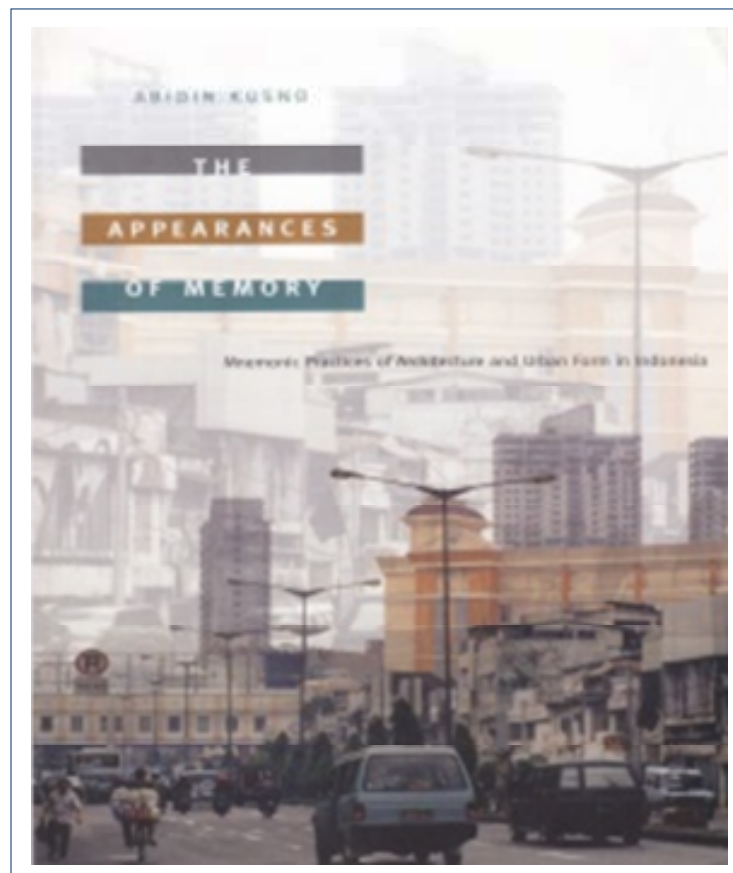


## BOOK REVIEW

By: Alexander R. Cuthbert <sup>1</sup>

Author : Abidin Kusno  
Year of publication : 2010  
Title : The Appearances of Memory. Mnemonic Practices of  
Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia.  
Publisher : Durham and London, Duke University Press,  
Pages : 332  
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Quality English language texts on Indonesian urbanisation are few and far between, and those that address the consequences of postcolonialism for urban space are even rarer. Abidin Kusno's *The Appearances of Memory* is one such text. It has been some ten years on the making and has been well worth the wait. His first book *Behind the Postcolonial* appeared in 2000, with the intention of examining ways 'from which to view the emergence and development of the socio-cultural crisis in the postcolonial world, and the ways this crisis both shapes and is shaped by the practices of architecture and design' (p10). Its singular contribution was to invert the overall thrust of many postcolonial studies, that is, through the lens of domination/resistance with the *emballage* that this entails, and in the process to challenge historicist approaches to development studies. As a matter of choice, Kusno prefers to accept the cultural inheritance of architectural and urban space from colonialism as a gift to be transformed in the remaking and renaming of place by a new society. This view does not derogate history, and reduces the trauma in postcolonial societies seeking to construct a new identity. He suggests that the acceptance of colonial culture is both necessary and appropriate. Indeed, once we accept that the history of the world conflates to the history of colonization, then the concept of domination takes the place of the given rather than the exception.

