A Certain Age

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CLASS IN A GRADE SCHOOL PROBABLY IN METRO, LAMPUNG, SOUTH SUMATRA. AROUND 1940. KONINKLIJK INSTITUUT VOOR TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE, LEIDEN
CHAPTER ONE

BYPASSES AND FLYOVERS

Riding, riding, riding, through the day, through the night, through the day.
. . . And courage is grown so weary, and longing so great. There are no
mountains any more, hardly a tree. . . . Alien homes crouch thirstily by mired
springs. . . . And always the same picture. One has two eyes too many.

— Rainer Maria Rilke,
The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke

ARCHITECTURE, HISTORY, AND THAT WAY OF TALKING

Already in the late colonial era “the road network in Jakarta had been as-
phalted and many trees cut down to make way for electricity and telephone
wires and poles. The effect was to make it much harder on the eye.”¹ In the
time of independence, after 1945, the Sukarno era, the poor and untidy quar-
ters around the axes of the metropolis were progressively (albeit slowly)
cleared, and cleared out.² Since the 1970s, in the post-Sukarno years, the
tempo quickened. Jakarta has been officially called bmw — bersih, “clean,”
manusiawi, “humane,” wibawa, “ordered.”³ It became a correct feeling (if
there is such a thing) that one might ideally comprehend Jakarta in one
glimpse: “Jakarta can be immediately seen on the map. The shape or layout
of the city is marked by the flyovers and motorways running east, south,
and west, cutting through the metropolis and heading out into the coun-
tryside.”⁴ Not yet, but almost, postcolonial (and postrevolutionary) Jakarta has
become a postmodern metropolis, like Los Angeles, for instance, “whose
mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of inces-
sant unreal circulation — a city of incredible proportions but without space,
without dimension.”⁵
The traffic lights of Jakarta throughways and avenues, after the sun sets and the still remaining poor neighborhoods disappear in the dark, offer a perspective that is geometrical and logical. The straight lines, abstract and thus pure, meet at vanishing points. They are like the continuity of a political task, or like the “rails of revolution” that Sukarno, the president and the engineer, talked about: “Do you want to live forever? So pull back to the moment of the Proclamation of our Independence . . . back to the purity of our souls, . . . back, and straight on, to the moment when our Revolution began!”

The rows of lights—of traffic and of revolution—as in Siegfried Kracauer’s vision, “create an appearance of a plentitude of figures from zero” as they “progress in one-dimensional time”; this logic, the geometry, and the politics “work hard to reduce everything to the level of the zero out of which [they want] to produce the world.” The lights in straight or correctly curved rows, indeed, dazzle the observer and mold his memory as they “emerge from the past without substance, purged of the uncertainty of existence, [and] they have the stability and outline of algebra.”

As one walks and drives through the avenues and highways of Jakarta, one can feel that the city and the revolution might have been built in the same way:

The Indonesian Republic can live 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, 30 years, 300 years, and, straight on, till the end of time. . . .

One year since the Proclamation of our Independence became 2 years, 2 years became 3 years, 3 years became 4 years, 4 years became 5 years, 6 years, 7 years, 8 years, 9 years, 10 years, 11 years . . . and God Willing these 11 years will become 110 years, 1,100 years, maybe 11,000 years!

Today we experience the 17th anniversary, 17 times 17 Augusts of freedom! 2x, today, we experience August 17th, the Proclamation of Independence Day, the reckoning that is great and holy!

To move through that kind of space and along those kinds of lights brings, kind of, a sense of liberation. Trying to observe and absorb this post-Palladian, postcolonial, and almost postmodern metropolis, one might almost convince oneself that “the community of human destinies is experienced in the anonymity of non-place, and in solitude.” Almost, thus, one might comfort oneself that in a non-place like this, any “spectator,” acceptably and correctly, “is a passerby.” The omnipresence of the hard surface,
of the asphalt of the roads and of the concrete of the walls, may, almost, bring satisfaction to a scholar.

Not being able to penetrate, not seeing much beyond reflections (the walls are not just of concrete but of glass as well, and the wet asphalt is like a mirror), may cause a pleasing sensation: “There is no sub-text. . . . The enunciative domain is identical with its own surface.”16 By the very contours of the metropolis, the view and the thinking of the passerby is “drawn close to the surface of the architectural frame. . . . This relationship [is] further pressured [by] reducing the foreground elements of architecture while emphasizing the horizon itself as an object, maintaining the spatial hierarchy of perspective by bringing it up to but not over the limit.”17 This kind of architecture, of horizon, and of counting, it has been argued, is built as a “monumentalizing of age.” To live and die through this space, as well as merely to pass by this space, it may become (it may be reduced to) “an act of remembrance.”18

I think of Mrs. Sosro as the most beautiful apparition. She was a woman of a little over ninety when I met her in 1992. She was my first (memorable) interviewee in Jakarta on the metropolis project.19 She could not easily walk anymore. She received us sitting in her bed, a big brass structure, with a single long, hard pillow and a mosquito net half pushed aside. The gauze of the net softened the light coming from the outside. Thus Mrs. Sosro’s face, as well as the whole space around her, was blurred. This was the late colonial beauty of fading photographs that we postcolonial scholars do not wish to admit. It is difficult for us to convince ourselves that, perhaps, “different concepts touch here and coincide over a stretch. But you need not think that all lines are circles.”20

Mrs. Sosro received us in her house “in a native neighborhood” (one would say “native” if it still were the colonial times), a poor area, off the highways and promenades of Jakarta, yet very much in the center of the metropolis. I could easily imagine her, if she were not bedridden, waiting for us looking out of her window with her elbows on the sill. She had a wrinkled voice.

