

**Practicing Architecture Today**  
**Young Architect (Junior?), Senior Architect (Old ...)**  
Lecture by Han Awal, Jakarta Design Centre, 22 July 1990

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*In 1990, a group of architects in their 30s came together under the name Young Indonesian Architects (AMI, Arsitek Muda Indonesia) and held their first exhibition under the title Pameran Arsitektur Prospektif (Prospective Architecture Exhibition) at the Jakarta Design Centre (JDC). Alongside their works, AMI published a manifesto expressing their belief that architects are designers and design is an exploration. This manifesto was a challenge to the architectural practice in Indonesia at the time, which AMI perceived as stagnant. During the event, AMI invited architects from the older generation to express their views in a symposium entitled "A Dialogue Between Young and Senior Architects". Han Awal, 60 years old, was among the speakers.*

*In his lecture, Han reflects on the emergence of this new spirit and the position of his generation in the architectural profession. Han admires AMI's inquisitive spirit and reminds the new generation that, as professionals, they not only have a responsibility to innovate but also towards the users. He emphasizes functionalism and technical mastery as qualities that architects must therefore possess. He concludes his speech with a message to his colleagues that this change of course is not a threat but a hopeful step for the profession; that an architect's career is not limited by age, and that their work is not done yet.*

*The text was translated by Adelia Andani for the project Dipl.-Ing Arsitek: German-trained Indonesian Architects from the 1960s and edited by Eduard Kögel and Moritz Henning with Alisa Kotmair. Footnotes are by the translator and editors.*

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Panel at the discussion at the Jakarta Design Centre, 22 July 1990. Far right: Han Awal.

“Ideals are noble, facts are sacred.” (English proverb)

### **Introduction**

In the past, an architect – one of the oldest professions – had a high position in society, especially in religion. Often the name of an architect is associated with the ruler – the king or anyone in power. The title “Master Builder”, as in Michelangelo’s era, was still popular until the beginning of this century.

An architect was often the right-hand man of a king, advising on physical constructions that manifested the leader’s aspirations. With its aesthetics, the built environment should please both the people and the leader, enabling a harmonious state. The arrogance of architects is therefore understandable. And because the sign of a professional is often arrogance, this arrogance shows how dedicated an architect is to his profession. In other words, there are positive sides to arrogance.

With the advent of industrialization and modernization, as well as widespread democratization, this central role is fading day by day. The term “Master Builder” has become a farce; the works of an architect are often no longer evaluated for their characteristics. The incentive to stand out also tends to disappear – almost no architects dare call themselves “Master Builders”. A designer at most ... or a co-signer! The era where architects are a “prima donna” has passed. Now architects are only a tiny part of the overall construction industry, part of a more extensive system in engineering where the role of an educated architect is in the shadows, a “background”. In the end, appearance doesn’t really matter ...

However, do not be discouraged: It turns out that from the start, architects at least have the ability to work in groups and think up solutions together with other disciplines. From the very beginning, architects – like composers – can create in harmony. Therefore, it is not surprising that, recently, architecture graduates have emerged as skilled managers and successful entrepreneurs, becoming “Master Builders” in a broader sense. Why not? It is clear that the ability to think integrally (in a multidisciplinary way) is an intrinsic characteristic of an architect. There are opportunities to reclaim social status, only in more complex and broad terms.

Dear young architects,  
this development is typical in the middle of this century, and it happens everywhere. But there will always be architects who will stay afloat in this current. It is an irony that while the avant-garde of the 1920s spawned new names, most of them were drowned in a system that was already out of control.

So, if we talk about architects today, there is a variety of them: from freelancers, individuals, groups, collaborations, limited partnerships, and limited companies to in-house architects. There can also be permit consultants and co-signers (architects in charge) in that big system. That is how the commercial world demands it. Many things that used to be prohibited by the code of conduct have now become commonplace. Many see the code of conduct as an obstacle; they become cynical, sometimes even a caricature ...!

This erosion also results in the absence of compliance or dedication to the profession. An architect becomes more of a businessman than a professional. This balance is often heavier towards the business side, where conflicts of interest are difficult to avoid, and professional rules seem insipid and meaningless. The fruits of architectural development may also be stunted in this way. Its identity and personality will be hard to find again. Even if there is any style, then it must be the one that is trending; otherwise, the client will turn to other architects, even foreign ones ... just to find satisfaction in manifesting their desires. Then again, isn't architecture a reflection of society? If there are talks that we are facing decadence in architecture, then what is the role of architects now? To what extent can such rapid strides be facilitated? It's very difficult, indeed.

