

**Colonial designs:
Thomas Karsten and the planning of urban Indonesia¹**

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Thomas Karsten (1885 – 1945) is undoubtedly a major figure in the history of architecture and town planning in Indonesia. Between 1915 and 1941 he was involved in town planning in 12 of the 19 municipalities and towns in Java (the most prominent exception being Surabaya) 3 of the 9 towns in Sumatra, and the only town in Borneo² This paper does not attempt to investigate or question his importance in this field but to place his architectural and town planning ideas in the context of his broader politico-cultural ideas and activities in the Dutch East Indies between 1914 and 1942, and these, in turn, in the context of an evolving colonialism and colonial discourse.

Karsten's importance has been specifically defined in terms of his contribution to an emergent definition and practice of colonial town planning and architectural principles in Indonesia. His productive working life coincided with the inauguration and evolution of the practice of town planning in colonial Indonesia, a policy not formalized till the end of the colonial era³ and which evolved largely as a response to practical and local municipal problems. Karsten's contribution was both to this process and the attempt to develop from it both a new scientific discourse and a social vision for colonial Indonesia. Not trained as a town planner⁴, arguably Karsten was influenced as much by the ideology of his social vision as he was by the principles of architecture and the 'science' of an

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² Erica Bogaers, *Ir Thomas Karsten: De Ontwikkeling van de Stedebouw in Nederlands-Indië 1915 – 1940*, Doktoraalskriptie Planologie, University of Amsterdam, 1983(unpubl.) p. 60, 62.

³ The Stadsvormingcommissie was established in 1934 with Karsten as a member and presented its final report, the Ontwerp Stadsvormingordinatie in 1938, to which Karsten was a major contributor.

⁴ Karsten began his studies at Delft in a mechanical engineering and later transferred to construction engineering.

emerging profession. It is in an attempt to identify the influence of the former that this paper focuses on Karsten's broader 'colonial' views.

It has become common to understand the urban as a culturally constructed space reflective of a multitude of meanings and representations. In particular the colonial urban space has been associated with the cultural and discursive expression of colonialism as well as the physical manifestations of colonial power. While colonialism has particularly been expressed through the articulation of 'forms of difference', the colonial urban was also an intensely 'ambiguous' space: it is precisely in the urban colonial arena that the extreme dichotomies established by colonialism are both most readily obscured and accentuated. On the one hand, it is here that colonial culture 'flowers', and that a comprador indigenous middle class evolves, whilst at the same time, in response to the new ideas and institutions, nationalist discourses are defined and articulated. More particularly as Çelik argues, architecture represents an important manifestation colonial discourse – that 'ensemble of linguistically based practices unified by their colonial deployment of colonial relationships' - since, at base, it too is 'coded by linguistic conventions, albeit visual and spatial ones'⁵. From this perspective architecture most obviously expresses the aesthetics of function manifested in physical form and where colonial architecture extends to the design of the native house, it represents an intervention in the private and domestic traditions of the occupant. More than 'architecture', colonial 'town planning' represents the broader exercise of the colonial aesthetic, the ordering of the urban space as determined by the colonial gaze. In the colonial context, it concerns the ordering of the relationship between the various ethnically, racially and economically constituted urban dwellers.⁶ To appreciate how urban design reproduces political culture it is necessary to examine each circumstance within its particular historical context. In the Dutch East Indies, as I have argued elsewhere, the colonial urban represented a new field of colonization in the twentieth

⁵ Z. Çelik, *Urban forms and colonial confrontations*, p. 6 citing Peter Hulmes definition of colonial discourse.

⁶ This brief discussion refers to the much wider theoretical argument advanced in Z. Çelik, *Urban forms and colonial confrontations*, University of California Press, 1997, (Introduction) and B. Yeoh, *Contesting Space: Power relations in the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore*, OUP, 1996 Ch. 1

century that inspired a new dimension of colonial discourse.⁷ It is a discourse that evolved during the last three decades of colonialism and left behind a significant physical legacy in terms of buildings and townscapes. But, as a discourse, it ended with independence. Neither Karsten's town planning theories nor his broader thesis of a cultural synthesis found purchase in postcolonial Indonesia because they were essentially the product of a colonial vision rejected by Indonesian nationalism.

This paper identifies the social and cultural notions concerning colonial relationships that shaped Karsten's colonial urban 'aesthetic'. To understand the significance of his plans and principles, it is important to simultaneously place him in both his professional field and within a colonial discourse and politics because Karsten consciously situated his science in the context of the construction of a colonial society and explicitly saw his work as an intervention in colonial policy. For Karsten town planning was a consciously political process in that sense. To undertake the larger task of specifically relating his architectural and town planning principals to his social ideals is beyond the scope of this already over long paper, but is broadly sketched here and will be amplified in the final version of this discussion. For the moment this paper is concerned to locate Karsten in the ideological environment of his day, within the spectrum of 'progressive colonial discourses' by firstly locating him within the discourses of urban reform in the Netherlands and Dutch East Indies, secondly within the broader cultural and political discourses in the Dutch East Indies, specifically in Java.

Karsten and urban reform

a. In the Netherlands

From patrician family origins – his father was professor of philosophy and university vice-chancellor – it is likely that his home environment already provided Karsten with progressive, or at least liberal, ideals.⁸ Bogaers' sketch of Karsten's personality, drawn from extensive interviews with his children, and colleagues from his

⁷ J. Coté, "A conglomeration of .. often conflicting ideas": Resolving the 'Native Question' in Java and the Outer Islands in the Dutch East Indies, 1900 – 1925, *Itinerario* vol. nos 3 & 4, 2004, pp. 160 – 188.

⁸ E. Bogaers, *Ir Thomas Karsten*, p. 50. His sister became one of the first women in the Netherlands to study chemistry

colonial days, suggests that as an adult he was a fairly stiff and socially ‘difficult’ and isolated person because of his rather fixed, and for some radical, ideas but one who nevertheless inspired because of the firmness of conviction and ability to define and support his vision in theory and in practice.⁹ There seems little evidence that he was a communist as Bogaers asserts— let a lone a socialist - but he was clearly influenced by the socialist discourses of his day. His marriage in Java to a Javanese (after he had established his personal position economically and politically in Java) in an age when this was no longer customary for ‘totoks’, further defined his place in colonial circles. When, at the end of a long career working in private practice for municipal authorities in the Dutch East Indies, his expertise finally received official recognition in Batavia by way of his appointment to colonial government committees on urban reform (first the Bouwbeperkingscommissie (1930) and later the Stadsvormingscommissie (1934), and later still as lecturer at the School of Engineering at Bandung (1941), he may well have believed that he had finally reached a level of which his father may have been proud.¹⁰

His decision (in status conscious patrician Netherlands at the turn of the century) to enroll at the Delft Polytechnische School (after 1904 the Technische Hoogeschool) and the study, initially of mechanical engineering, thereafter, (following the transformation of the institution), of structural engineering, already suggests an urge towards a socially-directed vocation. As the extensive private papers of his friend and colleague Henry Maclaine Pont indicate, the new faculty of *bouwkunde* represented a significant philosophical and intellectual change and one in which the first cohort of students were actively involved.¹¹ Not only did the students present their own curriculum proposals to the faculty but they also established a faculty student association ‘Practische Studie’ (practical study) to encourage the practical application of the theoretical studies. Karsten was not apparently amongst the leaders of this group but one of a very small number of graduates from a faculty that till 1920 annually delivered only between 3 and 10

⁹ E. Bogaers, *Ir Thomas Karsten*, pp. 52 -5.

¹⁰ He had however strenuously pursued professional and economic success throughout his career.

¹¹ B.F. Leerdam, *Architect Henri Maclaine Pont: een speurtocht naar het wezenlijke van de Javanese architectuur*, Technische Universiteit Delft, 1995, pp. 10 -11. The establishment of a separate faculty of construction engineering, reflected a deeper issue regarding the nature of the profession: whether it was fundamentally a technical and applied science or an art, and its social responsibility to provide a rational response in terms of building construction to the social, productive and material changes produced by the late 19th century.

graduates. As the influential literature of the day suggests, and the extensive diaries of his colleague, Maclaine Pont, and of Tan Malaka, the Indonesian student and later Indonesian communist leader written in a slightly later period indicate, a student's education in prewar Amsterdam consisted of much more than formal studies, and socialism and Marxism, as well as religious revivalism, were the 'hot issues' for contemporary undergraduates.¹²

Karsten's activities prior to commencing a career in the Dutch East Indies provided a useful if unintended preparation. There is no indication that he had initially set his sights on the Indies and one possible explanation is that he wished to escape wartime Europe in which Germany – where he had briefly lived, worked (and loved) – now became the enemy and the Indies was both neutral and far distant.¹³ Certainly by the 1920s his antipathy towards 'Western civilisation' and his commitment to 'home' in Java was emphatically articulated. Specifically he went to Java on the invitation from a former fellow student, the 'colonial' Henry Maclaine Pont, to assist in his architecture firm. All indications are that on arriving in Java he started from scratch in terms of envisaging a specific Indies-relevant architecture and town-planning approach, although the practice of municipal 'social' planning itself was not new to him.