Mrs. SOSRO: I used to sell herb drinks, prohibited herb drinks. Thus they call me Siti Larang [Lady Prohibited]. I used to sell them on the street,
and I announced my ware by the chimes of a bell. They used to ask me, “Where do you stay?” I used to say, “I don’t know.” They asked me, “What is the date?” I said, “I don’t know.” I did not wish to know. I did not wish to know what had been. Have you met Kartodirjo—?

RUDOLF MRÁZEK (RM): Sartono Kartodirjo, the historian?

Mrs. SOSRO: Sartono. He said, “He who does not understand history is like a patient in a mental hospital.” I think he is crazy.

Two friends had come with me. One is a colleague, a historian, who came from the West like me. He is interested in herbal medicine. The other one is an incurable political activist. As an Indonesian revolutionary and former leader of the communist youth, he spent thirteen years in the post-Sukarno prisons of General Suharto. It was he who brought me here, because he had concluded that my research was useful and that Mrs. Sosro, a freedom fighter among other things, would be useful to me.

OTHER HISTORIAN: Mrs. Sosro, during the Dutch time [before 1942], you were selling tonic?

Mrs. SOSRO: True.

OTHER HISTORIAN: And you helped other fighters?

Mrs. SOSRO: Yes, if they needed.

OTHER HISTORIAN: You sent food to the Suharto internment camps [after 1965], too.

Mrs. SOSRO: Djoko [a friend] helped me with it, before he died. Then his mother-in-law helped. I thought of her just yesterday.

Talk hopscotched over and between national struggle, prisons, exiles, and herb-drink peddling. We three kept to our way of questioning, and Mrs. Sosro to her way of answering. Only at certain short moments—it was becoming clear to me, the most precious moments—the logic of the interview halted. An answer, and then sometimes also a question, strayed. On these few happy occasions, some of the answers and some of the questions frayed at their edges. We were getting off perspective.

OTHER HISTORIAN: You got the “Golden Pen,” didn’t you? How did it happen?

Mrs. SOSRO: It is from the Union of Indonesian Journalists. They believe that I am the oldest journalist still alive.

Chapter One

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RM: Mrs. Sosro, what kind of school did you go to?
Mrs. SOSRO: No school.
RM: So, you had no school friends?
Mrs. SOSRO: No school friends. Just friends.
RM: How did you get into the nationalist movement?
Mrs. SOSRO: My vader [father] was political. Thus I am political.
RM: I see.
OTHER HISTORIAN: I see.

My friend, who had been in prison for so long, became more than a little impatient, and he began to push:

Mr. HARDOYO: Auntie Sosro, Auntie Sosro, Rudolf has written about Tan Malaka. You worked on a journal directed by Tan Malaka?
Mrs. SOSRO: I do not remember.
Mr. HARDOYO: You knew Tan Malaka! Everybody says so.
Mrs. SOSRO: Oh, yeah. When I was in prison, I read his MADILOG. When I got out of prison, there was the Proclamation of Independence. And I lost the book. I still can’t find it!
OTHER HISTORIAN: Did you meet Tan Malaka in Jakarta or in Bogor?
Mrs. SOSRO: It was a little book. Well, not so very little. Thin, but large. Like this.
Mr. HARDOYO: He came from Banten [West Java], right? What kind of man was he? Tan Malaka.
Mrs. SOSRO: He was short. And funny. So funny, my!
OTHER HISTORIAN: But you have read his books?
RM: Patjar Merah?

_Patjar Merah_ (The Red Darling), is an Indonesian and revolutionary version of the French and antirevolutionary _Scarlet Pimpernel_. It is supposed to be Tan Malaka’s life—_M_aaterialistic, _D_ialectic, _L_ogical (it was his _MADILOG_), a thriller, and a tale of magic—a reading suited for a (victorious Indonesian) freedom movement.21

Mrs. SOSRO: _Patjar Merah_, yes.
RM: You’ve read it?
Mrs. SOSRO: Oh, yes. But Sherlock Holmes was better. In prison I read Sherlock, Sherlock, and Sherlock again.
This marked the moment of my first (memorable) failure on this project. Soon, yet too late, I realized that I should have questioned Mrs. Sosro next about *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and then *A Scandal in Bohemia*. That chance has never returned, of course; she was ninety at the time.

**RM:** You read it in the Dutch [colonial] prison?
**Mrs. SOSRO:** Of course. In the Japanese time [1942–1945], in prison, we could not read. We had to sew caps and sweep the floor.

Mrs. Sosro was not exactly getting tired. Her delicate body was not exactly failing her. Merely, through her increasingly strident breathing, longer moments of forgetting (or of thinking to herself), through “the rhythmic interruption of the logos,” she was trying to tell us, increasingly—the three of us, so bad at hearing—about a journey, and about a history, for which, as Cornet Rilke knew, “two eyes are too many.”

**RM:** So, in the Dutch prison, you were allowed to read?
**Mrs. SOSRO:** Only when I was sick. And I was sick for a long time. I was brought to the prison hospital, and a plainclothes policeman came. And he asked me: “Can you read, girl?” “Of course she can read,” the doctor said, “she is a political.” So they put a book under my pillow. You understand: because I was sick and in the hospital.

Whatever is being asked and answered, increasingly, happens as if under a cloud of pain, a hospital, and a cemetery. She talks in *tombeaux*, and, by the power of it, the interview begins to flow in spite of the three of us asking our questions—against the traffic, so to speak. Even more important, in spite of and against my asking, I begin to listen, and thus get closer, perhaps, to a “dialogue, this articulation of speech, or rather this sharing of voices.”

