

A brief overview of Dutch Indian architecture and town planning

The initial reason for the Dutch, or rather the Dutch East India Company (VOC), to set sail to this archipelago was the lucrative spice-trade and the abundance of spices on several islands, notably the Moluccas.

The first settlements that were erected were fortresses and strongholds. As the VOC gradually conquered more territory, the settlements were extended with or replaced by towns. The most impressive was no doubt the capital: Batavia (now Jakarta). Laid out on an orthogonal plan, Batavia very much resembled a Dutch town. There were streets and canals bordered with houses with thatched roofs and sash windows. And there was a central square, lined with the town hall on one side, and a church on another.

The bankruptcy of the VOC towards the end of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of a new era: the true colonisation of the archipelago.

The first sign of the new era was the introduction, in 1830, of a system that forced farmers to produce crops for the government in Batavia. When this overtly oppressive system was abandoned in 1870, the colony entered a liberal phase in which private entrepreneurship went hand in hand with territorial conquests and modernisation.

One of the developments that embodied the latter was the development and professionalization of Dutch Indian architecture. As in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe, this emergence of Dutch Indian architecture was fed by an increasing discontent about the lack of architectural quality of many buildings built during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In order to improve the situation in the Dutch East Indies, architects increasingly argued for the need to develop a proper, contemporary Dutch Indian architecture. An architecture that would meet local, economic and cultural demands.

As was to be expected, the views on the true nature of contemporary Dutch Indian architecture greatly differed. By and large two movements emerged. One movement, represented by Henri Maclaine Pont, favoured the application of indigenous materials, constructions and decorative elements. The second movement, whose viewpoint was ardently defended by Casper P. Wolff Schoemaker, loathed the application of indigenous architecture and consequently argued for the application of a carefully adapted Western architecture.

The aspiration to improve the poor quality of Dutch Indians architecture coincided with another need: the need to improve and expand existing towns.

The consequential emergence and professionalization of town planning ran almost parallel to the emergence and professionalization of architecture in the Dutch East Indies. Developments in the colony sometimes even surpassed developments in the Netherlands. This for example was the case when H. Thomas Karsten, the 'founding father' of Dutch Indian town planning, published his treatise on Dutch Indian town planning as early as 1920: years before a similar treatise on Dutch town planning was published. A similar event occurred in 1938, when a Bill for a Dutch Indian Town Planning Ordinance was presented. Equally years before a similar ordinance was presented in the Netherlands.

As I need to be brief and don't have time to go into details, I restrict myself by stating that many Dutch Indian architecture and town plans designed between 1900 and 1942 have a very distinctive character.

To illustrate this I show 3 collages: Bandung, Surabaya, and Semarang.

Just as the development of architecture and town planning was well on its way, the outbreak of World War II and the Japanese occupation of the archipelago brought it to a standstill. A standstill that, although the Netherlands initially refused to believe this and consequently after the Japanese surrender started post-war reconstructions, ultimately turned out to be the beginning of the end of its rule over the archipelago.

Handling heritage

When the Dutch, after a bloody colonial war, finally handed over sovereignty to Indonesia in 1949, the tactile remnants of 350 years Dutch presence were everywhere: houses, offices, shops, harbours, irrigation works, canals, roads, etc. As most remnants were integrated and essential to the country's economy and society, the majority of them were left intact. Only monuments that overtly hailed Dutch conquests in the archipelago were removed.

The utilization of objects built under colonial rule was purely pragmatic: although a remnant of Indonesia's colonial past they were also highly functional. It was this realisation that initially safeguarded most colonial built heritage from demolition.

Until the economy started to boom in the early 1980's, that is. It was only then that, due to the demand for more and wider roads and new buildings, colonial buildings were increasingly perceived as obstacles: both physically and mentally.

Given the colonial origin of colonial buildings, it was hardly surprising that most Indonesians hardly cared about their disappearance. The aspirations of modern Indonesia were related to and focussed on the future, not the past.

Given this attitude, it was remarkable that it was the demolition of one of the emblems of colonial society in Djakarta, a European private club, that changed this attitude around. The destruction of 'De Harmonie' in order to accommodate the widening of one of Djakarta's main roads, angered academicians, professionals, and citizens alike. Not because they disliked progress or idolized the country's colonial past, but because they understood that by demolishing historic buildings one does not erase the past and because the building was a fine example of early nineteenth century architecture in the archipelago.

In the Netherlands things were different, but little better. Unlike the Indonesian population, ninety percent of the Dutch population today is hardly ever confronted with the Dutch colonial past. One of the reasons for this situation is that for decades any discussion about the Dutch presence in Indonesia was smothered by an amalgam of emotions, ranging from frustration and nostalgia to anger and shame. The consequence, silence and denial, had a far-reaching effect: many Dutch citizens born (roughly) after 1975 are hardly aware that Indonesia was once part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Although efforts to change this ignorance around still only catch on with a limited group of people, it was thanks to a publication and an exhibition that ultimately some attention emerged for Dutch Indian built heritage.

Struggle for preservation

Although petitions, demonstrations, studies, publications and exhibitions did not stop bulldozers, they did procure something almost equally important. They created awareness and appreciation among academicians, professionals, citizens and administrators that

historical buildings, including colonial ones, are an intricate part of a country's history and therefore deserve to be protected. Not only because of their significance from an architectural and historical point of view, but also because of their economic value.

In Indonesia this awareness resulted in the establishment of numerous local heritage societies, a Indonesian National Heritage Trust, and a Documentation Centre for Architecture. Simultaneously supporting groups in the Netherlands were established. Over the last 25 years it were these (largely voluntary) organisations that raised many, often ardent, debates with real estate developers and (local) government about the sense, and nonsense, of new building schemes on historic sites.