Within four years however, by 1918, he had defined a set of principles that formed the basis of his town planning career that saw him engaged as consultant in the majority of towns and cities in Indonesia.¹⁴ Arguably it was both his 'foreign-ness' – initially a totok fresh from Europe – and his commitment – it seems likely that had he survived internment he would have elected to remain to work for 'Indonesia' - that determined Karsten's influence. This is not a remarkable juxtaposition: it was his gaze as colonial outsider that was important in rejecting traditional 19th century Indisch colonial

¹² Social reform in the Netherlands was also influenced by religious revival and moral regeneration movements, initially generated by the Calvinist theologian and politician, Abraham Kuyper. Roman Catholic revival (in the Protestant kingdom) followed and two of Karsten's colleagues, Maclaine Pont and Grand Mollière both came under the influence of the latter.

¹³ It appears that Karsten did have relatives in the Indies. A more detailed research into his family background and extant private papers is required to detail his motivations. This is underway.

¹⁴ He was engaged as town planning consultant to Semarang (1916 – 20, 1936), Buitenzorg 1920 – 23), Madiun (1929), Malang 1930 – 35), Palembang 1930 – 35), Batavia (1936-37), Magelang (1937 – 38), Bandung (1941), as well as for Cheribon, Meester Cornelis, Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Poerwokerto, Padang, Medan, Bandjermasin. See Bogaers, Ir Thomas Karsten, p. 62.

assumptions, that allowed him to engage with his new environment and cultural surroundings in new and progressive ways, and that maintained his essentially European perspective. On the other hand he clearly did arrive with a set of intellectual frameworks of both a social and technical nature within which his specific approach was developed.

Karsten's basic life view had been formed in the Netherlands prior to his arrival in Java. The diverse socio-economic conditions of early 20th century Amsterdam, his home town, provided an appropriate training ground for contemplating the colonial city. Aside from the specific intellectual formation he gained in his course at Delft, Karsten was a member of the Sociaal Technische Vereeniging, a sober but 'progressive' and reform-minded organization of 'public works' professionals. (In the colony he immediately joined its sister organization in Java). More importantly, was already keenly involved in the very contemporary and passionate debate on public housing in Amsterdam. As the Netherlands only industrial city at the time, Amsterdam was a highly segmented urban environment with extremes of poverty, ethnic (specifically Jewish) segregation, and wealth. Between 1908 (while still a student) and 1910 he was closely involved with key proponents of public housing reform in preparing projects for a new housing project.¹⁵ Where such projects again were in tune with similar urban reform projects in Europe and the New World, Karsten was here involved, beyond his academic studies, in the practical applications of the latest notions of the international 'progressive movement'.¹⁶

The Netherlands at the time was in the midst of a period of intellectual and political tension that preceded an era of conservative Calvinist politics. In a process of social transition that traditional Dutch historiography has termed 'pillarisation', modernising socio-economic transformations were being contained in a Dutch society which was progressively being vertically divided along denominational and ideological lines.¹⁷ Amsterdam was the Netherlands' largest, socialist oriented intellectual and

¹⁵ Bogaers, Ir Thomas Karsten, 51

¹⁶ The prominent Dutch architect Berlage was undoubtedly the inspiration for this project linking architects and social workers. Berlage had been working on housing in Amsterdam since the beginning of the century. This pre-history, as it were, to the colonial public housing question will need further research.

¹⁷ An adequate discussion of the political and social reconstruction occurring in the Netherlands at the turn of the century would be too extensive to be included here. Nevertheless an appreciation of the background influences on Karsten's thinking as a scion of the Dutch bourgeoisie at a time of immense political change

politically active working class community and it was here that Karsten was drawn to, and was working with some of the country's foremost practising radical 'social progressives'. Before leaving for Java, Karsten contributed to at least one significant town planning report in the Netherlands, the *Volkshuisvesting in de Nieuwe Stad te Amsterdam* (1909). The members of this community project can be all identified as leading figures in a 'practical social reform movement' ranging from liberal democrats to socialists and feminist socialists.¹⁸ This was the grouping in which Karsten remained for the rest of his life.¹⁹

Whatever the social principles underlying his professional work, evidence of his active involvement in 'practical socialism' after graduating (and possibly beforehand) in Amsterdam places him in the centre of the contemporary progressive movement. Stuurman's analysis of the Dutch progressive movement suggests that this movement consisted of a mixture of radical liberals, social democrats and socialists, as well as liberal and socialist feminists who could, up to a point, could combine on practical issues

needs to be kept in mind alongside the specific influences coming from within his profession. Following the writing of Siep Stuurman (*Verzuiling, kapitalisme en patriarchaat: Aspecten van de ontwikkeling van de moderne staat in Nederland*, 1983, *Wacht op onze daden: Het liberalisme en de vernieuwing van de Nederlandse Staat*, 1992) which rewrote Dutch historiographical traditions regarding the interpretation of the reconstruction of the modern Dutch state, a new generation of social historians have plotted the conflicts between secular liberal and denominational reformers at the turn of the 20th century. Specifically mention could be made of S. Dudink, *Deugdzaam Liberalisme: Sociaal-liberalisme in Nederland, 1870 – 1901* (IISG 1997) and L. Bervoets, *Opvoeden tot sociale verantwoordelijkheid: de verzoening van wetenschap, ethiek en sekse in het social werk in Nederland rond de eeuwwisseling*, (IISG, 1994). Both these texts describe what in English literature is generally understood as the 'progressive movement'. This constituted the intellectually stimulating context in which Karsten's social ideas were formulated – as were incidentally those of the almost contemporary Indonesian students, and later Indonesian nationalist movement leaders, Soewardi Soerjaningrat and Tan Malaka.

¹⁸ It included Johanna ter Meulen, a leading feminist and advocate of social work amongst the poor the founder of the Dutch public housing institute, Hudig, the architect, van der Peck working on slum restoration, whose wife, Louise Went, was a leading feminist socialist who worked as a home visitor in the Amsterdam slums, a local unionist (Wolring) and the city's director for Amsterdam's municipal housing Kepler. See L. Bervoets, *Opvoeden tot sociale verantwoording*, ch. 6

¹⁹ These Amsterdam progressives founded a school for the training of social workers, funded by P. W. Jansen, the wealthy tobacco planter and liberal philanthropist (who later employed the Indonesian communist leader (to be) Tan Malaka, for his (pioneering) school for coolie contract workers in Deli) Associated with this experimental (privately run) school were the leading radical liberals, socialists, and 'progressives' of the day: the socialist Wibaut, later Amsterdam mayor, P.L.Tak, a leading socialist MP; Dr M. Treub, lecturer in political economy at Amsterdam University the leading theoretician of the social liberal movement of the end of the 19th century and leader of the radical liberal movement – but not a socialist (Stuurman, *Wacht op onze daden*, p. 308). Lecturers at this school included, Helen Mercier, leading Dutch feminist, and every other prominent left liberal and socialist personality of the day. Of Karsten's partners on the initial Amsterdam report, Van der Peck lectured there on domestic hygiene and on housing plans and architectural design and Hudig, on the history of socialism, while ter Meulen directed the school. L. Bervoets, *Opvoeding tot sociale verantwoordelijkheid*, 1994, ch. 6.

of social reform, if not on political direction.²⁰ They were moderate reformers, not revolutionaries and Karsten, the colonial social engineer in the making, very early in life defined himself in this category. Evidence for Karsten's activities after 1910, the year he resigned from the STV and the Amsterdam report was submitted, is unclear. Most of that time appears to have been spent in Berlin which, in 1911, led to his first two publications, a two part report on *Berlijnse indrukken* (impressions of Berlin) published in the Dutch journal *Bouwkunde*. Contemporary Berlin was more a much more important centre of intellectual radicalism, from Marxism to social reformism and, compared to the Netherlands, and for Dutch progressives, the centre of world civilization. One can only speculate that Karsten further developed his social philosophy in the cafes and intellectual circles of Berlin.²¹

b. In Java

In the Javanese city of Semarang, where he arrived in 1914 to work for Henry Maclaine Pont, a fellow Delft graduate of colonial background, Karsten found himself in a environment of social and ideological tension in some ways similar to that which he had left behind. Here, in an essentially more complex urban context, social inequality was manifested in terms of social class as well as race, within as well as between each of the three main racial groups. Without the stereotyped baggage of a colonial, this would have been immediately apparent to the erstwhile Amsterdam slum reformer. Karsten immediately became involved in the municipal planning process through which he undoubtedly quickly became intimately acquainted with the intricacies of the colonial hierarchy and cultural and social environment.