**OTHER HISTORIAN:** Soesanto Tirtoprodjo?
**Mrs. SOSRO:** The one who died? I was sick at the time. I could not do anything for him. I could go to Hatta [former Indonesian vice-president]. I wrote to Hatta, but then he got sick also.

**OTHER HISTORIAN:** When Hatta died, did you go to his funeral?
**Mrs. SOSRO:** Oh, no, Hatta was buried in . . .

**OTHER HISTORIAN:** Tanah Kusir.
**Mrs. SOSRO:** Tanah Kusir. I was sick.
My friend still does not let go. He cares about my research:

Mr. HARDOYO: Auntie, Auntie, do you still remember Tan Malaka’s Fighting Front?
Mrs. SOSRO: Oh, I remember. I was in Malang [East Java]. Salirah, my sister, came to see me: “Get up! How can you sleep?! Don’t you understand? Tan Malaka has been arrested!” I did not understand. I was ill. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t eat. In the end they wanted to shoot me as well. “Well, you please yourselves!”

It was hard to hear it, and it is much harder to write it down, but Mrs. Sosro was giving us her life not exactly as history—more disturbing still, for a professional, there seemed to be not even a story. Because, I now think, in Mrs. Sosro talking to us, there was nothing of the “frantic passing of the petty present.”

RM: So, you were poor most of your life?
Mrs. SOSRO: Yes, 200 percent poor. The rich natives were 100 percent poor.
RM: But, there was a fresh newspaper at home every day?
Mrs. SOSRO: Oh, yes.
RM: No radio?
Mrs. SOSRO: No.
RM: No gramophone?
Mrs. SOSRO: His Master’s Voice? No, just a dog.
OTHER HISTORIAN: And in the Japanese time?
Mrs. SOSRO: No change.
OTHER HISTORIAN: No change!
Mrs. SOSRO: Well, it was not easy. But it would still get worse: people will become sentimental. They will forget what anger is. Hardoyo, you know Pranoto Reksosamoedro?
Mr. HARDOYO: He just died, last month.
Mrs. SOSRO: Oh, he died!
Mr. HARDOYO: He died.
Mrs. SOSRO: Well, during the Japanese times people were beaten and others were ordered to watch it. But nobody at that time would come and declare that this or that had to be razed: ordering people that they raze things without even thinking about it. Houses are being razed at

Bypasses and Flyovers

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present merely because the people who lived in them have died. Just because of that!

At this point my two friends left for other assignments, and I stayed behind for a few more minutes.

RM: Do you talk to your grandchildren like you talk to us?
Mrs. SOSRO: What do you mean, my boy?
RM: Do you talk to your grandchildren like you talk to those who just pass by? Do you talk to your grandchildren about history?
Mrs. SOSRO: About history? Yes, sometimes they ask me.
RM: What do you tell them?
Mrs. SOSRO: I tell them stories.
RM: So that they will not forget?
Mrs. SOSRO: Yes, but I am not happy about it. I am not happy about it at all. I do not enjoy in the least that feeling after I finish a newspaper: “Who was where, what happened, was it in Yogyakarta, was it in Malang, was it Soesanto. . . .”

Mrs. Sosro, it seems, forgot that she had already told me this. Or perhaps she was explaining to me, at last, why someone like Maurice Blanchot might write: “Whence this injunction, do not change your thought, repeat it, if you can.”27 Her last words to me, ever, were about that historian again.

Mrs. SOSRO: Oh, when I read, “He who does not understand history is —”
RM: Sartono Kartodirjo?
Mrs. SOSRO: Yes. “If you do not understand history, it is the same as if you were locked in a madhouse.” I have heard this, my! If it were so, I should be locked up. That Sartono, he must be — [end of tape]

MRS. SOSRO’S THEOREM

If it is true that everyone has a past of his or her own, it nonetheless happens that some, those who remember having lived fragments of their past with others, can sense they have shared at least this memory with them. . . . The complicity that emerges from this parallelism — no matter how
capricious and subjective memory may be—sometimes materializes un-
expectedly, in a serendipitous meeting or along a detour in conversation.

—Marc Augé, In the Metro

There has always been much killing in Jakarta, but there has never been an
age of barricades there—omnibuses turned over, “flag fastened to an axle,”28
paving stones “dragged up to the top floors of the houses and dropped on
the heads of the soldiers,” “stripped bodies of the gravely wounded thrown
contemptuously onto the barricades to make them higher,”29 signs proudly
affixed to barricades like that in Paris of 1871: “Barricade of the Federates,
Constructed by Guillard Senior.”30 All the pathways of Jakarta that some-
how seem to matter to history are obviously asphalted. Actually, as Brecht
wrote,

What’s wrong with asphalt—?
It’s only the bog that denounces its black brother asphalt,
so patient, clean and useful . . .
In the asphalt city I’m at home.31

Since the 1950s, the high tide of the Sukarno era, modern Jakarta has been
designed, and dreamt out, around the axes of a few black, patient, and useful
throughways—General Sudirman Street, Thamrin Street, General Subroto
Street—with a linear city of multistoried hotels, department stores, and
office buildings along them.32 The soul of Jakarta has been designed geo-
trically, and with all the modern respect for geometers: “Geometrical order
[is] methodical and faultless . . . geometers and all those who act methodi-
cally . . . impose names to things in order to abridge reasoning . . . geometry
teaches perfectly. . . . nothing is freer than [geometers’] definitions.”33

I recall most often the Jakarta as it was at the moment of the riots of
1997 and 1998. The wide and smooth throughways of the city then, at last,
began to function as designed. Models came alive. Highways came forth
into becoming. They became arteries (and I will come to the blood soon).
Never before might a historian have covered the distances of the metropolis
as efficiently as during those days. A trip for an interview at another end
of the sprawling city—usually one to three hours of speeding, braking,
and calling it a victory — could now be made in twenty minutes. Horizons
seemed opened. Or, rather, there were no horizons any more; only the open
road.
At last, as well, there was an easily, mechanically definable order of things: streets were jammed = there was no riot; streets were empty = there was a riot somewhere. A specially designed FM radio station, Sonora, was always on the air as we were on the road. Its programming was made up of drive-on music and riot forecast only. Rational driving, by the force of the riots, came forth into becoming at last. A few times, of course, one had to swerve, turn around, and, guided by Sonora, take an alternate road.