What was also obvious though was that, whereas the public and academia started to embrace colonial architecture and town planning, the topic remained very delicate from a political point of view. Not so much because of the topic itself but because, despite the fact that commercial relationships between Indonesia and the Netherlands normalized in the early 1970's, the political relationship between both countries remained sensitive.

This became no more clear than in 1992 when, following criticism of the Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs regarding the enforcement of human rights in Indonesia, Indonesia suspended all diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, including those in the field of culture.

Equally awkward was the decision of the Dutch government to schedule the 1995 state visit of the queen of the Netherlands to Indonesia in such a way that she would not be present at the festivities commemorating the fiftieth birthday of Indonesia's independence. A decision that lead to numerous debates, in Indonesia as well as in the Netherlands.

Another indication of the sensitive relationship occurred in 2002, the 400th anniversary of the VOC. One of the debates focussed on the designation of the occasion. Was it justified to call it a 'celebration' or was 'commemoration' more appropriate?

To make matters even more complicated, the Dutch government insisted to abandon the adjective 'colonial' and instead use the less antagonistic – but also less accurate and highly ambiguous – adjectives 'mutual', 'shared', or 'common'.

It was only in 2005, when the Netherlands accepted (but not acknowledged) 1945 as the beginning of Indonesia's independence and regretted (but not apologised for) the military violence inflicted on Indonesia between 1945 and 1950, that the tense diplomatic relationship between both countries loosened and a cultural agreement could be signed.

Four projects

To illustrate the different levels and variety of projects that have been undertaken during the last decade, I will briefly present the four projects described in my paper.

The first project is restaurant VOC Galangan, a former VOC-shipyard in Djakarta. The aim of the initiator of the project, a wealthy local entrepreneur, was twofold. First, to restore the former glory of the buildings of the shipyard. Second, to revive the area by adding an attractive locality for festivals, parties, and seminars.

Although the first aim (restoration) was already problematic, the second aim turned out to be even more difficult. The main reason for this was the location of the area: north Jakarta. Although this area is historically of great importance, it is also remote, run down, and difficult to reach by almost any kind of transport.

What does not harm business is the fact that the complex is a VOC complex. On the

contrary: in line with an increasing willingness to accept testimonies of the Dutch presence as an inherent part of Indonesia's past and (cultural) heritage, the efforts of the owner to restore and utilize an exceptional example of colonial built heritage is highly appreciated by many Indonesians.

The second project is Perkumpulan KotaKu (which translates as: 'My City'), an association of entrepreneurs in the same area. KotaKu's approach was different from the first project. Instead of focussing on one object, KotaKu focussed on an area. The area, Djakarta Kota converges with seventeenth and eighteenth century Batavia.

The motivation to fight for the revitalisation and preservation of this area is closely linked to the fact that many of KotaKu's participants owned real estate and businesses in the area. Assets that, due to an indifferent attitude and often counterproductive policies of the local government, rapidly lose their value.

To turn the tide KotaKu wrote an action plan, conducted studies, organised exhibitions and seminars, and lobbied the government. The arguments for preservation KotaKu presented were always multifaceted. Apart from the historic and architectural value of the area and its buildings, other important arguments were the loss of business, the socio-economic disintegration and the physical deterioration of the area.

KotaKu's all-round and integral approach demonstrated three things. First that a socio-economic argument for preservation is as – if not more – powerful and legitimate as architectural, historical or aesthetic arguments. Second that an integrated, multidisciplinary, overall approach is far more effective than a haphazard approach. And last but not least, that awareness, appreciation, and even more so commitment of government and local population are crucial for any project related to the preservation of built heritage.

Good governance and commitment but also mutual respect and understanding were essential criteria for the third project: putting together an inventory on all 275 British, Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch fortifications in Indonesia and identifying suitable, sustainable functions for some of the objects.

The project, which is financed by two Dutch ministries (Foreign Affairs & Culture, Education, and Science) and the Indonesian ministry of Culture and Tourism, is hoped to be a first step towards a constructive future Indonesian-Dutch cooperation regarding colonial built heritage. This hope is based on the fact that the Indonesian government considers the project highly important under the current Indonesian Act on Monuments and Archaeological Sites.

The fourth project is my own Ph.D.-research on Dutch Indian town planning between 1905 and 1950. With this study, which describes the developments in the colony as autonomous events in relation to developments in the mother country, I hoped to achieve two goals. The first was to fill in the still substantial gap in Indonesian and Dutch architectural history. (Although not the first study on Dutch Indian built heritage, it is still one of a very limited number of studies on Dutch Indian built heritage.) The second goal was to change the predominantly Eurocentric, and rather condescending, attitude that colonial built heritage is merely a derivative of European developments and therefore hardly worthwhile studying. To prove the irrationality of this assumption, more studies are urgently needed.

Apart from the political context it was largely also due to this condescending approach that colonial built heritage for a long time was considered irrelevant. Luckily the tide is turning: the Netherlands and Indonesia, but also other European countries and their former colonies, and international organisations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, DOCOMOMO, EAHN, and mAAN have recently shown an increasing interest in the history, the significance, and the

preservation of colonial built architecture and town plans.

This development is relevant for two reasons. The first obvious reason is that it is no longer acceptable to ignore a considerable quantity of the world's built heritage merely because of its sensitive political, i.e. colonial, origin. The second reason is that in order to assess the value and significance of colonial built heritage, (comparative) research is indispensable: between the colony and the mother country, but also between various colonies and their respective mother countries. Only in the framework of this wider context will it be possible to fully assess the value and significance of colonial built heritage: on a local, national, and even international scale.