Semarang, while a typical 'Indisch' urban environment, was in some ways unique: neither a colonial bureaucracy or a trade-dominated town, such as contemporary Batavia or Surabaya. It was the transport and commercial hub of central Java and the centre of a network of cultural influences emanating from the Yogyakarta and Surakarta royal courts, a prominent European community of private commercial and professional

²⁰ Stuurman, *Wacht op onze daden*, p. 311-12.

²¹ At least it is known that he provided a design for the remodeling of a Berlin café.

citizens, some key provincial and local government officials with broader than usual horizons, a wealthy and influential, landowning and commercial Chinese community, and prominent representatives of a newly emerging, western-educated Javanese middle class. It also had a relatively large Eurasian population, a significant percentage of whom were classified 'pauper',²² and a rapidly growing Javanese community, 80% of the urban population, providing the city's 'mass' as well as specifically the port, warehouse, transport and domestic labour upon which it depended. This appears to have provided appropriate ingredients to inspire a progressive reform movement in the first decade of the 20th century.

Briefly, Semarang, became the focal point of progressive ideas and activities within all main racial communities in the Dutch East Indies as Amsterdam was for the Netherlands. Buoyed by a sugar industry that had returned to prosperity, but affected by a series of severe natural disasters, severe epidemics of cholera and plague, a 150% increase in the Javanese population that had led to significant overcrowding in the existing centre, as well as an influx of new European settlers,²³ by the second decade of the 20th century, this once relatively coherent, multi-ethnic, but now rapidly expanding and differentiating community, was faced by a number of practical problems. Broadly, the issue was how to accommodate the Javanese worker population, as well as renovating the significant underclass of Eurasian poor, and integrating both into a modern urban colonial economy and society. While progressive discourses from the metropolitan Netherlands provided an influential impetus, the urban history of Semarang demonstrates that a colonially- derived policy driven by the need to find practical solutions for 'welfare' issues also inspired urban planning responses in various departments of colonial and local administration.²⁴ Semarang had been central to its early development, in part because of the influential Semarang paper, *De Locomotief*, but no less so because of its

²² Tichelman considered Semarang as strongly influenced by a Eurasian or Indisch culture and unlike the very modern Bandung, considered the older Semarang at the beginning of the 20th century 'less thoroughly influenced by the West', as a place where 'modern Indonesian organisational life was still relatively underdeveloped, leaving much scope for Eurasian initiative' F. Tichelman, 'Racial relations and the trades union movement on Java, 1900 – 1916/17'. *Essays in Honour of Bob Herring*, p. 395

²³ See Tillema, Sijthoff, Supplement to Gemeenteblad 1914.

²⁴ The so-called 'ethical policy' is better described as relatively influential movement for colonial reform, which focused on the need to modify colonial policies and in particular for the colonial state to be more proactive in promoting Javanese development. Reformist discourses had been welling up since the mid 1880s, both in European and in elite Javanese circles.

locally-based professionals and publicly minded private citizens who had raised for public debate the questions of urban health, sanitation and water supply, slum life and overcrowding, and education. It was, as I have argued else where, the constellation of issues intensified by the urban context that generated this new colonial agenda

A major stimulus for a changing climate was the granting of municipal status in 1906, and the initiation of a broader debate of decentralization which it produced. While powers were initially limited (no elected mayor till 1912, no wholly elected council till 1918), the potential for local self –government was eagerly grasped by some leading citizens. It was specifically in the context of the new opportunities provided by municipal government that the discourse on urban development in and radiating from Semarang emerged. Semarang became home to a number of principal protagonists associated the key journals promoting urban affairs and decentralization (*Lokale Belangen*), cultural journals, (*De Taak*) as well as a range of European, Chinese as well as Indonesian self-help organizations including the Eurasian *Soerja Soemirat* welfare organization, the Javanese civil servant organization, *Mangoenhardjo*, and Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan, the Chinese cultural and educational organization, which addressed a range of constituencies all variously able to be described as progressive.

The period 1912 – 1920 is generally recognized as a period of political transition: when supporters of the ideal of ‘association’ had most reason to be optimistic and when the possibility of its realization was irrevocably ended, when political nationalism was first clearly articulated by each of the main elements of colonial society, when modern international capitalism established itself as the dominant force and a radical Marxist critique of a colonial political economy permanently ruptured a liberal world view. This was the period when the old 19th century colony was transformed into a modern colonial state administration to support the rapid development of international capitalism through the systematic transformation of administrative structures and principles and regulation of society. Much colonial and nationalist discourse centred around the process of administrative decentralisation and when finally defined in 1925, Java had a formal system of representative local, municipal, provincial and central councils, none of which had real power, but which were intended to signify the normalization of colonial civil and social relations. This process at once defined the protagonists in the debate about the

future of the colony: nationalist ‘realists’ who read the process as indicating the only solution was autonomy and those mainly Europeans and some conservative nationalists who continued see in it a possibility to articulate political dialogue. Karsten belonged to this latter group which by the 1930s, had been driven to the margins of colonial society, but which continued to naively reject what were then mainstream colonial and nationalist positions. Karsten could be described as a colonial utopian except that he believed he had a highly practical means to achieve the implied goal of modern colonialism.

Karsten and urban reform

Karsten arrived in Semarang, when despite the onset of World War One, there was an optimistic air about the city. Between 1910 and 1914 the key issues of urban reform had already been addressed in Semarang - sewerage, water supply, housing regulations and hygiene - setting the scene for more extensive urban planning and providing the basis for a related expert scientific discourse to be disseminated to a wider public. In 1914 its confident merchant and civil community mounted the first ‘world exhibition’ for the Indies.²⁵ Specifically, 1914 saw the publication of an extensive plan for the incorporation of private and communal land to allow the extension of municipal town planning and hence the resettlement and expansion of its urban population. The issues involved in this piece of urban planning represented in microcosm the issues and implied the practical principles central to the progressive colonial agenda more generally. If the timing of Karsten’s arrival in Semarang was completely fortuitous, it could not have been more appropriate.

Semarang’s progressive ‘force’ derived from an effective working relationship between a fortuitous collection of forward thinking colonial government employees, unconventionally radical, professionally trained, private citizens, a number of energetic western educated Javanese, and extremely rich and powerful Chinese businessmen. Key professionals such as the regional medical officials, Dr de Vogel, and public works engineers, Ir A. Plate and Ir. J.J.G.E. Rückert, successive heads of the Semarang municipal public works department, lord mayor De Jongh, as well as private activists,

²⁵ J. Coté, ‘Staging Modernity: The Semarang Exhibition, 1914’, Paper presented to Centre for SEAS Monash University, September, 2001. In fact the exhibition was a financial failure rescued from disaster only by the self-interested philanthropy of the Chinese millionaire.

such as D.V.J. Westerveld, the socialist HBS teacher and long time city councilor, and till 1914, Henry F. Tillema, the irrepressible Semarang businessman and polemicist,²⁶ drove both the planning and the broader public support for urban planning. Constituted initially as an appointed advisory body, the municipal council of Semarang from its inception included Javanese, Chinese and Arab representatives. By 1918 it was fully elected although its electoral role was only 1357 out of a total population of around 96000 Javanese, 7500 Europeans and 8000 Chinese.²⁷ One of the council's first successes was the construction of a water pipeline (the Ungaran water pipeline completed 1914) that enabled the provision of public water hydrants and public washing facilities throughout the urban kampungs. In 1910 it had obtained a detailed report on the condition of housing of the cities impoverished Eurasian population and in 1914, a report on that of Javanese inhabitants of the urban kampung, both undertaken and compiled by the socialist grammar school teacher DJ. Westerveld.²⁸ More directly, on the eve of Karsten's arrival, the Council had investigated and prepared a detailed plan for the incorporation of all lands between the old city and the overlooking hills immediately to the south which it envisaged as constituting the municipal district of Semarang.

More broadly, in the course of the previous decade, a cluster of interrelated issues related to the housing of the concentrated urban Javanese population (including sanitation, provision of land and cost and maintenance of housing and urban migration, together with broader issues concerning the acculturation, education and training) were all brought to bear in a discourse of '*volkshuisvesting*'. The term '*volkshuisvesting*' is best translated as 'public housing' and, following Dutch tradition, referred to local municipal (as well as private or cooperative-provided) housing not necessarily limited to the needy and destitute. In the colonial context the debate centred very much on the

²⁶ J Coté, 'Towards an architecture of association: H.F. Tillema, Semarang and the construction of colonial modernity', in P. Nas, (ed) *The Indonesian Town Revisited*, ISEAS/Lit Verlag, 2002, pp. 319 – 47. Initially on a municipal council advisory committee, after 1910 Tillema was elected member of the municipal council.

²⁷ Semarang Gemeenteblad, 1918. Population figures are approximate for 1910.