Therefore, a manifesto by young architects that sounds a bit bombastic is actually moving, or at least it can bring us back to realize the importance of that little aspect: architects as designers that have no limit to their explorations and listen to their conscience, fighting for responsible creations, also for the future.<sup>1</sup>

We are delighted – amazed – that in this devastating time, a group of young architects is still passionately answering this challenge through design, the language that all of us architects know.

In this climate where architects are often cornered, these “young” architects voice their reaction: diversely manifesting themselves, seeking breakthroughs, though sometimes by referring to global influence or simply returning to the past, dissatisfied with the development

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<sup>1</sup> Han Awal refers to a passage in AMI's manifesto (1990): “... for us Young Indonesian Architects, architecture is a form of design exploration that is equipped with a high sensitivity to the conditions of Indonesian society and the environment.”

of architecture up to now, where there is no visible continuity of previous developments.<sup>2</sup> This is understandable and obviously acceptable.

This reactive architecture tends toward extreme eclecticism (like Michael Graves,<sup>3</sup> etc.). On the other hand, it digs up what has almost been forgotten: ourselves – ourselves in the spatial order, in the exploration, and then in the richness of forms. Grappling, they sometimes find delicious “*gado-gado*”<sup>4</sup> but are far from grasping the understanding of other architects or the client. Then try again, trial after trial. It is clear that architects should keep exploring. Search passionately, with aspiration, where architectural forms are closer to art. But keep in mind that all this is only one aspect of the overall progressing works of an architect, though it needs more emphasis.

### **How about functionalism?**

Ninety-five percent of users’ questions – whether the clients, occupants, tenants, or others – are related to function, especially when the construction is underway. Functions and design strategies are questioned down to the smallest things. For them, professional architects shouldn’t make mistakes. Every functional error is regarded as the architect’s responsibility. So, apart from other demands, mastering functionality is the minimum qualification an architect must have.

### **What is the fate of functionalism in architecture?**

Although functionality is considered a minimum requirement, an architecture that is solely based on function is obviously tedious because it has been massively implemented. You may have mastered other approaches of different significance. The urgency of it often becomes a determining factor as large projects require significant investments and high returns. This focus leads to a design system where financing is a major constraint requiring patience and unique talents, which our architects have gradually mastered.

### **Commitment**

All reactions, movements, and even the chosen name refer to a manifestation – a manifesto that embodies a noble commitment. With a fiery spirit, “*Api Nan Tak Kunjung Padam*”,<sup>5</sup> young architects will develop a shared responsibility, positioning themselves firmly to face the challenges of the 21st century. This generation will be the main actors by the end of this century. Even though there will be differences of understanding, this shared commitment will shape your attitude toward developing our architecture in the near future.

There is no need to be afraid of revolutions, but remember that this will be written in stone. Besides the *passie*,<sup>6</sup> every move needs a close watch because the realization will be in the detail. There is an early saying that says:

Ideas are noble, facts are sacred!

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<sup>2</sup> Even though AMI did not adhere to certain ideals, the emergence of this group was heavily influenced by the Postmodern movement in the West that criticizes Modernists’ rejection of any cultural references.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Graves (1934–2015) was an American architect, designer, and educator. He began his career as a disciple of Modernism but turned to Postmodernism by the late 1970s.

<sup>4</sup> A traditional Indonesian dish containing mixed vegetable salad with peanut sauce dressing.

<sup>5</sup> “*Api Nan Tak Kunjung Padam*” which literally means “eternal flame”, is an Indonesian proverb referring to unyielding spirit.

<sup>6</sup> Passion (in Dutch).

### **Senior architect (= old?)**

As long as architectural products are still associated with the architect's name, we believe that architects will never get old, not even thinking of retiring. They will always be ready for any creative tasks assigned to them until they die. We all know that Eero Saarinen (1910–1961) died on his drawing table with a pencil in hand; Louis Kahn (1901–1974) died in the middle of inspecting a building; Le Corbusier (1887–1965) drowned while swimming in the Mediterranean that he loved so much.

Frank Lloyd Wright [1867–1959] set up his studio, Taliesin West (1937), in the desert when he was over 70, and designed his famous Fallingwater house [1935–1938] when he was even older. Wright, Philip Johnson [1906–2005], and I.M. Pei [1917–2019] are only a few architects who were blessed with long life to bequeath impactful works contributing to the development of world architecture.

If we reflect on ourselves in terms of these senior architects (= old?), then we, these “old” people, should still earnestly create works that will be meaningful for the future. To be honest, we are still waiting for such works from our fellow architects .....!

What we have experienced needs to be expressed in new creations. If we drown in the construction industry system, I'm worried that we will only be commissioners and consultants. Of course, this is very reasonable, but if we try to become creative again, I'm sure these creations will inspire you endlessly.

That's all.