

Impressions of a trip to Java

May last I participated in the 'Architecture Tour Java 2010'. This tour is an initiative of the architectural historian Pauline van Roosmalen; she created the format for this trip and she acted as a guide as well. The technical part of the trip was executed by Merapi Tour and Travel and I think that both of them should be complemented for the program they offered.

Merapi for supplying us with airline tickets, excellent local transportation, a Dutch speaking guide who really cared, and for the flexibility they displayed in dealing with small changes in the program according to the wishes of participants.

And for Pauline, our guide. She signed for the selection of the fine former colonial hotels where we stayed and for the beautiful restaurants where we had our meals. But, probably more important, she also succeeded in awakening in a very short time in all participants a keen interest in colonial architecture and in town and country planning in the former Dutch East Indies. Thanks to her devotion it soon became clear to me that this almost forgotten part of Dutch colonial history justifies a keen and broad interest in the present day.

One of the remarkable aspects of the tour was to find – to my great surprise – that the interest in colonial building and urban development is alive and growing in nowadays Indonesia. Everywhere we came Pauline introduced us to people who are devoted to the preservation of this part of the mutual Dutch-Indonesian heritage. Some of them, being students of architecture, had a professional interest. But we also met a surprising amount of local volunteers working with great keenness for the preservation of those relatively young monuments, mainly dating from the first half of the past century.

An important backing for these local initiatives must be that many of those buildings are still used for the purpose that they were originally designed for. This explains for the sometimes excellent state of repair in which we found most of these structures. Concerning this part of the matter there was hardly any difference between the former premises of De Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij (now used by Pertamina), the head office and branches of the former Javasche Bank (now serving the Bank of Indonesia), catholic churches, school buildings, monasteries and hospitals.

One of the main attractions of this trip was, that it was arranged for us to enter most of these buildings. Inside one gets easily impressed by the artistic quality of the decoration programs and by the high quality of the materials the colonial architect used in their designs. A side effect of these visits was that I got a fair impression of the physical environment in which the Indonesians employed there spend their working days. And I found that their environment is in many ways more attractive – at least more spacious – than the flexible working units where I – employed as a university lecturer in the Netherlands – am supposed to perform my day-to-day duties.

It was also remarkable to see that most of the colonial buildings that are still in use today haven't yet been equipped with an airco system. The techniques for cooling down the interior by using a natural circulation of air as employed by the colonial architects do apparently still give sufficient relieve in that hot climate today.

And then of course there was the art deco style; hardly employed in the Netherlands but obviously flourishing in the roaring twenties and thirties in the Dutch East Indies. Looking – for example – at the town hall in Cirebon, or walking down the Jalan Asia Afrika in Bandung with the famous Preanger and Savoy Homan hotels, one feels like strolling around in Miami's South beach area. The popularity of this style-of-building also shows the cosmopolitan character of colonial society in those years.

These are only some impressions of a very successful and – in spite of the busy program – relaxed trip to the beautiful isle of Java. A journey that in my opinion everyone with only the slightest interest in the Dutch overseas heritage should make.

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