²⁸ Henry Tillema had publicized the urgency of and the principles for, slum reform, and had set the council to consider the necessity of purchasing public land (*gemeenten landerijen*) to provide planned, public housing for both Javanese and European residents. Westerveld, initial 1909 – 10 report on Eurasian homes was replicated in 1914 in his report – *Woningstoestanden onder de Inlandsche bevolking in Semarang* - Until at least the 1925 housing congress, this was the only such report in the colony. The right of a municipal council to appropriate private land had been enacted in 1910.

problem of providing and arranging mass housing. It also reflected the more general process of the 'Europeanisation' particularly of the urban colonial landscape, the result of both an increased colonial settlement as well as of modernization more generally. Within this context, the issue of housing was not only an issue of cost and design, but more generally broached the issue of the domestic as well as the social culture of the Javanese urban residents as well as their physical and social proximity location to the European community. Housing and the town planning of an urban native population within a European dominated urban environment thus brought to view pivotal social, political and cultural colonial issues. Even at a purely 'aesthetic' level, which Karsten for instance as architect and town planner was wont to emphasize, aesthetics involved significant 'colonial' issues: on the one hand, the imposition of notions of cultural improvement, and on the other hand, issue of behaviour related to health. More fundamentally, town planning involved the question of the representation and preservation of social hierarchy in the spatial positioning of the social relations of a colonial society.

Complicating the situation were two further issues. The first was financial. The central government was reluctant to fund such programs which, on Dutch tradition, were an issue of local municipal government. The *gemeenten* however countered that in the colony, it would have to carry the burden of servicing the needs of a largely non-contributing urban native population, where the welfare of the native population was a central colonial government responsibility. Moreover it needed financial assistance to buy out landowners. Secondly, there was the issue of the legal rights of a municipal government to interfere in the legally enshrined autonomy of the Javanese village administration. Urban *kampung* (Semarang counted 137 *desa*) represented autonomous indigenous communities (protected by colonial legislation) which now represented obstacles to the municipality in implementing its health and town planning objectives. This legal limitation was moved in 1918 when the municipal government gained the right to intervene in the indigenous *kampung* in the overall interests of the *gemeenten*.²⁹

²⁹ See the history of the volkshuisvesting debate in G. Flieringa, *De Zorg voor de Volkshuisvesting in de Stadsgemeenten in Nederlandsch Oost Indië in het bijzonder in Semarang*, Rotterdam, 1930 ch. 3. The right to appropriate private land was enacted in 1910. See also J.L. Cobban, 'Uncontrolled urban settlement: The *kampung* question in Semarang, 1905 – 40', *Bijdragen*, vol. 130, 1974, pp.403 – 427

These issues very thoroughly aired by the Semarang *gemeenteraad* thereby largely defining the colonial discourse on the necessity (as well as the right) of a progressive municipal council to transform – educate, train, or coerce – the indigenous communities under its jurisdiction. The Semarang debates extensively summarized in the published annual council report reveal an extraordinary sensitivity to the issue of race.³⁰ This was partly occasioned by its legal concerns (after all the expansion of municipal powers was pushing it into uncharted waters, forcing the colonial government to change or introduce new laws) but more positively it took some pride in representing itself as a multi-ethnic council (albeit not equally represented³¹). Specifically in arguing for the right to appropriate private lands within the perimeter of the municipality and take control of its indigenous communities, the councilors developed a strong case against the almost exclusively Chinese landowner group. The Council case for land appropriation was to a large extent based on the desirability that non-caring, if not exploitative Chinese landlords be replaced by the progressive intervention of the municipal authority. Town planning (and all its attendant issues of urban reform) implicitly involved the education of the urban Native. Colonial town planning discourse was essentially a colonial discourse.

In the second half of the second decade of the twentieth century, with legal and financial issues defined, if not resolved, there was an acute need to address the ‘housing problem’ of the growing metropolitan centres of the colony. Semarang was at the forefront of this development, and Thomas Karsten was at its centre. Semarang Council’s plans for its newly acquired residential districts in 1916 – 19, while not the first housing plan – housing complexes for Javanese workers had been developed by private companies – appears to have been the first planned urban expansion project under municipal direction. Karsten was involved with the design of two of them (one for the council and one for the private Chinese landowner) and in consulting for the overall development plan for the municipal district.

Karsten’s town plans

³⁰ The issue of land appropriation was presented in detail in a report of 1914: *Onteigening van particuliere landerijen binnen de gemeenten Semarang, Gemmente-Blad* Uitgegeven voor rekening der Gemeente Semarang, vol. 8, 1914, 200 pp.

³¹ The 1918 Annual report notes with approval the expansion of voting rights to non-Europeans for the first totally elected council while regretting the restrictive electoral criteria and apparent lack of interest.

This paper makes no attempt to reference Karsten's architectural and town planning principles but here briefly presents some of Karsten's solutions to the volkshuisvesting problem, before turning to a consideration of the cultural principles that underpinned them. The following brief references to plans for new housing estates in Semarang (1915 – 1919) – and illustrations of town planning designs, specific sets of street design, and photographs for Javanese housing – demonstrates the formative stages of (and influences on) his work.³² These were Karsten's first, and were produced in his capacity as consultant to the municipal works department which also commenced its town planning operations at this point at the behest of a very progressive and energetic council.³³ According to Bogaers, it is not possible to specifically identify Karsten's contribution in the overall Semarang city plan in its final form in 1928. She however strongly emphasizes the important contribution of the heads of the Council's public works department, initially Plate, and after 1918, Rückert, in the overall design.³⁴

An article in 1921 by the former head of municipal public works, Ir. A. Plate provides a summary of plans for the 3 housing districts that had thus far been developed for Semarang.³⁵ Plans developed between 1916 and 1919 were intended to accommodate 55% increase in Semarang's population, or 45,000 Javanese, 8500 Chinese and 7000 Europeans.³⁶ Plate with whom Karsten initially worked, shared – or at least approved of – the 'ethnic solution' incorporated in the plans. What the article does not reveal is the level of coercion, manipulation and resistance involved in the implementation of these designs for urban residential districts.

Recognising these designs as attributable to Karsten, Plate's description emphasizes their integration of aesthetic, practical and social requirements. In the largest

³² Presented during the presentation, not included here.

³³ Karsten became involved as partner in Maclaine's Bouwkundig Bureau which in 1915 was engaged by the municipal planning department as consultant. (*Gedenkboek der Gemeente Semarang, 1906 – 1931*, p. 170.)

³⁴ Bogaers argues: 'Since the original plans [for the expansion of Semarang] were developed before Karsten arrived in the Indies, it is quite possible that he was significantly influenced in his thinking by what he learned in Semarang. After all he had not specialised in urban town planning when he arrived in Semarang. In that case it is quite possible that Plate and especially Rückert were his teachers. Who specifically provided what elements to the plan cannot be ascertained from the description of the plans. Karsten's contributions cannot be underestimated: clearly he had demonstrated sufficient capability to be appointed by the Council as town planning consultant.' Boagers, Ir Thomas Karsten, pp 123-4.

³⁵ A. Plate, 'Het Uitbreidingsplan der Indische Gemeenten', *Nederlandsch-Indië Oud en Nieuw*, vol 6, no. 4 & 5, 1921, pp. 99 – 110, 145 – 160.

³⁶ Plate, 'Het Uitbreidingsplan', vol 6, no 2, p160.

of the projects, the subdivision of the privately owned Pekunden and Peterongan estates, a star-shaped arrangement of major roads radiating from a central point dominated the design aimed to effectively link the new area to existing parts of the city and the future development of the hilltop district of Tandy. The Pekunden and Peterongan land bordered the existing southerly extent of the old city, already surrounded by major roads into the central Java hinterland. Chinese owned, this land had been the immediate focus of the council initially intent on, if not urban expansion, very definitely urban resettlement, to secure a healthier urban locale. Council endeavours were stalled however by the landowners who employed Karsten, already engaged by the Council, to prepare their own real estate plans for approval by Council, in order, according to Bogaers' researches, to increase the land-tax value, a strategy later re-enforce by building some sample houses. Land-speculation, and certainly not the provision of kampung housing – the main concern of the Council - was the prime motive which was countered by the council by imposing stiff penalties on undeveloped building land to ultimately force compliance with the councils urban development plans.

The plan however was developed in detail. Broad avenues were specifically created to maintain a view of the distant hills north and to the low-lying, built up old city, but the radiating roads and related landscaping were specifically designed to provide contrasting vistas and avoid a geometric plan or uniform landscape. In practical terms, these roads were intended to provide convenient vehicular access to the various parts of the old and new city but also, effectively (specifically in the southeast sector) cut through an existing extended kampong area (Babut).³⁷ Finally, the plans provided for each of three communities, and within each, provided for differentiated requirements. For the Chinese community the new district provided residential as well as business expansion, with separate zones for residential, business and warehousing needs. Other areas were divided into large blocks specifically designed for 'semi-permanent' kampong –that is Javanese – housing while smaller blocks were intended for 'permanent' housing for 'little Europeans'. Main roads and more elevated sites were reserved for 'villas' that is, for

³⁷ The stated intention was to specifically provide for a mountain vista.

well-off Europeans.³⁸ While thus roads and allotment sizes provided the ‘organic’ structure of this residential district, ‘[t]he boundaries of the different residential areas were carefully masked by the designer by a water course, a square, a grass-field, a hill and a group of trees. In the first instance, use is made of the existing features.’

