“Kota Madani”: Islamism of Urban Planning in Banda Aceh

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Abstract

This paper shows how the spirit of an idealised Islamic past is brought to life in Banda Aceh, though not only Islamic Sharia implementation, but also Islamic city planning. I show this by observing the ways the idea Islamic City, “Kota Madani” has been translated into several architecture developments and consequently the ways the architecture form and boost the image of Islamic city. To do this, the paper employs semi-structured interview, participant observation and literature study method. The paper conducts a survey on architectural development and spatial regulation in Banda Aceh. By doing this, I argue, the state, in this case Banda Aceh’s local government, through its institutional policies and practices, politically controls the formation of public architecture, especially iconic or monumental architectural heritage. The stakeholders, especially government have translated the idea “Kota Madani” into at least three interrelated ways. Firstly, They adopt what so-called the image and Middle East architectural styles, especially Islamic holy places architectural style. Secondly, spatial planning has set and consequently strengthened the Baiturrahman Mosque as a central or landmark of Banda Aceh. Thirdly, Islam is combined with modern concept by enacting several modern buildings and facilities imbued with Islam.

Keywords : Islamic City, Kota Madani, Architecture, and Identity

Introduction

I specifically focus on how the Islamic City, “Kota Madani” is translated and appropriated by several stakeholders, especially in the design of public architecture such as mosques, schools, government offices, etc in Banda Aceh. Madani, which is also literally translated as civil society in English (Rosyid, –), is a translation from the Arabic word mujtama’ madani which has two meanings: madinah which means a city reflecting dynamic activities and tamaddun meaning civilization (Hafidhuddin, 2003). KotaMadani is the concept of an Islamic city based on egalitarian concepts. An example of this society was strongly associated with Al–Madinah city, Saudi Arabia, during the life of the Prophet Muhammad. If the age of Enlightenment was an important milestone for Western modernity, in Islam, generally speaking, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad is also seen as an important milestone, because he transformed ignorant human beings in to members of a civilised society. His sayings and actions, including the life during his era, have become one source of references for Muslims.

The notion to form Islamic City is also in line with the global phenomenon of rhetorical and politicised claims to return to ‘Islamic’ values and teachings, and to form Islamic cities within the Islamic world. In Banda Aceh this notion is also in line with the implementation of Islamic sharia which, for the government and other elites, is a panacea for the independence crisis that caused a thirty–year conflict in Aceh, as well as a way of distinguishing Acehnese identity from the rest of Indonesia.

The creation of identity imposed by static physical settings, like architecture and urban planning, has become a concern and interest of states through the hands of architects and urban planners. This paper, therefore, sees urban planning and architectural design as state–controlled systems or state–driven systems of constructing and controlling a number of cultural tools in the heritage process. As noted by Billig (1995), architecture is a medium for conveying political messages of government; the banal nature of architecture works to continually reinforce particular understanding of identity. In Addition, as architecture has the ability to convey certain messages as if it is equivalent to a language: either as a “code” or written or spoken language (Hershberger, 1988, p.190). Eventually, landmark architecture is inextricably bound up with collective identity claims (Libeskind in Jones, 2006). The state, through its institutional policies and
practices, politically controls the formation of architectural heritage, especially iconic or monumental architectural heritage. This is undertaken in order to form a certain sense of place. Consequently this can trigger certain memories and construct certain identities.

To investigate the ways Islamic City, “Kota Madani”, has been understood and translated by various involved stakeholders in the development of public architecture in Banda Aceh, I employed several methods: participant observation and literature study. I have conducted interview with several involved stakeholders, a survey and participant observation of architecture development and literature study on spatial regulation in Banda Aceh. Then I classify the public architecture into several possible themes and analyse using several theories and comparisons with other architectural styles. In addition, a triangulation between participant observation, interview, and literature study has been undertaken to ensure the validity of the data.

