

Jakarta at the Margin

Frontiers in Resilience & Vulnerability

The Indonesian capital is the core of the world's second largest urban region, a sprawling metropolis of more than thirty million people. Today the sprawl stretches from horizon to horizon, but it all began on the banks of the River Ciliwung, where its waters meet the Java sea. Since before the founding of the city this river has been a place of contestation and competing interests, with colonial powers including the British, Dutch, and Portuguese all vying to assert their control over the strategic waterway and the surrounding kingdoms. Today, some 500 years later, the question of exactly who has rights over these riverbanks remains as pertinent as ever.

Having ousted their European rivals and razed the local kingdom's capital of Jayakarta to the ground, the Dutch would build their new city on its ruins. Batavia, as it was named, was planned around a series of canals, and the city's long history of water management challenges began. Originally intended to protect the vulnerable warehouses from attack while assisting in the transport of goods and people, Batavia's canal network also served to segregate the growing population and make them easier to control. These slow-moving waterways quickly became stagnant and infested with mosquitoes, and the Dutch would soon abandon them as unsalvageable, relocating their administrative centre several kilometres inland.

Recent decades have seen the return of 'riverbank politics,' as successive administrations have attempted to address Jakarta's perennial water crises. The city's exponential population growth, poor planning, and inadequate infrastructure have increased the pressure to widen, deepen, and straighten rivers, with local residents often blamed for worsening flooding and poor water quality. In reality, Jakarta's troubled relationship with water is much more complex. A combination of imported ideas about how cities should function, economic volatility, insufficient infrastructure and a changing climate all have their part to play.

Today Jakarta's historic centre finds itself on the margins, trapped between a river system stretched beyond capacity and a coastline rapidly sinking into the sea. Threatened with eviction, forced into one-sided negotiations, and surrounded by failing infrastructure, the people who call this area home nevertheless demonstrate extraordinary resilience in the face of these compound challenges. The communities of the lower Ciliwung are some of the oldest in Jakarta, having survived political upheaval, natural disasters, economic transformation and even open war. They are centuries-old repositories of collective knowledge about what it means to survive and thrive through uncertainty, and proof that it can be done.

Jakarta at the Margins invites you to explore how different ideas of resilience have shaped 5 historic areas of the capital, and asks what we can learn about living with uncertainty in an increasingly insecure future.

1. Kampung Vertikal Aquarium

The housing complex now known as a 'vertical kampung' is one of contemporary Jakarta's most important urban spaces. Originally a typical kampung (urban village) named after marine laboratories operated by the Dutch colonial government, it was demolished in 2016 by then governor Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) because of the residents' lack of legal status. However, the residents refused being forcibly relocated to a social housing complex more than 20km away, and defiantly remained in place, establishing a miniature tent city while they fought for recognition.

Over several years of intense political struggle, the residents of Kampung Aquarium secured a right to remain on their historic land, and a process of negotiation began to determine the shape and nature of their new residences. The challenge of creating a space which met the residents' needs while conforming to existing regulations and planning policy has been an ongoing challenge, and many compromises were made along the way. The extent to which this vertical kampung can truly replace what was lost is a matter of debate, but Kampung Aquarium is very clearly a case study in resilience, solidarity, and collective action in pursuit of a right to the city.



2. Old Port & Museum Bahari

The maritime museum (Museum Bahari) stands opposite Kampung Aquarium, occupying the very same East India Company warehouses around which the trading post of Batavia was built. In the immediate vicinity we can also see the last remaining sections of the bastion wall which surrounded the controversial city, and the historic harbourmaster tower, from which a watch was kept over the port's comings and goings. Batavia proved a less than ideal location for a trading port, with narrow, shallow channels and heavy sedimentation causing problems for larger vessels, and eventually a new port was built at Tanjung Priok to accommodate modern trading capacity.

The historic port of Sunda Kelapa now services only relatively small *pinisi* vessels, a traditional boat design which has been used since ancient times. The ancient name 'Sunda Kelapa' was restored in the post-independence period, in recognition of this crucial location in the history of Jakarta, and of colonialism in Indonesia.