A slightly later plan, with which Karsten may have been indirectly associated as consultant, was developed for the Sompok district. Unlike the Chinese owned districts, this area was owned (either communally or individually) by Javanese kampung dwellers who had to be coerced into selling their land to the Council in the period 1915 – 1919.³⁹ This was designed to accommodate housing for an extra 11,000 (Plate says 11– 12,000) Javanese kampong dwellers, with, according to Plate, land set aside for ‘less-well-off’ Europeans.⁴⁰ Resistance from traditional owners plus the perceived urgency to solve the growing urban housing problem encouraged the Council to develop a further kampung housing area to provide for 5000 kampung dwellers. Housing here was rapidly constructed between 1920 and 22 although the integration of the district into an overall plan took much longer.

The most impressive project with which Karsten was involved was the design of the Tjandi hill area, a 400 hectare area that had been previously purchased by the Semarang Council. Plans for this were reviewed and reworked in 1916, approved in 1917 and allotments sold by 1921. Here Karsten is known to have worked with Plate in a design constrained by the commercial considerations of the Council which demanded maximum returns (high allotment prices) and minimum outlay (minimal infrastructure costs).⁴¹ Both the plan and the commercial success of the project made Karsten famous.

Plate emphasizes that the terrain itself (partly for cost reasons) provided the framework for the street and road design with special attention given to maintaining vistas, and causing as little terrain displacement as possible. Central to this more luxurious district was the design of squares and public open spaces with water features,

³⁸ The specific attention to the specific requirements of the Chinese community, not mooted by Plate, no doubt relates to the fact that the plans were being funded by the Chinese developer-owners

³⁹ Bogaers concludes on the basis of a 1930 map that the process of land acquisition had not been completed even then. (p. 106)

⁴⁰ According to Bogaers’ research, 800 Europeans were to be housed here, a significant incursion into the once Javanese kampong district, and these were to be accommodated along the main roads from which footpaths stretched back into the kampong. The description does not suggest any novel features.

⁴¹ Bogaers suggests these were two major planning influences.

and particularly of landscaping – a list of trees species was including in an appendix. Road and open space designs combined both vehicular (including public tram) movement and aesthetic dimensions of providing appropriate vistas. These public spaces (in particular the De Vogel Plein and the Raadsplein) as well as the positioning of the lord mayor's residence and other civil and social institutions and facilities also acted to memorialize the civic importance of the urban housing project.

The district was intended to provide a healthy district for wealthier inhabitants and assumed 500 to 800 mainly European buyers (or 2 – 3000 inhabitants).⁴² Here also roads and designed as well as natural features formed the boundaries of residential zones: squares were surrounded by large blocks to encourage large villas with extensive private gardens, elsewhere a water feature 'forms a more or less natural separation between different residential districts' (Plate 159), There the division was between smaller building blocks 'for average or even small blocks, but only for stone buildings, therefore for Europeans' while the subdivision on the other side of a small pond was intended for kampung housing. Lower down, steep gradients forming smaller allotments defined areas for kampung construction. The steep terrain which excluded the possibility of roads and which also guaranteed easier sewerage and water removal, defined areas specifically as kampong districts. Plate indicates that building was well underway at the time of writing.

In 1919 the entire set of expansion plans were reworked by municipal engineer Rückert with Karsten's assistance. The aim here was firstly to ensure the effective integration of the separately developed districts, in terms, firstly of integrating the road network, the introduction of newly developed public wash and bathing and the sporting facilities but also in terms of the overall development of the Semarang community. It is in this latter context that a new approach to town planning was articulated: architectural differentiation of the urban community was to be thought of no longer in racial terms but in terms of economic zones.⁴³ In the process, the European dominated but ideologically

⁴² Bogaers, fn 29, p. 150. No source is provided. Bogaers suggests Chinese would also have been included but the plan provided by Plate specifically mentions only Europeans and kampong.

⁴³ Bogaers, Ir Thomas Karsten, p. 123 citing J.J.G.E Rückert, *De uitbreidingsplannen van de Gemeenten Semarang*, *Technische Gemeenten*, 1921, p. 441. The addition of more 'practical' public spaces such as sporting fields was to replace the parks and squares which were a feature of the earlier attempt to provide open features in the residential housing districts.

consensus-driven gemeenteraad had broken the hold of Chinese landowners, and gained the direct access to thousands of Javanese families.⁴⁴ This, an astute observer may have recognized, also raised the question of what was now to be done with the responsibility it had now gathered to itself in shaping a colonial civil, cultural and economic society. By 1920 there were already numerous alternative responses to this question of which Karsten's represented one.

Some planning principles

At the most general level, Karsten's concern was how to reconcile difference with order: difference between Javanese and European, and again Chinese as well as between a 'traditional' Javanese society and a modernizing Javanese urban middle class. The issue for the professional was how to codify and manifest this in concrete form. In urban Java itself

[t]he problem was – and is – always the great variation in the buildings that need to be regulated; that extends from intense building (even if not consisting yet of many storeys) to extensive landholdings in the outer suburbs, encompassing both the most modern construction methods and the simplest desa homes, and all differentiated according to the completely different living styles and level of economic development of three, sharply separated races. And, apart from the fact that all these variations have to developed separately as regard technical regulations, is the need to prevent the constantly occurring danger of disorganized intermingling which, from both technical and hygienic, as well as from social and aesthetic reasons is unacceptable.⁴⁵

The solution lay in the combination of controlled differentiation – recognition of a number of different forms - within an overall strictly regulated plan of external features and facilities. By the time of the Woningcongress of 1922, Karsten had resolved the problem of dealing with the different needs and characteristics of the 'three, sharply separated races' within an ordered environment by a more refined theory of zones or districts (city centre, shopping prescient, suburbs) and classes or types of buildings (offices, residences, factories).⁴⁶ While these 'scientific' principles appeared to set aside

⁴⁴ This implication has not received attention and needs to be investigated further. I suggest that this represents a major factor in defining, in Nas's terms', the 'colonial city'.

⁴⁵ On the class and zone system contained in the building regulations of Buitenzorg' *Locale Belangen*, vol. 11, 1923-24, 346 – 60.

⁴⁶ The assertion was made by Karsten in the same article.

race-based approaches, they nevertheless continued to recognize different cultural practices and values while at the same time being sufficiently flexible to allow a gradual interaction, in theory a social evolution towards a European ideal while in practice (theoretically in the interim) containing current conditions.⁴⁷

The rider to the definition of zones and classes was that these had to relate to local conditions and each community's cultural values. Here specifically Karsten inserted his theory of 'cultural pedagogy', the contribution of architecture and town planning to the *development* of Javanese individuals and society. In his position paper to the 1922 Woningcongress on modern native housing – the house of the 'upper levels of the urban native population' - defined how architecture would contribute to the cultural emancipation of the *inheemse volk* within the modernizing environment of the colonial city. Economic conditions were gradually producing a convergence in the domestic habits and economic behaviour of the once distinctly differentiated colonial communities – European, Chinese and Native. Nevertheless cultural differences would continue to be evident. (p. 3). In planning for the future – and in designing and building housing estates – this state-of-becoming had to be addressed. Not to do so would leave the indigenous urban population without cultural direction, and modernity would undermine their self-confidence and self - respect. Conversely, the systematic and professional development of the architectural resolution of the complex of economic, cultural and social issues presented by the modern colonialism would provide the material basis for their psychological and spiritual emancipation.

Given that 'good form' in general is the expression of a combination of social and spiritual meaning, in a home it must be similarly found in the extent to which it expresses both social and individual feelings of self worth (p. 13). Where this was absent, 'it suggests and produces indifference towards the home, and a lack of interest in its value.' (p.14). For Karsten the principle that the psyche of a people was integrally related to the form of the home represented the central principle in colonial housing design. Given that 'that all building produced by the people, everywhere is fine and full

⁴⁷ In one sense these plans implied further segregation. In 1912 Tillema had described the existing housing situation in Semarang in highly negative terms, as disorganised because of the intermixing of Javanese (semi-permanent) and European (permanent stone) housing – in Karsten's terms, mixed houses of economic status. As reported to Bogaers, Karsten's Indonesian colleague, Soesilo, reported the return to this situation in the Karsten and Soesilo designed Kebayoran in the late 1950s.

of character, even beautiful,’ and given ‘the emotional impact of the environment in which the vast majority exist, where the emotional lives of men largely but women and children are totally played out’, and given ‘a people so sensitive as the Indonesian people’, to neglect house design was to neglect the development of the character and spiritual development of a people. Environment influences the spiritual and moral development of an individual, so that ‘house construction in which form – internal and external- is neglected due to indifference or single-mindedness – means to actively contribute to the impoverishment of the spirit in the same way as economic impoverishment of people affect their income and neglect of hygiene that of their physical well-being (p.14).

