

Dutch Jakarta Left Behind

Despite 16 master plans since 1990, little has been done to revitalize the historic area

By Joe Cochrane

The famous Old Batavia area of North Jakarta, which dates back to the 17th century, is a grimy, run-down neighborhood whose breathtaking colonial buildings are set next to seedy nighttime karaoke bars and spooky, dark alleys.

In the early 1970s, the then-Governor Ali Sadikin put cultural preservation high on his agenda, starting with the renovation of Batavia's Taman Fatahillah Square. The reason was simple: to motivate tourists to spend an extra day in Jakarta before continuing on to the resort island of Bali.

Unfortunately, the governor's broader vision of conserving and promoting Jakarta's cultural heritage did not rub off on his successors; they had other priorities.

Apart from the 1993 opening of the Cafe Batavia inside a 19th century building on the square, not much else has happened, save a few small museums.

"In 1970, we were the pioneers—Singapore hadn't done it and Bangkok had nothing," Soedarmadji "Aji" Damais, an Indonesian cultural expert, told the *Jakarta Globe* in an interview earlier this year for a special report on saving Jakarta's Old Batavia.

"Ten years later, we were left behind," he said. "What we had in mind was like Boat Quay [in Singapore]. It never happened, and [Batavia] is so much nicer than Boat Quay."

North Jakarta is far from a lost cause, however. Property developers never needed to target Old Town, or *kota tua* as it is known to Indonesians, because the city continued to grow southward. Block after block of historic buildings remain largely

intact, albeit in various stages of decay, unlike many old historic quarters in Asia.

Jakarta Governor Fauzi Bowo says renovating Old Batavia into a historic, cultural, and tourism scene will not only be a money-spinner but also create an economic renaissance in North Jakarta, now a shadow of its old glory.

Last month, the Jakarta city administration signed an agreement with the Ministry for State-Owned Enterprises so that more than 20 government-owned buildings around Taman Fatahillah Square may be leased for commercial use as part of a revitalization master plan—the 16th such plan since 1990.

A group of building owners has been working with city officials for months to find a way to save Old Batavia's buildings before they, like the city's Dutch colonial administration, are consigned to history. ●

