
WHEN WEST MEETS EAST: One Century of Architecture in Indonesia (1890s-1990s)

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From the 17th century to the end of World War II, the Indonesian identity was that of a Dutch colony, an extension of the Netherlands. In fact, the name for Indonesia while under the Dutch administration, *Netherlands Indie*, translates to "the Netherlands that lies in the *Indie*." Architecturally, Indonesia was not a virgin land when the Dutch came. Its architectural tradition and heritage contrasted greatly with western architecture in general, and Dutch architecture in particular. The Dutch imported their building types and construction methods to Indonesia, and in fact when colonizing bureaucracies matured, the buildings themselves were designed in the Netherlands, materials were shipped to Indonesia, and constructed under Dutch supervision (and probably at the hands of a Dutch or Chinese master mason or master carpenter) (Fig. 1). This imported architecture was consciously as similar to Neo-Classical architecture built in the Netherlands as possible.

By the end of the nineteenth century this imported European style began to influence Indonesia's traditional architecture. In the Yogyakarta and Surakarta



Fig 1: The Dutch colonial style as seen in an East Javanese Bank Office in Surabaya.

palaces, indigenous architectural forms are juxtaposed against European styles. (Fig. 2) Still more extreme an example, The Royal Cemetery of Sumenep Sultanate, built in the mid-19th century, was completely European in style. How European architecture entered the 'center and peak of Javanese culture' is still in debate. A more revealing question might be what influenced the king's or sultan's decision to allow European styles to infiltrate traditional design so much? Certainly the wholesale adoption of European architecture may suggest an acceptance of cultural inferiority by the sultan, or possibly an architectural message and exemplar of how two architectural sources (local and European) meet.



Fig 2: Grand Pavillion of Mangkunegara Palace, Surakarta. Notice the European pediment as the portico of this Pavillion.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Dutch influence had penetrated even further into Indonesian culture. In remote, scattered villages that are only accessible by foot, residences from that period have European characteristics. Common architectural features displaying this Netherlandish influence are

Doric or Ionic columns or pilasters (that are not in proper proportion), a pediment which is sometimes poorly ornamented, and European decorated floor tiles. These buildings, however, are products of local vernacular practice. It is doubtful that Dutch architects were involved due to the low quality of workmanship. It is more probable that the architect was an Indonesian who had once worked with a Dutch architect or craftsman -- many of the villagers who tried their hands at construction during this period were farmers trying to earn a living during the agricultural off season.

Why did these villagers adopt European styles while maintaining their indigenous village organization? Was it a demonstration of skill on the part of the 'architect'? Or was it an expression of 'modernity' that the client desired? Whatever the answer to these questions, one thing is now obvious: European styles had undergone the process of assimilation and transformation. In fact by the 20th century European styles were no longer considered alien. What happened with the architecture that the Dutch planted in Indonesia at this period? Gill suggests that by this time Netherlandish building practices and styles had merged with the indigenous architecture in such a way that was suitable for the country's yearly pattern of dry and rainy seasons.(Ref.1) He called this modified style: '*Indische huis*,' or Indies building. (Fig. 3) Comparison with modified European architecture across other continents, particularly in Africa,



Fig. 3: Indische Huis

Australia, and Central America, shows similarities with other assimilated architectural colonial forms. Some of these forms common to other hybrid architectural production are a large veranda in the front part of the building; a long projecting roof extending from the sides of the building (which sometimes became a side veranda); and the high-pitched roof which sometimes used local materials such as reeds or wooden tiles.

One of the distinguishing features of the *Indische huis* is its use of the indigenous roof forms, the most important being the extended hipped roof. This roof form, unfamiliar to the Dutch mother country, was so transformed by colonial architects that it had little similarity to vernacular architecture of the Indies. However, since the architecture was now different from the Netherlands, the Dutch saw it as 'Indianized', a modified European architecture.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century Indonesia underwent a distinctive architectural development. Not unlike Europe, Indonesian architecture was engaged in a battle over style. There are several prime examples that remain from this battle. In the northern part of Sumatra, some mosques were built in a Moorish style, combining elements of Indian-Islamic architecture (Medan, Banda Aceh and P.Penyengat) (Fig 4). Bandung is now a battlefield of Art-Deco, Wrightian, and Amsterdam School style. (Fig 5a + 5b) An experiment in modernizing the



Fig. 4: Mosque at Banda Aceh

indigenous architecture of Indonesia was daringly carried out by Maclaine Pont in his design for the Bandung Institute of Technology. (Fig 6) Jakarta and Surabaya, as well as many provincial cities in Java, saw the rise of many buildings with minimal ornament and decoration. In Surabaya, the Government Office (1933) is obviously patterned after the Hilversum Town Hall by Dudok. This building contrasts with the Mayor's office (1921) which is adorned with geometric ornament and decoration.

