The Change of Public Perception towards Alun-Alun Bandung as a City Center

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Abstract

A struggle for Bandung’s identity has been reflected on the dilemmatic situation in its city center- Alun-Alun Bandung. Alun-Alun has been known widely as a traditional form of indigenous city center in Indonesian city. Presently, Alun-Alun is no longer perceived as the representation of Bandung city center. As a result, public space in Bandung has become an empty landmark. Many questions have been arising regarding history is still a significance basis to build a city center image. This paper tries to visualize an ephemeral aspect of the city, seen differently through the time. A durational installation artwork is created by the author to convey an artistic critic that describes a destruction process of water to a soil, as a symbol of time that decays the meaning of Alun-Alun Bandung.

1. Introduction

This paper tries to elaborate the transformation of Alun-Alun and its meaning conversion through time, supported by various theories that relate to the issues of contextual design. Alun-Alun Bandung, a genius loci of Bandung, has been slowly losing its significance and value following the globalization process. An unplanned development - as mere pragmatic response without historical sense - has transformed Alun-Alun into an entity of superimposed
expressions without unity. This transformation gives impact on the sense of identity of places. Public in Bandung has no longer perceived Alun-Alun as a landmark of city center.

2. Transformation of Alun-Alun Bandung

2.1. History of Bandung: the hybrid city

The city of Bandung was established in 1811 when Daendels was the Dutch Governor in West Java. Daendels instructed the mayor at that time – Wiranatakusumah II - to move the capital city of West Java to the Grote Postweg - the main artery road that linked West Java and East Java. Wiranatakusumah tried to find the proper location through technical and mystical consideration. He had to move the city center three times before he found the right location in the west side of Cikapundung river, next to Grote Postweg. Alun-Alun was a concept of indigenous city center borrowed from the Javanese symbolic meaning of power balance. Daendels had modified the traditional Alun-Alun for the city center of Bandung by combining the Javanese culture with colonial style.

Fig. 1. The Grote Postweg has crossed the unity of Alun-Alun. Source: Kunto, 1986.

The traditional Alun-Alun comprises an open plaza which is typically surrounded by four buildings: Kraton/ Palace at the North, mosque at the West, prison at the South, and traditional market at the East. The placement of this building on north-south and east-west axis was based on the fundamental dual principle in Javanese philosophy. Alun-Alun functions as a city center that is vibrant and symbolizes the sense of community. The city axis goes through south to north because the north side is the most sacred place: the Kraton/ Palace.

Transformation of traditional building typology in the surrounding of Alun-Alun Bandung had brought some influences. First, the typology at the north side is changed to loji building (business center), post office, and gigantic Dutch bank. The Kraton/ palace is not to be located here and moved to the south area. The new building was a symbol of Dutch authority on economic and business. Secondly, there was no market at the east side besides the cinema or Dutch’s club house. Thirdly, the significant change was in the orientation of Alun-Alun. The Kraton/ Palace of Wiranatakusumah II was located at the south side replacing the prison, while the Dutch governor residence was built are the north side. This signified the domination of Dutch authority to the local government.

The construction of new buildings deliberately in the city center is a showcase of power exercise of the Dutch to disguise the authority of the Palace in an implicit way. The new architectural style in the surrounding Alun-Alun was the effort of the Dutch to degrade systematically the independency of local culture. As a result, Alun-Alun became a place of dualism: an assimilation of west and east culture. Hereafter, new settlements and other economic
facilities were growing in the surrounding of Alun-Alun. Not long afterwards the new city of Bandung emerged which then became the capital city of West Java and Alun-Alun was the city center. Maclaine Pont in 1920 affirmed that the order of vernacular settlements had been abolished as the original symbol of city center is faded away. He said that besides the distinctive strategy of the Dutch government, the lack of local people’s appreciation in protecting their genius loci stimulated the degradation of the city center.

On the International Conference of Modern Architect at Swiss in 1928 Bandung is stated as the ideal prototype of a colonial town. Since then Bandung started to develop its unique identity by building a governor complex of Gedung Sate and residential areas that followed the rule of assimilation style. North Bandung is designed with the domination of European atmosphere (Karsten, 1920) with new architectural style that is a mixture of European architecture and tropical building. This style became a prototype of Dutch building in other cities too.

