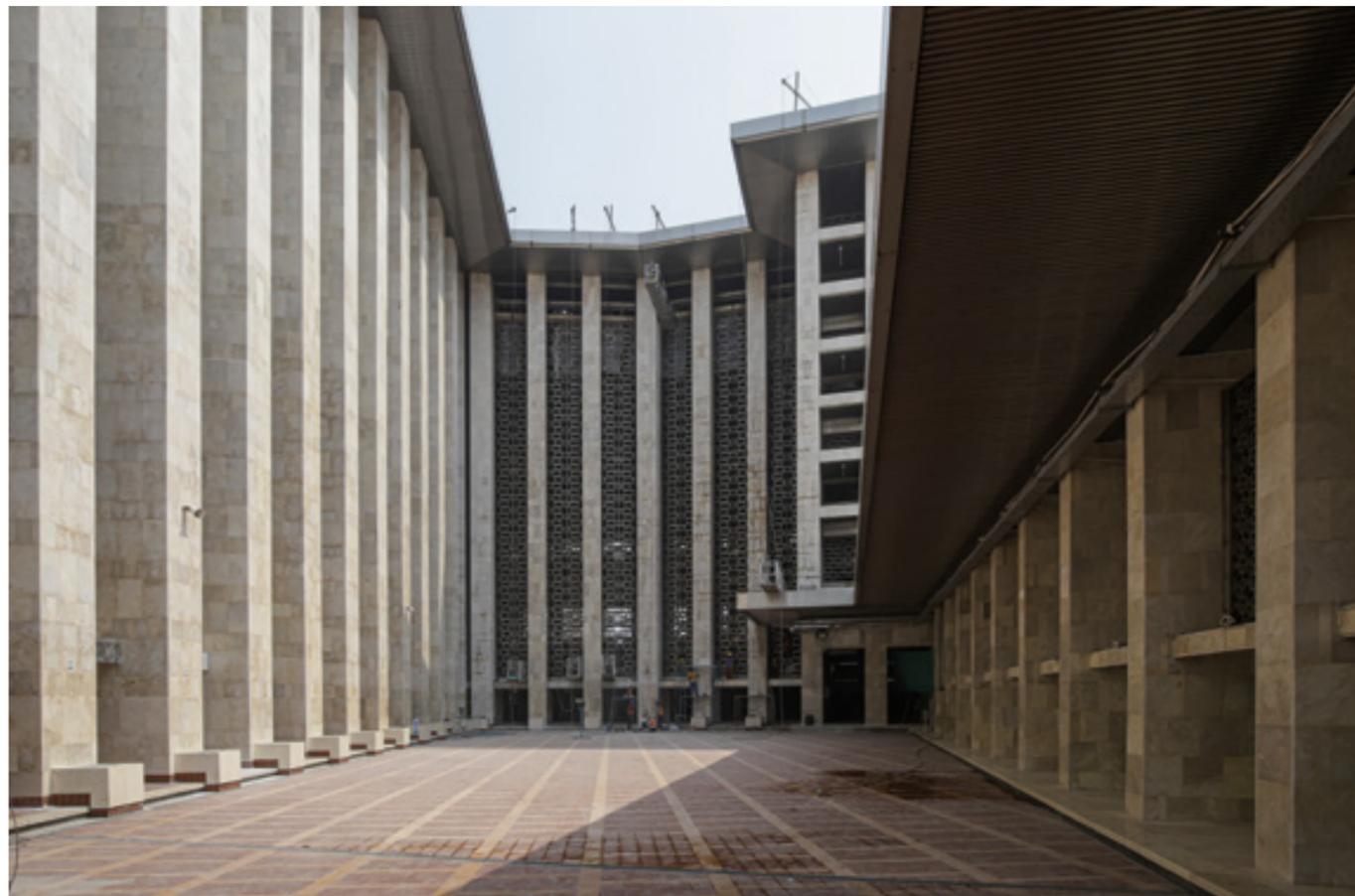


# ISTIQLAL MOSQUE

Friedrich Silaban



View into the courtyard of Istiqlal Mosque, Jakarta. With the tall facade pillars (left) and arcades (right).

Photos: © Moritz Henning



The main prayer hall is surrounded by four levels of galleries.

Text: Setiadi Sopandi

In 1953, the government of the Republic of Indonesia launched a competition for the design of a new national mosque in Jakarta. As a symbol of postcolonial national identity, the project was considered of the utmost importance. Its site would be the northeast corner of Merdeka Square, designated by President Sukarno to be the epicenter of the capital city. Of the 27 entries, Friedrich Silaban's modernist design won the competition, but the realization of his colossal vision proved more difficult than expected. The state's funds were limited and construction works dragged on for years. The colossal scale of the project required enormous amounts of steel and concrete, a supply that was partly imported from abroad, but which also greatly stimulated the emergence of domestic production. Although the lack of local technical

expertise posed a challenge at the time, Istiqlal Mosque was nevertheless constructed with the most up-to-date technology. The prayer hall—a huge space lined with galleries running over four levels—is topped by a breathtaking reinforced concrete dome, the casting of which required the assembly of a complex polyhedron steel-frame structure built with the help of steel pipes and ball joints manufactured in West Germany. Because religious protocol mandates that the prayer hall be oriented towards the Qibla—slightly off the axis of Merdeka Square—Silaban rotated the mosque's inner courtyard, known as a *sahn*, by 20 degrees to have the colonnade facing directly onto the National Monument, in the middle of the square. Silaban conceived the *sahn* of the Istiqlal Mosque as an intimate patio offering worshipers refuge

from the tropical rain and scorching sun between its slim, deep rectangular columns. Similarly proportioned, but four times as tall, the majestic columns on the main facade rise up uninterrupted over the whole height of the building, conveying a severe sense of monumentality. Frequented daily by hundreds of people and often used as the backdrop for official state visits, the semantic power of Silaban's design remains unchallenged and makes the Istiqlal Mosque a highly charged national symbol projecting Sukarno's original vision for Indonesia as a unitary, modern, independent state, both nationally and internationally.