Designing colonial cities: the making of modern town planning in the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia 1905-1950

Far-reaching socio-economic changes caused by burgeoning private enterprise, in combination with new insights and demands in terms of hygiene, infrastructure, architecture and town planning; emerging anti-sentiments among growing numbers of indigenous inhabitants; and the direct confrontation of administrators with local issues: together these provided a prolific setting for the making of modern town planning in the Dutch East Indies in the first half of the twentieth century.

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Before 1905

After nearly three centuries of Dutch domination, the Dutch East Indies—the archipelago that is today called Indonesia—underwent two major changes around the turn of the twentieth century. The first change was the introduction of the Agrarian Act (Agrarische Wet) in 1870. This act enabled private individuals to possess land on a long lease and, as a result, opened up business opportunities. The second change was the enactment of the Decentralisation Act (Decentralisatiewet) in 1903 and the Local Council Ordinance (Loçe Radenordonnante) in 1905. These two acts enabled the government to decentralise the archipelago’s administration to local administrative entities—soon referred to as municipalities.

The introduction of the Agrarian Act fundamentally changed the outlook of the colony and its society. Prior to the enactment of the Agrarian Act it was predominantly male Dutch civil servants who set off to the Dutch East Indies. Following the Agrarian Act increasing numbers of businessmen, other professionals, and their wives headed to the archipelago from the Netherlands and other European countries. Consequently, as the Dutch/European and Indonesian community became more diverse in terms of profession, gender and nationality, the Dutch Indian community increasingly became a multicultural version of Dutch/European society in Europe.

Given the need to address these rapid socio-economic and demographic changes, the decision to delegate the administration from the central government to local municipalities appeared to be a prudent one. In reality, however, decentralisation was anything but easy—as the municipalities soon discovered. The most important obstacle was that the government had left the municipalities severely under-resourced. Consequently, they lacked almost everything: sufficient administrative authority, annual budget, experience, knowledge, labour and materials. A serious handicap from a town planning perspective was that the maintenance of public works—from the shared responsibility of the Department of Public Works (Binnenlandsch Bestuur) in the archipelago, Menteng-Nieuw Gondangdia in Batavia (1910) planned by P.A.J. Mousjen and others, is illustrative of this approach. The plan, though clearly designed with notions of planning in terms of vistas, is basically a street plan bordered by plots of land destined for housing and some open, public spaces. What the designers seem to have overlooked, though, was how the new neighbourhood connected to the existing town and how it would affect future developments of Batavia. To circumvent the municipality’s administrative limitation with regard to kampungs, Batavia resorted to the construction of modern town planning in Europe at the time: the principle of zoning; or in other words the division of a town plan into neighbourhoods based on socio-economic strata. The situation in the Dutch colony was complicated, however, due to administrative and financial constraints which meant that administrators and architects were not at liberty to interfere in kampungs because they were governed by an autonomous indigenous administration. The consequence was that, initially, administrators and architects/planners could only address the needs of the non-Indonesian neighbourhoods.

Convinced that it was more efficient to tackle these setbacks collectively than individually, the municipalities established the Association for Local Interests (Vereniging voor Locale Belangen—VLB) in 1870. The VLB, its journal Local Interests (Locale Belangen), and its annual Decentralisation Congress offered professionals, including architects and town planners, useful and necessary platforms to exchange expertise and knowledge. Several congresses and in particular several preliminary advisories written at the request of the congress organising committees, were instrumental in the emergence, rationalisation, professionalisation and institutionalisation of modern town planning in the Dutch East Indies.

The emergence of town planning

As was customary in all European colonies around the world, Dutch Indian society was ethnically diverse and very class-conscious: by and large, Europeans, Indo-Europeans, Indonesians and other Asians socialised and lived in different social groups. Consequently, social groups and neighbourhoods had their own distinctive features even though the borders of the various ethnic groups were in many ways permeable in order to ‘allow the mutual penetration of races [...] everywhere the demands of life demanded individuals to mingle’.2

In general, neighbourhoods for Europeans, Indo-Europeans, well-to-do Chinese and indigenous dignitaries were vast and moderately to sparsely populated. The parcels of land were relatively large, the houses luxurious and the gardens lush. The overall atmosphere was European. Middle-class Asians, Indonesians and Indo-Europeans lived in considerably denser populated areas where the streets were narrower, sometimes unpaved, and the houses smaller and often combined with shops. The atmosphere in neighbourhoods was either indigenous, Chinese, British-Indian or Arab. The predominantly indigenous areas at the lower end of the socio-economic scale were the kampungs: densely populated and often unplanned, semi-permanent, predominantly indigenous settlements where facilities such as running water, baths, and toilets were often public.

The socio-economic division within ethnic neighbourhoods largely coincided with the rationale that characterised the Overall atmosphere was European. Middle-class Asians, Indonesia...
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Taman Sari (1913), a new kampung designed to be a model for well-planned indigenous neighbourhoods with good houses and public hygiene facilities. Unfortunately though, its design was never realised due to important aspects: the social and cultural requirements with regard to, for example, the spatial and hierarchical layout of the area and the individual houses (the kampung). It demonstrated the communal construction of dwellings (see illustration 1). As a result, particularly of the first omission, the kampung’s anticipated inhabitants did not move in on time, and the Batavia municipality decided to demolish Taman Sari.