This did not mean literal imitation of traditional housing in the new housing complexes, but it did mean the careful study of their elements, preferably by an Indonesian architect, but in the meantime by a European expert with wide knowledge, experience and interest in this matter – Karsten defined himself. Secondly he argued that house design and the broader built landscape in which it was to be situated, was preferably to be undertaken by one person to ensure the planning of a seamless and logical whole -..again intimating that person was he.

Karsten was given the opportunity to undertake such a project the following year. The Mlaten housing project was designed to accommodate 1899 people, 207 Europeans, 505 Chinese and 1180 ‘Inlanders’. It was not intended that this community include the very poor. The new community roughly maintained the colonial ratios, but was considered a somewhat dense population for an area of 52,000 sq m. Undertaken by the Gemeenten and part financed by the central government, the land was purchased from its Chinese owners, Sie Sien Kie and Sie Ing Hok by a specially formed public housing company, N.V. Volkshuisvesting controlled by the council. Housing was largely pre-built by the project, the first 73 directly under Karsten’s supervision, and rented out: 538 simple one and two room dwellings without toilet or bath facilities, and a further 90 with two or more separate rooms.⁴⁸ As elsewhere, original housing occupied by some 100

⁴⁸ To be illustrated during presentation.

families were first removed – they were considered irregularly situated and poorly built.⁴⁹ The complex was provided with public toilet, wash and bathing facilities, initially serviced by coin-operated water hydrants which later proved inadequate due to vandalism and over use and replaced by supervising attendants. Back yards and the front of houses were carefully supervised ‘to ensure they would not become too messy’.

Regularly people have to be reminded to keep their household good inside their property and not to keep old junk [barang]. Behind the houses two drying lines have been erected which provide more than sufficient space for the drying of clothes. In this way it avoids people setting u their own [washing]lines which would very quickly create an untidy impression.⁵⁰

Karsten and cultural

Between 1917 and 1940 Karsten was directly associated with a series of related, ultimately unsuccessful, politico-cultural journals reflecting the views of a small, largely overlapping ideological and social grouping. While not directly involved in politics, Karsten sought to intervene in the political discourse of colonialism directly via his contribution in these journals in a debate about the cultural ‘education’ of Javanese society.

As demonstrated above, for Karsten the town planning was crucial, since he saw it has providing the framework for the development and integration of a modern (colonial) society and ultimately an autonomous Indonesian one but more particularly, as providing a framework for the evolution of the modern Javanese. Architecture provided the link between social form and the individual’s emotional and spiritual existence. He saw town planning as matter of an urgent intervention in history, in the moment when both urban expansion and the evolution of a new colonial society was taking place. Significantly, of the first 50 of his publications, 90% were published not in architectural or professional journals but in a cultural journal that set out to define a discourse of reform for a modern colonial society. The journal, *De Taak*, which he helped establish and of which he was a contributing editor, encompassed one aspect of his attempt to bridge what he recognized were the emerging chasms in the colonial society. Because it

⁴⁹ Westbroek, ‘Exploitatie en bebouwing van het land Mlaten’, Semarang, *Lokale Techniek*, vol. 1, no. 1 & 2, Jan-April 1932, pp. 10 – 19. Details for the landholdings from *Gemeente-Blad*, 1914, pp. 549 – 52.

⁵⁰ Westbroek, ‘Mlaten’, p. 16

coincided with both the high point of Sarekat Islam movement, of the Marxist and radical socialist movement, and an increasingly conservative European community with the unsettling environment of World War One, it must be recognized as a political intervention. The two later journals/movements with which he was involved, *De Stuw* (1920s) and *Kritiek en Opbouw* (1937 – 42) also each coincided with a new tense moment in colonial politics, in which an increasingly marginalised ‘liberal progressive’ colonial group attempted to lobby for the amelioration of conservative colonial policies.

Karsten, while not prominent in the pages of the latter journals, was represented in *De Taak* by numerous articles on aspects of culture with a specific social (which is to say political) focus. Not a polemicist with a literary bent, Karsten’s contribution was limited to propounding an increasingly assertive set of guidelines for ‘right living’. The view he propounded here and those implicit in his more town planning-centred writing remained largely unaltered from those he defined within a decade of his arrival. Indeed it seemed that as his pessimism about the future of Europe strengthened, his commitment and intent to see Java and the Indies colonial project succeed, intensified.⁵¹ What in 1931 crystallised for Karsten the decline of European civilisation was its loss of a sense of ‘communalism’ - *gemeenschappelijk (geestelijk) inzicht* – coinciding with an increasing ‘perfection of form, entertainment, comfort and appearance’. This left one with ‘a feeling of incredible emptiness lying behind the overfull and over-attended exterior, which is almost frightening’. This he compared with the ‘collectivism’ the ‘not-individualism’ of Asia (his home). ‘It is precisely this quality that enables them to achieve quite different results with modern capitalism than that achieved by the divided and atomised and individualised Europe.’⁵² In his town planning principles, one senses a nostalgia for this lost communal feeling which he was intent to recreate by simultaneously transforming the trends of a modernizing urban Java into a coherent urban plan of tree-lined

⁵¹ Two important letters (21 March, 1924, and 4 January 1931) to Prince Mangkunegara during two trips to Europe offer insights here. Access to his personal diaries would allow more insight into the psychology of Karsten’s ‘colonial project.’

⁵² Karsten to Prince Mangkunegara, 4 January 1931, Mangkunegara Archive. In 1924 he commented on the sense of pessimism in Europe: ‘The entire situation has little attraction for me any more, in contrast to the indisputable multidimensional nature of the artistic and intellectual cultural life [of Java]’. Karsten to Mangkunegara, 21 March 1924. Java was also an individual psychological and intellectual journey because he considered himself also as a typically modern European individual (see Jessop for citations from Karsten’s diary) separated from society. One might extrapolate from these letters that in Java he was attempting to find himself. It was however to be a Java of his making.

boulevards, squares, vistas and neighbourliness – reflecting all local ingredients. Despite its innovations, Karsten’s project appeared to be an anti-Modernist one.⁵³

De Taak, established by Karsten, the politically outspoken Ch .P. van Wijngaarten, a Semarang lawyer and municipal councilor, Sam Koperberg, a moderate Socialist Democrat government employee and activist in encouraging the preservation of Javanese culture, J.E Stokvis, liberal editor of *De Locomotief* (1910-17) and M.G. van Heel (a businessman), saw itself standing as an independent arbiter between the demands of different racial and political groups: radical in contrast to both colonial conservatives but also to adherents of the ethical policy ‘who supported the policy but feared the nationalist movement of the people, and wanted to divert it; who, wanting to remain in authority, were prepared to be sympathetic rulers but who did not want to give up their authority’; critical of Eurasian politics and the European socialists as well as radical elements of *inheemsche bevolking*, ‘not even whose intellectuals had any clear idea of the path that needed to be taken’,⁵⁴ the polemic of *De Taak* could be described as ‘post-ethical’ or perhaps ‘practical ethical’. Linked with the group supporting municipal urban planning, it disseminated a discourse supporting decentralisation and equal representation at local councils, and actively attracted a range of mainly moderate Indonesian organisations such as Budi Utomo, Regentenbond, Javanese civil service organisation, Mangoenhardjo, the central Sarekat Islam and moderate elements of the Indo political party, Insulinde. It saw itself as attempting to provide a practical resolution to the sentiments initially raised by turn of the century *Ethici* and in particular to build bridges between the European and Indonesian communities. By 1925 the journal folded, finding itself left isolated by the sharpening of political boundaries between European and

⁵³ Karsten noted that this emptiness and artificiality coincided with an ever greater perfection of technology. Ironically, he expressed a similar enthusiasm for precision, regulation and uniformity – albeit with reference to local (cultural) conditions

⁵⁴ The Editorial Committee, ‘Begin’, *De Taak*, vol. 1 No. 1 August 1917. Of this group Koperberg and Stokvis are the most interesting, involved in numerous literary enterprises including *Koloniale Studiën*, and instrumental in organising, since 1912, the annual decentralisation congresses and the related journal *Lokale Belangen*. Through both congresses and journal, the group they represented (which also included the influential Theosophist, D. van Hinlopen Labberton as well as the outspoken socialist D.J.A. Westerveld and of which Karsten appears to have been only peripheral member) (Biographical details in F. Tichelman, *Socialisme in Indonesië: De Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging, 1897 – 1917*, Foris Publications, 1985, passim). In particular Stokvis and Koperberg maintained contacts with key nationalist leaders including Soekarno. Similar personnel were involved in the *Kritiek en Opbouw*. *De Stuw* represented a different grouping of middle of the road intellectuals, with less links with the Indonesian movement.

indigenous politics, and expressing itself disillusioned by the colonial government's preoccupation with the advance of capitalism on the one hand and the 'non-cooperation principle propagated and discussed far into the native world' on the other.⁵⁵ Its proudest moment was perhaps the announcement of the establishment of the Java Institute, and the successful meeting of the *Kunstkringbond*, the federation *kunstkringen* (cultural study groups) that worked locally to promote interest in Javanese culture.⁵⁶

Karsten wrote publicly against racism, and objected to conventional colonial 'rassenwaan'. But he asserted, racial consciousness was an essential ingredient of a proper colonial relationship – each should recognize its abilities as well as its limitations – and in particular the development of the *Inlander* would ultimately depend on the development of his self confidence and the rejection of 'a sense of racial shame which the Native too often feels in a response to the racism of white people.'⁵⁷ This was the theme also of the original editorial: development was impossible without the conscious cooperation of the indigenous population whose emancipation depended not simply on economic and political power but in a self conscious desire to improve knowledge of science and the arts, especially of indigenous arts. Education (or self-education) was the ingredient of self-respect, and moral autonomy the basis for eventual economic and political autonomy. Here it was the important role of the *verblijvende Westerling*, the European who made his home in the Indies to 'offer leadership without taking leadership'.