A small group of students appears on the road, about twenty of them in all. A chubby and sulky girl, a few steps ahead of the others, walks slowly with a big wreath. Others carry flowers. Pathetically, they walk against whatever might be on the twelve-lane road. As we come closer to them from behind, my taxi driver slows down and makes an elegant maneuver to pass the group, while I, sitting inside, in the back of the car, safe and from elsewhere, think of making some idiotic gesture, like a thumbs-up, for instance. After another few hundred meters of driving, we can see vendors on the sidewalk gazing back to where we had come from, making sure the group is really as small and as studentish as it appears, still far away, to be. We drive fast again. Looking back, I can still see the students, very small in the distance, and the vendors packing up their shops, just in case. To the north and to the west, there is smoke. We know from Sonora that this is the Senen Market burning. The road is empty again, just one lonely motorcyclist through the whole trip. The armored vehicles, which we had seen in front of Hotel Indonesia on the way there, had disappeared. “Army is afraid, ” the driver comments. Marines are taking over.34

There were moments when the goods from looted shops—TV sets, refrigerators, electric fans—were heaped in the middle of the road and burned: a specter of a barricade, a specter haunting the metropolis.

He who offers for sale something unique that no one wants to buy, represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange.35

But mostly the looted commodities were taken home.

The roads and highways of the metropolis reflected the mood, led the traffic, and channeled the despair. Yet they themselves were inviolable.36 They were merely dirtied and trimmed, sometimes sidewalked, by the upheaval:

Chapter One
Glodok erupts after raids on pirated CDs. . . . Along the way they damaged several shops and broke flowerpots.

Commemoration of 1998 shooting marred by clash. . . . The protesting students, who were blocked by troops while attempting to get closer to Suharto’s residence, became enraged and burned the Megaria Police post and vandalized many public goods such as flowerpots along the Diponegoro Street.37

The Semanggi (Trifoliate) interchange became a place and name possibly most closely identified with the riots. It equaled the events. The demonstrations, and the killings by the army, culminated here, at this foremost flyover of Jakarta, the exact point at which the north-south and east-west axes of the metropolis intersect.38 Here, the arterial bleeding happened. It could be observed from quite a distance, from the sidewalks, from the slopes of the flyover structure, and from the windows of the skyscrapers around. The people, as they watched, trimmed the highways. A little (collateral) girl of five was among the victims. Her father had raised her on his shoulders to let her see better. An army bullet hit her as it flew over and passed by.

From the window of my hotel, on the fourteenth floor, not far from the Semanggi interchange, I could watch the morning-afters of the bloody days.

November 15, Sunday. In spite of everything (maybe because of everything) that happened yesterday, at 8 a.m. sharp, there is the usual walking, jogging, bicycling, and footballing of the Jakarta middle class in shorts on Thamrin Street, toward the Merdeka [Freedom] Square, and back to Sudirman Street and on to the Semanggi. The two faster lanes in each direction are closed to the traffic as on every Sunday morning. Tens, and at about nine o’clock, hundreds, of people are here to do their sporting on the road. The highway is all white, all green, red and white, green and orange, and all pink, as the workout uniforms go. Jakarta burned yesterday and, if nothing out of the ordinary happens, it will also burn today.39

Count Harry Kessler, in 1919, also from a leisure window, watched another metropolis: Berlin, Germany. Sitting in a cabaret near the Potsdamer Platz, the heart of that city at the time, he heard some shots during a dance number. It was an attempt at a German revolution: “Not one paid any attention [amid the] big-city life . . . [amid] the immeasurable depth, chaos,
and might of Berlin. . . . This colossal movement [the attempted revolution] only caused slight disturbances in the much more colossal ebb and flow of Berlin.”

Eighty years later, in Jakarta, in the postcolonial (and postmodern) metropolis, not even the noise of jazz bands, closed doors, and curtained windows was needed. The mere jazziness of the street itself had done the trick.

Professor Roosseno Soerjohadikoesoemo, the engineer, was a jazzy man. When I met him in 1995 he was in his eighties, but he still complained that he could not — after an accident, for the time being — motorcycle to downtown Jakarta to hunt for English paperbacks in the secondhand bookshops. He was a jazzy, modern man. As early as 1938, a Javanese magazine thanked him for installing, free of charge, an antenna for the first-ever Indonesian “Union of Eastern Listeners” in Bandung [West Java]. With his friend Sukarno, who was eight years older and a graduate of the same elite technical college, Roosseno, still deep in the Dutch colonial era, established an architectural bureau in Bandung. There, he and Sukarno designed a number of houses, two of which, at least, quite nice, still stand.

There are just three or four “native” names to be found in the colony’s most prestigious technical journal *De Ingenieur in Ned.-Indië* (The Engineer in Neth. Indies). Roosseno’s name appeared there repeatedly, and with flair. His articles dealt with the most modern, avant-garde, rational, and calculable way of building — with reinforced concrete. It was a passion and à jour of the time. Nina Kandinsky has recalled how, in the 1930s, she and her husband visited one of Le Corbusier’s houses in France, and how they found even “bookshelves made of concrete.”