The battle of style during this period is made more complicated with architects who consider that their architecture should be both modern and Indonesian. An office building for a sugar company in Surabaya, designed by Hulswitt, Fermont and Cuypers (1926) has a modernistic body adorned with decorations



Fig. 5a: Villa Isola, one exemplar of Art Deco Style of Bandung



Fig. 5b: Telecommunication Office, Surabaya



Fig. 6: Assembly Hall of Bandung Institute of Technology

imitative of the ninth century Hindu/Buddhist monuments of Central Jawa (notwithstanding the fact that Surabaya is in East Jawa, and has different culture and indigenous architecture from that of Central Jawa). A combination of Art Nouveau ironwork and a modified indigenous roof form of Sumatra with a Neo-Classical plan is seen in the Mpu Tantular Museum (formerly a residence for a bank director). (Fig 7)

Two thousand miles from Surabaya is the palace of Sultan Bima and Sultan Samawa. In the mid 1930s, each palace was enlarged by the addition of a masonry building. Here we find the indigenous forms of wooden architecture now replicated in masonry. The earlier wood framed palaces allowed the building to sit delicately on columns, leaving the ground floor open and the upper floor fully enclosed with a wood-



Fig. 7: Mpu Tantular Museum, Surabaya



Fig. 8a: Javanese construction as shown in the Open Pavillion, Yogyakarta Palace. Note that for both for Fig 8a and 8b, the outward appearance of the roof form is quite similar to Fig 3.

en wall. However, the new masonry palace is has an enclosed ground floor because of the elevated stone foundation, while its upper floor is similarly enclosed with masonry walls. The general consensus is that the use of stone and brick is remarkably modern, while the shape of the building is strongly vernacular. Preserving the vernacular shape of the building on the one hand, and introducing European construction on the other, was also exemplified by the Reception Hall of the Mayor of Bandung Residence. It is an open pavilion whose form is a copy of indigenous architecture from Central Jawa. However, it employs European methods and techniques for wooden construction. (Fig 8a and b)

In the 1930s Henri Maclaine Pont designed a number of buildings that have become the cornerstone of the Indonesian modern architectural movement. What he meant by modern architecture is modernizing indigenous architecture; not Indonesianization of European modern architecture. We have mentioned his work in Bandung as one of his more important experiments. These efforts were followed by the Pohsarang Catholic Church. (Ref.2) (Fig 9a and 9b) A couple of projects were also built in the 1930s, but have since been destroyed. Some Indonesian historians also put the name Thomas Karsten in parallel with Pont. If



Fig. 8b: European construction as shown in the Open Pavillion, Mayor of Bandung's Residence

Pont is the father of modern Indonesian architecture, then Karsten is the founder of modern city planning. Although they were both employed as civil servants, Pont had the opportunity to work in the archeological office in his later career, while Karsten spent most of his time working for the municipalities. Pont's sensitivity in the integration of modern technology of construction, philosophy of indigenous architecture of Indonesia, and richness and uniqueness of indigenous forms are manifest in his Pohsarang Church. On the other hand, Karsten's success, among other things, is in his consistency in establishing nature as the major defining and controlling element of city planning. A mountain in the distance, for example, is



Fig. 9a: Pohsarang Catholic Church, Kediri. Front elevation as photographed in the 1930s



Fig. 9b: Pohsarang Catholic Church, Kediri. Side elevation as photographed in the 1930s

taken as the focal point of an avenue, as well as the main axis and street grid controller. In this way, Karsten placed the modern city planning as subordinate to the physical natural elements. Buildings higher than six floors and buildings with large glass facades are probably the only absent modern form in Indonesia during the first thirty years of the twentieth century.