There is not the slightest possibility at the moment that the people themselves or even their intellectuals can clearly define the path forward. In any attempt to find the correct way mistakes are made. It is not only amongst Westerners that there is often an over-estimation of self-worth: denial of the good in other peoples is also a fault not exclusive to them. Not all criticism of Western government policy, of the European community as a whole is just or defensible. Where necessary therefore, objective criticism will need to be expressed of community leaders: where necessary, the justness of government policy and the correctness of the Western community will need to be indicated. .

⁵⁵ Editorial, *De Taak*, Vol. 8, no. 25, Oct. 1925, p. 391.

⁵⁶ Kartsen,, Drie Djokse dagen, *De Taak*, vol 3, no. 2, 1919, pp. 15 – 17.

⁵⁷ Karsten, Rassenwaan en rassenbewustzijn, *De Taak*, vol. 1, no. 18, pp. 205-6. The discussion was intended as a balanced commentary to the protests voiced by the 'jonge Indiese' movement and the claims of the Eurasian community. He concluded: 'Self - respect on both sides, and mutual recognition – that would be just.' This reflected the tenor of *De Taak*'s politics which commented on both Indonesian and Indo politics, included articles by progressive Europeans and western educated Javanese and largely welcomed what it saw as the positive opportunities provided by the establishment of the *Volksraad*.

In his first article in the first edition⁵⁸ Karsten had already essentially stated this position in terms of the need for cultural ‘education’. Karsten’s credo was that art was the social superstructure (*maatschappelijk bovenbouw*) of the people and thus depended upon other more basic and mundane elements of a social organization. Artistic expression finds its form gradually through the enactments and thoughts taking place within a community or class, which, whether in conflict or in harmony, represents an organic whole. Where contemporary society, both Javanese and European, was in chaos the contemporary circumstances in the Dutch East Indies would not by themselves produce that unity from which a new, socially relevant (*levensvatbaar*) culture would emerge: Westerners would draw from a European, not from tropical culture, while indigenous society ‘was nowhere near being in a position to commence working on a social superstructure because of its lack of a decent social structure.’ It was here that Karsten saw a role for *De Taak*, and quite transparently, here also Karsten identified the role of town planning. On the one hand, ‘the current interest in traditional culture amongst the people needs to be encouraged’ because it represented ‘a point of connection for further and later development’; on the other hand, *De Taak* would contribute to ‘a stringent and critical supervision both in terms of technique and aesthetic quality, with stringent rejection of imitation’, over such further developments. In the development of Javanese culture the education

‘needs to be begun –amongst the lower classes by their own compatriots – amongst intellectuals who can be reached through associations and schools, aside from those who have received a more complete education in the Netherlands. They will be the ones who can later search for – and find – the way to their own simultaneously higher developed and yet pure, tropical-Indies [tropisch-Indies] culture.

Karsten and Prince Mangkunegara

The correspondence with the Mangkunegara prince that spans three decades and begins around the time this was written exemplifies the process Karsten and *De Taak* had in mind. The correspondence reveals an apparent convergence of minds beyond the realities of contemporary colonial politics on the part of two men who see themselves outside its constraints: the prince, head of an autonomous principedom, and the

⁵⁸ Editorial, *De Taak*, vol 1 No. 1, 1917

architect/town planner who perceives himself as a cultural planner of a new society. In this relationship Karsten presents himself – and the prince – as being equal observers on the sidelines of, or rather, above, a colonial world, united by the common interest in ‘Javanese culture’. The convergence is significantly differently constituted however: on the one hand, the Prince is interested in the modernisation of his culture, on the other Karsten is motivated by the preservation of a particular definition of culture. In this, Karsten is unavoidably orientalist, and the prince, positioned in the correspondence as an architect’s client, is portrayed as a neophyte.

The correspondence between Karsten and the Mangkunegaran prince – at least that which has been released – begins in 1918 and ends in 1942. It consists of a mixture of formal and personal correspondence, and of personalised business letters. The bulk of the extant correspondence concerns Karsten’s supervision – presented as professional advice – of the prince’s plans to update (renovate, extend and refurbish) his palace.⁵⁹ It was a palace that Karsten evidently took to be a model of new Javanese tradition – a tradition entirely sidelined by Indonesian independence.

The association of the aesthetic interest and sensitivity of architect and the modernising and progressive attitude of the Javanese prince forms part of what Laurie Sears has described as the ‘interlacing of Javanese and Dutch *mentalités* within discourses of modernity’.⁶⁰ Intertwined in this correspondence are several themes and projects that go to the heart of the interplay between Dutch colonial progressives and Javanese intellectuals: the preservation, restoration and re-education of Javanese traditions ranging from building, to performance, to discourse. Specifically, key projects represented in the correspondence (the Semarang Sobi Karto theatre, the Solo and Semarang wayang and gamelan performances, the photographic documentation of classical central Javanese

⁵⁹ The most significant gap is between 1924 and 1930 but otherwise runs consecutively and coherently across a number of issues. Key series of correspondence concern work on the palace itself, on the provision of carpet, lamp shades and tiles, and wall decorations, and on the provision of a series of photographs of classical Javanese architecture from Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Some of these issues continue over many years. Remarkably work continues apparently as normal between March 1941 and July 1942, the 15 months of Japanese occupation, initially interrupted only by Karsten’s illness and in 1942 ‘disruptions’ in communicating with Bali until in July, the Balinese correspondent, the Frenchman Bonnet, is imprisoned and not long after, it seems, was Karsten.

⁶⁰ L. Sears, ‘Intellectuals, theosophy and failed narratives of the nation in late colonial Java’, pp. 333 - 359

architecture and the restoration and extension of the Mangkunegara palace) exemplify the Hindu-Javanese orientalist discourse that had evolved since the late nineteenth century that concurrently acted ‘as a counterweight to the prospect of a unified Java under the banner of Islam’. This was not only an ‘orientalist’ move, as it were, but essentially therefore a political move in the defence of colonial authority. Sears argues that this discourse on Javanese culture – in her text centring on wayang – ‘was the product of the interlacing of Javanese and Dutch aesthetic visions and intellectual agendas that engendered and were engendered by discourses of modernity’⁶¹

The correspondence and the activities described therein underscore this assessment. Patently, the issue was not ‘authenticity’, in any sense – as performance, in terms of audience, or in texture. Sears’ informant in 1983 – the head of the Mangkunegara palace administration in the 1930s reports that ‘the wayang performances held at the court in the 1930s were very private esoteric events with limited audiences.’ Her comment is ‘that these performances were unique to a particular moment in the colliding trajectories of Javanese and Dutch knowledges.’ Karsten’s ‘concerts’ in aid of raising funds for the beautiful Sobi Karto were similarly ‘inauthentic’, if more popular. One thousand people attended a performance noted for the fact that girls acted out traditional male roles, while north coast gamelan aficionados noted the distinctly different Solo gamelan style that the intervention of the Surakarta prince (via his European partners) interjected. Also heartening to Karsten and the prince (as the former ruminated on the performance in a letter to the latter) was the interest shown by a new middle class Chinese audience, if for no other reason than this would certainly be financially attractive.

A different set of tensions between ‘authentic tradition’ and ‘the modern’ takes place in the architect’s advice to his eagerly modernising client. In one extensive ‘advice’ Karsten advises the prince against adopting red roof tiles (Karsten politely pointed out that while popular with Europeans and Chinese they were ugly and aesthetically inappropriate for the palace) and altering ceiling heights during renovation (Karsten pointed out this would ruin important old timber work). Later, Karsten advises the prince to substitute green for the shiny red floor tiles the prince had ordered (in order

⁶¹ Sears, ‘Intellectuals, theosophy...’ p. 340

to maintain the overall green/grey effect created in the palace) but conditionally accepts the Prince's desire to adopt Balinese decorations (or rather Balinese inspired paintings undertaken by the European artist Bonnet) a plan pursued despite the war conditions and one that ended only with the incarceration of both the intended artist and Karsten himself.

