

unit 8 the 20th Century



part 1: The Dutch East Indies as a late Colonial Case Study

This material draws heavily on Dr. Iwan Sudrajat's PhD 'A Study of Indonesian Architectural History' - Sydney University 1991. I am indebted to him for permission to use his research in this manner.

The Indies at the turn of the century was a highly segmented society divided along racial, ethnic, regional and religious lines. This received official recognition in the form of an Ethical Policy introduced by the Dutch colonial government in an attempt to deal with social segmentation and control the direction of social change in an increasingly volatile colonial empire. There was however no agreement on the desirable society to form the end goal of the policy.

Some sort of special relationship was envisaged between the Netherlands and a semi - autonomous East Indies [not yet Indonesia]. This clearly involved a multi-racial society in the Indies as the Dutch did not wish to withdraw either its economic interests or its community which by now had been established for several generations.

There were two dominant positions on what was the desirable form for the society of the future. The first envisaged some form of genuine partnership between the indigenous cultures and the culture of the Dutch colonisers leading to the gradual emergence of a genuinely new society "able to contend with the pressures of the modern world but drawing its cultural strength both from traditional Indonesian sources as well as from the West." The political agenda of this position was to resist both the rising tide of indigenous nationalism and the increasingly heavy hand of the coloniser in the affairs of the Indies. This position was widely favoured by the Dutch and Eurasians who, having been established for several generations regarded the Indies as their home, had come to value the indigenous cultures in their own right, and had to discover a model for the future society which while not denying the validity of the indigenous cultures [an impossibility in the long run anyway] still gave them a permanent role in the society.

The second position strongly favoured a unified society in which the western element was dominant . The argument for this point of view was that as it was impossible to quarantine the Indies from the rest of the world, and as powerful elements of the indigenous cultures were strongly conservative the only way to develop a culture which was suited to the modern world was to acquire the economic orientations of the west which were seen to grow out of the dynamic attitudes to life and change which characterised the west - the belief in "progress" is a peculiarly western belief.

The ultimate outcome of the Ethical Policy according to this attitude was the emergence of a "Tropical Netherlands". Both viewpoints had their supporters, neither were going to be easily achieved but arguably the interpretation of the development of architecture in the Indies during the twentieth century is dependent on some degree of understanding of the socio-political context within which the architecture was produced.

During the first two decades of the century, there was a considerable need for public buildings and housing, resulting from the expansion of the colonies, the decentralisation of colonial administration and the growth of private business. A considerable number of Dutch engineers and architects came to the Indies to take up government appointments and/or establish themselves in private practice. Private buildings were designed by private sector practitioners and public buildings by public sector architects and engineers.

Typical of the architecture of this period was the central office of the Netherlands Indies Railway company in Semarang on the north coast of Java designed by B.J. Ouëndag and J. F. Klinkhamer [1916/17] in a sort of Renaissance Revival style. The engineers and architects of the time were hampered by a limited choice of both local and imported building materials, climatic requirements to which they were unaccustomed and the absence of an æsthetic canon appropriate to the Indies.

The third of these factors was the most problematic. In 1908 an engineer from the Public Works Department S. Snuijff lamented in rather patronising fashion: "No national colonial architecture exists at present even after three centuries during which the Dutch were established in the East. Political and economic conditions have never promoted this, whereas the mild climate and the fertility of the soil have never created anxiety on the part of the uncivilised population to acquire better and more permanent dwellings neither as regards size nor with a view to construction do the native buildings occupy a place of the slightest prominence in the architecture of the present time "

A growing concern for the dominance of European architectural expression and the gradual extinction of indigenous architectural tradition pervaded the first decades of the twentieth century and was a regular topic of discussion. In 1916 a General van Heutz published an open letter in which he expressed the optimistic but patronising belief that "even though native art could not eschew European influence, through appropriate guidance a sensible adaptation could be made, so that it could take benefit from the European culture without losing its own innate qualities. Others believed that a sort of cultural natural selection was in progress which would inevitably result in the end of native architecture and applied art.

In the early 1920's the direction of architectural development in the Indies and the survival of an indigenous architectural tradition were frequently discussed. The association of the new society with what came to be called Indo-European architecture -

a new socially conscious architecture expressive of the ideals of this new society became increasingly common. Opinions on the possible development of an Indo-European style of architecture paralleled opinions on the vision of the new society. The first viewpoint insisted that if the Indo-European architecture was to flourish at all its origins would need to be found in the indigenous architectural tradition, particularly the Javanese tradition. The strongest proponents of this position were Thomas Karsten and H. MacLaine Pont, who were deeply sympathetic to the Javanese people and their culture.