Museum Bahari Spice Warehouses

This historic museum was once the beating heart of Batavia, first as a trading post and later as the capital of the Dutch East Indies. The warehouses once held endemic spices like nutmeg, which bankrolled early colonialism, and pepper, which pushed them into conflict with the Sunda kingdom based in pre-colonial Jayakarta.

Old fortress wall

Originally intended as a trading post, not a bustling city, the first steps in establishing Batavia were centred on defence. Vulnerable to attack from incensed local kingdoms in Java and Sunda, there was also a concern of seaborne raids from other colonial powers. These sea walls were constructed to defend against enemy ships, and began the tradition of sea wall projects which dominate Jakarta's coastline until the present day.

Fat Cu Kung Temple

Fat Cu Kung Temple, built privately by Koh Acai in 2016, serves both as a place of worship and a public site open to visitors. Its central figure is the revered deity Fat Cu Kung, known as the Lord of Law—a rare sight to find by the seaside, as such temples are usually located in Chinatown areas like Glodok. The temple houses a dozen statues of various deities, gathered from personal collections, friends' donations, and family heirlooms. The owner himself is a deeply spiritual person who practices prayer with *Poapoe*, showing that this place is more than a collection—it's a living expression of devotion.

The Syahbandar Tower

also known as the Uitikijk. It was built in 1839 on the site of the former Bastion Culemborg, a defensive fort constructed around 1645. Serving as a watchtower for ships entering and leaving Batavia through the Sunda Kelapa Harbor, it also functioned as a customs office to collect taxes on imported goods. Located at the corner of Jalan Pakin and Jalan Pasar Ikan in Sunda Kelapa, this 12-meter-tall tower offers views of the harbor area and its surroundings. However, due to land subsidence and vibrations from heavy traffic, the tower now leans about 2.5 degrees to the south.



3. Kampung Luar Batang

Luar Batang means ‘outside the gate,’ and the name of this long-standing neighbourhood reflects its exclusion from the city of Batavia proper during the colonial period. Indigenous people were prohibited from residing or bringing their boats into harbour within the fortress-city, and their settlements clustered outside the walls, separated by canals. The neighbourhood is dominated by the historic Luar Batang Mosque, one Jakarta’s oldest, and home to a shrine of a local saint who was once held captive by the colonial authorities.

The presence of this pilgrimage site has helped shield Kampung Luar Batang from outside intervention, and its residents have thus far resisted eviction and relocation. For that reason, the kampung typology has developed organically, with dense networks of social and economic interaction supporting a vibrant community across the generations. The neighbourhood now sits several metres below sea level, however, and saltwater flows freely through cracks in the towering dockside wall. Whatever the future holds for North Jakarta, the residents of Luar Batang seem determined to remain with their heritage and identity as one of Jakarta’s original kampung.

Red bridge

The red bridge has a long a storied history of connecting the two neighbourhoods of Kampung Aquarium and Kampung Luar Batang, the only pedestrian route which avoids a convoluted journey of almost two kilometres. The current bridge is a reconstruction of a much older bridge, which the residents remembered from their childhoods and pushed the government to build.

Sunken homes

As one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Jakarta, it’s no surprise to see evidence of the city’s long-term transformation everywhere. The entire neighbourhood lies several metres below sea level, and you might notice seawater flowing out from many of the homes. Many of the older homes lie even lower still, below the level of the new concrete layers which have been used to raise the streets.

Masjid Raya Sunda Kelapa

This historic mosque is one of Jakarta’s oldest and most important pilgrimage sites, said to house the venerated remains of a local saint. Constructed in the 18th-century, the legacy of this site has afforded protection to the surrounding community, as well as supplementary income from the many pilgrims who continue to make regular visits.



4. Kampung Susun Kunir

Similar to the case of Kampung Aquarium, residents of Kampung Kunir's homes were destroyed by government apparatus in order to clear the riverside for a water monitoring station in the year 2015. The residents refused to leave, citing their legacy of helping preserve the area's historical sites, guarding against rioting and property damage, and their rejection of a proposed relocation site in a remote and isolated corner of the city. They were particularly outraged given that their neighbourhood had won the 'Jakarta Green and Clean' award for taking care of their immediate environment just five years earlier.

