

## Exhibition Review

### *Tanahku Indonesia: Celebrating the Indigenous Interior*

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#### **Towards Meaningful Indigenous Material Practices**

*Tanahku Indonesia* was a week-long, architecture and interior design exhibition showing local earth-based materials to reveal their potential as an integral part of Indonesia's creative economy development. Curated by Yandi Andri Yatmo and Paramita Atmodiwirjo, the exhibition was held in dia.lo.gue Artspace in Central Jakarta, Indonesia from 8 to 12 November 2017. This exhibition attempted to reveal the materiality of earth-based materials across a broad spectrum, which was not limited to the physical presence of the materials, but more as a reflection of knowledge that was grounded on the deep understanding of their context. This multifaceted exhibition showed various earth-based materials gathered from different places within the Indonesian archipelago, as well as the methods and techniques related to the materials, while also revealing their values within architectural and interior design practice in Indonesia.

Every exhibition has its agenda, so did *Tanahku Indonesia*. The title of the exhibition, which means "My Earth Indonesia", was entirely reflected the agenda, in order to show the richness of Indonesia's earth materiality and to illuminate this materiality as a local treasure. Based on thorough research by the Architectural Design Research Group from the Department of Architecture, Universitas Indonesia, and funded by Indonesia Creative Economy Agency, this exhibition put materiality in interior and architectural practice into scrutiny, and at the same time attempted to bring forward an awareness of materiality to a wider audience. It focused on indigenous material

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practices that had been collected from various places in Indonesia, as an attempt to reveal the values that are often neglected in modern industry.

However, the exhibition did not only show the images of hope and optimism, but also some parts of the exhibition also depicted the harsh reality of Indonesia's material practices and the exploitation of Mother Earth as a result of modern development which we are rarely aware of in our daily lives. The balance between hope, excitement, and despair was simultaneously experienced during the exhibition. Berge (2009), a Scandinavian architect who was one of the pioneers of sustainable architecture, highlighted that we had managed our earth with very little knowledge about it. The anthropocentric views of modern development had brought us to the brink of ecological disaster. Thus, the whole agenda of this exhibition was not only economical, but also political, to bring forward an awareness of a more meaningful material reality through indigenous material practices.

### The Materiality of the Materials

Figure 1  
Collection  
of soils from  
Indonesia  
34 provinces  
and their  
geographical  
distribution



To focus the audience's attention, the research objectives and findings, and the curators' vision, a 'hook' was used to brand and to present the exhibition through the lens of the visitors instead of the specialists (Rumschlag, 2013). A collection of 240 jars of soil and sand samples were collected from the 34 provinces in Indonesia and a large map indicating their locations welcomes the visitors as they enter the exhibition [Figure 1]. The sensuous quality of the collection and its geographical information, as well as the narrative of places where the materials were gathered, seemingly orientated the visitors to the richness of the Indonesian earth. As Walter Benjamin (1999) wrote, "The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space" (p. 206). The material and the physical reality of the soil and sand became the things that enabled a direct engagement between the audience and the exhibition, in

effect this juxtaposition created a sense of being present together with the earth of Indonesia.

This sense of literalness was the property of materials that seduces our perception and experience. Archaeologist Tilley and Bennet (2014) argued that there was no substitution for the direct experience of physically being there. However, it was impossible to create an exhibition across the archipelago solely to enable people to have a direct engagement with the Indonesian earth. The material practices are not only affected by the physical materiality per se but also heavily influenced by the images of the materials that are construed by the society (Sheller, 2012). Our economic system and social values are affected by the materiality of objects, which eventually shape our civilisation as a whole. The exhibition, therefore, constructed the dialectic between the materiality and the visuality of the material practices that allow us to have a more holistic reflection of our material culture. "...it is important not to see exhibitions as existing in isolation, but rather engaged in a dialogue with the world around them" (Francis, 2015, p. 56).



Figure 2  
Collection of  
Indonesia's  
earth-based  
materials

This exhibition could be seen as a process of interiorisation to increase control and ownership of our environment (Power, 2014) as a challenge against modern industry. Modern industry uses standardisation as a mechanism of perfection and uniformity. In the modern context, the imperfections of hand and the variations in the ingredients were the enemies of industrialised perfection (Sennett, 2008; Pollan, 2013). The modern pursuit of perfection thereby dulled our senses to the real value of our material reality.

Sociologist Sennett (2008) argued that only through crafting could we have a foundation to evaluate our material reality. In crafted materials, the spirit of people is literally synonymous hand-in-hand with quality (Berge, 2009), while in modern industry, the image of

the product is far more important. The celebration of indigenous materials in the exhibition essentially attempted to show the real value of the materials that are woven into the fabric of social and cultural values of the local community through the lens of craftsmanship. The people involved behind the lengthy processing of materials, as well as tools involved and the ingredients available in the regions thus are indicative of the complex relationship between materials, technology, people, and places.

