

New Building Offers Opportunities

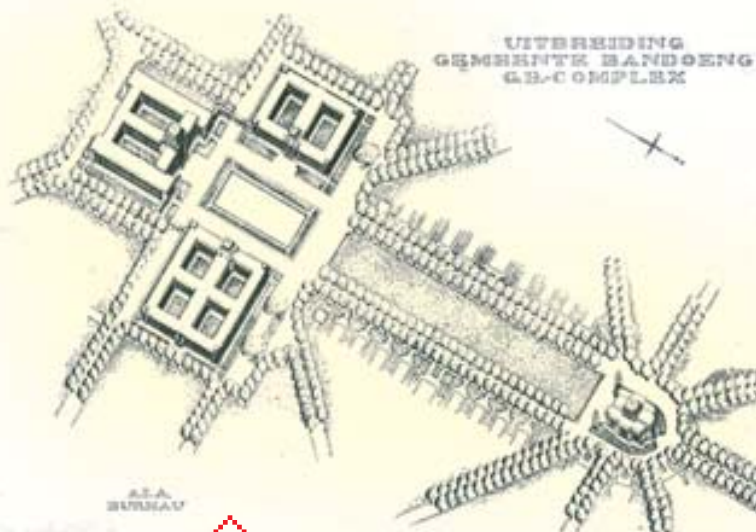
By drs Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen (*)

Bandung citizens are upset, angry and frustrated about yet another mega-structure that will be built. The 'West Java Convention Centre and Hotel' combines a convention centre, a hotel, the inevitable shopping mall, and a multi-story car park. The building will be built diagonally across Gedung Sate. Various arguments against the project are raised. The majority of them focus of laws that are trespassed and environmental consequences. Although both arguments are extremely relevant, I would like to focus the discussion on another aspect though. Because I fear it is unlikely the project will be abolished I think attention should also be given to the size and 'design' – or rather shape – of the project. If the building were large but architecturally sound and context-sensitive, I would have little objections to it. Unfortunately the plan presented in Pikiran Rakyat (31-3-2006) promises to be neither. The image presented meets neither architectural nor town planning

criteria. The 'design' is merely the umpteenth tasteless and tacky building built by real-estate developers in Bandung – and thus completely at odds with the highly sophisticated town plan and buildings that were once initially designed for this particular part of Bandung.

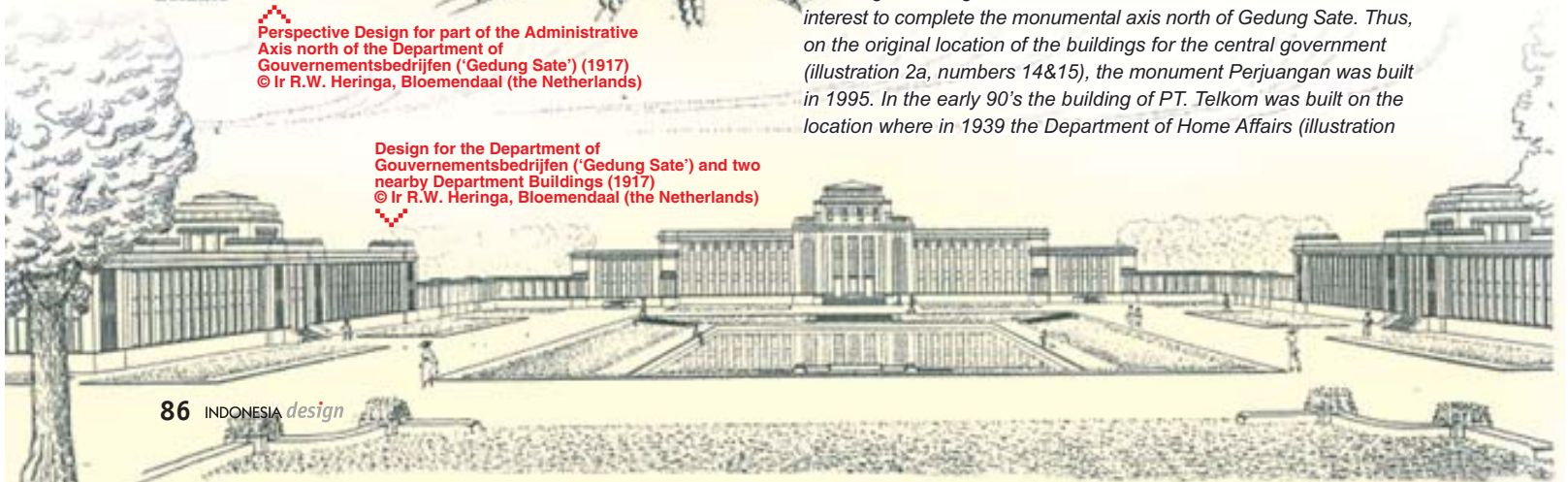
Exactly 90 years ago expectations were high. Governor-General mr J.P. count van Limburg Stirum had just suggested to move all departments from Batavia to Bandung. This decision would turn Bandung from a rather sleepy countryside town into the colony's new administrative capital. To accommodate the departments and other ambitious institutes (among them the Polytechnic (Technische Hoogeschool) and Institute Pasteur) the architectural firm Algemeen Ingenieurs en Architectenbureau (AIA) designed a monumental plan north of the railway. North from the anchor building of the plan, the Department of 'Gouvernementsbedrijven' ('Transport and Communications'), better known as 'Gedung Sate', AIA designed a long and wide avenue lined with simple and well-designed buildings for the other departments. The avenue would visually link the Department of 'Gouvernementsbedrijven' to Tangkuban Perahu. [ILL. 1a + 1b]. Not long after the municipality approved the plan the municipal development company bought the land rights (hak milik), prepared the lands for building, and schematically sold parcels for development. Bandung's efforts were of little avail though. Not long after the first buildings were built (Gedung Sate, TH), the government in Batavia cancelled the relocation of the departments. As a result the municipality of Bandung was stuck with large financial deficits and a far from complete town plan. Attempts to persuade the government to resume the relocation of the departments failed – even though the revised building plans and architecture of 1928 and 1938 were much more sober than the initial ones. [ILL. 2a + 2b].