I met Mr. Roosseno less than a year before he died. We sat on the porch of his house in South Jakarta. Shrubs with white blossoms separated us from the street. I was a day or so before leaving Indonesia on emergency — I had a bad infection in my only working ear. He was, as I had been warned, indeed deaf as a post. I asked my questions, and he gave his answers. Neither of us, it transpired, understood a word spoken by the other. Yet we were happy, which is clear from the tape — both of us, or rather the three of us, because, as I found out back in the United States, there is also a parrot on the recording, were shouting and uproarious. I listen often to this interview. As André Breton wrote, truly, it appears that “dialectic misunderstanding [is] what is
truly alive in the dialogue. ‘Misunderstanding’ is here another word for the rhythm with which the only true reality forces its way into the conversation. The more effectively a man is able to speak, the more successfully he is misunderstood.”

Mr. Roosseno’s life was long; this he tells me on the tape, and then he goes on, beginning squarely in the middle. When the Japanese came close to invading Java in 1941 (he was in his thirties at the time), Mr. Roosseno was ordered by the Dutch authorities to destroy bridges. “One hundred and fifty bridges,” he says, and I can hear his smile. Half a year later, the Dutch surrendered, and the Japanese occupation authorities ordered Mr. Roosseno to rebuild the bridges. “Expertly,” he says; he did it, as well: “One hundred and fifty—plus.” In August 1945, the Indonesian revolution made a move as if to begin, and Sukarno, who became the president and top leader, summoned Roosseno, you know why—there were just a handful of Indonesian engineers available to the new nation state. Roosseno (the fighting against the Dutch was in full swing) established and led a “Weapon Laboratory,” where he taught the most à jour, rational, and calculable methods of how to blow up “bridges in particular.”

He remained close and useful to both Sukarno and the revolution, he said, because he was “so good at the calculus”: “This was not a way of doing things in some knightly manner. I was a friend of Sukarno, and as his friend I had to help. And there was nobody who could really count. I was regarded as the man who was smartest of all, namely, in calculating the right mix of concrete.”

In 1955, with the independent Indonesian state internationally recognized and settling down, Roosseno was sent to Paris on a trip paid for by the Indonesian and French governments to study an even more progressive technology, the method of building with prestressed concrete. In this way, he told me, he confirmed himself and his nation to be “an element of the modern.” This also became his, and his nation’s, history:

ERA OF PHILOSOPHERS: . . . Archimedes (287–212 B.C.) discovered the meaning of Center of Gravity . . .


ERA OF MATHEMATICIANS, 1636–1815: . . . Robert Hooke, Johann and Daniel Bernoulli, Euler, and Legrange. . . . In 1660 Robert Hooke stated, in Latin: ut tensio sic vis, which means in English: The power of any spring is in the same proportion with the tension thereof. . . .
A giant...

In 1930, the technique of construction with prestressed concrete developed, pioneered by Eugène Freyssinet (died in 1962), who was called by the world of technicians the Father of Prestressed Concrete. Freyssinet was a genius, who had worked by intuition. . . . I hope that there is or will be born, here among us, incarnations of Robert Hooke and of Euler. I trust that the intellect of the Indonesian nation is good enough for this.48

When I met Mr. Roosseno, he was still consulting and still by far the most respected civil engineer of the nation. Reverently, he was addressed as the “Father of Indonesian Concrete.”49 He in a sense equaled, totaled, Jakarta and thus the revolution. Throughout the Sukarno era, and still after it ended, Roosseno designed and dreamt out the concrete face of the metropolis, and of Indonesia as far as it aspired to be modern—read the metropolis’s reflection. Roosseno was the brains behind Jakarta’s and Indonesia’s first five-star (and concrete) Hotel Indonesia at the major city junction of Sudirman and Thamrin Streets; he was the brains behind Mesjid Istiqlal,50 the concrete and biggest mosque of Southeast Asia, right in the geometric center of Old Jakarta; he was the brains behind the National Monument, a monolith just a few hundred meters from the mosque, the spiritual (at least so designed) focus of the nation.51 The National Monument bore a special meaning for Roosseno, he told me and many before me, because here he used the technique of prestressed concrete fully for the first time.

Concrete, and prestressed concrete especially, was Roosseno’s choice for building bridges, bypasses, flyovers — and a sublime space and time as well: “At the opening of the Jakarta Cengkareng Toll Road and Overpass my heart beat with the greatest joy. You ask why? Because when I took a car, and as we drove through the Cawang-Sudirman Interchange, all that my eyes could take in were the giant letters the length of the speedway and high above the city — making the names of SUKARNO and HATTA.”52

Like Baron Haussmann, the builder and asphalter of modern Paris, Roosseno allowed for no hurdles and certainly for no barricades — nothing that would stand in the way of the progressive, modern, concrete, fast, and sublime. Like Baron Haussmann he knew that “the perspective of an imagined vantage-point above the city gives a sense of more rational order than existed at ground level.”53
Four years after Mr. Roosseno’s death, I met his oldest daughter, Toeti Heraty, in her Café Cemara (Casuarinas), one of the finest art galleries in the metropolis. She told me about her father's last months. When his wife, her mother, died, she said, not long before I had seen him, Mr. Roosseno fell in love again. To the horror of his five adult children, he decided to set even this matter straight, and he married again. He (still with the motorcycle) moved into his new wife’s house.