At the end of WW-II, in August 17, 1945, Indonesia proclaimed her independence. This proclamation was not followed by a smooth hand-over of administration. Conflicts with the Dutch provincial government

had direct consequences in architecture. First, with the diminishing numbers of Dutch architects, few Indonesian architects were available to take their place. Second, a shortage of building materials contributed to minimal architectural production. Third, the staff of the former Dutch department of public works was asked to take over the duties of Dutch architects. Fourth, construction companies were commissioned by the client to act as architect, which resulted in a very conservative architecture in those years. University graduates in civil engineering were also commissioned to do architectural works, but their number was quite small. Among them was Soekarno, the first President of Indonesia. The designer of a mosque in Bengkulu, he has been an important critic of building in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. His political views, including the politics of architecture, is openly nationalistic, are clearly stated in his speeches and addresses, for example: "Let us prove that we can also build the country like the Europeans and Americans do because we are equal." (Ref.3) A clover leaf highway, four high rise hotels, and a broad by-pass in Jakarta, are among those projects that were approved by Soekarno to demonstrate the capability of Indonesia.

Western-style projects were purposefully built not so much as a conscious westernization, but rather to prove that modern Indonesia can do the same things the west can do. The Building for the House of Representatives, designed by Suyudi (an Indonesian who is a graduate of a German university) has a very large twin shell roof, reminiscent of Saarinen's TWA airport, and must be viewed as the utmost demonstration of this Indonesian capability. The structural engineer was also Indonesian (the late ir. Soetami). One other architect that Soekarno praised was Frederich Silaban, a former officer of the Netherlands-Indie Department of Public Works. His experience in this office is reflected in his statement: "What is Indonesian architecture? It is an architecture that emerged from utmost tropical climatic utilization. It is not a copy and imitation of indigenous



Fig. 10: Bank Indonesia Building, Jakarta

form, so that we may mark our modernity."(Ref.4) His Istiqlal State Mosque (the largest in South East Asia in the 1970s), and the head office of the Bank Indonesia, (Fig. 10) are the clearest demonstrations of his concepts. Not surprisingly, Le Corbusier's and Niemeyer's play of *brise-soleil* are distinguishing characteristics of Silaban's works.

During the 1950s, a distinctive architecture, known by Indonesians as 'jengki style' (after the word 'yankee' - the American armed forces) appeared. Johan Silas speculates that this distinctive architecture is an expression of the political spirit of freedom among the Indonesians. (Ref.5) The spirit of freedom translated into an architecture that differs from what the Dutch had done. The modern cubic and strict geometric forms are transformed into more complicated volumes, such as pentagons or other irregular solids. Roofs are pitched, the surface and composition are festive. These characteristics are not commonly found elsewhere in Europe and America. More surprisingly, these distinctive forms are mostly designed by construction companies, or architecture students of Bandung Institute of Technology (where the Department of Architecture was established in 1951). (Fig 11)

As the copying of European and American modern architecture became the spirit of the age among newly independent nations of the third world, Indonesia saw that its architectural education was the primary vehicle to achieve it. Initially established



Fig. 11: A house in Jengki ('Yankee') style, Sarangan-East Java

under Dutch professors, in the mid 1950s they had to leave due to political difficulties between Indonesia and the Netherlands. For a short period some German professors managed the department, but by the end of the 1950s Americans, as well as Indonesian graduates from American universities, took over. Consequently, the graduates of ITB are most influenced by American architecture. Among those graduates who practice in Surabaya are the late Djelantik, Harjono Sigit, Johan Silas and Harry Winarno Kwari. (Fig 12) Their works represent the general stream of architectural style in the first half of the 1970s. Their designs mostly were inspired by Latin American architects and are characterized by the dominance of *brise-soleil*, strict geometry, and repetition of facade elements. Djelantik's administration building of the Surabaya Institute of Technology is directly comparable to the *Unité d'Habitation* of



Fig. 12: A Rice Mill Office, Sukorejo - East Java, designed by Harjono Sigit

Le Corbusier. The first half of the 1970s was clearly the heyday of the International Style. Conversations with the above mentioned architects shows that they refuse to be blamed for westernizing Indonesian architecture. "I am working in the modern spirit of architecture," is a typical reply. Here, we see that the term westernization is refused, or, is interchangeable with modernization.