The role Karsten adopted here was precisely that which he had envisaged in 1917. His aim was not to achieve 'authenticity', but the modernisation and refinement of tradition. The Mangkunegara palace was the ideal cultural and, it was hoped, political focus of this project and the prince the ideal neophyte/acolyte for this. His interests and attitudes to life, already established in his youth, were confirmed during his stay in the Netherlands and, by the time Karsten developed a relationship with him – around the end of the second decade of the century, Mangkunegara had already proceeded independently along the path of 'cultural modernisation'. Mangkunegara had already promoted models for modernising Javanese language.⁶² Before calling on Karsten, he was already dealing with Dutch architects in the Netherlands (Cuypers) on the refurbishment and renovation of his palace.⁶³

Mangkunegara VII, known while a student in the Netherlands as Soeparto (Soeriosoeparto) or George (!), was the son of Mangkunegara V and like his contemporary Kartini, had rejected feudal tradition in his youth, leaving the palace as a youth and taking a position as a clerk with Kartini's uncle, the Regent of Demak, the most prominent representative of the progressive Javanese priyayi. In 1909 he moved to the office of the Resident of Solo where, with many other Javanese *praja*, (Javanese administration) he became a prominent member of Budi Utomo, the first nationalist organisation. The resident together with the famous Dutch progressive, Conrad van Deventer (in Java to open the first Kartini school) supported Soeriosoeparto's plan to study in the Netherlands where he arrived in 1913 to audit lectures by Snouck Hurgronje at Leiden. In the period 1913 till his return in 1915, Soeparto participated fully in Dutch life, including joining the army reserve which lead to him being called up in 1914 and reaching the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. Soeparto's diaries indicate his active interaction with a range of prominent Dutch and Indies figures as well as fellow Javanese students, most

⁶² Poeze, *In het land der Overheersers*, p. 126

⁶³ Poeze, *In het Land der Overheersers*, p. 121.

significantly Noto Soeroto and Hoessain Djajadiningrat, and members of the Indisch Vereeniging, joining them in social and cultural activities as well as a Dutch social set who knew the young socialite as George (to Noto Soeroto's John). For Snouck Hurgronje and his successor as Adviser for Native Affairs, Rinke, the aim of sending such young men to the Netherlands was somewhat to the right of the cultural project Karsten had in mind. It was to enable them:

To become a guide for his people, an honest person who would point out their weaknesses, who would be able to represent the good aspects of other cultures so that the Javanese would come to accept these without at the same time absorbing the ugly and the bad aspects of their culture.⁶⁴

Given Mangkunegara's close connections to Noto Soeroto, (who later became his secretary in Surakarta) and the latter's leadership of the Javanese 'culturalist' movement in the Netherlands, it is significant to note that by the 1920s even in the Netherlands, a decisive split had emerged between it and the *Indische Vereeniging*, the group of socialist Indonesian students at the point at which it was reconstituting itself as *Perhimpunan Indonesia*.⁶⁵ This paralleled political developments in Indonesia itself at the point where the correspondence between Karsten and Mangkunegara commences. The initial broadly-based and inclusive membership of the proto-nationalist organisations such as Budi Utomo and Sarekat Islam were already moving decisively into distinct political positions. As Shiraishi has shown in the case of Sarekat Islam, the Javanese aristocracy moved rapidly away from any organisations that became blatantly nationalistic or anti-colonial. Noto Soeroto on the other hand explicitly continued to develop a 'cultural associationist' position, which he defined in a series of articles in 1928-29 in the periodical he had established, *Oedaya*, in reaction to the radicalisation of the Indonesian nationalist movement. For Noto Soeroto, independence would come, but not by way of a pseudo-Western democracy but via the leadership of the 'aristoi', 'the natural leaders of the indigenous people themselves: the carriers of the culture, of tradition, of mature reflection and of the sense of responsibility' together with the advice of elected representatives of the people. While this 'aristo-democratic' model was not wholly

⁶⁴ H. Poeze, *In het Land der Overheersers, Indonesiërs in Nederland, 1600 – 1950*, Foris' publications, 1986, p. 101. Biographical details also from Poeze, *In het land der Overheersers*, pp. 99 – 103 and *passim*

⁶⁵ H. Poeze. *In het Land der Overheersers*, pp. 180 – 1.

dissimilar to that implied and later defined by the radical nationalist Soekarno, in the late 1920s it appeared a particularly conservative representation of nationalist aims. Moreover, for Noto Soeroto independence would come about gradually and in coordination with the Netherlands, in line with the view expressed by 'liberal socialists' such as Karsten. Addressing fellow Indonesians Noto Soeroto declared:

If you do not engage in overcoming the centuries old defects in our character: namely the mutual jealousy and discord, then you will never achieve anything. Because, by your inner weakness, on the one hand, you will make the task of the Dutch, who want to work with us and who are becoming aware of the new and important calling that the Netherlands has in this time of dislocation in the development of the world, more difficult and on the other hand you make it much too difficult for those Dutch who consciously or unconsciously still hold to the old attitude: divide and rule till the end of our days. Recognise that only through cooperation between the most energetic group amongst the best Dutch people and the most energetic and best amongst the Indonesians can the nature of this colonisation into a genuine form of government. Let us especially thoroughly appreciate that achieving our own nationality will not mean a separate and lonely existence amongst the other nations of the world. Broadly speaking, in the rapid development the world is experiencing, nationalism will no longer mean an unlimited sovereignty.... In this stage of international development, any country that attempts to maintain an absolute nationalism, will be left behind. We cannot tear our nation loose, we must, on the contrary, develop connections and form close associations with the West.⁶⁶

Mangkunegara was politically and intellectually, if not actively, associated with this position. Symbolically then, it was not surprising that in 1937, with the entire radical Indonesian nationalist movement in goal or interned in Boven Digul, Mangkunegara with family (and his secretary, Noto Soeroto) spent four months in the Netherlands to celebrate the wedding of the crown princess, Juliana.⁶⁷ In the same year however Karsten joined a small group of left liberals in establishing *Kritiek en Opbouw*, an anti-fascist liberal journal to which Noto Soeroto was also a contributor, that called for the release of the imprisoned nationalists, criticised colonial capital and supported the further development of an Indies society under Dutch rule. It was a Euro-centric journal advocating a view of colonial development that Karsten had been working for in his town

⁶⁶ H. Poeze, *In het land der Overheersers*, pp. 207-08

⁶⁷ H. Poeze, *In het Land der Overheersers*, p. 283. He was again represented together with a majority of Indonesia's remaining feudal houses at the celebrations of Wilhelmina's 40 year reign in the following year.

planning but which right-wing critics defined in 1938 as ‘idealist socialist, noble communist and salon bolshevik’!⁶⁸

Conclusion

Karsten saw his role as shaping the cultural and intellectual orientations of those classes of Javanese society who came to form the core of the articulate post-colonial civil society. Broadly, his published and professional work can be defined as an attempt to shape mentally and physically the parameters of contemporary Javanese (urban) life. His artistic and architectural involvement in Javanese ‘traditional culture’ was neither more nor less ‘authentic’ than the urban houses he designed for the urban Javanese – rather they were both architectural interventions along a cultural continuum which ultimately, in his colonial vision would merge to become the modern Javanese tradition. His encounter with the cosmopolitan Mangkunegara prince provided a context for cultural articulation – as he also enjoyed particularly with the Budi Utomo president and Volksraad member, Dr Radjiman – a colonial encounter which disappeared along with the colonial vision that sustained it.

Karsten remained well within the European environment – his Eurasian domestic life was, according to Bogaers essentially European – from where he engaged directly with selected (moderate) representatives of an indigenous society and worked through European institutions that supporting them. On the other hand, professionally he worked as architect and town planner and town planning consultant, and through his published work in professional, town planning, and municipal association journals, to define and disseminate the scientific principles for the organization of colonial urban settlements that would impose an ‘educative environment’ for the less articulate Indonesian urban dweller. He did not see himself engaged in developing an Indisch culture (as Sears alleges), a hybrid Dutch-Javanese culture, but a harmonious multi-ethnic one in which a modern Indonesian culture flourished. It was nevertheless a vision fairly strictly confined within a bourgeois and orientalist world view soon to be swept aside.

⁶⁸ E. Locher-Scholten, ‘Kritiek en Opbouw, (1937 – 1942): Een rode splinter, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, Vol. 89, 1976, pp. 202 – 227.

It seems that Karsten hardly moved from the view he developed in his first years in Semarang, and the idealistic perspective that some there held of modern urban society. As the world around him congealed into its separate components his own vision hardened into a set of fixed regulations which sought to stem the tide towards an inevitable rupture. Had he survived internment however, he could well have been part of a group around *Kritiek en Opbouw* editor, Koch and Sjahrir's young socialists, working for a non-revolutionary Indonesia but would have found himself once more on the margins of the dominant social forces. Given his marginal political position, the physical remains of Karsten's legacy are all the more remarkable and their structures arguably have left their imprint in contemporary Indonesian urban life.