

This article is a revised version of the positioning paper I wrote on request of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre in the framework of a project on identification and documentation of modern colonial built heritage.¹

Considerations

Time and again the application of the word 'colonial' leads to discussions. Although I sympathise with objections against this word for being extremely Eurocentric, inaccurate and discriminating I also think that despite its shortcomings it most clearly determines what it refers to: architecture and town plans commissioned and realised by a European government at the time of its reign over a foreign - mostly Asian, African or South-American – country. Replacing colonial with 'mutual' or 'overseas', although sympathetic, from my point of view is equally problematic as 'mutual' is meaningless without explaining the colonial context and 'overseas' is maybe even more Eurocentric than 'colonial'. Given these considerations the adjective 'colonial' offers the advantage that because of its built-in reference to specific political, regional and social circumstances and characteristics, it unmistakably refers to a particular kind of built heritage. Characteristics that do not necessarily qualify it as exemplary and outstanding architecture and town planning but are relevant when assessing the value and meaning of this particular heritage. Thus, despite its invalidity as a criteria to assess value and meaning of individual built heritage, I will use 'colonial' when referring to buildings and town plans (both referred to with the word 'architecture') realised in countries that were at one point ruled by a European power.

The reason(s) why countries and governments do or do not appreciate and preserve built heritage differ around the globe. As a result identification, listing, preservation and restoration of built heritage and the implementation of a policy can not be taken for granted.

With regard to architecture and town planning that was realized in countries that were formerly colonised by Western countries, the issue of appreciation and preservation is even more delicate as it is linked with the issue that the architecture was built by non-indigenous people who at the time ruled over the country. This situation gives rise to the question who is actually 'responsible' for this particular heritage: the country in which the artefacts are located and/or the former coloniser? Although in general it can be stated that former colonies and colonisers moved from an very emotional approach with regard to their mutual history towards a much more rational one, this question sometimes still turns out to be relevant. This for instance becomes obvious when it comes to collecting data, expertise and, last but not least, money.

Conceived and realized at a time when European nations established empires by ruling over countries that were usually far away and much more extensive than the territory Europe, the remnants of the architecture in these regions that was realised during that time bear witness of a once existing world order and its transitory character. Assuming colonialism as we once knew it will not re-occur, this architecture therefore is a tangible testimony of a world-order of a time that once existed.

This realisation leads to two questions. The first one is whether it is 'because' or 'in spite' of its political context that this specific heritage is of particular interest and importance. The second one is who is actually responsible: the former coloniser, the former colonised, or maybe both?

Despite the negative connotations that for a long time were linked to anything related to former colonial administrations, scholars, architects, politicians, and also a general audience over the last twenty years have increasingly shown an interest in colonial heritage.² Although

the drive behind this development is not always a very positive one from an architectural point of view – namely the rapid economic developments that erased and erase buildings and sites that for decades and sometimes centuries, characterised towns, villages and landscapes – it did change many people’s outlook on the significance, quality, and importance of this specific category of heritage.

As this change occurred and more studies were conducted, more time and attention was paid to the specific (local) circumstances and demands under which the architecture was built. As a result, aspects that for a long time were not taken into consideration, finally were and consequently changed the outlook on colonial heritage – particularly in the country that used to be the coloniser. When several historical studies showed that European colonial architecture was not by definition secondary to developments in the ‘motherland’ – and (thus) not of inferior quality – it was gradually agreed that colonial architecture had its own merits and needed to be valued accordingly.³

Valuating Colonial Built Heritage

The outlook, importance, and value of the architecture realised in a colony were very much determined by political, economic, social, and cultural conditions that greatly differed from those in Europe and America. When assessing this heritage it is therefore of the utmost importance to incorporate and consider these circumstances in order to arrive at as objective a assessment as possible. An illuminating example of how this can be done is given by Gwendolyn Wright in her book on the politics of design in French colonial urbanism.⁴ In her book Wright describes how the French government used the colonies as a kind of experimental playground to try out new architectural- and planning concepts and ideas. Wright researches the commonality of this practice, the aims by which different administrations ruled their colony, and the differences or similarities in the practice of architecture between colonies and their motherland. By situating these achievements in their specific context and valuating them in their own right, Wright succeeds in explaining why colonial French architecture is worthwhile from both a conceptual as well as from a design point of view.