2.2. The decline of Alun-Alun as a city center

After reaching an ideal colonial city, the first dramatic change of Alun-Alun occurred in 1960 to support the Asia Africa International Conference that took place near Alun-Alun. Soekarno, the president at that time, had ordered the construction of Swarha hotel as a symbol of Indonesian hospitality, of which architecture inspire buildings in its surroundings. Swarha was built in international style architecture reflecting the spirit of modern era in Indonesia, by which the original character of Alun-Alun has gradually faded away.

In 1970 a massive development of shopping facilities occurred around Alun-Alun area. The commercial district was built as a response to capital needs. Miramar and Palaguna shopping center were built at the east side replacing the club house and cinema. Then some other malls were built in Dalem Kaum area at the south next to the Palace. The change of activities have a direct impact to Alun-Alun, and the most significant influence was from the great mosque at the west. The architecture of the mosque has been changed from the eclectic style of Dutch colonial and Javanese muslim into modern geometric style in response to the surrounding architecture of shopping centers. The great mosque has made its appearance similar to other neighbouring buildings. The transformation process on building typology has continued until 1990 when a tower of bank building was built at the north side and created a contrast skyline to the existing buildings.

The impact of the abovementioned transformation destroyed the unique character of Alun-Alun Bandung – as a perfect symbol of assimilation of the Dutch Colonial style and Javanese style. Consequently, changes in Alun-Alun appearance has shifted the public perception towards the identity of a city center. That was the turning point as
Alun-Alun Bandung lost its charm as a city center and its non-physical aspect that lingered to sense of place started to fade away. The new eclectic style of Alun-Alun Bandung became strange to the public and no longer a landmark of the historical Bandung. The public is distracted from Alun-Alun and seek for a new image of city center. The public memory on the historical city center of Bandung has faded away.

The changes of Alun-Alun Bandung was predicted by Prof. Dr. JH Boeke in 1930. He analyzed that this phenomenon was a result of dualistic economy system that occurred in Indonesia: the traditional and modern capitalism. Around the 60's, Indonesia was dominated by capitalism that had caused a breakdown of social structure and had transformed the uses of city space and city order. (Boeke, 1966). Most of the establishment of modern cities in Indonesia was a response to capital needs (Supomo dan Djosutono, 1954). For this reason, Alun-Alun Bandung has not only becoming an economic container but also a reflection of political change on national economic policy in Indonesia at that time.

Another issue that has stimulated the changes of Alun-Alun is the political issue. Comparing to Agora, Alun-Alun has the similar purpose to represent democratic value (Galion, 1960). On the contrary, that gigantic open space (Alun-Alun) presently did not represent democratic value during the New Order regime after 1965. Many public tragedies have been exhibited in the public space, such as the tragedy of 1998, mysterious kidnapping, and anarchy of dictatorship. Orde Baru regime exhibited their authorities by creating traumatize events in public space, which has caused a paranoia until today. For this reason, the public repress their fear by avoiding public space and the government limits access to public space by erecting huge fences surrounding the open space. This kind of phenomena reflects a distrust of people and the government.

As a result of shifting perception, Alun-Alun Bandung, nowadays, is in a dilemmatic situation. The government built fences and basement parking that made Alun-Alun as a public space vacant, anonymous, and ambiguous. The city center becomes exclusive and offers opportunity for contesting power. Alun-Alun is no longer a public place but an invisible identity of dominant authority of certain people. This condition gradually detach its function as a public place to people’s memory. This unfortunate situation is utilized by the capitalism for creating commercial place as a substitute for public space, which is preferred by the people because it guarantees safety and universality. Bandung government has tried to recreate a new city center in Tegalega at the south of previous Alun-Alun. Unfortunately, Tegalega has failed to represent the new city center of Bandung due to lack of emotional connectivity that creates a sense of place. The biased meaning of a city center has raised some fundamental problems regarding the identity of Bandung as a city. The history of city center, which usually becomes the identity of the city, is not to be found in Bandung. On what basis is now the city government has to identify the image of the city. The image of Alun-Alun as a city center has been lost and, therefore, Bandung failed to express its identity and became a schizophrenic city.
2.3. City center concept in contemporary city

In a contemporary city, a city center is developed from the agglomeration of business and economic activities that spread all over the city. City centre is detached from the symbolic value, and its role is more mundane and pragmatic. City center is no longer a single place; any place can be a city center, as long as it is a vibrant public space with sense of place.

