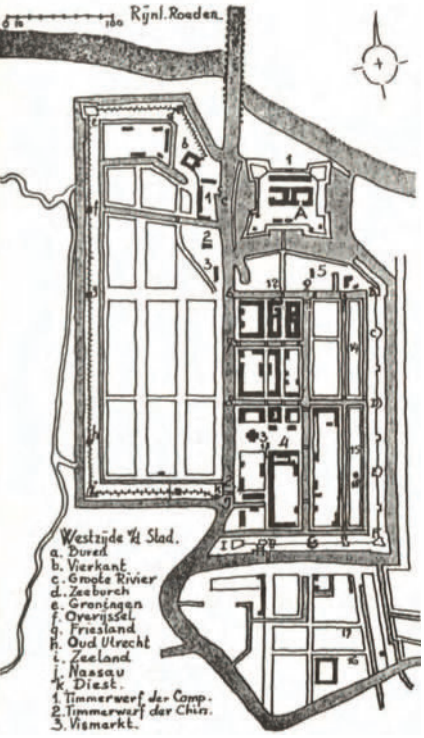
Dutch

Colonial Architecture and Town Planning

History, Preservation and Present Use



Indonesia: Plan of Batavia (now Jakarta), as it was in 1635, sixteen years after its foundation. The dominant direction (North-South) is accentuated by the canalised Ciliwung river (H.A. Breuning, *Het voormalige Batavia*. Amsterdam, 1954).

The seventeenth century

The newly formed Dutch Republic of the Seven United Provinces was the base from which in the seventeenth century trading posts were founded in what are now fifteen different countries in Asia, Africa and America. Today, there are still numerous tangible reminders of this colonial background in the form of street patterns and buildings. There are also names, such as New Zealand and Cape Horn, to evidence the fact that Dutch seamen filled in plenty of other blank spaces on the world map.

The old centres of such huge conurbations as New York, Recife, Cape Town and Jakarta still retain the structures of the seventeenth-century settlements known as New Amsterdam, Mauritsstad, Kaapstad (Cape Town) and Batavia. The last mentioned of these cities was the first to be founded, in 1619. It grew rapidly to become the largest European town in Asia, and was referred to as the 'Queen of the East', although it was in fact the riches offered by the Moluccas, then called the Spice Islands, which had led to the foundation of the United East India Company (VOC) in 1602.

Towns like Willemstad (on Curaçao, founded in 1634) and Paramaribo (Surinam, 1667), on the other hand, both of which were under the dominion of the West India Company (WIC), grew at a much slower pace. Even today, they still illustrate the difference between the compact type of town, enclosed by water and walls, and the more expansive, open layout with a fort to defend it at just one point. The same layout can be found in Cape Town, South Africa (VOC, 1666).

Willemstad still provides a living picture of what New Amsterdam must have looked like in 1664-1667, when it was captured by the British and renamed New York. Both towns were bounded by water on three sides, the fourth or landward side being protected by a wall; in New York the location of this is still recognisable in the name of Wall Street. In the same way, Broadway is the equivalent of Bredestraat, which is still the name of the main street of Willemstad in Curaçao. This street marks the division between the fort area and the original residential district. Willemstad's Fort Amsterdam still retains its Governor's Residence and Protestant church,

Brazil: Frans Post, *Rio São Francisco and Fort Maurice*. 1639. Canvas, 62 x 95 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

structures which were once to be found in the old fort of New Amsterdam. In both cases the original town centre with its formal layout has acquired a less formally structured residential area across the water: Brooklyn (originally Breukelen) in New York and Otrabande (Farside) in Willemstad.

Malacca (Malaysia) and Colombo (Sri Lanka), by contrast, are not Dutch towns by origin. They were captured from the Portuguese, in 1641 and 1656 respectively, and it was not until they were rebuilt and extended that they acquired a distinctive Dutch character (Colombo still has Dutch street names like Keyser Street). Settlements were also captured from the Portuguese in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), one example being Elmina, with its enormous St George's Castle, which fell in 1637. Although the Dutch built new forts and adapted some of those already in existence, Elmina was the only place where any sort of town building occurred, and even there it was only on a very modest scale. The islands of Gorée (Senegal) and Mauritius (to the east of Madagascar) were both lost to the French, Gorée in 1677 and Mauritius in 1710. In 1654, the Dutch part of Brazil returned to Portuguese rule. Before that happened, however, the painter Frans Post had had time to produce a record of the area that is without parallel in the whole of the colonial world.

