual flooding, and escalating social inequality. Ultimately, the investments directed toward Jakarta tend to concentrate on prestigious sectors that exacerbate existing disparities, without yielding a significant impact on the welfare of local communities or improving the quality of infrastructure equitably. In the long term, this not only contributes to a widening divide but also undermines Jakarta's credibility as a truly "global" city. A truly global city should be evaluated not solely based on its monuments and investments but also its inclusivity and livability for all segments of society, rather than merely for a privileged minority.

In the long term, a development approach focused exclusively on symbolism presents two significant challenges. First, the social and economic disparity between the elite and the broader population continues to widen. Investments funneled into large-scale projects fail to meaningfully improve the quality of life for residents in underdeveloped areas. Second, this approach undermines Jakarta's credibility as a truly "global" city. A genuine global city should not only be evaluated by its monuments or skyscrapers but also by how effectively it creates an inclusive and livable environment for all its citizens, not merely a privileged minority.

## **Colonial Legacies in Urban Development**

The current urban landscape of Jakarta and other Indonesian cities reflects historical injustices and presents a concerning repetition of past patterns. Although significant advancements have been made since the colonial era, many of the disparities that existed then continue to affect contemporary society. The prioritization of monumental developments and symbolic infrastructure largely benefits an elite minority, reminiscent of the colonial focus on serving European interests over those of the Indigenous population.

The history of colonial cities in Indonesia, including Surabaya during the era of Dr. Soetomo, offers valuable insights into contemporary urban dynamics. During the Dutch

colonial period, urban development policies were primarily designed to serve the interests of the European political and economic elite, who maintained dominance despite the indigenous population constituting the majority. This dominance resulted in stark inequalities in access to urban resources, with Europeans enjoying superior infrastructure and public services, while indigenous communities were systematically marginalized. Nationalist figures, such as Dr. Soetomo, recognized the need to advocate for the political and social rights of the native population, aiming to secure more equitable access to urban development and public resources. In drawing parallels to present-day Jakarta, similar disparities persist, where elite groups benefit disproportionately from symbolic infrastructure projects, while the majority of citizens remain excluded from the development process. Just as Dr. Soetomo and his contemporaries championed the political and social rights of indigenous populations during the colonial era, a comparable struggle for social justice remains pertinent today in modern cities like Jakarta. A truly “global” and progressive city must transcend mere symbolism; it should embody inclusivity and promote the equitable welfare of all its residents, reflecting the same spirit of nationalism that Dr. Soetomo and his peers fought to uphold.

Dr. Soetomo was a pivotal figure in Indonesia's national movement, focusing on raising political and social awareness among the indigenous population under Dutch colonial rule. While he was not directly involved in urban policy-making, his efforts were closely connected to addressing the social injustices prevalent in colonial cities, where access to infrastructure, education, and public services was predominantly reserved for the European elite. Through the establishment of Boedi Oetomo in 1908, Dr. Soetomo advocated for the rights of the indigenous people, particularly the right to better education, which he saw as key to elevating their political and social consciousness. In colonial cities like Surabaya, where Dr. Soetomo was active, urban policies favored the interests of the European elite, leaving the majority of the indigenous population marginalized. Through nationalist movements, Dr. Soetomo and his contemporaries sought to challenge colonial domination by advocating for the rights of the indigenous people to gain fairer access to resources and policies, including in the management of urban spaces. His vision remains highly relevant to modern efforts to achieve equality in Indonesian cities, where symbolism and large-scale development often take precedence over the broader needs of the population, echoing the inequalities of the colonial era.

This trend indicates that, despite the formal end of colonial rule, unequal access to resources remains prevalent. Marginalized communities still struggle to secure essential services such as clean water, adequate sanitation, and reliable public transportation, echoing the challenges faced by indigenous populations during Dr. Soetomo's time. The ongoing emphasis on high-profile projects, such as the Jakarta International Stadium, highlights how current policies often favor visual symbolism over meaningful improvements in residents' quality of life.

This situation raises critical questions about the effectiveness of urban development initiatives. Are they genuinely addressing the needs of all citizens, or are they merely perpetuating existing inequalities? While strides have been made toward progress, the persistence of these issues suggests that valuable lessons from the past have yet to be fully incorporated into current policies. As a result, we find ourselves in a scenario that feels more

like a historical repetition rather than a genuine evolution toward inclusivity and equity for all segments of society. In essence, without a significant shift in focus toward addressing fundamental social and economic disparities, Jakarta risks remaining trapped in a cycle of inequality reminiscent of its colonial history.

### **The Paradox of Urbanism in Jakarta**

Jakarta exemplifies the paradox of urbanism, wherein grand symbolic structures such as the National Monument (Monas) are intended to represent progress but fail to align with the reality of the city's underdeveloped infrastructure. The city continues to grapple with chronic issues including traffic congestion, flooding, slums, and a scarcity of green spaces.

Many of the facilities in Jakarta are located in areas that are inaccessible to low-income residents, both financially and in terms of accessibility. This indicates that non-inclusive development will only deepen social inequality, creating an illusion of modernity that is not rooted in the realities of people's lives. Such grand developments often merely reinforce social exclusion, allowing only a select few to benefit, while the majority of residents continue to struggle with inadequate infrastructure and limited access to basic services. One notable example is the Car Free Day event held on Jalan MH Thamrin every Sunday. Although this event is designed to provide space for residents to engage in activities without vehicles and enjoy the city's ambiance, its implementation often results in issues. Despite the aim of Car Free Day to create public spaces accessible to all, its execution frequently conveys an exclusive impression. Events like Car Free Day, which are intended to promote a healthy lifestyle and enhance the quality of public space, are often hindered by the complexities of their execution. The closure of major roads, while intended to create space for the community, can disrupt many individuals who should benefit from it, such as public transportation users or those living in the surrounding areas. All of this reflects the irony that services that are intended for the public are often difficult for the public to access. This highlights the need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to urban planning and development where the voices and needs of the community are genuinely considered. Only in this way can we create public spaces that exist not just on paper but are truly accessible and enjoyable for all residents of Jakarta regardless of their social and economic backgrounds.

This underscores how urban symbolism often functions as a veil, concealing the government's inability to provide sustainable and inclusive development. Jakarta may appear symbolically advanced, yet its functional city planning and management continue to fall short of expectations. The Jakarta government must redirect its focus from merely constructing monuments and large-scale projects to prioritizing development that enhances the well-being of its citizens. In the future, Jakarta should not only be recognized for its grand monuments, but also as a city that provides a high quality of life for all its residents, becoming a place that serves as both a symbol of national pride and a comfortable, functional, and humane environment in which to live.

### **References**

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