The second viewpoint denied the significance of the local architectural tradition and ruled out the possibility of there being any further basis for its future development. They argued that the basic elements for the new Indo-European architecture must be found in a combination of western architectural canons and the ancient Hindu – Javanese architecture developed by the Indians. Among the chief proponents of this viewpoint was C.P. Wolff - Schoemaker whose ideas were often tinged with racism.

Thomas Karsten was perhaps the first architect to acknowledge the political relevance of the new Indo-European architecture. Karsten was born in Amsterdam in 1884. In 1909 he graduated as an architect from the Technical University of Delft. In 1914 he travelled to the Netherlands Indies where he commenced work for the architect H. MacLaine Pont in Semarang. Between 1916 and 1942 he was architectural consultant to the City of Semarang - a sort of City architect. In 1917 he went into private practice in partnership with the architects Lutjens and Toussaint in Semarang. In 1924 he commenced in his second partnership with the architect A. Schouten. This lasted until 1933. In 1933 he established himself in sole practice with his main collaborators the Indonesians R. Soesilo and Abikoesno. In 1942 he was interned in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp in Bandung where he died in 1945.

In a lecture presented in 1919 he argued that identifiable movements in the fabric of the contemporary society of the Indies "...would eventually lead to independence. He believed that progress in social self assurance would eventually lead to progress in cultural self assurance , and that the present period represented an occasion for the Indies to recover itself, to open up possibilities, and to revive and develop its own culture and architecture ...". [ibid p163]

For this situation to come to fruition required political will and commitment from western architects. They must recognise the right of the Indies to its own artistic expression and the right of indigenous artistic traditions to continue to develop. They should renounce their allegiances to western architectural ideals and seek to formulate a tropical architectural canon based on local conditions such as climate, light and scale. Finally they must train "the natives" to become fully-fledged architects.

In this regard his collaboration with the Indonesians Soesilo and Abikoesno must be seen as an example of his willingness to practice what he preached.

Karsten excluded ancient Hindu-Javanese art and architecture as a potential source of architectural form as he felt it no longer had any living connection to the local culture. The proper basis for the further development of an indigenous architecture was he felt, the living architecture of later Javanese culture, characterised most strongly by the pendopo building type which found its finest development in the architecture of the kratons Karsten's vision of an Indo-European architecture was most clearly expressed in

his designs for a Javanese Folk Theatre [1921] and the Sono Budoyo Museum in Yogyakarta [1935] and the Pasar Djatinggaleh Semarang [1930].

"...Karsten offered an assurance of the possible development of late Javanese architecture. Its present poverty, he said should not be perceived as evidence of permanent impotence, but rather as a long term absence of the material possibility for development...". He warned that there should be "no question of imitating an earlier historic style, nor [of implementing] an eclectic working method of the type which has done so much harm to European architecture in the 19th century. It is a matter of the rejuvenation and renewal of a living but repressed art. The demand for 'historical accuracy' in architectural forms was totally irrelevant, because what was involved was the application of a still living style to other needs, the use of new materials under different circumstances ...". [ibid166]

Karsten found a fellow traveller in the architect H. MacLaine Pont. MacLaine Pont was born in Jakarta in 1884. In 1893 he travelled with his family to Holland via the U.S.A. where they visited the Chicago World's Fair. In 1909 he completed his studies at the Technical University of Delft. In 1911 after two years work experience in Amsterdam he returned to the Indies and commenced working in the Head office of the Cheribon - Semarang Railway Company in Tegal. In 1914 he drew the now virtually ruined Poncol Railway station in Semarang. In 1918 he designed his best known work the campus plan and main buildings for the Technical University in Bandung ITB. In 1942 he was interned by the Japanese but survived to return to Holland in 1945 where he died in 1971.

Maclaine Pont's determination to incorporate aspects of the indigenous architecture into his work can perhaps best be seen in the well known head buildings for the Technical University of Bandung, completed in 1920.

In this project he was primarily concerned with two factors. First , practical factors such as air circulation and the use of local materials and labour and second, functional aspects such as traffic patterns and the use of space. He tried to invoke the indigenous architecture by using a modified version of the roof profile of traditional Minangkabau houses and by avoiding the appearance of a monolithic mass concealing the diverse functions which occurred within.

Maclaine Pont's deep concern for the preservation of native building methods was shown in an article he wrote in 1923 in which he maintained that the lack of insight on the part of the colonial policy makers in respect of various institutions, customs and needs of the indigenous population had brought traditional building activity to a state of desolation. He argued that failure to remedy this situation would inevitably lead to a breakdown in the traditional systems of housing provision and a corresponding increase in the Government's responsibility with respect to housing provision.

