

Jakarta Reflection

Drawing in on Jakarta

An interview with Ken Pattern

Text by **Kylah Brown**

Arriving through Jakarta is like being in a supermarket slowly walking down the aisles in a sort of trance, only to be snapped out of it when something catches your eye. There is so much to see: so many people, colours, and so much junk.

Because it is visually, and often emotionally, overwhelming to take it all in, we don't; and it whizzes past us like a blur. Lithographer Ken Pattern has chosen to document in acute detail what many of us choose to ignore.



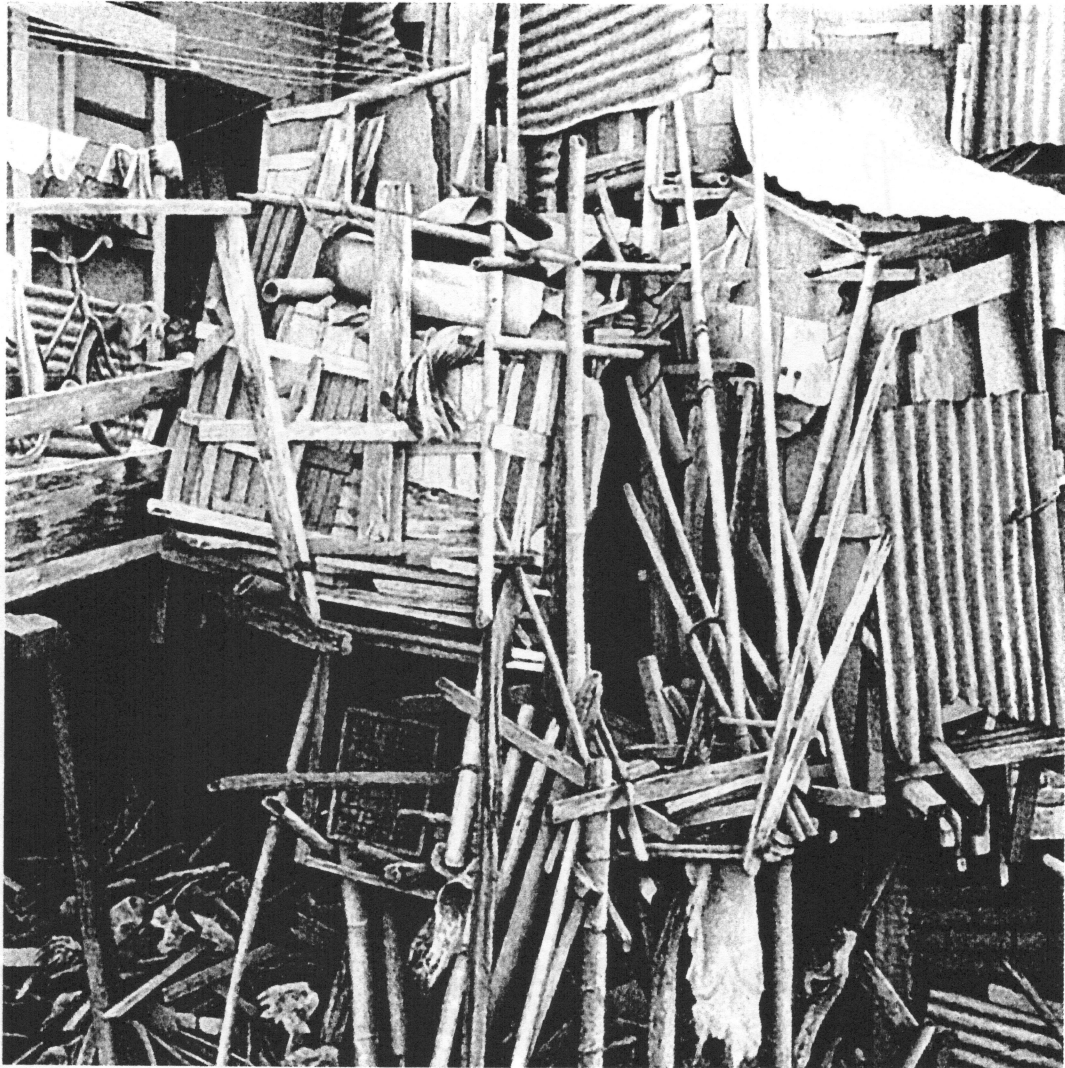
The Catwalk

When Ken Pattern first came to Jakarta in the late eighties, the city was a very different place. He remembers being up in the Wisma Metropolitan looking down not on a city, but a sea of red roofs and kampungs melded together. Someone would be ploughing a field next to an office building.