Returning to Islamic Principles as a Global Phenomenon

The return of Banda Aceh to its Islamic past is also part of a global phenomenon. This return mostly emerged after colonization, or the end of World War II, and is part of a reaction to modernization and globalization (Nasr, 2010). Generally speaking, as argued by Frishman and Khan (1994; p.11), colonialism, together with war with Christianity and the Mongols, had caused the displacement of Islamic scholars from the centre of Islamic civilization, such as Cordoba and Granada in Spain. In addition to that, they mention that the fall and secularism of the centres of Islam, such as the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul in Turkey, have also contributed to the fall of Islam, which is now, however, emerging from its backwater and expanding to become the fastest growing major monotheistic religion. Thus, according to Nasr (2010), there are at least three general reactions to modernization emerging in the Islamic Word: Islamic modernism (adoption and Islamisation of modern technologies), a gradual attempt to study the meaning and history of Islamic science, and a study of Islamic science from an Islamic point of view through to re-reading unexplored Islamic manuscript stored in India, Yemen and many other places.

In urban planning, Abu–Lughod (1987, p. 1) finds that urban planners, with a new respect for past achievements, are searching for ways to apply this to today’s cities that identify as Islamic, which is happening not only in many part of parts of the Arab world, but it seems now in other parts of the Islamic world, and particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia. See for example the implementation of Islamic Sharia in Kelantan, Malaysia and Aceh, Indonesia. This, according to Abu–Lughod (1987), is really misleading, as the contemporary context of the Islamic world is not as it used to be. The cities in the Islamic world today have followed the Western planning model for cities, especially American cities which are based on modern science and technologies that are not in line with Islamic science principles (Nasr, 2010). To adopt modern technologies, to be modern, for most non–Western culture such as in Southeast Asia, means to be developed (Byrne, 2012, p. 297). Yet, this modernity, as mentioned by Frishman (1994), in the Islamic world today, has negative connotations, as opposed to Islam, which has only positive connotations.

“Kota Madani” in the Spatial Planning of Banda Aceh

For the new Banda Aceh, as shown by Qamun Rencana Tata Ruang Ruang Kota Banda Aceh (the urban planning law) No.4 year 2009, it is better to return to the past while engaging in appeals to modernity. This is done through the resurrection of past tradition, in this case “Islamic” values, and the accommodation of new technologies to compete with other modern cities in the world. This resurrection is not unusual for a post–disaster city and society, and has marked many societies’ efforts to sustain cultural resilience after a surpassing disaster (ICCROM, 2005). In Banda Aceh after the tsunami, the new urban planning law No.4 year 2009 of Banda Aceh clearly aims to form an Islamic city based on Islamic and modern principles. This Islamisation and modernization of planning can be obviously seen through the aims of urban planning of Banda Aceh “Mewujudkan Ruang Kota Banda Aceh sebagai Kota Jasa Yang Islami. Tamaddun, Modern dan Berbasis Mitigasi Bencana” (to create Banda Aceh as a modern, Islamic service city based on disaster mitigation) and Long Term Vision of development of Banda Aceh “ Terwujudnya Banda Aceh Sebagai Kota Tamaddun, Modern dan Islami” (To form Banda Aceh as a Modern Islamic city). In previous urban planning such as Rencana Tata Ruang Wilayah/RTWR 2000–2010 (Banda Aceh Government, 1999 (2000)) and its revision RTRW 2001–2010 (Banda Aceh Government, 2000), the government did not clearly stated that they are forming an Islamic City. In addition, in his speech in a meeting held by the People Representative Council of Banda Aceh on 22 March 2012, Mawardi Nurdin and Illiza Sa’anuddin Djamal – at that time they were still candidate of mayor and deputy mayor – stated that they wanted to continue their success in last five years in leading the city by forming Banda Aceh as Kota Madani, Islamic City (“Mawardi Nurdin–Illiza: Melanjutkan Prestasi dengan Kota Madani”, –). The Islamic City they aim to is “Kota Madani adalah sebuah...
kota yang penduduknya beriman dan berakhlak mulia. Menjaga persatuan dan kesatuan, toleran dalam perbedaan, tata hukum, dan memiliki ruang publik yang luas (Kota madani is a city where the citizens are maintaining peace, tolerance, law, and open minded).