The identity of most Indonesian cities is in its historical background, which is usually manifested in the city center Alun-Alun, landmarks, monument or sculpture. Some cities such as Yogyakarta or Solo in Java have successfully maintained their identity because of the long history as the seat of a powerful monarch. Other cities have defined their identity by attaching to a story, legend, or national event. Some capital cities in Java like Semarang and Surabaya identify themselves as a city of historical events. Surabaya as Kota Pahlawan (The Hero Cities) and Semarang as Kota Pemuda (The Youth Cities) to commemorate the heroic battle against colonial Dutch
aggression in the past.

On the contrary, Bandung, which had a unique identity of cultural assimilation in the past, is now developing into a city with an unstable identity. Bandung has undergone several changes of identity, which brings both negative and positive impacts to the city. In negative sense, Bandung surrenders itself to the ruling capitalism in that many unidentified assimilations has happened in the city causing a blur identity. Meanwhile, the positive side of not having an identity has freed Bandung from any particular conventional traits. Bandung as a city without identity is free from any associative image in that it absorbs any influences easily. The more changes occurred in the city, the more vibrant places are to be found.

However, the public in Bandung has various perceptions about city center. Many senior residents still argue that Alun-Alun is the city center, but they also agree that Alun-Alun is irrelevant to be the symbolic representation of city center. It seems that people simply relate Alun-Alun to their memory of a place. For the younger generation, most of them perceive the commercial area, mall or culinary district as the city center. They tend to identify city center for its vibrant place disregarding the history of the place.

Bandung has become a “transient” space that allows people to express their heterogeneity without relating it to a specific image. People who live in a transient space is no longer attracted to a place as manifestation of cultural and technical needs. Public place is discerned as a dynamic space without permanent symbols, by which many “third place” are changed into public place. It can be concluded that the city center of Bandung has become “transient”, since it is detached from time and spatial definition. Bandung needs to seek a new identity based on its present condition and not its historical basis. Bandung tried to live in the present and to fade away the past that had made Bandung as untypical Indonesian city. Bandung, in this sense, has created a strategy of “out of the box” in that cultural value is not the basis of its identity.

2.3.1 Morphological form of city center

Kevin Lynch, in his book “The Image of a City”, recited five elements that build a city image: path, node, district, edge, and landmarks. Those five elements can be a subtle orientation to define the city image through its urban structure. Based on this theory, it is imaginable that Alun-Alun Bandung lost its role as a city center. The physical form of Alun-Alun is incongruent to its associated meaning. Alun-Alun has a history but none of its physical form symbolizes its historical values. Back to Lynch’s theory, Bandung has never had meaningful public spaces in the form of path, edge, node, landmark or district. Some path elements such as Braga or Dago Street have survived but detached from their historical aspect.

Bandung city treats public space in ambiguity in that its form is inconsistent to its meaning. As space has failed to deliver authentic meaning, it has worked only on people’s perception. As it is said by Saussure, when “Langue” fails, “Parole” will take the role. Any individuals will create the meaning of space according to his/ her background. People’s perception on public space in Bandung has never created a collective identity of the city. Referring to Lynch’s image of the city, Bandung has no meaningful city center which can identify all memories leading to an agreeable identity. The five elements of Lynch are in a fluid state in that modern urban structure is unidentified, which in post-modern cities indicated as a phenomenon of transient space.

New landmarks in Bandung: mall, café, and factory outlet, offer new meaning to public life by shifting public place from outdoor to indoor space. People’s expectation in public place is to see something and to be seen. Urban life has set different standards on enjoying public life in which consumerism directed the meaning of public place. The banal culture of postmodern has been intact with the spirit of urban culture and has created a new paradigm in which identity of the city is irrelevant and redundant.

To compensate morphological disorientation in city center, the government has stated the physical improvement of order, cleanliness, and attractiveness in seven sample areas in the city, which can be perceived as the new city center. All of these areas are located in commercial district with high load of traffic, by which exemplify transient space that is detached from permanent meaning. The new city center has been challenged for its contribution the image of the city.
2.3.2 A Creation of Meaning

The meaning of conventional public space is changing as its function and context grows over time. Most public space in Indonesian cities is perceived as a place associated with political struggle. Historical place and monuments that evoke national pride and memory of the past become landmarks to identify a public space. In this sense, a public space has always socio-cultural meaning and becomes a city center. The meaning of public space constitutes the identity of the place (see Carr, 1992) and its meaning developed as an interactive process between space and people through time. Space provides stimulation and people bring their history and association. For this reason, Alun-Alun Bandung still has a meaning for senior residents who identify the space as a nostalgic childhood place.