Figure 3  
Material  
process  
diagram

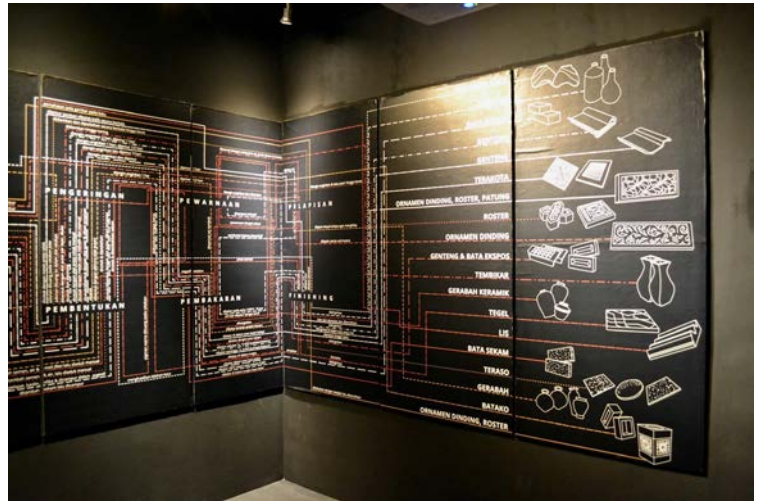


Figure 4  
Tools for brick  
making from  
various regions



Every material has its own unique stories. In the centre part of the exhibition, the whole records of explored stories about the collected materials were displayed in the forms of artefacts, drawings, photographs, videos, and models. In a darkened exhibition space, a

six-metre-long diagram illustrated the long journey of various materials from different places through the various processes that transformed them into ceramics, bricks, statues or any other earth-based products [Figure 3]. The processes involved traditional methods, such as cutting, pounding, filtering, mixing, carving, and moulding, using simple, yet specific tools. The diagram explicitly showed the diverse methods and ingredients being used by the local community in crafting their products. The tools were also inevitably differentiated, fulfilling the specific purposes of each process [Figure 4]. It is interesting to see that to produce a brick; each place has a particular set of ingredients, tools, and processes. These local industries use their local resources, tools, and skills which could be a key to sustainable practices, as suggested by Berge (2009).

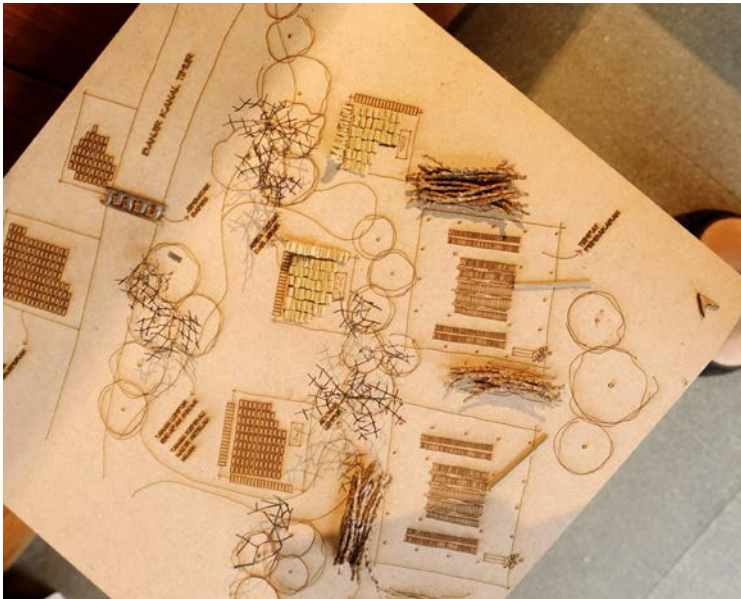


Figure 5  
Model of  
material  
production

Around the other side of the exhibition, visitors could catch a glimpse of the stories of the local industries. Here, a series of models represented the back-end of the material production in four different regions [Figure 5]. The rough and unfinished look of the models was intended to provide a hint of the modesty of the places. Moreover, their scale demonstrated the small, yet sustainable local industries' craftsmanship. The scope of the practice and the production cycles were limited; raw materials originated from local places, the actors involved lived nearby, and the supporting materials were also locally sourced. As Sennett (2008) stated, craftsmanship was about the limit of the materials production processes. This section emphasised the celebration of indigenous materials, especially their

production process, simplicity, and humbleness.

The exhibition also showed the agency of the materials. The actors behind the making of the products are essentially vital, yet often they are dismissed by modern industry. The materiality of the making is a question of authority. "The successful workshop will establish legitimate authority in the flesh, not in rights or duties set down on paper" (Sennett, 2008, p. 54). It is often easy to forget the real cost of the workers' efforts in either obtaining or processing the materials into products. In this exhibition, the faces of the people and their efforts were shown in various ways to reveal the real value of the materials beyond the physical reality that we have at hand [Figure 6].



Figure 6  
Video and  
photographs  
documenting  
the actors and  
the workshops

Some local industries have been struggling in maintaining their sustainability, due to modern competitors that provide cheaper products in a larger quantity. But, often we do not realise that the quantity itself is a problem. "For the first time, the sheer quantity of uniform objects aroused concerns that number would dull the senses, the uniform perfection of machined goods issuing no sympathetic invitation, no personal response" (Sennett, 2008, p. 109). The wide array of the imperfect samples of earth-based materials and products displayed in the exhibition offered a glimpse of personality that was missing in sleek, modern materials. The personality of the workers, the sense of place and community were reflected in the materials as the manifestation of cultural participation. Thus, the materiality became the "interface between people, the environment, and interaction of individuals regarded as components of a social system," (Shanks & Tilley, 2007, p. 83).

## The Value of the Materials

People nowadays tend to be more aroused in anticipating new things rather than appreciating operations (Sennett, 2008). The modern pursuit of perfection may have gone too far; the more people have, the less they value the things they have. The value of our material reality is decreasing at a faster speed than ever before, which leads to increasing waste. Berge (2009) urged for the need to consider ecological principles in valuing our world. The *Tanahku Indonesia* exhibition could be seen as an attempt to restore our senses and sensibility to the real value of indigenous materials through the lens of their craftsmanship. Understanding our material reality is not necessarily limited to the physical reality of things but rather, as a reflection of the cultural and social practices of the local community that allows the possibility of those materials to be made into objects of use and enjoyment. The construction of the value of materials thereby should be based on their locality and specificity. The value of material practices cannot be replaced by any means of technological advancement, but rather these are inherent in the people, place, and culture of Indonesia.

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