What is interesting to note for these aims is the words “Islam” and “modern”, which, following leading literature in Islamic studies such as Nasr (2010), clash in philosophies and principles. Along with its Islamic aims, my interview with the mayor of Banda Aceh also reveals that the government of Banda Aceh wants to turn the city into an Islamic city which is associated with kota madani, for example: We will create Banda Aceh as a model for kota madani…where there is tolerance among Moslem and other believers…so that people can live peacefully, harmoniously, and tolerantly…this is really like the ways Prophet Muhammad united Anshar and Muhajirin (Anshar was a group of people in Madinah, who helped Muhajirin, a group of people from Mecca who had just moved to Madinah.)…everybody lived peacefully and tolerantly…this is what we hope in the future. Interview with the Mayor of Banda Aceh, date….

In Spatial Planning of Banda Aceh, based on my interview with Head of Spatial Planning Department of Public Work Office of Banda Aceh, “Kota Madani” has been translated into green city concept as Islam encourages a state to provide a comfortable place for its inhabitants (interview on 14 October 2016).

Representing “Kota Madani” in Architecture

Instead of pursuing more philosophical concept of “Kota Madani” like the one during the Prophet time, Banda Aceh many stakeholders, as architecture in its ubiquitous presence and has symbolic meanings, it is a potential tool to be employed in the government symbolic political Urban Planning. Thus this paper observes several efforts to use architecture as a language to describe the idea of Islamic City, “Kota Madani”. I argue there are at least there ways of implementing and translating the idea of “Kota Madani” in architecture by involved stakeholders.

Firstly, the Baiturrahman Mosque is deliberately planned to be the city’s symbol. The Qanun No.4 Tahun 2009 tentang Rencana Tata Ruang Wilayah Kota Banda Aceh tahun 2009–2029 (the Spatial Planning Law) stipulates that the buildings around the mosque should not be higher than the minaret of the mosque and should function in accordance with the religious uses of the mosque. For example, surrounding buildings may not operate as hotels, karaoke centres, or have other entertainments that are in conflict with the mosque (Qanun No.4 Year 2009).

Consequently, the mosque styles have become source of reference to architecture development in Banda Aceh. This is evident in the design of the shopping centre known as Pasar Aceh, an old market renovated with modern features through the program “Revitalization of Pasar Aceh”. The façade of the shopping center literally replicates the arch and ornamentation of the Baiturrahman Mosque, which is seen as a model for Islamic architecture by the government. The replication is undertaken to give a sense of traditional and Islamic style. See for example the mayor statement on the Government website on 2 January 2013, “Kita melakukan ini agar Pasar Atjeh dapat terlihat lebih modern, dan tetap tidak meninggalkan substansi tradisionalnya. Kita berharap agar hal ini dapat menjadi contoh untuk daerah–daerah lainnya,” (we hope Pasar Aceh becomes more modern and still has traditional sense, which consequently it can be an example for other regions) (Purnama, 2013). Another example of this copy–paste architecture is the
Politeknik Aceh, a new college developed along the Krueng Aceh River, just a few kilometers from the mosque. Literally, the skin of the buildings is similar to the Baiturrahman Mosque façade, which is believed to be an expression of Islamic architecture and Acehnese identity.

Figure 2. Politeknik Aceh (left, source: http://www.politeknikaceh.ac.id accessed 2 on June 2014) Pasar Aceh Shopping Centre (right, source: photo by Cut Dewi).

Secondly, the government copies some styles in Middle East countries, especially cities in Saudi Arabia. This is evident in the new development of the Baiturrahman Mosque. As Banda Aceh is the capital city of Aceh province, the intention of creating a Kota Madani has also influenced the decision making at provincial level; the governor, Zaini Abdullah, wants to support the designation of Kota Banda Aceh as Kota Madani by refurbishing the Baiturrahman Mosque in the style of the Nabawi Mosque in Medina. He wants to add umbrellas which are strongly associated with the Nabawi Mosque, Medina, Saudi Arabia. Below is the plan for the refurbishment of the mosque, which will be equipped with underground parking, a new ablution area and a wider garden. This plan has commenced in 2015.