Mrs. TOETI: To live in the right with her, he had to change his religion, to leave Islam, and let himself be baptized; the woman was Christian. When he died, very soon afterward, we children visited the woman and asked her if she would let him be buried next to our mother. She had consulted her religious experts. In the end, it was arranged like this: first, the Christian services were held in the woman's house; then to the church, before they brought him here, to Cemara; then we drove him to the mosque, for the prayers, where he was received back into Islam; then across the city again, to the Karet Cemetery, where he was buried next to our mother, his first wife. We made it all in one morning.54

Thus Mr. Roosseno’s journey was consummated as it had been designed. Across the enormous metropolis, through, or rather above it, in a single morning, thanks to the throughways and bypasses, of course. In his death, after the Christian and the Muslim prayers, in style, Mr. Roosseno has been united with the fourfold—the modern, historical, architectural, avant-garde, metropolitan fourfold—the Aristotle-turned–Le Corbusier fourfold: “(1) highways (earth), (2) railways (fire), (3) waterways (water), and (4) airways (air).”55

CLOSING IN ON THE VANISHING POINT

THEOREM: . . . the last line of a proof.

PROOF: . . . a procedure that brings conviction.

—Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*

In the fall of 1998, I was told that the menu of the poorest of Jakarta, a fistful of rice with chili sauce and the smallest piece of fish, came to about 2,500 rupiahs. Thus every beggar on the sidewalk had to beg 4,000 rupiahs a day, a frightening sum, to keep up hope of survival.56 For the months I stayed in

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the city (mostly in the better-off parts), I saw four-year-old children in the streets, living there day and night, without any related elder in sight, except us, the more or less sentimental passersby.

Already during the 1950s, President Sukarno had to see this coming. This certainly was why he talked so much, in one breath, and with increasing emotion, about sublime places, architecture, revolution, and stars.

*If we are not able to fly, we will crawl.*

Don’t say that I talk *bombast* or *humbug* when I talk about the spirit of the [large black hawk] *Radjawali!* . . . Let us fly to the skies, and again to the skies! . . . Oh, Lord, although I live on the Earth, the child of the Earth,—I was feathered by the starry sky.

I am not saying that I am like the Prophet, no—I am just an ordinary human being, who, however, as an engineer has been given aspirations by the Almighty God—high aspirations, thanks to the Lord who be praised, not low aspirations. Not aspirations that wallow in the mud, my Brothers and Sisters, but aspirations that—and why not say so—are suspended from high in the sky.

There is something of Sukarno, and Roosseno, and Le Corbusier in each of us—and in a postcolonial metropolis more than elsewhere. I tried to get over the impact of the toddlers on the streets, and so on, and so on, by having, for instance, a cold beer or five at a sixteenth-floor bar on Thamrin Street, close to the stars, in one of the skyscrapers that Roosseno helped to project and that Sukarno dreamt about.

One other place in Jakarta, where it seemed that I might get away for a while, was a little park, a barren space rather, a half-hour walk or five-minute drive from the skyscraper beer place. Here a one-story colonial-style house used to stand before the revolution, belonging to a Dutch official. Then, beginning in 1942, Sukarno lived here. From the porch of this house, on August 17, 1945, at 10 a.m., he proclaimed the independence of Indonesia.

Very few photographs of the house still exist as far as I know. On August 15, 1960, two days before the fifteenth anniversary of the Proclamation of Independence, and at the height of his power, Sukarno ordered the house to be demolished. Henk Ngantung, a close friend of the president, a painter and a high official on the city council at that moment, opposed, so he writes in his memoirs, Sukarno’s idea to obliterate the historically significant house. But
the president shut him up: “Are you one of those people who want to show off my underpants?” The only thing Henk Ngantung was permitted to do was to “make a two-square-meter replica of the building, showing the same materials and colors as the house.” “But I don’t know where is the replica now,” Henk Ngantung writes.

Where the now destroyed house used to stand, there is an empty space. As if to enhance the emptiness, at one end of the area (there used to be a garden behind the house, and it is gone as well), two larger-than-life statues were put up—Sukarno reading the proclamation, and Mohammad Hatta, his deputy, standing at his side. At the other end of the expanse, there is the new, early 1960s, six-story Gedung Pola, the so-called Blueprints and Patterns Building, built as a part of the obliteration (of “zero panorama,” of “monumental vacancies,” of “ruins in reverse”) Blueprints and Patterns Building because the nationally crucial urban and rural plans and models were to be deposited there, and—on special occasions—exhibited. This was impossible to prove, but maybe Henk Ngantung’s “mini” of Sukarno’s proclamation house is there as well. Otherwise, the Blueprints and Patterns Building, as I recall it, is a space of echoes and closed doors. On closer inspection, it seemed empty except for the Central Office of the Pioneers of Indonesian Freedom, which was on the second floor.

Roosseno listed the Blueprints and Patterns Building highest among the achievements of Sukarno, the president and “architect of the nation”:

First of all, He gave instructions to architect F. Silahan to design the Blueprints and Patterns Building. It was He who set up the outlines of the Blueprints and Patterns Building function. He decided upon a needle-pin exact point, the lot at the Pegangsaan-East Street No. 56. When I am passing the Pegangsaan East Street today (now called Proclamation Street), I can appreciate how gloriously designed the Blueprints and Patterns Building is. The house where Sukarno himself used to live for several years can be seen no more.

Roosseno’s biographical data compiled by his students (this is how the echoes and the designs work) place the Blueprints and Patterns Building—it is built of concrete, of course—at the top of his accomplishments.

Next to the Blueprints and Patterns Building, just a fence away from the barren square—and next to the highway, along which Roosseno’s coffin sped
the day of his funeral — there stands the house of Mrs. Hartini, Sukarno’s widow, one of his widows.

Mrs. Hartini Sukarno’s is a big mansion. She moved there, or rather, after Sukarno died, she was moved there from the president’s summer palace in Bogor, in the hills an hour’s drive south of Jakarta.

