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Sylviana Hamdani speaks to the architect in charge of the giant task to help revamp Kota Tua Something New for Old Town

Kota Tua, located at the heart of Jakarta, is legendary. During Dutch colonial rule, the area was established to act as the city's center and headquarters for the colonial government, where dozens of state offices, military forts, warehouses and grand mansions stood proudly in the face of time and change.

Alas, at the end of the 17th century, severe cholera, dysentery and malaria ravaged the Old Town, killing hundreds of its inhabitants.

Survivors then moved south, abandoning the area to turn dingy, run-down and neglected.

Since the millennium, the Jakarta administration has made several attempts to revive the glory of this historical quarter, but it wasn't until Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo and Deputy Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama stepped into office that progress finally started being made.

Early this year, the dynamic duo founded the Jakarta Endowment for Arts and Heritage (Jeforah), a non-profit consortium that consists of state-owned companies, private firms, renowned artists, architects and historians with aims to revive the Old Town area.

The consortium worked fast. Since its inception, Jeforah has taken concrete steps to conserve and revitalize Kota Tua's historical buildings.

Post office

The first on their list was the grand Post Office building, just across the *Stadhuis* in the heart of the Old Town.

The *Stadhuis* was originally built in 1707, after which it functioned as the City Hall. Today, it is known as the Fatahillah Museum and houses an impressive collection of paintings, furniture and home-ware from the colonial era.

Constructed in 1746, the Post Office served as a vital center for communication — a function it still maintains today.

Though the tradition of sending letters via post has obviously dwindled with the explosion of Internet connectivity and smartphones in the capital, the historical government building still provides postal services — albeit at a limited capacity.

The actual Post Office now occupies only a small portion of the ground floor, leaving the remaining space, as well as the first floor, empty for many years — until Jeforah stepped in.

The consortium assigned award-winning Indonesian architect Andra Matin with the heavy task of revamping the 268-year-old building and transform it into a contemporary art center.

Galeria Fatahillah & Kantor Pos

Jl. Taman Fatahillah No. 1, West Jakarta
Open Tuesdays to Sundays, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Entry costs Rp 50,000 (\$4.20)

Galeria Fatahillah

The 52-year-old architect looked pensive as he sipped his coffee in Galeria Fatahillah's lounge, located on the first floor of the old Post Office building. The morning sun shone through the large casement windows, bathing the lounge with its soothing, golden light.

"This is the starting point in reviving Kota Tua," he said, referring to the Post Office's new art space and the consortium's plans to revamp 85 historical old buildings in the old quarter.

According to Andra, the Post Office was chosen as Jeforah's project due to its vital position in the city.

"All post offices [in Indonesia] in the colonial era were built at Kilometer Zero, which marked its vital function in the cities," said Andra. "So, by transforming [parts of] the Post Office into an art gallery, we hope to create a [center] of calm and aesthetics that will influence the entire city."

The five-time IAI (Indonesian Institute of Architects) award-winning architect spent three months designing Galeria Fatahillah, but was given only one additional month to execute his plans.

"We worked 24 hours a day to finish [the gallery]," he said with a laugh.

Andra completely revamped the 2,000-square-meter second floor of the building, installing white partitions to create walls and halls that now carry striking works of art.

"I don't think that we should preserve old buildings as some sort of sacred temples," said Andra. "If we do that, the buildings would never be of use to the people in this modern era. Instead, I think we should create new uses for old buildings to revitalize them."

To do this, he added, adjustments would need to be made.

The thin walls of multiplex boards now running along the Post Office's second floor stand approximately 1.5 meters away from the building's original walls, leaving a hollow space.

"Actually, the entire project could never have been finished in one month's time," said Andra. "So my strategy [to meet the one-month deadline] was to put some space between the original walls and the partitions, so that builders may continue their conservation work behind

the partitions, without disturbing the ongoing exhibition or the visitors."

The architect also decided to include gaps in the new partition walls, through which visitors can see the original walls and windows of the old post office.

Meanwhile, a gap, approximately 30 centimeters in size, between the original ceilings and the top of the partition walls allows visitors to admire the massive overhead beams that have successfully supported the structure for over more than centuries.

"With this arrangement, I hope that people can see that old and new constructions can indeed co-exist in harmony," said the Bandung-born architect.

Some parts of the gallery are overlaid with wooden decks that rise about 20cm above the post office's original floors to provide space for the complex circuit of mechanical cables, ducts and pipes from the air conditioners.

The gallery's interior, dominated by a flawless shade of white, looks calm and pristine, inviting tourists, art aficionados and curious Jakartans to linger.

"I've always loved the color white," Andra said. "[The color is] so pure. And when the sun falls on a white surface, [the rays] will create a new color spectrum, which continues to change according to the weather."

White, according to the architect, is also the ideal platform to display the paintings and various art work.

"White is humble," he continued. "It doesn't boast of itself, but [highlights] the things put on its surface."

For the Galeria Fatahillah project, Andra worked with the Japanese brand Nippon Paints to create a pristine white paint, which was later named "Andra Matin White."

"I will continue to use this paint in my future work that require the particular shade of white," Andra said.

As a final touch, the architect allowed some dilapidated walls to remain in several parts of the gallery.

"They will act as monuments that bear witness of how the building looked before [it was revamped]," he said.

Galeria Fatahillah first opened its doors to the public on March 13.

The gallery completed its debut contemporary art exhibition last week and is now preparing for a larger show scheduled for later this year.

"It's my first revitalization project," said the award-winning architect. "And so far, I'm quite happy with the results."

Next stage

But Andra's work on the historical Post Office is far from over.

The architect is currently working on the second stage of the buildings' revitalization project, which is to design the use of its vacant areas on the ground floor.

"We're planning to open a cafe, black-box theater and souvenir shop on the ground floor," Andra explained.

A large "Visitor's Center" is also planned for the space, which will be a big draw for tourists and Jakartans interested in the history of the structure, as well as the new developments being made to the Old Town.

"The space will act as an information center of all the things that are happening in Kota Tua," Andra said.

The second phase is scheduled to start in January, 2015 and is targeted to reach completion at the end of that year.

"I hope this [post office revitalization] project can be a catalyst for the future conservation and revamping efforts of old buildings in Indonesia," Andra said.

Award-winning architect Andra Matin was chosen to revamp Kota Tua's historical Post Office, which he tackled by first transforming the 2,000-square-meter second floor into an inviting art space named Galeria Fatahillah. JG Photos/Sylviana Hamdani



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Andra Matin, architect