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The other 'other': Re-framing and re-defining research on Southeast Asian colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism

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To take stock of current research on architecture and urbanism in Southeast Asia and discuss 'the other', this paper focuses on the academic, socio-political and cultural considerations that generate, frame, steer, and disperse research findings on Indonesian colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism. To this end, this paper develops four primary observations and consequences for those carrying out this research.

The first observation concerns the critique from Indonesian and other non-European colleagues about the Eurocentric perspective of my research. The second observation is that many studies on colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism are bi-lateral projects at best: they rarely cross more than one national border and remain confined as something between the former colonised and the former coloniser. The third observation is that while many architectural historians analyse and describe the history of European and North-American architecture and planning along strictly defined national, regional and local boundaries, the very same historians often ignore that architecture and urbanism in 'Asia' are equally diverse. The fourth and final observation considers the role language plays in facilitating, sharing and exposing research and research findings.

The above observations relate to my own experience as a scholar of Dutch colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism. While on many levels I am the 'other' in Indonesia, I have been and seemingly continue to be the 'other' in Dutch and other Western academic circles. Based on this experience, I therefore argue that Western, i.e. Dutch scholars who study colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism, intellectually and geographically (often) are the other 'other'.

Observation 1: Eurocentric perspective

In the Netherlands, I'm frequently asked why I study colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism in Indonesia. In Indonesia, this question is much rarer; instead, Indonesian academics query the overly Eurocentric perspective of my research: a justified critique, as I will explain below.

In defence of my own research, I hope it suffices to say that, being an architectural historian I am aware that my work will always be somewhat subjective due to the sources I have available to consult and select. This selection of sources is at the same time pragmatic *and* opportunistic. Pragmatically, my research is limited to, and consequently defined by, the linguistic and geographic availability of sources. In terms of opportunism, I have to work around these limitations and consequently often work with random and often very incomplete material.

Acknowledging I consult primary and secondary sources predominantly produced by Dutch officials, architects and citizens that are kept in Dutch and Indonesian archives and libraries, a Eurocentric perspective seems all but inevitable. Because my sources have been created by Dutch/European officials and professionals they have, as Gyanendra Pandey states, been subjected to prior 'selection and classification'.¹ For this reason alone, my research – and presumably any historical research – will always be problematic in terms of objectivity. Rather than dwelling on this generic problem though, the more interesting question is what the alternative is.

Regarding my research on colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism in Indonesia, including Indonesian, Chinese Indonesian, Arab and Indian sources potentially would allow for and guarantee a less Eurocentric interpretation/reconstruction of historic developments. But to what extent would this interpretation/reconstruction be more objective than my current interpretation? Although they would reveal interesting and relevant aspects of the colonial and post-colonial narrative, and thus would provide the much needed 'other' perspective, this perspective would not necessarily be less subjective and better informed than the European perspective. Just because they are non-European sources doesn't ensure they are, to borrow from Pandey, less 'mad' and 'trifling' than European sources.

Observation 2: National boundaries

My second observation concerns the geographic boundaries and scope of colonial and post-colonial research on architecture and urbanism. Until fairly recently, research on colonial and postcolonial architecture and urbanism were predominantly defined and curbed by national, and sometimes even nationalist considerations and boundaries. It was also almost exclusively executed by researchers who either originated from the country that previously colonised the country under scrutiny or by researchers who originated from that former colony. As a result, colonial and postcolonial research was an almost exclusively national/lateral – or at best bi-lateral endeavour. Even when historically more than one European country played a part in the history of a former colony, researchers rarely engaged in transnational, let alone comparative research into similar developments in other colonies, either those of their own country or others.

Analogous to the Eurocentric perspective, the restriction to national boundaries is caused by accessibility of research sources. With very few national and colonial libraries or museums collecting documents and artefacts from 'other' colonies, 'other' research sources, physically and intellectually therefore remained largely out of the 'other' scholars' scope and reach.² As written and printed sources are increasingly being digitised, or born digital and thus accessible online, the argument of the physical and even intellectual 'accessibility' of sources is gradually vanishing. The emerging digital environment is tending to eliminate these geographic boundaries – and consequentially economic and intellectual boundaries. In so doing, the digital era offers and creates new and transnational research opportunities and challenges researchers from around the globe.

