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Waiting for the Spiritual Call

It is easy to explain the importance of safeguarding a country's history through preserving heritage. However, to inculcate such a spirit in people in Indonesia remains difficult. Heritage expert **Martono Yuwono** talks about the challenges.

INTERVIEW BY Anton Adianto
PHOTO BY Bagus Tri Laksono

Why is heritage important for the country?

According to the 2010 Cultural Conservation Law, heritage objects, buildings, structures, sites and areas are included as part of the nation's cultural riches that are important for the understanding and development of history, science and culture in the lives of people and the nation. They need to be preserved and managed through various means of preservation, development and reuse to improve the national culture for the greater good and welfare of the people.

Colonialism and repression in the era of the VOC and the Dutch occupation, which lasted for centuries, seemed to have created a repressed cultural clash in this country.

The elimination, destruction and removal of a city's local wisdom, which was followed by the marginalisation of communities that supported the cultures that developed colonial cities, was a civilisational genocide that is inconceivable in the history of humanity. There is a correlation between the country's experience in the past and the phenomenon that sees its citizens turning away from the maritime character that was handed down from their seafaring ancestors, better known as the people of the sea.

The dark days of colonialism are at the root of this country's various problems, including the years Indonesia spent in the grip of other countries. Raphael Lemkin used

the term "cultural genocide" in his book *Introduction to the Study of Genocide* and said that: "Colonialism cannot be left without blame."

A strategy that involves a lengthy therapy is needed to help the nation heal through restorative efforts to bring back the character of its cities, as well as the identity and characteristics of the nation.

This is the critical issue at the root of the problems regarding urban restoration in Indonesia that we inherited from the colonialists. Cities with foreign characteristics, especially port towns and several remote areas, are those that feel the impact as cities with little local wisdom left.

The continuation of the history of a city's

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civilisation is a cultural process and lies at the core of heritage site preservation. The character of a city is directly correlated with the character of the people and the society inside it. According to the 2010 Cultural Conservation Law, heritage preservation is a means to strengthen the character of a city and the personality of the nation. This effort is also a cultural strategy for the recapturing and rebirth of the marginalised local wisdom in accordance with the UN Convention of Civil Rights as part of the emancipation struggle for local culture.

The effort is more than a rehabilitation of an old building for romanticism, for the sake of nostalgia, for tourism or for economics and profits in the spirit of “Disneyworld”, and obviously not to glorify the value of colonialism. In Indonesia, this is not in accordance with the mission of the 2010 Cultural Conservation Law. Therefore, heritage preservation is very important for this city and nation, especially for cities that have a dominant foreign or colonial characters.

What makes you care so much about Indonesian heritage?

It is closely linked to the formation of a city’s identity and a nation’s character. Past civilisations are the basis of a moral strength that is important for the formation of a city’s

identity and a nation’s character, cultural endurance and even national fortitude, which will increase the self-esteem and optimism of the nation in facing the challenges of the global era.

We need to safeguard the vision of how to develop a city’s character that was drafted by our founding fathers. Historical conservation is a cultural strategy and it should be a national commitment. We have to manage the past heritage of the city as a reference to build cities in the future by unearthing the character of local wisdom and national identity that is contained inside in order to revive the initial character of the city.

This was done by Ali Sadikin, the governor of Jakarta from 1966 to 1977, who was known as the pioneer of historical preservation in Jakarta, Indonesia and ASEAN, when he restored the Old Town of Batavia as Fatahillah Park. He also restored several other colonial buildings as monuments to commemorate the struggle of the country. [Ali] took example from the nationalist spirit in the restoration of historic cities as the centre of national civilisations in Warsaw, Poland and other cities in the US.

I think of the restoration of a city’s character as something urgent and something that has to be prioritised, beginning from port towns and remote villages which experienced

the most traumatic effect, as part of cultural consolidation. It will also anticipate the challenges and tough competition between world cities in the global era where the strength of character becomes the stake for the survival chances of a city. The pressure of modern development that is oriented towards the market is that it tends to dictate a penchant to develop growth centres as an instrument of global market, followed by changes to lifestyle and the adoption of “foreign culture”.

Who inspired your interest in architecture and heritage?

I was born in the era of Dutch colonisation and grew up during the Japanese occupation and the Indonesian revolutionary period. I followed my parents as they relocated to the hills and began to realise the significance of the Indonesian struggle for independence, which was finally fruitful thanks to the people’s patriotic spirit—a feat that is well-respected by other Third-World countries. I had a lot of discussions illustrious figures who were involved in the struggle and they helped shaped my attitude and obsession to dig deeper into the values of nationalism and patriotism as the basis of the nation’s self-esteem. This was the same obsession of Ali Sadikin.

I picked architecture as the vessel to express my obsession. But as a student at the Bandung Institute of Technology [ITB], I had the desire to leave my studies behind and move to the medical faculty, because I thought being an architect would be just becoming a “drawing handyman”. In 1972, I met the head of Bappeda [Regional Development Agency], Piek Mulyadi, an architect who graduated from ITB. He offered me a job to work for the Jakarta government with the catch of being involved in the restoration project of the “Classical City,” to appeal to my interest in the classical music and the violin.

I had the personal satisfaction to be able to work under the leadership of Ali Sadikin, beginning in 1973 when I was appointed as the planning architect and coordinator for the restoration of the Old Town Batavia and

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also as the counterpart of the ILO consultant for the project, Sergio Dello Strollogo.

During my tenure, I helped restore heritage buildings, sites and areas that were left behind by the colonial governments, along with traditional villages such as the Old

Port of Sunda Kelapa, Betawi Condet village, Tugu Portuguese village, among other places.

What cities are doing heritage and preservation right?

If by heritage you mean structures left behind by the colonialists, then most cities that were occupied by foreign governments have heritage buildings that need to be preserved. Colonial cities with heritage sites and buildings that are well preserved and properly managed include Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang and Sawahlunto. There are also cities across the archipelago with fully-preserved local wisdom, or that have suffered minimal cultural shock, such as Nias, Toraja, places around the island of Bali, Yogyakarta and Surakarta.

How can Indonesia promote awareness of the importance of heritage?

Heritage or historical conservation is a moral-ethical approach in developing a city that involves humans and the values of humanity inside them, in which humans are placed as the subjects of development. Personal satisfaction and pride become the benchmark of a successful conservation effort, instead of mere financial profit. Therefore sincere dedication, honesty, a keen interest, deep insight, as well as pure

motivation in the area is needed, in addition to adequate experience, knowledge and technical skill.

We also have to learn about and respect our seniors who gave their all to abdicate, serve, put down the foundations and open the path for the next generations to work and dedicate themselves in the respected field of heritage preservation.

We need education, training, and certification for those who have cemented their wish to work in the field of heritage conservation to allow them the expert status. In The Netherlands, a set of criteria had to be satisfied to work in the field, such as having a special certificate in the “super specialist” field of urban planning and development through education, coaching, on-the-job training and experience on the field, since this job is not merely a hobby or more of like or dislike and unfair judgment as it is today...

The requirements that are drafted in the law are a very heavy burden to bear for those involved in the field of heritage conservation. But the most important thing is the calling that drives you to the field. If there is no such calling, other motivations such as prestige and self-respect, popularity, material benefit, among other things, will not help you complete the mission of heritage preservation.

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