Yi Fu Tuan describes that the relationship to a place requires an experience that stimulates the sense of cultural root (see Tuan, 1980), and this sense would never be experienced in contemporary city since people tend to ignore the meaning of a real space. Nowadays, the sense of rootedness, which is part of cultural identity, has never been prioritized and this has happened in Bandung as well. The identity of Bandung is defined politically as it replaced the cultural memory -historical memory is continuously replaced by vibrant space dictated by dominating power.

Public space must be comfortable and has a positive meaning (Carr, 1992), yet, Bandung could not provide that kind of space. As a response to the existing public space, people seek public life in commercial places, which in turn makes public space as transient in character. Hence, public life is associated not with people’s interaction but updating to urban culture. Public space is no longer a medium for reflecting cultural achievement in the city.

2.4. Towards a Virtual City

In the digital era, technology has replaced physical interaction among people with connectivity of people-space-time. Public space as interactive place has been replaced by virtual space. Paul Virilio in Lost Dimension describes that post-modern city has lost architectural and physical interaction dimension. The memory of place and street is replaced by digital memory in which relationship among people and to places is mediated by computer, smartphone, and internet. The phenomena of Foursquare, GPS, waze, and google map has made people dependent to info-graphic sign rather than physical sign or landmark as orientation in the city. The meaning of architectural elements is degraded and shifted into a virtual reality and people is not capable to understand the congruency of those elements to its meaning. Virilio has indicated the dead of architecture in the city and the replacement of geographical dimension by virtual dimension. In digital city, authentic cultural history and any attachment and relation to a place will be replaced by virtual culture; the geographical meaning will be reduced to imographs and imagology.

The city is losing its aura, spirit of history and memory that define its identity and existence. The history of the city does not have any power to bring memory to the people. City center has no particular meaning since emotional relationship between people and space does not exist. Alun-Alun Bandung is changing as its history is left behind and the eclectic style of Middle East mosque sits next to the international style of abandoned Swarha hotel. Some colonial style buildings still exist, yet, some new malls are built next to it. Alun-Alun Bandung is decomposing as the city center is replaced by the virtual place. Through the time Alun-Alun has experienced a cultural negation and Bandung is ready to detach from its history and to create new memory of postmodern city.

The transformation process of a city -conventional-capital-digital- has changed the character of urban space into a homogenous cityscape and urban culture. The city is dominated by icon of business enterprises such as Mc Donald, Coca-Cola, Levi’s and is identified by the spirit of popular culture. Responding to this issue, Bandung now has developed some new public space in stimulating people to interact with others. It becomes compulsory to provide public space with digital equipment such as power connections, cell phone charger, and WiFi internet. The physical aesthetic is no longer a strong attractor to public. On the other hand, the seduction of technological comfort has successfully made people to be engaged in public space, although ironically most of the time they are occupied by their gadget.
3. Conclusions

Alun-Alun Bandung has left traces of people’s memory even though it has never been fully represented in physical form. The history of the city only becomes a knowledge for the people. It will become meaningful when the future city of Bandung is responding to the history of the city and cultural values of the past. The emergence of contemporary city indicates the shift from a homogenized culture into a pro-technology culture, from a historical city to a futuristic city. To reach a futuristic Bandung, the sense of rootedness has to be eliminated and replaced by a new memory.

A good nostalgia of Bandung, which is no longer available, might be the most valuable meaning of Alun-Alun Bandung. Alun-Alun Bandung in the future will become a symbol of a silence city and a memory of an ideal colonial town. The satire expression of the lost and mourn of Bandung history is exhibited in the author’s ephemeral durational installation work. This work is an effort to criticize the identity of Bandung through the condition of its city center. This artwork represents metaphorically the memory of an ideal public space Alun-Alun of the colonial town Bandung in 1930. A medium of water decomposing soil is selected to represent the expression of transience. The artwork is intended to create a new memory over the history and a requiem for Alun-Alun Bandung in contemplating its transformation toward the virtual city.

Fig. 7. Durational installation art: decomposition of a heritage building in Alun-Alun. Unfired clay on water vitrine.

Fig. 8. Durational installation art part 2: decomposition of a heritage building in Alun-Alun. Unfired clay on a water table. The building in 1930 made of ceramic clay started to melt into water and left the large plaza Alun-Alun to be anonym.
References


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