To illustrate how some instruments level national boundaries while others seem to achieve the opposite, I will briefly describe two projects and their national-international idiosyncrasies. The first project is a digital research environment that was initiated and developed by Delft's University of Technology between 2011 and 2014 and soft-launched in January 2015. The second 'project' is the Netherlands' Shared Cultural Heritage Policy (*Gemeenschappelijk Cultureel Erfgoed Beleid*, GCE Policy) that was implemented in 2009.³

The digital research environment – also digital repository – offers free online access to a variety of sources about European colonial architecture and urbanism: text documents, photographs, maps, archives and data about architects, urbanists, commissioners and professional organisations. The rationale behind the repository was to remove the impediment of national, geographic and economic borders and thus generate and facilitate international, comparative research by providing free access to sources online. To ensure the repository met the needs of its anticipated targeted user groups and ICT requirements, TU Delft regularly consulted national and international future users and IT-specialists for input and feed-back.⁴

Conversely, whereas the objective of the repository was all about crossing national borders and creating international research, the funding was considerably less internationally oriented. Although the ambition of the repository was well received, the conditions of the Dutch grant that facilitated its creation curbed international aspirations. Because the grant could only be extended to Netherlands partners, collaboration with non-Netherlands partners was only possible if those partners were financially independent of the repository's initial funding. To date, the various intricacies involved in developing the repository as a bi-lateral, let alone multilateral international project have for now put the repository's further development on hold.⁵

The Netherlands' Shared Cultural Heritage Policy is another example of a half-hearted attempt to level national borders and foster international collaboration.⁶ To create a sustainable future for heritage in countries with historical ties to the Netherlands, be it trade or otherwise, the policy has financially supported numerous projects aimed at creating awareness and fostering knowledge about 'shared' heritage, including the built heritage.⁷ Since its implementation, the GCE Policy has generated a plethora of projects overseas.⁸ In the Netherlands though, the policy has had little to no impact. In contrast to the Netherlands' former overseas territories, most academics, professionals and citizens in the Netherlands are hardly aware or chose to ignore, let alone 'appreciate' the 'shared' cultural heritage of the Netherlands and these other countries. It is to a large degree the biased objective and implementation of the GCE Policy that lie at the heart of this lopsided development in the Netherlands and beyond.⁹

Put together, the TU Delft repository and the GCE Policy illustrate an intriguing but unsettling reality: a reality in which projects on the one hand aspires international horizons, while on the other hand these very same aspirations are curbed by national conventions and consequential financial restrictions.

Observation 3: 'Asian' and 'colonial'

My third observation concerns the ease with which 'Western' architectural historians reference and classify architecture and urbanism beyond the Occidental. While they analyse and describe the architecture and urbanism in Europe and North-America along meticulously defined national, regional and cultural boundaries, they generally discuss non-Western architecture and urbanism in colonised countries in Asia as if Asian colonies were one geopolitical and cultural (architectural) entity.¹⁰ The unsophisticated and inarticulate classifications 'Asian' and 'colonial' not only obscure the national, regional, cultural and stylistic differences between the various Asian countries and cultures, they also downplay the multifarious challenges, approaches and achievements of architects and town planners who worked in a colonial context.¹¹

Although 'Asia' and 'colonial' generally work as catch-all terms to identify a particular geographic region, political regime and even period, they are also way too broad to recognise and create the insight necessary to acknowledge the richness and the variety of this specific category in world architecture and urbanism. The combination of a Western architectural training and the different ('other') climatological, material and cultural requirements, the Asian and colonial context often resulted in hybrid architecture and town plans. It is this hybridity, this combination of local and imported elements, which make buildings and town plans in Europe's Asian colonies as complicated to classify and characterise as buildings and town plans in Europe.

An example of the intellectual lop-sidedness of this biased approach was the international workshop organised by the International Planning Historian Society (IPHS) in Delft in 2015.¹² To discuss the history of planning worldwide, IPHS invited 49 speakers. Of these 49 speakers, seven originated from outside Europe and North America: two from Australia and India, and one from South Africa, China and Indonesia. Of these seven, three worked at an Australian university, one at a South African university, not one was based within an 'Asian' university. With regard to the thematic and geographic coverage, the workshop's programme also illustrated the biased nature of the field.¹³ Out of a total of eight panels, only one session was dedicated to Planning History outside Europe. With less than 20 minutes per paper, the five presenters on this panel were invited to discuss urbanism/planning in Africa, the Arab World, China, India and Southeast Asia respectively.¹⁴ The general character of this panel and the consequential succinct nature of its papers, were in stark contrast to the much more sophisticated delineation of the other panels and the consequent length and breadth of some of these panels' papers. For while the speakers in the other panels frequently had ample opportunity to discuss even the minutest detail of particular aspects of Planning History in Western countries, cities and periods, the five presenters on Planning History beyond Europe and America could not but sketch these developments in the broadest of terms.