A large number of trading posts were also founded along the Indian coast, and the Dutch had a settlement in Taiwan up to 1661. But the most extraordinary of all the smaller settlements was undoubtedly that on the island of Deshima near Nagasaki. For more than two hundred years, from 1641 until Japan was effectively opened up in 1856, Deshima formed the sole contact between the Western world and this most mysterious of countries. Attempts are now being made to re-create the situation there as it was during the time of the Dutch. Deshima, a small island shaped like a segment of a circle, had

Ghana: The Castle of St George d'Elmina, seen from St Jago. The Portuguese core was rebuilt and enlarged after its reduction by the Dutch (from Brazil) in 1637. The place remained in Dutch hands until 1872. The houses on the foreground date from the early nineteenth century. One of them collapsed some ten years ago. (Photo by C.L. Temminck Groll, 1966).

a number of curving streets running parallel to each other, along which stood merchants' houses with their adjoining offices and warehouses. The Japanese authorities permitted the United East India Company's officials to live and work there – the only foreigners allowed to do so – but wished to prevent any permanent settlement. For this reason the Dutch were not allowed to take their wives to Deshima; and they were permitted to leave the island only once a year, to attend the Emperor at his Court.

As for the towns, they were not built to any sort of standard plan. Nonetheless, they shared a number of common characteristics. In the first place, all layouts show one dominant direction which is accentuated, where possible, by one or more canals. Secondly, the street plans are not rigid, in contrast to Roman, Spanish colonial and modern American towns, but follow the local topography. Lastly, the squares are usually fairly informal and the building plots in the towns are often some 20 to 25 feet wide, narrower than in most other towns.

There was (or is) generally either a 'Herenstraat' or a 'Herengracht' (*'Heer'* meaning a patrician gentleman and *'gracht'* being a canal) running in the dominant direction of the town, and most towns also had a 'Prinsenstraat' or 'Prinsengracht' of slightly less grandeur. Although the Stadholders, the Princes of Orange who were the chief magistrates of the former Dutch republic, did not play a prominent role in the East and West India Companies, many forts were named after them: Orange, Nassau and William all figure on the list. And it was in this way, too, that the island of Mauritius received its name as far back as 1598.

With the exception of a number of forts, there are not many seventeenth-century buildings still standing on the three continents referred to. The most remarkable of those which do survive is the Town Hall of Malacca, which was built before 1656. This building has now been restored and converted into a museum. In Surinam one can find the painstakingly preserved ruins of the oldest synagogue in the Western hemisphere, built in Jodensavanne in 1685. Its grounds contain an impressive cemetery.

Jakarta has its 'Portuguese Outer Church', a building with an extremely beautiful interior that was erected right at the end of the seventeenth century; despite its name, it is a Protestant church. It retained this function (present

Japan: Kawahara Keiga (?), *View of Deshima*, c.1850. Silk, 47.9 x 80.4 cm. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

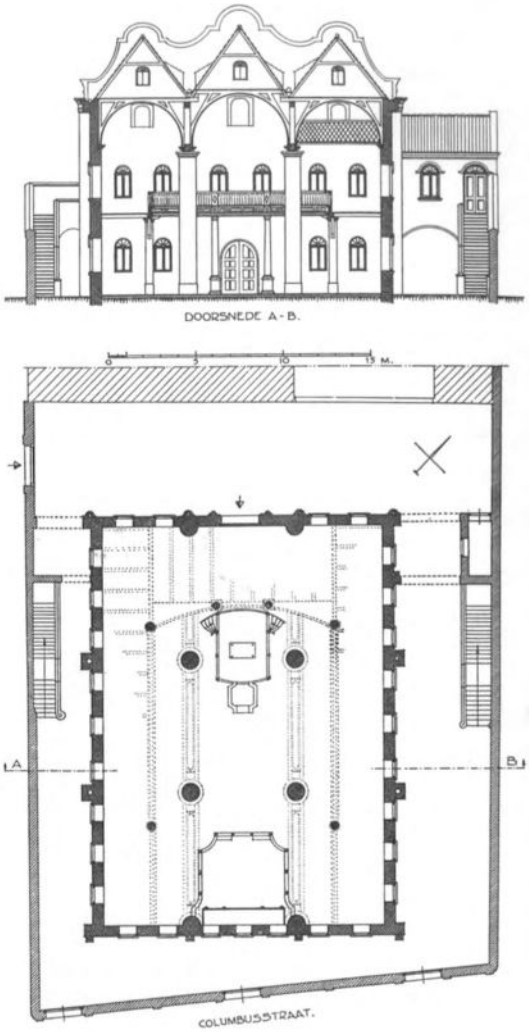
name Gereja (church) Sion). The building is rectangular in shape, divided by two rows of columns into a wide central aisle and two narrower side aisles. It has a sober exterior, but inside a richly ornamented organ stands facing a finely carved pulpit by Hendrik Bruyn (1695). The same arrangement is often to be found in Lutheran and Mennonite churches in the Netherlands. Other Indonesian remnants of the seventeenth century are the fort church and other parts of Fort Rotterdam in Ujung Pandang (formerly Makassar).

