

Making the City of Confusion work:
The Urban-Flow-of-Things and Precarious Livelihoods in Jakarta
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Published as:

Nowak, Nurman (2026). Making the City of Confusion Work - The Urban-flow-of-Things and Precarious Livelihoods in Jakarta. Göttingen: Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (SUB Göttingen). [E-Diss, Doi:10.53846/goediss-12240].

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Summary

This ethnography explores how Jakarta is shaped by a constant state of change and emergence, which is perceived in everyday life as an ambiguous urban force—a phenomenon I call *urbanity-as-force*; and how street-based urban dwellers in Kota Tua (Old Town) as well as governments and capital engage with this force to *make the city work* in line with their respective needs and interests.

I organize the narrative of this ethnography through *heuristic figures*: narrative epistemic devices and conceptualized tropes that guide analytical attention in appropriate directions. They are abstracted from recurring patterns in ethnographic material collected through *multi-sited ethnography* and *sensory ethnography* amid the chaos of everyday urban life.

The pivotal heuristic figure is the *urban-flow-of-things*: the self-perpetuating interplay between the physical movements of people and things across space and the succession of encounters and occurrences to which these movements give rise. It translates *urbanity-as-force* into polymorphic, analytically tangible manifestations. From above, it appears as flows of vehicles, people, and things moving along infrastructure; in the street, one is exposed, physically and emotionally moved by it—an experience I frame as *urbanity-as-affectivity*. Life stories about this exposure are narratives of an everyday urban life that continuously generates *bingung* (confusion/anxiety). I consider this concept and its methodological development the main contribution of this work.

Bringing these manifestations of the Urban-Flow-of-Things into analytically valuable relations, a referential framework emerges: *Kota Bingung* as the city where the *urban-flow-of-things* courses freely and untamed, continuously generating *bingung*. Building on this framework, I argue that making Kota Bingung work is fundamentally a matter of the conducts, logics, and practices through which actors engage with the *urban-flow-of-things*.

In the empirical chapters I show that government and capital use science, technology, and power to plan, produce, and distribute bounded enclaves (*Spaces-of-Order(ing)*) across the cityscape, where the *urban-flow-of-things* is domesticated. These enclaves allow function, use, and users of these spaces to be prescribed. Connected through infrastructure, they cohere into the *City-of-Modernity*, which enables the state and capital to mold citizens, create new lifestyles and absorb surplus production.

Outside these enclaves, in Kota Bingung, urban dwellers develop *urban métis*: a practical intelligence emerging from exposure to the *urban-flow-of-things*, enabling them to turn fleeting encounters into lasting relationships and contingently evolving, seemingly random situations into profitable occurrences. With the case of Kota Tua (Old Town Jakarta), I describe how urban rakyat, i.e. urban commoners or poor and lower middle class urbanites, mobilise *urban métis* to appropriate urban space which they (re-)establish as an urban common sustained by and organized as intermingled social relations that enable access to space, the built environment, urban utilities, information, and infrastructure. These structures and practices allow them to carve out functioning livelihoods and provide leeway for maneuvering crisis – thus making the city of confusion work for the needs, desires and interests of *urban rakyat*.