“She is still beautiful,” everybody was telling me. She is. But the minutes of silence in this interview are long beyond bearing. The tape mostly records my loud Indonesian, as I try to keep the talking going. The rest is Mrs. Sukarno nodding. “Happy?” “Happy.” “Siblings?” “Siblings.” Ultimately, there is no sense in going on. But, as the tape recorder is turned off, she begins herself. Quietly. Asking about my children, and, as she speaks, I realize that rarely I am asked so nicely. Then, just a sentence: She had always to remain a lady, to everybody.

She says that she stayed behind all the time: “There had to be only one captain on the ship.” I say that he was a lover too, and the father of her children, and that he might have had a chance to open himself up to her without being afraid that it would be used against him. She says that in politics one does not show weakness. After another sip of tea, and a pause, she adds that she still has a friend. Yes, they are in touch. It takes me a while to realize that she is talking about another widow, Jovanka, that of Marshal Tito of broken (and now extinct) Yugoslavia. Yes, of course, she is still alive, and beautiful. They do write to each other.

Mrs. Sukarno has been to Prague, also, of course, with Sukarno; and her eyes point me to a low shelf under the window. There, indeed, I can see now the visiting-dignitaries Bohemian cut crystal displayed. As I leave, she sends her blessing to my wife, my sons, and my daughters-in-law as well. A guard sits on a folding chair at the open gate and sleeps. “In his dream, nothing but the desire to dream.”

State widows’ houses, at least in this postcolonial metropolis, are, let’s say, like libraries. In the Indonesian National Library in Jakarta, for instance, there is an electric signal gate, plugged in only when schoolchildren arrive on excursion. A teacher demonstrates to the pupils: he takes a book from a shelf, goes through the gate, the alarm sounds, and the children with all of us in the reading room laugh and applaud. Then, the children are gone, the signal gate is unplugged, and everybody can take from the library, again, whatever he or she might wish.

Mrs. Rahmiati Hatta was a widow of the man whose statue is there next to the statue of Sukarno, next to the fence of Mrs. Sukarno’s house. In 1998
Mrs. Hatta still lived, and not far from Mrs. Sukarno, in a Dutch-colonial-style house on Diponegoro Street.

Mrs. RAHMIATI: Thank you, Mr. Rudolf, for coming, even when I do not know yet, in fact, about what this interview is to be. But [as you asked me] I will try to think back in my life. I was born in Bandung, in February of 1926. I had a father, a mother, and a sister four years younger than me. My parents, as was usual in the past, of course, worked with the Dutch, with the Dutch government, in the Department of Railways. It was called Staatsspoorwegen. Both of my parents worked; it was before the Depression, and, because they were not village people, but educated people, they had good salaries—together, maybe, 400 guldens. It was really a lot, so much that the Dutch even suggested that my parents become Dutch. They had become gelijkgesteld [assimilated, made alike], so that if something happened to them, in court they would be considered to be Dutch. Thus I was a privileged person. I did not live in a village, not knowing whether I would eat the next day, lacking everything. My mother was also a woman of the movement. She was on the board of a vocational school for girls. Thus I went to this vocational school, and there we learned to cook, sew, keep accounts; learned what was urgent and what was not, and, thus, how to lead one’s own household—to become women useful to the nation.68

When did she meet her husband?

Mrs. RAHMIATI: During the Japanese occupation. But I knew Sukarno before.

RM: Do you have your grandchildren here?

Mrs. RAHMIATI: Yes. A granddaughter.

RM: Do you tell her about the time when you were a child? Is there that connection between you and the girl?

Mrs. RAHMIATI: She is still little. But she knows that her grandpa had become Hatta, the freedom fighter, and that he was an important person. We can visit him because he has a grave, and because he has a statue. So I can say: “This is the grave of grandpa,” and “grandpa was a good man; he is in heaven already. You put your hands like this and pray.” But she can’t yet understand much. She is a child. Three years old.

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Hatta’s younger daughter, visiting from New York where she lives, shows me around the house. The whole second floor looks like a nursery for her little daughter, and the girl, indeed, moves fast on all fours, behind and in front of us, as we walk and talk. The largest room on this floor is the celebrated Hatta library, a national monument of sorts too. Hatta is reputed to have carried sixteen (sometimes more, depending on the lore) boxes of these books in Dutch times from one place of exile to another. The bookshelves cover all four walls from floor to ceiling. There are yellow index paper stickers here and there: “Philosophy,” “Economy,” “Iran,” “Goethe.” Hatta’s daughter tells me the story of the library, and Hatta’s granddaughter nods up to her every word: “We hired a librarian when my father was still alive, and he rearranged part of the library into a new system. About half was redone, and about a third was stolen. Then we hired another librarian and after him another. Now we have run out of money. Otherwise, the library is as it was.”

There are folders on a long table in the middle of the room. Several of the folders are open; others appear empty. “Some people are interested in publishing Hatta’s papers,” the daughter is telling me. “Whenever there is a crisis, people return to Hatta.”