In the *Appearances of Memory*, Kusno focuses, as the title denotes, on a series of *aides-memoires* that encapsulate a complex archaeology of memory – the archetypes of mnemonic experience for many Indonesians. Moving from his prior work subscribed by the influence of political cultures, he now moves to consciousness and experience, dredging the mnemonic for its material, symbolic and creative content and their role in interpreting and reconfiguring urban space. This may best be described in his own terms as 'a new regime of seeing' (p185). This is no mean task, and Kusno has incorporated six previously published chapters with three new to the book, stitching together prior work into a more complete document. In no way however does this reduce the value of the text, and many examples exist of similar strategies. While the book is organized to go back in time, with the more contemporary material towards the beginning, it could easily have been organized in reverse with no loss of meaning. So there is also a weak sequential relationship between the chapters, one of little consequence. The cement that holds the book together has nothing to do with the linear sequencing of the text, but of a series of ideas that deal with the persistence of memory as the history of the present represented in a kaleidoscope of different forms.

*The Appearances of Memory* is richly textured and challenging, it is erudite, scholarly, and an object lesson in style. It is a dense and captivating book. In reading it I was reminded in many ways of W. G. Sebald's work, *The Emigrants, Vertigo, and Austerlitz* but specifically of his opus magnum *The Rings of Saturn* along with the revealing set of interviews he gave entitled *The Emergence of Memory*. The haunting beauty of Sebald's images are also recalled in Kusno's choice of several illustrations, as in the painting of Sukarno in Surabaya St. Jakarta (Figure 47), an interrogation session during the Japanese Occupation (Figure 56), and the classical Parisian baroque gatehouse to a gated community in Jakarta (Figure 59). While it may push analogy too far to compare Kusno's intentions to that of Sebald, one thing is undeniable. While the focus is indeed different, the effort is the same in both cases. It asks how we can possibly explain and accommodate history, with all of its contradictions, confusion, violence and manipulation, particularly when it is either erected in space (*Glodok on Our Minds* ch.3) it or is conspicuously absent in *Back to the City* (Chapter 4.) Closer to home, Kusno pays

homage to his mentor and friend Anthony King, whose *Spaces of Global Cultures* preceded *The Appearances of Memory* by six years. As is right, Kusno also generously acknowledges the influence of other world class scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Terry McGhee, Rudolf Mrazek, James Siegel and others.

The book has four main sections, – *Governmentality, Remembering and Forgetting, Reminiscences* and *Mental Nebulae*. The initiated will appreciate the postmodern nature of the text, which represents an astounding pastiche of memories and reflections on the nature of urban space and its production. The thematic dimension includes collective memory, terror, postcolonialism, ethnicity, violence, trauma, nationalism, exploitation, resistance, displacement, poverty, globalisation and many other sedimentations. Content traverses nationalist urbanism, the Japanese occupation and Islam, to Art Deco architecture, busways, Garda (gateways), shopping centres and squatter housing. Relevant to this journal is the observation that Kusno never uses the term *urban design*. Yet this is indeed what the book is about. In fact it is of its essence. It distills many fundamental properties of urban design, and in the process of analysis, flays much development in the capital, Jakarta. At the same it offers us a panegyric on the existential content of the discipline, and delivers an object lesson to many architects (starting with Sert) who would reduce the scope of urban design to that of building projects. Kusno clearly demonstrates that the mnemonic is a core value of urban space and its construction, a place where time is interrogated and the persistence of memory reified, a dimension perhaps more significant to urban design than the narrow sectarian interests of development briefs

As will now be apparent, I have studiously avoided the usual process of reviewing new books where each chapter is described sequentially in order to reveal the content. In *The Appearances of Memory*, we would learn little from doing this. Despite an overall historical regression in the material which adds a comforting linearity to the content, the text does not really progress in any significant direction beyond its own rhizomatic form. In this I recollect an interview with the French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard who was asked ‘your films do not appear to have a beginning, middle and an end?’ Godard’s response was ‘yes they do, but not in that order.’ Similarly, for Kusno, meaning does not surface ‘from what comes next’ but from the plethora of representations, contestations, visions, symbolic values and ideas, that infuse each section, albeit differently in each case. Discursive practices rule. In the process of recording, history is transformed by memory, it becomes fractured not only by the multitude of post-modern ‘voices’ but also by a vast array of images, places, histories, and events that have characterized the contested nature of urban space in today’s Indonesia. Without doubt a seminal contribution to the field.

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