Despite their shortcomings, both plans were well intended attempts to address an emerging issue in the colony: the need for qualitatively and quantitatively sufficient housing. Instrumental in creating awareness about this issue and in stimulating municipalities to strive for improvements in general and in kampungs in particular, were the pleas from medical specialists notably W.T. de Vogel and H.F. Tiffema from Semarang.

Maclaine Pont’s sketch extension was presented for approval in 1915. Three years later, in 1918, a revised version was published. This version was presented to the local and a Town Planners’ Congress. The second resolution, from 1920, stated that municipalities were eligible for a subsidy of up to fifty percent for kampung improvement projects, provided the applications were approved by the Housing Act.

The relevance of ‘Dutch Indian Town Planning’ in terms of the professionalisation of town planning in the archipelago notwithstanding, it was a governmental resolution from the second half of the 1920s that ultimately institutionalized the colony’s town planning practice. The first resolution, from 1926, granted priority rights on land to municipalities over third parties if they were able to substantiate the indispensability of the land for a sound and coherent development of the town, based on a sufficiently detailed town plan approved by the local and a Town Planners’ Congress. The second resolution, from 1929, stated that municipalities were eligible for a subsidy of up to fifty percent for kampung improvement projects, provided the applications were approved by the Housing Act.

The reasonable administrative autonomy of the kampung in the 1920s, the second resolution finally gave administrators and town planners the space and the financial means they had been pleading for since decentralisation was introduced.

What distinguished Henri Maclaine Pont’s Darmo plan from Moojen’s Menteng plan is that Darmo is clearly divided into two parts. What distinguishes Henri Maclaine Pont’s Darmo plan and the northern extension plan for Bandung (1919) are all the various new neighbourhoods and, in fact, due to their success, the industrial development that had been lifted some ten years earlier, these two resolutions finally gave administrators and town planners the space and the financial means they had been pleading for since decentralisation was introduced.

Consequently, his text ‘Town planning in the Dutch Indies’ (“Stedenbouw in Indië”), although published in a newspaper at the time of the congress,1 Kersten’s text, on the other hand, was presented and discussed at length during the congress and won much acclaim among colleagues and administrators in Indonesia, in the Netherlands.2 Dutch Indian Town Planning (“Indische Stedebouw”), a concise yet comprehensive description of Kersten’s ideas and suggestions about town planning, offered what administrators and colleagues had been waiting years for: a handbook on town planning in general and in the Dutch East Indies in particular. With his text, Kersten not only laid the foundations for Kersten’s career and reputation as the colony’s town planning theorist and designer.3

The rationalisation of the planning practice enabled architects and town planners to design town plans that complied better with the market reality. In 1931, the Dutch government promulgated the Spatial Planning Act (Wetsontwerp Beknopte Ruimtelijke Ordening, abbreviated: W.B.R.O.) for municipalities, but without any regional planning component.3

As the Dutch Indian Town Planning Act was in force for urban areas, the Dutch government promulgated the Spatial Planning Act (Wetsontwerp Beknopte Ruimtelijke Ordening, abbreviated: W.B.R.O.) for municipalities, which had been introduced in the 1930s but had never been fully implemented in the archipelago due to a lack of statistics. Based on this approach, where a wide variety of data about existing and possible future conditions was collected and analysed prior to the design process, the CPB planners were able to design plans for Banjermasin, Balikpapan (1949) and Samarinda (1950), and a regional plan for North Sulawesi. Particularly the latter not only provided a reconstruction of the heavily damaged towns, but also improved awkward prewar situations and anticipated future (regional) developments (see illustration 7).

The rationalisation of the planning practice more or less in place, there was only one more issue that needed to be addressed: a legal framework. In order to realize this, the government established the Dutch Town Planning Technical Committee (Stadsbouwcommissie) in 1934. The committee’s task was to study the full extent of town planning and to determine what suitable regulation to regulate this planning. The committee, a combination of administrators, civil servants, lawyers and architects, presented the findings of its work in 1936 in the form of a Town Planning Ordinance (Stadsbouworderscommissie - SVO) for municipalities in Java and an explanation to this ordinance. Sadly, the timing of the presentation of the Town Planning Ordinance was rather unfortunate. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the Japanese occupation of the archipelago in 1942 postponed its enactment until a later date.

