

Who Knows Best

By Daniel E. White, July 31, 2023

In the *Christian Science Monitor*, April 24/May 1, 2023 edition, the following story ran under the heading “Points of Progress.”

“Residents of an informal settlement saw their homes razed, but they fought to return and helped design the permanent buildings that replaced the slum. The Kampung Aquarium eviction in 2016 displaced 241 families who had lived there for decades. After a gubernatorial election made negotiations more feasible, residents worked with authorities to create Jakarta’s first self- managed municipal housing.”

The residents’ design input replicated the tight-knit community and micro-economy that had defined the slum. Each apartment has a nook at the resident’s door where they can sell goods. Broken appliances are fixed by a resident technician, and a carpenter makes and sells furniture. The buildings have community gardens, and open stairwells facilitate cross-floor conversations. The first two buildings were open in August 2021, with the remaining three set to open this year.

‘Professional experts aren’t the sole authority when it comes to finding the best solutions to the community’s needs,’ says Amalia Nur Indah Sari, an architect on the project who works for the Rujak Center for Urban Studies. ‘In fact, they aren’t even the most important. The residents know what is best for them.’”

People of a Certain Age, how many aspects of this story pique your interest? Here’s my list:

- An external power destroyed a community for its own purposes, one that, though probably shabby, had nonetheless survived for decades.
- New leaders brought a new mindset that involved listening to those most affected by the action.
- The new design included significant aspects of the old community; it was tight-knit and sustained its own economy.
- To address potential problems that might occur on-site, there are people there to help.
- Professional experts can be wrong.
- The further in distance the professional experts are, the better the chance that they will get something wrong.
- In this instance, the people most affected by the problem designed the solution.

What lessons are transferable to our country from the story of an informal but long-term settlement being replaced by a new settlement for which the residents offered design ideas? The U.S. has both informal (tent cities, homeless encampments) and formal (The Projects) settlements in which its less economically privileged live. Some work. Some do not.

The Jakarta model is still new but are there ways to proceed in addressing the challenge of ensuring a roof over the heads of all citizens embedded in this story?

The story also illustrates a dilemma inherent in a free society trying to “provide for the general welfare” of its citizens. Are there values at a state or federal level that are in a tension with values at the local level? Put simply, do local people know better than state or federal governments what’s best for them?

In their 2018 book, *Our Towns*, Deborah and James Fallows describe an America “acutely conscious of its problems—from economic dislocation to the opioid scourge—that is also crafting solutions, with a practical-

minded determination at dramatic odds with the bitter paralysis of national politics. At times of dysfunction on a national level, reform possibilities have often arisen from the local level. The authors describe an America in the middle of one of these creative waves.” (Book Jacket)

They wrote about more than 25 communities from every region of the country that identified a significant problem and crafted solutions from local ideas using local energy and talent. They developed a list of signs of civic success.

These included:

- “the phrase public-private partnership refers to something real;”
- “people work together on practical local possibilities, rather than allowing bitter disagreements about national politics keep them apart;”
- “people are open to possibilities, not afraid of new ideas.”

To read their book is to appreciate the fact that a lot of good things are happening in the U.S. on an on-going basis, the ineffectiveness of national politicians notwithstanding. Like the Jakartans, citizens of these communities have helped craft solutions and have a sense of ownership of them.

Yet, historical reality reveals that there are some aspects of our political and economic systems that have required action at a national level. Civil rights, voter rights, women’s rights, workers rights; could we call ourselves one nation if there were fifty separate approaches to these matters all crafted by the local folks?

Our economy depends upon various forms of transportation—air, rail, trucking—that benefit from national regulations regarding safety and national infrastructure projects like the Interstate Highway system. A stable monetary system is also a key to our prosperity demanding that there be one currency that supports the economic activity in every city, state and region

No wonder that each era of American History has endured constant tension between local, state, and federal governments. Read the Constitution. Read The Federalist Papers. The Framers wanted that diffusion of power. To make the system work requires people of good will wanting to make it work.

The Monitor considered its story a “point of progress.” The local people—the residents—were heard by government. Government listened. There was a real public-private collaboration.

People of good will want to make solutions work, no matter who has the idea.

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