He argued that what the Indies demanded from contemporary architects in order to reach a unity of style was not an indulgence in artistic production, a display of drawing talents, or a study of foreign architecture, but introspection and an earnest study of what constitutes an Indies architecture. This would undoubtedly lead, he felt to simpler, less expensive and more satisfactory architectural solutions. Only with such restraints would native aspirations be protected.

In 1923 this debate was heightened with the arrival in Java of the celebrated Dutch Architect H. P. Berlage. He came specifically to assist architects in the colonies define the direction in which contemporary architecture should develop and to suggest ways of achieving a synthesis of East and West. His opinions and suggestions are known from the several lectures he gave and the articles that he published. He lamented that the stylistic character of new buildings in the Indies reminded him so much of Europe. They lacked an "Indies" spirit and were impoverished by the indiscriminate application of Hindu-Javanese decoration.

He asserted that a colonising power always forces not only its political sovereignty but also its cultural ideals onto its colonies. Two possible consequences could be expected from this process depending on the vitality of the subject culture. Either the demise of the subject culture or the the impregnation of the colonisers culture by the indigenous culture. Following this line of thought Berlage was of the general belief that the development of an Indo-European style was only possible through the fertilisation of western architecture by Eastern art forms.

Berlage argued that architecture could be seen as composed of two primary "elements" a constructive element born of intellectual knowledge which was therefore universal and an aesthetic element, born of feeling which is particular temporary and everywhere different. Accordingly he warned that there should not be any reaction against the modern constructive spirit, which is quite universal. But protection from the incursion of European art forms was needed because a perfect Indo-European art style could only be produced by the search for harmony between Western construction and Eastern art forms. In this connection he made reference to several successful attempts that had been made by Thomas Karsten Pavillion for the Princess Nurul in the Prince's Kraton, Solo, H. MacLaine Pont Institut Teknologi Bandung and J. Gerber Gedung Sate, 1920 Bandung, commenting that these works only formed a starting point for a course of development whose final realisation was still in the future.

He further emphasised the necessity to train Javanese to become fully professional architects within the Indies and requested the establishment of an architecture school in the Technical University of Bandung [ITB] in Java.

The debate over possible directions for an Indo-European architecture climaxed in a series of confrontations between H. MacLaine Pont and the professor of architecture, the Engineer C. P. Wolff Schoemaker, one of the most influential proponents of European architecture.

Wolff - Schoemaker was born in 1882 in Banyu Biru the brother of the architect R.L.A. Schoemaker. In 1911 he seems to have commenced work for the public service in the Netherlands Indies. In 1917 he undertook a study tour to the U. S. A. where he came into contact with the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1917 / 18 he established an architectural practice together with his brother in Bandung. In 1939 he seems to have travelled to Holland where he took up a post at the Technical University of Delft and in 1949 he died in Bandung.

Like his brother R. L. A. Schoemaker, Wolff - Schoemaker firmly adhered to the western classical architectural theory of Vitruvius, which suggested that good building has to be functionally effective, structurally sound and visually attractive - firmness, commodity and delight [commoditas, firmitas and venustas] His buildings such as the Concordia Society

building and the Protestant Church [Bethelkerk] in Bandung [1925] testify to this theoretical commitment, as does the Villa Merah [1922] by his brother R. L. A. Schoemaker.

His distaste for indigenous art and architecture which he considered to be the product of an inferior civilisation led him to the belief that the basic elements for a perfect Indo-European architecture were to be found in ancient Hindu-Javanese architecture which was after all produced by the [very civilised] Indians. He encouraged architects to study these monuments in order to comprehend their characteristics and find some new impulse in them, just as the 18th and 19th century European rationalists had studied medieval buildings.

" ...The development of a typical Indo-European tropical style' he affirmed 'can perhaps be hastened if we allow the principles of style and design methods of the Indians to influence and enrich our formal ideas. In order to arrive at a tropical style we shall no longer confine ourselves to the inlay of Hindu-Javanese ornament on capitals, cornices, or facade crownings of renaissance style buildings, or the encrusting of modern buildings with an exotic glamour of chaotic composition. Once assimilated as values expressing the spirit and structure of our own creations, we can give a higher meaning to the Indian aesthetics of ornamentation ...". [ibid 171]

Thus the paternalist and somewhat racist Wolff-Schoemaker and the perhaps somewhat romantic MacLaine-Pont had diametrically opposed views of the desirable future path for the development of an Indo-European architecture and their debate quickly developed into a full blown public quarrel given expression via their respective lectures and publications in the years 1923 and 1924.

