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May 24, 2010

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From the rubble of a devastating earthquake in 2006, Kotagede in Yogyakarta has managed to rebuild itself. (JG Photo/Dalih Sembiring)

From Jogja Ruins, a Cultural Rebirth

Culture is a basic need. This saying circulated during Yogyakarta's reconstruction following the devastating earthquake that hit the region in May 2006. To see the power of this saying when put into action, simply travel to the traditional town most famously associated with the province's silver industry: Kotagede.

On Saturday, the people of Kotagede, the local government and various organizations, including Badan Pelestarian Pusaka Indonesia (Indonesian Heritage Trust) and Jogja Heritage Society, took part in the grand opening of the Kotagede Heritage Trail: A Tribute to Community-Based Efforts in Post-Disaster Recovery.

The heritage trail will lead cyclists and pedestrians through the small alleyways of the town's charming urban villages to see how the post-disaster recovery programs have successfully managed to reconstruct many of the ruined buildings while maintaining their original look and feel.

"Kotagede has proven that post-disaster recovery programs can run faster when local philosophy is included in the process," Catrini Kubontubuh, from the Indonesian Heritage Trust, said during the opening.

"In other words, areas hit by disasters need cultural emergency responses. A lot of houses built by the government during the reconstruction process in Aceh [after it was hit by a tsunami in December 2004] are abandoned. It turns out that one of the reasons why people refused to live in the houses is the fact that the toilets are contained within the main buildings, which they see as taboo."

Kotagede, or Big Town — the name denotes its central position in the early stage of the Islamic Mataram kingdom — has not faced such problems. People realized early on that the intangible heritage in their established architectural rules, designs and patterns within the town's unique layout had to be preserved. With training, they learned ways to preserve their structural heritage, such as the correct methods of caring for old timber and how to reconstruct traditional Javanese houses.

As the approximately 100 participants of the heritage event were making their way through Kotagede on the hot Saturday afternoon, they quickly noticed the characteristic "between two gates" layout.

Arranged in neat rows at several points, residences are divided into two parts: a pendopo, or a pavilion-like structure, built on columns intended for receiving guests or ceremonies, and a dalem, or the house. Facing one another, the distinct structures wedge in long, paved paths called gang rukunan (alleys of harmony).

The old town's cultural, as well as archeological, richness can be found in every alleyway. From the extravagant, museum-like Omah Kalang — a name suggesting that the house used to belong to the head craftsman of the Islamic Mataram kingdom — that dates back to the pre-World War II era, to langgar dhuwur (small, wooden family mosques placed above houses), the variety is seemingly endless. You can weave through Kotagede's history all the way back to the 16th century by visiting Angkur Pasareyan Mataram. A royal cemetery complex made up of 627 tombs of the first two Islamic Mataram kings and family members, the pasareyan incorporates the Great Mosque and a couple of ancient ponds inhabited by huge white catfish.

"Not until they wander through its small alleyways will outsiders find out that Kotagede holds so many legacies," said Willy, from Organisasi Pengelola Kawasan Pusaka Kotagede (Kotagede Heritage Area Management Organization). "This information became more known soon after the earthquake, when Kotagede was surveyed for damage."

One can get a peek beyond any of the residences' wooden gates to see humble yet charming traditional abodes with vast, green front yards. Several houses, however, are still in the same condition that they were in the aftermath of the earthquake.

During the event, old town elders and village heads, who represented their people through OPKP Kotagede, read a declaration of intent.

They pledged to "safeguard the Kotagede Heritage Area as a basic force to achieve order, peace, prosperity and balance of life."

Despite the fact that Kotagede is divided into two administrative regions — several villages belong to Yogyakarta City, while others belong to Bantul district — this has not stopped all residents from working hand in hand through OPKP Kotagede. From its headquarters, a newly renovated pendopo and dalem called Omah UGM, the organization devised an eight-point strategy to achieve what is provided for in the pledge.

"There has been a suggestion that all heritage buildings in Kotagede be given tax deductions. I heard it was going to be applied to heritage buildings in Yogyakarta City, but Kotagede will have to wait for the process of gathering data to be complete," said Laretna Adishakti, from the Jogja Heritage Society.

Saleh Udden, the head of Jagalan village, said that together with the ongoing process of recovery, Kotagede was set to restart its cultural activities. "Before the earthquake, most households owned a gamelan set at home. Today, it is very hard for us to practice with a complete ensemble," he said.

Seeing how the town has risen after the disaster, it is not hard to imagine that its people, with their steadfast confidence in tradition, can soon have their gamelan and more.