The perspective and approaches of the IPHS workshop in Delft are not unique for Delft nor the IPHS. Despite growing research on colonial buildings and town plans in former colonies and increasing accessibility to research sources on this topic, 'Asian' and 'colonial' architecture and urbanism for most 'Western' researchers remains something from 'another' realm: a topic that potentially is interesting but not on a par with 'Western' architecture and urbanism and therefore less in need of – or entitled to – the sophisticated approach that applies to 'Western' architecture and urbanism.

Observation 4: Language

The fourth factor that I want to discuss challenges all transnational researchers: language. For many local researchers interested in Southeast Asia colonial and post-colonial buildings and town plans created by the colonial and post-colonial ruling class, language remains a challenge.¹⁵ Because vast quantities of contemporary archival and written sources are predominantly written in the coloniser's national language, mastering the former coloniser's language is relevant when it comes to interpreting these sources.¹⁶

Another major challenge as far as language is concerned, is the dissemination of research findings. Although this is a challenge for all researchers born outside one of the three present global academic

linguae francae (Chinese, English, Spanish), it is particularly poignant for many of the researchers who study colonial and post-colonial Southeast Asia.¹⁷ For unless they are native speakers of Chinese, English or Spanish, they are obliged to express themselves in any one of these, for them, foreign languages if they want to share their work with an academic community beyond their own linguistic and national borders and thus reach out beyond their own parochial audience.

Despite the availability of digital and other tools that can initially be of help to overcome initial linguistic obstacles, mastering at least two 'other' languages is thus vital when researching and publishing on Southeast Asian colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism.¹⁸

In recognition of the many challenges related to studies about colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism, the European Union from 2011 until 2014 supported the project 'European architecture beyond Europe' (ABE).¹⁹ The project's aim to contribute to the writing of a global history of modern European culture, including overseas expansions and transnational dynamics in its scope, was achieved by bringing together European and non-European researchers.²⁰ For two reasons, ABE was an interesting exercise. On an academic level, it was interesting because it brought together international researchers and their research. In so doing, the project provided ample opportunity for transnational, comparative exchange and research. On a socio-cultural level the project was equally interesting, particularly where the dynamics related to and created by language were concerned. One interesting aspect in that respect was the frequently returning question why the project's initiators had decided to use English rather than any other modern European language as the lingua franca of ABE.²¹ It was a question that was not so much raised because the critics had not mastered English, but because they did not understand – nor appreciate – why English the rather than their own language was the language of choice for the project.²² Regardless of the validity of the question, the relevance for my argument is that it identifies language as a problematic issue: an issue that to a large degree defined and simultaneously echoed the dynamic of ABE in that the majority of the informal interactions and research projects were defined along linguistic lines.

The conditions and dynamics of the COST funded project ABE are indicative of the crucial role language plays in facilitating, sharing and exposing research and research findings; for although all participants spoke English, it was and remained at times not easy share knowledge and interact socially. Considering research is often relevant for and therefore needs to be accessible to a national audience, researchers obviously publish in their own language. If the relevance of research extends beyond national borders though, the dissemination of research faces considerable challenges. A major challenge in this respect is language: unless transnational research is published in at least one of the three academic global *linguae francae*, its international exposure, and consequently its impact, will be almost negligible.²³

The other 'other'

Taking the above observations as a reference, I would argue that in addition to Gyanendra Pandey's 'other', there exists yet another other. This other 'other' is the 'Western' scholar who, for lack of a better denomination, studies European colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism. Although this scholar is neither 'excluded from' (the *mad*) nor 'exiled within' (the *trifling*) the archives and research as defined by Pandey, to date his/her research topic predominantly remains 'excluded from' and 'exiled within' the canon of European and world architecture and urbanism.

In addition to this exclusion, the 'Western' scholar interested in colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism is also the other 'other' in the country that is the very topic of his/her research. For even though the 'Western' scholar's research contributes to the knowledge and the canon of this other country, he/she is largely excluded from this country's academic circles, debates and funding opportunities. Erasing this hurdle by moving to this country does not solve this problem as by moving to one country, one inevitably distances oneself from the other country.

The consequence of (largely) working outside the scope of the local, the Western and the world canon, is a seemingly vicious circle. It creates a chicken and egg situation: because scholars who study colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism are less established in academia and the relevance of their research topic is (consequently) less acknowledged, funding and publishing opportunities for their research are more restricted than if they would research more common aspects of architecture and urbanism. The other 'other', in other words, is in many ways as much 'excluded from' and 'exiled within' as Pandey's 'other'. The only difference between the two 'others' is that where

Pandey's 'other' refers to those obviously ignored in archives and consequently in research, the other 'other' appears to be included, but ultimately is equally excluded.