Although not very explicitly, Wright’s and other studies indicate the need to revise the definition of colonial heritage, the ‘contradiction’ between colonial and ‘non-colonial’ built heritage, and the idea that colonial architecture around the world has common denominations that make it stand out as a distinct group. A revision is urgently needed for two reasons. Firstly because the apparently persistent idea that colonial architecture is inferior to contemporary architecture in Europe and North America needs to be put aside. Secondly because it needs to be acknowledged that colonial architecture is rooted in and a reflection of a multiethnic society. As multiethnic societies lead to cultural cross-fertilization and its products often do not fit in with Western criteria, valuating and determining the meaning and importance of these objects is often quite difficult due to lack of a proper set of criteria. As colonial societies and its artifacts by definition were a mixture of cultures – and Western criteria (thus) do not apply – it goes without saying that Western criteria used to valuate architecture in Europe or North America need to be revised, adjusted or maybe even replaced. Only when we acknowledge the specific qualities and characteristics of colonial architecture will we be able to arrive at a better understanding and a (more or less) objective evaluation of its position, meaning, quality, and merits. Without acknowledging its specific qualities and characteristics it is likely we continue to consider colonial architecture merely a regional derivative of Western culture.

In order to arrive at a balanced valuation system we can no longer shy away from the necessity to investigate the applicability and relevance of Western criteria to Western and colonial architecture alike. While doing this it is likely we will have to conclude that criteria

that have proven to be good standards in a purely Western context are less, or even unsuitable in a colonial setting and thus a new set of criteria is needed. Such a new set of criteria from my point of view should consider and include:

- Circumstances: political, economic, social, cultural, nature (social, political);
- Assignments and objectives: volume and scale of the assignments;
- Working practice: education, professionalism, opportunities, limitations;
- Framework: institutions, legislation, journals;
- Local conditions: availability of material, building and construction methods, styles and decorations;
- External influences: Western materials, building and construction methods, styles and decorations;
- Adjustments and adaptations: mutual integration of vernacular/Western constructions, material, styles, decoration;
- Contemporary references: other colonies, Europe, United States of America;
- Characteristics of architecture and town planning: distinguish and determine similarities and/or differences between a colony, its motherland and other colonies with regard to style, technique, material etc.

Studying colonial architecture with these criteria in mind will enable researchers and other professionals to draw the objective conclusions that are necessary to establish their intrinsic architectural value. It is my assumption that when this happens we can finally begin to acknowledge that architecture realized in former European colonies was innovative, did produce styles and buildings that were particular to a region and period, was the result of a cultural cross-fertilization, and, last but not least, does have qualities that makes it definitely worthwhile to preserve.

Notes

¹ Pauline van Roosmalen: 2003, 'Changing Views of Colonial Heritage' in R. van Oers, S. Haraguchi, *World Heritage Papers* 5, UNESCO, Paris, 121-128.

² Huib Akihary: 1988, *Architectuur en Stedebouw in Indonesië 1840-1940*, Walburg Pers, Zutphen; G. Gresleri, P.G. Massaretti and S. Zagnoni (eds): 1993, *Architettura Italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia; R. Home: 1996, *Of Planting and Planning. The Making of British Colonial Cities*, E&FN Spon, London; Helen Jessup: 1988, *Netherlandish Architecture in Indonesia 1900-1942*, University of London, London; Wim Ravesteijn, Jan Kop (eds), *Bouwen in de Archipel. Burgelijke openbare werken in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië 1800-2000*, Walburg Pers, Zwolle; Torsten Warner: 1994, *German Architecture in China. Architectural Transfer*, Ernst & Sohn, Berlin; Gwendoly Wright: 1991, *Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, University of Chicago, Chicago.

³ Despite various attempts Western awareness and recognition of different values outside the Western hemisphere only gradually seem to sink in. Though a small number of studies tries to give proof of the contrary, many art- and architectural historians today still argue that contemporary art and architecture is merely a provincial derivative of Western developments. See for a discussion on contemporary Indonesian art: Helena Spanjaard: 2003, *Modern Indonesian Painting*, Sotheby's, Up productions, s.l.; Astri Wright: 1993, *Soul, Spirit and Mountain. Preoccupation of Contemporary Indonesian Painters*, Oxford University Press.

⁴ Gwendolyn Wright: 1991, *Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, University of Chicago, Chicago.