



# LIFE IN THE DOME

BY SIMON PITCHFORTH

When *The Simpsons Movie* was finally released in 2007 we found that our heroes, along with all the other Springfield residents, had been sealed off and quarantined under a giant, transparent, geodesic dome whilst scientists monitored the town's heartbeat and vital signs from the outside. Sometimes I think that Indonesia's heaving capital has undergone a similar fate and that omnipotent, bespectacled UN doctors in lab coats are toying with the city's resources, population densities and weather systems in an effort to gather data that may come in useful during the planet's dark future of scarcity, overpopulation, environmental collapse and general bad vibes.

Is Jakarta in the vanguard in this respect: a disturbing vision of a world yet to materialise? Certainly the concrete rat runs of the metropolis contrast strongly with the palm fringed, slow pace of life to be found in the rest of Indonesia, beyond the limits of our imaginary dome. So how has this uber-urban, *Blade Runner*-esque vision come to pass?

Population density would have to be at the top of any list of pernicious influences on our dome scientists' clipboards. Jakarta is apparently the eleventh largest and also the ninth most densely populated city in the world with over 44,283 souls per square mile. The last Indonesian census, conducted in 2000, estimated the city's population to be 8,389,443. However, one should perhaps take this figure (as with most others published in this country) with a pinch of salt. More

realistic estimates posit a figure of between 12 and 15 million. Makes one dizzy just contemplating it doesn't it?

Recently deceased novelist, fantasist and prophet of global doom, JG Ballard, once wrote a short story called *Billionium* which rings uncannily true with Jakarta's bi-millennial population squeeze. In Ballard's dystopian vision, a man finds sanctity from the elbow to elbow mass of humanity in a cubicle room built into an alcove in the bend of a staircase. Outside the pavements are crammed with never-ending, 24-hour a day noise and pedestrians (the car having been long since abandoned) and everyone is jealous of the fact that our hero's cubicle is half a metre longer than the regulation

four metre limit. This cautionary little sci-fi horror story of urban population density gone mad resonates eerily with life in modern Jakarta.

The psychological effects of overcrowding are perhaps of vital significance when considering a city like Jakarta and events such as the 1998 riots that ended the Suharto regime. The relationship between behavioural, ecological and demographic variables is still very much a

matter of contention among scientists and researchers. However, some interesting statistics are now starting to swim into focus.

Studies show that in densely populated areas, an increase in aggressive behaviour can be seen as well as a decrease in maternal behaviour and an over activation of the adrenal gland. This results in hypertension and arteriosclerosis which in turn can beget violence, a sense of rootlessness and higher rates of suicide and mental illness. Scary stuff for sure but could Jakarta once again erupt in the orgy of violence that flashed over the city in 1998?

Indonesians are generally an amazingly polite and friendly people and usually manage to rub along with each other for the greater good. There are occasional moments of civil strife in Jakarta but, by rights, there should perhaps be a lot more given the sardine like nature of the beast.

Of course, Jakarta's very location is not a tremendous help. Global warming and floods will ensure that the city's buses will be strapping on outboard motors by 2050. So is there no hope? Absolutely not, but that's no reason not to smile and enjoy oneself. I do love the place after all and simply cannot agree with a recent survey that claims that Jakarta is the second worst city in the world for expatriates to live in. It's tough love perhaps but there's no other kind to get the old heart racing. Enjoy.

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A full version of the above piece can be found in the book *Jakarta, Jayakarta, Batavia* which is published by Bali Purnati and available in all good bookshops in the capital.

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