Building on an earlier essay I maintain that to include the other 'other' a more inclusive and less biased assessment of colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism is needed.²⁴ If colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism are to be included in and hence considered a relevant aspect of world and national architecture and urbanism, understanding and appreciating its qualities and significance in relation to other world and national architecture and urbanism is paramount. To achieve this I suggest that, rather than revising the methodology of architectural history, the criteria by which colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism are assessed, need to be discussed and reconsidered: not only to expose the dominance and Western orientation of assessment criteria, but also to identify and validate the qualities and consequent significance of colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism.²⁵

As scholarship on colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism are on the rise, the polarised/biased attitude towards colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism needs to be eradicated. To arrive at an inclusive approach, it is necessary to determine the intrinsic meaning, importance and value of colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism within the framework of world and national architecture and urbanism based on a revised or new set of uniform/globally applied/applicable criteria.

Conclusion

In my paper I argue that, in addition to 'the other' as perceived by Pandey, there is yet another 'other': the ('Western') scholar who studies (European) colonial and post-colonial architecture and urbanism. It is the researcher who from a European/Western perspective studies an unfamiliar topic and consequently remains (somewhat) outside European/Western architecture history. It is equally also the researcher whose research does not organically belong to the architecture history of the former colony. It is the research who, in other words, is simultaneously the 'other' and the other 'other'. In order to eradicate this present restriction, I argue that rather than discussing the architecture historical research methodology to include the 'other', we need to discuss how research and research findings are generated, framed, steered, dispersed and valued.

Notes

¹ Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *Unarchived histories The "mad" and the "trifling" in the colonial and postcolonial world*, Routledge, New York, 2014, 3.

² Because of their unique character, archives and artefacts but even more so buildings and town plans, pose even greater physical/spatial/geographical and consequently economic challenges.

³ Instead of 'shared', 'common' and 'mutual' are also used. For a concise discussion on the linguistic use of 'shared', 'common' and 'mutual' see Jinna Smit, 'To claim or not to claim. Sharing Archives: Policy and Practice' in: Charles Jeurgens, Ton Kappelhof, Michael Karabinos (eds.), *Colonial legacy in South East Asia. The Dutch archives*, Stichting Archiefpublicaties, 's-Gravenhage, 2012, 173-189; Alex van Stipriaan Luiscius, 'Atlantic Heritage: Mutual, Shared...?', paper Atlantic World and the Dutch Conference, Amsterdam, 2006. Also see Wim Manuhutus current PhD-research on common cultural heritage of the Netherlands and several of its former colonies.

⁴ //colonialarchitecture.eu.

⁵ Without additional funding in the (very) near future, the TU Delft repository is a risk to become yet another orphaned website. For more on orphaned websites, see <https://archive.org/web/>.

⁶ Prior to the GCE Policy, various Netherlands' ministries collaborated to arrive at an integrated and coherent foreign policy. To this end the *Homogene Groep Internationale Samenwerking* (HGIS: Homogenous Group International Collaboration) was established in 1997. HGIS exists to this day.

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, *HGIS-nota 2016 Homogene Groep Internationale Samenwerking. Memorie van Toelichting*, Tweede Kamer 34 301, no 1, Den Haag, 2015–2016,

<http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/dossiers/gedeeld-cultureel-erfgoed/programma-gedeeld-cultureel-erfgoed> (consulted 26 October 2016).

⁷ To optimise its impact, the policy only applies to a limited number of 'priority countries'. When this paper was written, the GCE-policy and priority countries for 2017-10 were not yet published. For the most recent period (2013-16), the Asian priority countries were India, Indonesia, Japan and Sri Lanka. Indonesia has been a priority country since the policy's implementation.

⁸ Examples of projects related to architecture implemented in Indonesia are National Archives of the Netherlands: Digitisation of VOC archive kept by the National Archives of Indonesia (ongoing since 2009/10); *Museum Sejarah* (Jakarta History Museum): Design for a Masterplan for the renovation of the museum, the former town hall of Batavia (now Jakarta). *Museum Sejarah* (Jakarta History Museum); redevelopment of Tawang Station (ongoing since 2010); National Archives of Indonesia: Advice for the establishment for an international Centre of Excellence about the *Verenigde Indische Compagnie* (VOC, Dutch East India Company) in Jakarta (2011); International Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies: International Workshop Urban Heritage Strategies (2011, 2014); *PT. Kereta Api Indonesia* (PTKAI, Indonesia Railway Company): Oen's Semarang Foundation, International Workshops & Conferences (ongoing since 2012) & Festivals (ongoing since 2012); The Missing Link, Creating a shared cultural identity for a sustainable redevelopment (2015-16); Isabelle Boon, Photography & exhibition 'Heritage in Transition' (2015-16).