As a result the 'avenue' north of Gedung Sate was a rather non-descript area until the 1990's. Since the 1990's though the municipality of Bandung and the government of West Java have shown a renewed interest to complete the monumental axis north of Gedung Sate. Thus, on the original location of the buildings for the central government (illustration 2a, numbers 14&15), the monument Perjuangan was built in 1995. In the early 90's the building of PT. Telkom was built on the location where in 1939 the Department of Home Affairs (illustration



Perspective Design for part of the Administrative Axis north of the Department of Gouvernementsbedrijven ('Gedung Sate') (1917)
© Ir R.W. Heringa, Bloemendaal (the Netherlands)

Design for the Department of Gouvernementsbedrijven ('Gedung Sate') and two nearby Department Buildings (1917)
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Design for the WJCCH (2006)
© Pikiran Rakyat

2a, number 7) was proposed. Although these buildings do not exactly stand out as architectural gems they do lend the area some kind of scale that formerly was missing. Given the history and the development of the area one can therefore argue that the construction of a building diagonally across from Gedung Sate is quite appropriate as it will further complete the axis. My main objection against the building is therefore not so much its location. My main objection is its Lego-Land style 'design': insensitivity to its surroundings, too large, badly proportioned and detailed, a crisscross of unnecessary features such as cupola's and turrets.[ILL.3] Undoubtedly painted in either primary or pastel colours, the future complex will be yet another example of the kind of buildings we see all over Indonesia when real-estate developers take control.

Why not skip the eternal shopping mall – don't we have enough of them already? Why not built a chic and classy building? Why not apply contemporary architecture that reflects the year when it was built? This is Bandung in the year 2006: not a Lunaparc in a nondescript country in a nondescript year. Good buildings require good design. Good design can only be achieved if a designer i.e. architects understands what is required to build a good building. The building of a new conference hall with adjacent hotel on this particular location offers great opportunities for a 'grand gesture'. An architecturally worthwhile design (well-considered on all levels: function, context, scale, design, material) would be a dignified substitute for the department that was never built. It would also be a distinguished pendant of Gedung Sate. There are plenty of options to do this. The most obvious one is to ask the Indonesian Association of Architects, (Ikatan Arsitek Indonesia, IAI) to organise an architectural idea- and/or design competition. Another approach might be to invite internationally well-known architects to put ideas and designs forward. This might lead to even more stunning results. Remember Bilbao? Before Frank O. Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Museum was built hardly anybody heard of the town. Today, everybody interested in culture not only recognises the design out of a million others, but also knows (and wants to visit!) Bilbao.

Luckily in Bandung no existing building needs to be demolished in order to create space for the new building – as in many other situations. Other than that though the future building will be no different from so many other commercial and private projects realised in Bandung over the last 20 years: spatially invading and architecturally intrusive. Very awkward as the construction of a building on the former location of the Department of Justice does not violate the town plan and might offer great opportunities. Provided commissioner and designer have – as in the old days – a daring, artistic and long-term vision. Without that vision though, the building will be just another stain on Bandung's badly deteriorated outlook. Today not much is left of the once highly sophisticated and glamorous architecture and town planning that characterized Bandung 80 years ago. From an architecture point of view Bandung in 2006 is almost bankrupt. The construction of a architecturally worthwhile building that pays respect to its historically prestigious location and adjacent building could be the turning point of this downward spiral. If done well it might, as a matter of fact, become Bandung's contemporary landmark building. It's not too late, but it's one minute to twelve. (graphic: th) 0

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Revised Lay-out for the Departments (1938)
© Netherlands Architecture Institute,
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Ground Floor Plan for the Department
of Justice (1938)
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