During the 1930's the debate over the correct direction for a new Indo-European architecture withered away, not least because the Dutch began to see that their hopes for the emergence of a "new society" in the Indies, either in the form of a tropical Netherlands or in the form of an independent hybrid Indies society was an illusion. The first decades of the twentieth century which were to bring great advances in the integration of the Indies society simply saw the emergence of nationalist movements and a rapidly increasing fragmentation of colonial society.

" ...The scenario of the Ethical Policy was almost entirely unsuccessful as the gap between the idea and the reality had always been too great ...". [ibid p175] After 1930 architects and scholars became more critical in their judgements of direction for the future development of architecture tending to agree on two points.; that tradition was not something to be imitated but something to be perfected and developed and that since the perfection of an Indo-European style was almost impossible more attention should be given to accommodating the climate.

The abandonment of the program for an Indo-European architectural style reinforced the already considerable impetus to adopt modern architecture. This impetus was partly rooted in the political propaganda of the Dutch colonial government which was concerned to counteract the impression in the mind of possible immigrants that life in the Indies although colourful and exotic was primitive and disease ridden. In this propaganda modern buildings were used effectively as 'evidence' to convince people in Holland that living conditions in the Indies were no longer primitive and it had become a

country where one could live as comfortably perhaps even more comfortably as in the Netherlands.

In this climate the late 1920's and 1930's produced a flowering of high modernist and/or streamlined 'deco' architecture in Java. Prominent among the modernists was A. F. Aalbers. Aalbers was born in Rotterdam in 1898 where he studied in the Academy of Architecture. In 1928 he travelled to the Netherlands Indies and in 1930 set up his own practice in Bandung. Between 1942 and 1945 he was interned by the Japanese and was repatriated to Holland in 1946 where he died in 1961. Aalbers' three villas in Dagoweg in Bandung [1937] resemble and rival their contemporaries by the Luckhardt brothers in Berlin and his First Netherlands Bank in jl. Braga, Bandung [1935] which tends towards the streamlined art deco which emerged during this period in Europe and particularly The United States, is strongly reminiscent of Erich Mendelsohn. In 1937 he also designed the apartment house 'die driekleur' in jl. H. Juanda, Bandung Also notable, in a similar modernist idiom is the now sadly decayed, The Office of the Borneo Sumatra Company by J. F. Blankenberg in Semarang [1938]

On the other hand, and particularly in Bandung, the late 1920's and 1930's produced an even greater flowering of Art Deco. Here we could refer to C. P. Wolff Schoemaker's eccentric Villa Isola [1932] and his somewhat Wrightian Hotel Preanger [1926] both in Bandung. Perhaps the pre-eminent deco building in Bandung, a city noted for its Art Deco architecture, is the Hotel Savoy Homann in jl. Asia-Afrika, by A. Aalbers from 1939.

The development of architecture in the Dutch East Indies during most of the first half of the twentieth century can be divided into two periods. In the first period lasting until the early 1930's the direction of contemporary architecture was shaped by the debate over the form of late colonial or post colonial society and the formal implications which individual architects drew from this debate. The second period which started in the late 1920's and lasted until the second world war represented a more pragmatic adoption of current international styles in the recognition that the dream of some form of integrated Indies society including both colonised and colonisers was never to come to fruition. The war, the occupation by the Japanese, the subsequent rise of nationalism, the resultant independence struggle and the establishment of an independent nation changed the direction of development completely.

ARCH 1025 History 3 Lecture 6 Reading List

Jessup, H. I., *The Architecture of Henri Maclaine Pont: Colonial Style and Native Tradition in Indonesia*, Lotus 26, pp108 - 113

Jessup, H. I., *Four Dutch Buildings in Indonesia: i. Henri Maclaine Pont's Institute of Technology, Bandung*, Orientations vol. 13 / 9, 1982, pp32 - 39

Jessup, H. I., *Four Dutch Buildings in Indonesia: ii. Thomas Karsten's Folk Theatre, Semarang*, Orientations vol. 13 / 10, 1982, pp24 - 32

Jessup, H. I., *Four Dutch Buildings in Indonesia: iii. Thomas Karsten's Sonobudoyo Museum, Yogyakarta*, Orientations vol. 13 / 11, 1982, pp24 - 31

Jessup, H. I., Four Dutch Buildings in Indonesia: iv Henri Maclaine Pont's Church,
Pohsarang, Orientations vol. 13 / 12, 1982, pp22 - 34