

Urban visual pollution: Cities without aesthetics

Scattered banners, posters and billboards presenting political figures that look ready to fight in the arena of general, regional or local elections characterize various parts of major cities around the country at the moment. I consider them to be visual pollution as they remarkably contaminate our vibrant cities. It's more distressing if we read slogans, promises and veiled messages written underneath.

One religious leader promotes himself with a phrase: "Look at Kaaba, then choose me." The picture shows the figure of a cleric wearing a turban and a white sash on his shoulder, perhaps to imply his religiosity. The picture of the Kaaba is merely to be glanced at because, in the end, the most important message is the cleric's election bid.

Many more banners feature state and government officials dressed in full uniform, with all the attributes of their positions. The advertisements often appear during special events such as Christmas or New Year.

Sometimes, the officials appear with their deputies or wives. In no way do these banners contribute to improving the quality of a city or serve as "a social work of art".

On the contrary, these political advertisements are actually damaging the beauty of a city, particularly those billboards scattered throughout the precincts of historic towns and along beaches and hills.

It is time to set more stringent requirements in licensing outdoor advertisements, beyond taking into account the placement (location) or revenue generation (local tax) and also acknowledge the beauty (aesthetics) of the city.

We'd be better to utilize the epithet popularized by prominent architect Mies Van de Rohe: "Less is more." It means that the less the faces of officials are shown, the more beautiful the city space will be.

If we look carefully at the Old City quarter in Jakarta, we will clearly notice a chaotic and dirty area with garbage everywhere. At least 13 of the 59 historic buildings in the area are severely damaged, poorly maintained and idle. Last year one of the ancient buildings, the former office of West Java NV built in 1912, actually collapsed.

The condition of historic buildings in the old town precinct of Semarang – which I often refer to as "Little Netherlands" – is not much different.

Sure, it must be admitted, there have been many efforts to revitalize the historic colonial legacy of the place. The asphalt on the streets has been replaced by paving blocks. The former office building used as a district court, which for many years has been neglected, has been renovated into a restaurant. One of the other buildings was converted into the Semarang Gallery, a place to exhibit art and cultural performances.

But many other ancient buildings are left empty and not properly maintained. Those derelict buildings, covered in overgrown bushes and porous walls, look like dirt. Those old buildings are very detrimental to the hopes of citizens and visitors who want to enjoy the historic part of the city.

When I visited the old quarter of Madrid in Spain some months ago, I observed a movement called Urban Art. The shabby facades of old derelict buildings were revitalized by local artists, who used them to create beautiful canvas paintings with a variety of themes.

Well, why can't the Urban Art movement be promoted in Indonesia, not only in the old towns or quarters, but all over the city? Instead of letting the walls and fences of public buildings get damaged by graffiti filled with vulgar words from ignorant hands, let us proceed with the movement and paint some murals. We can observe that walls decorated with paintings rarely catch the attention of unruly children who have extra energy.

It was also very shocking to hear news about the burning and tearing down of statues of Bima, Gatotkaca and Semar at different locations in downtown Purwakarta in West Java. I was told that the destruction of statues has occurred three times in the last few months. The pro-statue community almost clashed with an anti-sculpture group claiming to come from the West Java towns of Cianjur, Sukabumi, Bandung and Tasikmalaya.

Any architect or city planner would agree that statues are works of art that can bear the designation of being landmarks. Some examples of such landmarks in Jakarta include the "Welcome to Jakarta" sculpture in the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle, the statue of Sri Rama in the area of Bung Karno sports center and the Pancoran Monument.

Along Jl. Pahlawan, the most prestigious street in Semarang, there is a row of statues and wonderful puppets which are distinctive and memorable.

I cannot imagine the puppets and the statues being dismantled and burned down by people who do not understand the meaning of art. If the anti-statue group insists that they reject the sculptures on the pretext of (Islamic) religion, I would recommend them to visit the city of Jeddah, which is decorated with dozens of statues in various corners of the city.

The most interesting one, in my view, is the giant bicycle statue said to symbolize the Prophet Muhammad's bicycle.

I hold the opinion that the cities of Indonesia are still desperately short of artistic sculptures that could function as special attractions and create sense of place. The statue does not always have to be expensive. They can even be made of junk or cheap local materials.

When I had the chance to visit the city of Bilbao, I really enjoyed seeing a new statue in the form of a cat, made from local flowers. The cat statue was cleverly located in front of the new Guggenheim Museum, designed by internationally acclaimed architect Frank Gehry. Despite its beauty, it was quite inexpensive.

Therefore, it depends on artists, architects, sculptors to create works of art that should not be tampered with by anyone else. All of the landmark statues will offset the annoying outbreak of the urban visual pollution created by political figures.

We should go back to the prime essence of the city as a social work of art, adding to the beauty of human life and complementing the natural beauty of God's piece of work.

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