After the war, the infrastructure of town planning practice was fundamentally reorganised. As only a small number of professionals were still around—many, among them Kersten, died in the internment camps or had left the archipelago—it was decided to consolidate all expertise in a central organisation, the (Central) Planning Bureau (CPB) in Batavia. The bureau’s main task was to survey war damage and to design and coordinate the execution of reconstruction plans in towns and regions (see illustration 8). On Java this was done on the strip of land between Batavia and Bandung, on Sumatra, the towns Medan, Padang and Palembang and the islands of Calmantan (Borneo), Sulawesi (Celebes), Moluccas and New Guinea. The CPB focused on several areas in particular, the capital Batavia, and economically vital towns on Kalimantan and Sulawesi that were heavily damaged by hostile and allied attacks due to their relevance for the oil industry. Ironically, it was the need for a legal framework to execute the reconstruction plans of these towns in East Indonesia that led to the Town Planning Ordinance finally being decreed in August 1948.4

Backed by the Town Planning Ordinance, the CPB was able to manoeuvre. The first plan designed under the auspices of the bureau was Kebayoran Baru, a satellite town to the south of Batavia (see illustration 6). Designed to fill the dire need for houses in the capital, the new town epitomised the expansion and rationalisation of prewar town planning. Not only was the design for Kebayoran Baru the first plan to organise a new town, it was also the first plan to outline the various functional and socio-economic zones (dwelling, work, leisure, green). In East Indonesia, the CPB took this rationalisation one step further and implemented the so-called ‘survey before plan’ approach, which had been introduced in the 1930s but had never been fully implemented in the archipelago due to a lack of statistics.

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At the Dutch European Indian community

The institutionalisation of town planning

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reason was never given, Thijse gave two plausible reasons why the act never gained legal force. The first reason was that the draft was written in Dutch and those responsible did not have enough understanding of Dutch to translate the text. The second reason was the unremitting lack of qualitative and quantitative personnel to guarantee the implementation of the act. To sidestep this problem, it was easiest to refrain from assessing the act – and thus the obligation to execute and observe it.

The decision not to decree the Spatial Planning Act was unsatisfactory from both a methodological and a historical point of view. By not decreeing the act, the government obstructed the legal and methodological expansion of town planning into the wider realm of spatial planning. It also discouraged the ongoing professionalisation and adaptation of town planning as an autonomous discipline – a development that had begun in 1905 and, so far, had only been interrupted between 1942 and 1945. The absence of a Spatial Planning Act meant that the predominantly prewar Town Planning Act of the Republic of Indonesia, it was not symptomatic of town planning was not a tool of the colonial politics of the Dutch Indian government but an autonomous discipline.

Another aspect that comes through in this study is the gradual emancipation of non-European inhabitants and professionals. Although their number never equaled the number of European architects, town planners and administrators in administration and town planning gradually increased and undoubtedly changed the Dutch colonial period, people such as Adolfozul, R. Abikoeso, R. Slamet, I.B. Soebroto, M. Soesilo, Soetoto and Moe. Hoessin Thamrin were influential. After all the Dutch professionals left in 1957, important town plans were designed by Lucius O’Drien, B.S. Dananaguero, Herbowo, Kandar Tiongson and Radial Karti. These were the architects and town planners who heralded a new era: an era in which Indonesian town plans were designed by Indonesian town planners.

Notes
1 By the beginning of the 20th century, architects and engineers were already associated. A Dutch Indian version of the Royal Institute for Engineers (Koninklijk Instituut voor Ingenieurs - KIVI) was established in 1850. In 1898 the Association of Architects in the Dutch East Indies (Vereniging van Bouwkundigen in Nederlandsch-Indië) was established. Both associations published their own journal. The engineers’ journal was successively published under the following names: The Journal of KIVI, section Dutch East Indies (Het Technisch tijdschrift van het KIVI, afdeling Nederlands-Indië). The Engineer (De ingenieur) and The Engineer in the Dutch East Indies (De Ingenieur in Nederlandsch-Indië). The architects’ periodical was called: Dutch Indian Architecture Journal (Indisch Bouwkundig Tijdschrift). After Dutch Bouwkundig Tijdschrift merged with Locale Techniek in 1934, it was renamed Lokaal Techniek. From 1938 until its last issue in 1942 was called locale Techniek/BIT.
5 Although in many ways Karsten dominated the town planning practice in the Dutch East Indies, the emergence of town planning can not be solely attributed to him. Many others, for example director of municipal departments of public works (ir H. Hetjens in Bandoeng, ir J.J.C. Rückerl in Semarang), mayors (dr. J. D. de Swaarm), E.A. Voormeren in Malang, F.H. van der Wetering in Menado and Palembang, and central governmental officials (ne A.B. Cohen Stokvis) also contributed to the emergence, professionalisation and institutionalisation of Dutch Indian town planning.
6 Two years after Japan surrendered, Indonesia proclaimed its independence from the Netherlands. As the Netherlands refused to acknowledge its former colony’s independence, Indonesia and the Netherlands became involved in a three-year colonial war. Under international pressure the Netherlands transferred sovereignty to Indonesia in December 1949.
7 In order to apply the Town Planning Ordinance to these towns, a minor but essential revision was made. This revision not only allowed the condition that the ordinance applied to municipalities on Java was revised by the condition that the Town Planning Ordinance was applicable to all towns, with or without municipal status, throughout the archipelago.
8 Although developments after 1950 fall outside my core research, it is useful to describe them briefly in order to comprehend Indonesian town planning today.