By the mid 90's there was so much building going on. The Stock Exchange area used to be one big kampung that was, all of a sudden, levelled. Rural Jakarta seemed to all of a sudden become a concrete jungle; there was really no middle ground. "I started depicting Jakarta in black and white," Pattern says, "because that's how I saw it – in extremes. I began by taking photos of images I wanted to sketch and when I'd go back to visit them, often they had already been levelled and I thought 'Where did all these people go?'"

Pattern explains that people came to Jakarta from afar to make money, but they brought kampung traditions with them. Where they were living was really of very little architectural significance. It was the social heritage he was trying to document. One particular area of interest for him was the makeshift riverside communities. "People have a tendency to gravitate toward water sources. People here had no money and these houses were built entirely from found objects. I was amazed by the ingenuity of it." But the floods would come and wash it all away and the building would start all over again. Although Pattern recognized the misery and anguish this caused, he found the positive attitude and optimism of these people inspiring.

Patterns predicts that in the future, the city centre will be more densely populated with skyscrapers and the kampungs will slide off to the periphery. So how has this come to be? "A phenomenal lack of planning," Pattern answers matter-of-factly. "Nothing here is logical. There is no logical flow of traffic. To get from Point A to Point B, you have to go all over the place. Maybe it's a cultural thing; we [westerners] are so concerned with plans and how they accommodate the future. The hardest thing for a foreigner to do is try to figure out the logic here."



Found Objects

"It's like a movie set. If you go off the main roads, you see something completely different. The view you get from Jakarta's main thoroughfares does not represent Indonesia."

So why the problem in planning? "Indonesia aspires to the wealth of the developing world, but it faces serious difficulties in its struggles to achieve that goal. There's a pressure to catch up, but no natural progression. That's why we have kampungs next to fifty-storey towers of steel and glass."

Often, Ken Pattern feels, Jakarta's city planners have applied a western model and applied it where it has no foundation, no roots. Visitors come to Jakarta and are often impressed by the expressways and five-star hotels and think all is well development-wise. "But it is all a facade," Pattern explains. "It's like a movie set. If you go off the main roads, you see something completely different. The view you get from the window of an air-conditioned car on Jakarta's main thoroughfares does not represent Indonesia."

Pattern comments that without some sort of planning that pays greater attention to the real needs of the city's people, Jakarta will find it difficult to achieve the status of a great world city. "Kemang is a great example of the total lack of planning. Even a few years ago, it was mostly residential and green. Now it's saturated with restaurants and malls. Something is always going up. People see a plot of land and feel a strong desire to build a mall. The idea of preserving green space for balance is a lost concept." Pattern goes on to explain that to developers and businessmen, an empty lot represents nothing. If you have money, you can build and there aren't any effective rules and regulations to prevent it.

So what is being done to fix things? Pattern believes that not enough is being done to improve infrastructure. There's a lot of blustering going on, but very little action. There was talk about a rapid transit



The Road to Shangri-La

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system when Pattern first came here, but while the busway system is a small first step in the right direction, there is still an enormous amount to be done to develop an infrastructure that will ease congestion on the roads.

So what does Pattern hope to achieve through his art? Basically, he says, he is trying to document the world as he saw it, on the day he saw it. While he addresses social issues in an indirect fashion, in some of his lithographs, Pattern chooses to use humour to address some of the serious problems instead of being too didactic.

Despite his criticisms, Pattern states that Indonesia and its people have incredible resources and skills. In particular, he is in awe of the sense of dignity among the poor, their ability to adapt to difficult circumstances and to scrape a living out of the most unpromising situations. "And there is an unbelievable level of tolerance. If someone cuts someone off on the street, you don't see anyone giving someone else the finger, or pulling out a gun, the way you would in the west." And he loves the vastness and richness of culture in Indonesia. "You could live five lifetimes and still not be able to explore all of it." ➤

Ken Pattern is a frequent visitor and sometime resident of Jakarta, where he frequently holds exhibitions of his work, which includes both the prints of Jakarta streetscapes described in this article and many other subjects. For further information, please visit his website at www.kenpattern.or.id.