⁹ While writing this paper I was informed that the implementation of the GCE Policy is under revision. The rationale for the revision is the consideration that the policy should have (greater) impact in the other countries and there should be 'more in it' for the Netherlands.

¹⁰ Not only architecture historians apply this approach. In his latest book *Een geschiedenis van Zuidoost Azië* (A History of Southeast Asia) Henk Schulte Nordholt concludes that what defines Southeast Asia is the long-standing interaction between global developments and local dynamics. In his book, Schulte Nordholt focusses on similarities rather than differences between Southeast Asian countries. Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Een geschiedenis van Zuidoost Azië*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2016.

Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Een geschiedenis van Zuidoost Azië*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2016.

¹¹ Some architects worked in several colonies. Heinrich Steinbrück for example, was a German architect who worked in China until the First World War. After the war he worked in the Dutch East Indies. After he moved back to Germany in the early 1930s to get married, Steinbrück and his wife then moved to South West Africa (now: Namibia). Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam: Inventory Steiner Archive, p.7-8.

¹² International Planning Historian Society, *Planning History Workshop*, Delft, 11-13 June 2015.

¹³ The themes of the session were: The History of Planning History; Methods, Theory and Case Studies; Systems, Typologies and Cultures (two sessions); Writing Planning History: Time, Place and Culture (two sessions); Issues, Movements, Themes and Debates (two sessions). In addition to the sessions, the workshop also hosted a paper-less round table session and a discussion.

¹⁴ The respective speakers were Susan Parnell (African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town), Joe Nasr and Eric Verdeil (Ryerson University), Daniel Abramson (University of Washington), Bishwapiya Sanyal (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Abidin Kusno (University of British Columbia).

¹⁵ Although there are ways to side-step linguistic barriers, particularly as increasing numbers of sources are being digitised, mastering a language is crucial to understand and interpret sources.

¹⁶ The reverse applies also to research on indigenous and non-European architecture in Asia. As many of the sources on these topics are often less well/vigorously or differently documented than sources on colonial buildings and town plans, their physical whereabouts or accessibility frequently/often are unidentified. It is therefore that consulting these 'other' sources adds to the list of challenges.

¹⁷ Chinese, English and Spanish are the languages Delft University of Technology (the Netherlands) considers relevant when assessing staff's output. Publications in any other language are not deemed relevant in terms of academic output.

¹⁸ To illustrate the problem of language, see Marc Pabois, Bernard Toulhier (eds.), *Architecture coloniale et patrimoine. Expériences européennes*, Editions Somogy, Paris, 2006. Although this book brings together interesting international research, many of the books target audience do not, or insufficiently, read French.

¹⁹ 'European architecture beyond Europe' was funded via the European Program 'European Cooperation in Science and Technology' (COST). The programme supports European researchers, engineers and scholars to jointly develop ideas and initiatives across all fields of science and technology through trans-European networking of nationally funded research activities. Project 'Architecture beyond Europe' was registered as COST Action IS0904 and ran from 2011 until 2014. www.cost.eu; consulted November 6, 2016.

²⁰ http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS0904; <http://architecturebeyond.eu.huma-num.fr/>; consulted November 6, 2016.

²¹ The question was raised until the almost very last minute of the project: it was (one of) the last issues discussed during the evaluation of the COST Action following the Action's last conference in Palermo (13-16 April 2014).

²² One of the conditions for COST Actions is that throughout the Action participants communicate in one language only.

²³ The only exception with regard to current national boundaries are the former colonial boundaries. Although this does not apply to all former European colonies, oftentimes the middle and upper middle classes still master the language of the former coloniser.

²⁴ My earlier analysis dates from 2001. The analysis was written in reference to UNESCO's programme 'Modern Heritage'. Modern Heritage was initiated by UNESCO's World Heritage Centre. The programme aimed to balance the unbalance of UNESCO's World Heritage List for Culture with regard to two topics: the lack of objects from the Southern hemisphere and the lack of objects (read: architecture and town planning) from the nineteenth and twentieth century. The paper I wrote was one of several positioning papers for the programme.

Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, 'Changing Views on Colonial Heritage' in: R. van Oers, S. Haraguchi (eds.), *Identification and Documentation of Modern Heritage. World Heritage Papers no 5*, UNESCO, Paris, 2003, 122-128.

²⁵ A second reason why, from my point of view, there is no need to revise the methodology of the (architecture) historian is that (architecture) historians are, or should be, aware of inclusions and exclusions in archives and other sources, changing the methodology do eradicate the inclusions and exclusions.