Besides the appropriation of the Baiturrahman Mosque, domes has been literally interpreted as Middle East style and Islamic architecture, ranging from public buildings to recreational places. Domes have been adopted as a style for offices of emerging new organizations related to Islamic Sharia such Mahkamah Syariah (Islamic Court), Kantor Dinas Syariat Islam (Islamic Sharia Office), etc. In fact, Islamic architecture is not necessarily associated with the domes. As most Islamic architecture is derived from Hellenistic and Roman Imperial influences (Grabar, 2004; p.36), the domes actually belong to the era before Islam, and Islam adopted the domes and appropriated it for Islamic purposes. The architectural details, most scholars agree, coming from Islamic civilization are calligraphy, geometry, and garden design (Al–Asad, 1994; Frishman & Khan, 1994; p.13–14). The three details are artworks which are replete with the spirit of obedience to God. The calligraphy, according to Frishman and Khan (1994), expresses the intention of the Moslem scholars to announce to passers–by that the buildings are considered sacred places and convey
spiritual messages. Therefore, they avoid using the form of animal and people in the design, unlike in Classic European design (Frishman & Khan, 1994; Grabar, 2004; Thackston, 1994).

Thirdly, the Islamic city is combined with modern concept. Following Aspinall’s (2007) thesis of Sharia Implementation as a political tool to impress inhabitants that government is good, the Banda Aceh government by implementing Islamic City wants to evidence that it is a “good” government by adopting Islamic values in planning the city, but at the same time wants to be recognized as a “developed” government by pursuing modern technologies. At the same time they also wish to make clear that Islam in Aceh is not extreme and has emerged with modern principles. As Islam has become an issue internationally, especially in the west, local government does not want to lose international support by promoting a pure Islamic city. In addition, as Aceh also wants to be part of the wider world ( Hasan, 2009), it does not want to lose its opportunity to be part of the world by promoting pure Islamic urban planning. An example of how Islamic Sharia becomes a threat for international aid during the post–tsunami reconstruction was reflected in the case of an aid project initiated by the city of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. In 2007, this city assisted Banda Aceh in developing waste management and one stop access for public services ("Laporan Master Plan Pengelolaan Sampah Untuk Kota Banda Aceh Pasca Tsunami ", 2007). However, in 2009, this assistance was under review after the Apeldoorn government was informed about the implementation of Islamic Sharia in Banda Aceh ("Apeldoorn Hentikan Kerjasama dengan Aceh," 2009).

To reflect a modern city, the mayor consciously promotes modern architectural styles imbued with the spirit of Islam. To reflect the image of a modern Islamic city, modern dome–roof styles have been adopted in some buildings, especially public buildings. Even though this style emerged before the tsunami, it is favored more now since it was adopted in the architectural design of the symbolic project Balaikota, the mayors’ office. The building was designed with a hollow–domed metal roof and a cubical ship–shape façade. Color, dominated by grey, and materials, a combination of concrete, glass, and metal, have contributed to a strong modern image.

This building, however, has attracted controversy as it is not harmonious with its surroundings, which are dominated by old buildings from the 19th Century, as well as the nineteen sixties and eighties. Moreover, it has attracted many criticisms from local experts, especially architects, and the general community, both for its controversial architectural style and amount of funding, because it was built in the middle of a housing crisis after the tsunami. The critiques, however, tend to be confined to informal communication in coffee shops or blogs.

There are several other programs for making Banda Aceh a modern city, including: Banda Aceh Cyber Islamic City (BACIC), and Cities Development Initiative for Asia (CDIA). In BACIC, Banda Aceh presents a very strong concept of the Islamisation of modern technology – in this case the use of the Internet – as pursued by other societies within the Islamic world. The pure modern images, such as the pictures below, were taken from a government website in 2012.
Conclusion

Banda Aceh government, through its urban planning, controls landmark architectural heritage, like religious buildings and memorials, to facilitate the remembering of the so-called “glorious Islamic past of the Acehnese”, and to formally reform a sense of the city as a self-consciously Islamic city. Literally, the valuation of the Islamic past is registered in the government policy and practice to construct an Islamic city. This is undertaken through at least three interrelated gestures. Firstly, the government regulates the Baiturrahman Mosque as a city symbol. This is followed by several attempts to not only regulate buildings around the mosque, but also to copy the mosque’s architectural styles. Secondly, the government copies architectural styles of the Middle East cities, especially adopting the Nabawi Mosque styles in Medina and domes as Islamic architecture. Thirdly, there is obvious intention to form Islamic modern city by establishing several facilities and appropriating buildings in this way. All of these are undertaken to bring back the image of Islamic past and evidence the Islamic identity of Banda Aceh.

References