This is, in Jakarta, in the postcolonial—and postrevolutionary—metropolis, how public-memory persons die. “As something abstractly realized” they “cancel themselves out.”69 The abstractions of theirs fill the space, the houses, the streets, the intersections, and the city where they once lived. For those still living—be they indigenous or visitors—the space so filled is habitable only under certain strict conditions. The space filled with the abstractions, “being wholly mediated, creates a second immediacy, while the man [or the woman] not yet wholly encompassed compromises himself [herself] as unnatural.”70 Those state widows’ houses in the (almost postmodern) metropolis are like libraries, and like museums:

**THE YOUTH-OF-1945 MUSEUM:** This is a place where Mrs. Hatta offered to take me after the interview. On a typical day, the only visitors are school groups. I am here on a typical day, and I watch the children as they wander about and then cluster around three veteran cars outside in the museum’s courtyard. In the middle, there is “Republic 2” car (used to belong to Hatta), on its left, there is “Republic 1” car (Sukarno’s), on the right, a little higher, on a stand, there is a six-cylinder motor (taken out of “Republic 3,” the first Indonesian Prime Minister Sjahrir’s car).71
The “Old Graveyard” in Jakarta, sometimes called the “Old Dutch Graveyard,” is half cemetery and half museum. A few years ago, in fact, it was renamed Museum Prasasti, (Museum of Ancient Inscriptions), and one is expected to buy a ticket at the gate, where three ticket masters, every day except Monday, play cards.

As one enters, on the left there is a grave of one F. Darlang, a “captain-flier of the Royal Netherlands Indies Army,” who died in 1917 at the age of forty-five. Next to the aviator, there rests what remains of Dr. Willem Frederik Stutterheim (died 1942), a famous archeologist of Java and a companion of Claire Holt, a woman who told me everything about Balinese paintings when I first came to the United States forty years ago. Close to Claire’s lover there is the grave of Miss Riboet, “Miss Happy Hubbub,” the greatest of the Indonesian roadside-theater superstars, who died, I see here, in 1965. There are about seven hundred graves in the cemetery, and no burials take place here anymore. Glorious, old, and uncared-for trees still vaguely suggest the graveyard’s pattern as it had evolved during the past three hundred years (there are some early Dutch governors-general, with their wives and children, buried here as well). Besides this, or rather on this, there is merely the long grass, countless cats (merely visiting, like me), and seven goats, probably property of the men at the gate.72

Yet there is some activity going on in the cemetery. Evidently new, shiny metal plaques of a uniform design are being screwed onto the headstones here and there, with inscriptions repeating what is already cut into or engraved on the stones anyway, in a new lettering and a new order: name, birth date, death date, and (these are new categories) number and material (granite, bronze, marble, or sandstone). There is also a newly paved courtyard in a corner of the cemetery, next to the now defunct mortuary. There the ticket men and their families, it seems, spend their nights. The pavement is made of flattened and smoothed (as people walk on them) fragments of gravestones. Some letters, words, and even half sentences can still be read on the crazy-paved surface—“Rest in Peace,” for instance. As Roland Barthes wrote, “we enter into flat Death . . .—As if the horror of Death were not precisely its platitude!”73

As I became a cemetery regular, one day one of the guards got up from his cards and went with me from the gate among the graves. There was a secret to be conveyed. After fifty meters or so down the main alley, we came to a

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wooden shack that I had always passed without noticing. The man undid a
deadbolt and let me through a squeaking door. There it was, he pointed—
Sukarno’s coffin and, next to it, Hatta’s coffin. Someone had brought the
coffins in, to this half cemetery, half museum, where all these memorable
people of the past rested, in secret, from the respective hospitals where these
two great men of the country and of the struggle for freedom had died,
Sukarno in 1970, Hatta in 1980. Sukarno, of course, is buried in Blitar, East
Java, and Hatta’s grave is at the other end of Jakarta. But here, next to the
center of the metropolis, and in the center of my writing, here they were, the
two reusable hospital coffins on a sawhorse—sublime, architectural, open,
and empty.

In ancient Athens,

the annual public funeral of the citizens who had fallen in war for the city’s
sake was one of the most important civic events . . . the conveyance of the
bones from the city of the living to the city of the dead . . . [was done in]
procession. . . . One empty bier is decorated and carried in the procession:
this is for the missing.

In ancient Athens, also,

the first signs of anarchy occurred at funerals. At the time of plague, for
instance, people could not afford to bury their dead anymore, and they
would arrive first at a funeral pyre that had been made by others, put their
own dead upon it and set it alight; or, finding another pyre burning, they
would throw the corpse that they were carrying on top of the other and go
away.74

There are perfect cemeteries in postcolonial Indonesia, of course—
Heroes’ Cemeteries. There, all graves are laid in straight rows and perfect
rectangles.75 At least ideally, there are no goats. Each grave is adorned with
a helmet of the Indonesian National Army and with the Pioneer of Free-
dom number. One F. Silahan was the architect who—under the guidance of
Rooseno and Sukarno—designed the Central Heroes’ Cemetery in Jakarta.
He, it may be recalled—with the same people helping—designed the Blue-
prints and Patterns Building as well. In the Central Heroes’ Cemetery, be-
side the helmet and the number, on some graves, a black cable sticks out
from the earth. On select days, bulbs are screwed onto the cables, and power
is let in. Then, and through the night, there are hundreds of lights on the
graves in perfect rows, like traffic lights, and like souls.

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Central Heroes' Cemetery, Jakarta: Captain Suhadi tells me that there are 4,951 graves of heroes here, as of today. This cemetery’s capacity is 15,000. Captain Suhadi is the guard of the cemetery, and he has a gun and a whistle at his belt. On each August 17, the Proclamation of Independence Anniversary, and on each November 10, the Heroes of Revolution Day, the bulbs are lighted. Not this year, alas, for security reasons. There are 482 Heroes’ Cemeteries in Indonesia. The Prime Minister Sjahrir’s grave, which I came to visit, is no. 89 and has both the helmet and the cable. Still, before I leave, Captain Suhadi tells me that (again) I was cheated. The flowers that I bought at the entrance to lay on Sjahrir’s grave are anggrek biru [blue orchid], “lovers’ flowers,” and as for the 4,000 rupiahs, to put it mildly, I was overcharged.76