Under intense pressure to relocate, only seven families were able to remain defiant for the two whole years it would take to finally secure land rights. Deciding to remain on their original location rather than relocate to a nearby lot owned by a state-owned enterprise, the residents began the long and complicated process of determining their own future. Kampung Susun Kunir now stands as an example of collective planning, with provisions made for elderly and disabled residents, space allocated for micro enterprises, and as Jakarta's only social housing complex with its own heritage museum.

Old rail bridge

Half-hidden inside the Ciliwing's heavily-modified banks lie the brick and mortar foundations of the old station bridge. One of the earliest stations constructed by the Nederlands(ch)-Indische Spoorweg Maatschappij (Dutch East Indies Railway Company) operating in Batavia, it would later connect to the new administrative district at Koningsplein (now Monas), and ultimately to Bogor more than 40km to the South. This strategic railway line was an essential part of the Dutch administration, facilitating the movement of goods, people, soldiers and administrators from the agrarian hinterland to the political core and coastal trading centre.

New musholla (chapel) & food court location

Having reestablished their housing rights, the residents of Kampung Susun Kunir are working towards enriching their community. This includes constructing a new chapel for their communal prayers on the site where their resistance occupation was held, and expanding the space for vending and residents SMEs to take advantage of increased food and vehicular traffic.

Subterranean museum

The location of Kampung Susun Kunir is not only strategic, but also historic. The museum recounts the long process of realising the community's ambitions for housing rights, the design and decision-making mechanisms deployed during the process, and other aspects of life in one of Jakarta's first 'vertical kampung.' Additionally, special provisions were made to acknowledge, preserve, and display the archeological sites beneath the housing complex via glass panels in the floor.



5. Komunitas Anak Kali Ciliwung (KAKC)

Kampung Anak Kali Ciliwung is a riverside settlement located in North Jakarta, positioned between the Anak Kali Ciliwung River and the remnants of Batavia Fortress. In 2015, a river normalization program threatened to widen the river channel by fifteen meters, placing the settlement—which comprises Kampung Tongkol, Kampung Lodan, and Kampung Krapu—under imminent threat of eviction. In response, the residents collectively negotiated with the authorities and voluntarily agreed to compromise with a five-meter distance from the riverbank. This was achieved through partial reduction of their housing units, showing a proactive and cooperative approach to negotiate the space for settlements and riverbank. Together with the other kampung within the Urban Poor Network (Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota), the residents of Kampung Anak Kali Ciliwung collectively advocated for revisions to the city's zoning plan and applied for provisional building permit under cooperative ownership. Through this process of advocacy, the kampung obtained temporary building permits and formal recognition of its residential zoning, thereby ensuring legal protection against future displacement.

The community successfully demonstrated its capacity for self-upgrading as a means of preserving both the environmental quality of the river and the remnants of the Batavia Castle that interacts with Kampung Tongkol. The residents undertook a series of physical and infrastructural improvements, including the rehabilitation of roads, the construction of septic tanks, the reorganization of waste management systems, the restoration of riparian vegetation, and the establishment of buffer zones adjacent to the historical wall. These initiatives were complemented by housing renovations financed through a community-managed revolving fund. What initially emerged as an act of resistance and environmental improvement gradually evolved into a foundation for achieving security of tenure. The case of Kampung Anak Kali Ciliwung exemplifies a transformative model of participatory planning in Jakarta—where community-driven upgrading processes intersect with governmental political will.

Rumah Contoh (Community-led housing example)

In their process of negotiating with the government to preserve their riverside community, residents were not passive. Instead, they worked to develop new urban prototypes in housing and river normalisation which were capable of bridging the gap between competing visions of Jakarta's future. This 'example house' shows the semi-permanent and lightweight nature of typical Indonesian architecture, fulfilling the specifics of a compromise between state edicts and community interests.

Old Fortress of Batavia

The last remaining ruins of the fortress complexes which once protected Batavia, these crumbling ruins attest to the centuries of transformation which have taken place across this coastline. Largely forgotten, tucked away between an industrial roadway and a residential neighbourhood, the ruins are also evidence of the investment made in the city once referred to as 'The Queen of the East,' now abandoned and held together by the roots of towering Banyan trees