Amidst the dominance of the International Style, a small number of architects attempted to redefine modern Indonesian architecture. Atelier 6, an architectural office based in Jakarta, not only designed a purely geometric abstract form for the National Hero Cemetery in Jakarta, but also designed a new vocabulary of indigenous form: a modernized indigenous form. The Governor's office of East Nusatenggara, the Indonesian pavilion for the 1970 Tokyo Exposition and the Said Naum Mosque, are examples of modernizing the indigenous. Are they inheriting the spirit of Maclaine Pont? They make no such claim. In the early 70s there was still little interest in the history of Indonesian architects like Pont, except for van Romondt, a Dutch professor of Bandung Institute of Technology (the architect's alma mater) who teaches the history of Indonesian architecture.

Toward mid-1970s the government made an important step in the debate of modern architecture in Indonesia. The first move by the government was building Taman Mini (Indonesia in Miniature) where more than twenty indigenous architectural forms were re-created. Some of them are real buildings disassembled from their original site and transported to Jakarta. Some buildings are exaggerated copies of indigenous forms. Here, every province is encouraged to boast their indigenous architectural richness, so at the end there are twenty six indigenous architectural forms representing the same number of provinces in Indonesia. The next move from the government was a call for Indonesian architects to design an Indonesian architecture, not merely to copy modern architecture in the West. Again, the

government exemplified this call by adopting the design by FATA as national model. This design by FATA is a mosque for a petrochemical factory that modernizes the indigenous forms of Javanese mosques (characterized by its three tiered pyramidal roof form). Hundreds of mosques, spread all over Indonesia (which is as large as the distance from Los Angeles to New York) have now become the formula of what is called "Modern Indonesian Architecture". Most public buildings financed by the government now appear with geometric forms for the body, and distinctive indigenous roof forms as their top. Unfortunately, most of them are not sensitive to composition so that the top and the body do not integrate to each other. (Fig 13) The 1980s is the era where this formula was widely practiced for public buildings.

The beginning of the 1980s was also the beginning of a construction boom by the private sector. This private sector tends to be more sensitive than the government in dealing with architecture. To the private sector, the appearance of architecture is an integral part of the marketing strategy. The more luxurious the appearance, the more prestigious the company image is. This has become the prevailing philosophy of architecture. Competition among private companies accelerated during the previous decade, to the



Fig. 13: Provincial House of Representative of East Java, Surabaya. A traditional roof on top of modern style building

point where the use of a foreign architect is now becoming part of marketing strategy. (Fig 14) In the early nineties for example, it was not strange to find advertisements for an apartment that also included the photograph and name of the architect. Building 'modern' is no longer important; now the building must be designed by a foreign architect, no matter how bad their design is. Even projects that must definitely show indigenous form, such as tourist hotels in Bali, use indigenous forms but are designed by foreign architects.

The opportunity that foreign architects have to practice in Indonesia is in part due to the financing system of projects. Both in government projects and the private sector, if the financing is in part supported by foreign money, those foreign investors demand that the design be controlled by them. What makes the

government project different from the private sectors is, among other things, the government project may require a partnership between foreign architects and an Indonesian architect. Expectedly, this partnership may result in transfer of knowledge. What is ironic is that it becomes a model for architectural practice in the nineties. Projects on the national or international level will have a foreign architect; projects at the provincial level will have 'foreign' architects, i.e. Jakarta's architects; and it goes on until at the very end, architects at the district level are unemployed. Although we may not underestimate the capacity of those foreign architects to develop a true "Indonesian" architecture, we surely believe that this



Fig. 14: Wisma Dharmala, Jakarta. Architect: Paul Rudolph



Fig 15a: Contemporary scene, Bank Pacificbuilding, Surabaya



Fig 15b: Contemporary scene, Architect's house, Jakarta

task is ultimately obligatory for the Indonesians. The question is whether the situation conducive and supportive to a nation's cultural development. Indeed, the conflict between westernization and modernization in Indonesia does not simply involve architectural styles, but control over the building site, as well.

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