The eighteenth century

The eighteenth century saw fewer new settlements, but a spreading of the influence already established in those territories still in the possession of the Dutch. Although one or two new towns were built, such as Philipsburg on St Martin and New Amsterdam in Guyana, it was rather a question of a great deal of building work going on in towns already in place. Fortunately, many important fruits of this labour have been preserved in towns all over the world. Most of these buildings are unreservedly considered by the local authorities as being of great historical value, and some of them are listed as protected buildings. Today, many of the large houses built by the Dutch are in use as museums or offices, housing either government departments or private organisations.

Curaçao, one of the islands of the Netherlands Antilles, is well-known for its striking town and country houses built during this period. It is also the home of the splendid Mikve Israel synagogue, built in 1732 and now the oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere that is still in use. The Beth Chayim Jewish cemetery contains a remarkable collection of sculpted tombstones. On St Eustatius, the fascinating ruins of the buildings erected during the island's golden age, which reached a peak at the time of the War of American Independence, have been preserved. Oranjestad, the island's small capital, is divided into an upper and lower part. In the upper town stands Fort Oranje, famous for the 'First Salute' to the flag of the United States of America in 1776, when that country's independence had not yet been recognised by the British. There are also a number of eighteenth-century government buildings and private houses, one of which is now a museum. In addition there are the preserved ruins of a church and a synagogue, both dating from the eighteenth century. The lower town consisted of a row of warehouses along the waterfront. Some of these are still standing, and foundations are visible over a distance of more than a kilometre.

At the heart of Paramaribo, capital of Surinam, lies the Square behind the seventeenth / eighteenth-century Fort Zeelandia. Here stands the former Governor's Residence, built of wood on brick and dating mainly from about 1770; it is now the Presidential Palace. There are also some fine eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings. The town's two principal streets lead off this square. The first is Gravenstraat, which still boasts a series of magnificent eighteenth-century houses. All except one are of wood and this row is probably unique in the Americas. Then there is Waterkant (Waterside) which runs along the Surinam River and has fine early nineteenth-century properties. These too, with one exception, are of wood and date from the period of reconstruction after a great fire in 1827. Fort New Amsterdam, an earthen



Surinam: Garden facade and cross section of an imposing wooden house (1774) in Paramaribo (Gravenstraat). Since its restoration in 1962, it has housed the Ministry of General Affairs. A few years ago the roof was damaged by fire (Survey by R. Krooshof in: C.L. Temminck Groll and A.R.H. Tjin A Djie, *De architectuur van Suriname 1667-1930*. Zutphen, 1973).

Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles: The Mikve Israel synagogue (1732) in Willemstad. It is the oldest synagogue in use in the Western hemisphere (Survey by H. van der Wal in: M.D. Ozinga, *De monumenten van Curaçao in woord en beeld*. The Hague / Curaçao, 1959).

structure erected in 1747, was restored during the sixties and converted into a spacious open air museum, but has unfortunately now reverted to a state of neglect.

In Ghana, a number of forts were refurbished during this period. Some of these were – as mentioned above – already existing Portuguese trading forts captured in the first half of the seventeenth century. They include the oldest European structure to be built outside Europe since Roman times: the Castle of St George d'Elmina, begun in 1482. The buildings were modified and new forts were also built. Some of them are dilapidated, but others still fulfil a social function as the largest stone buildings in the locality. The whole

South Africa: Late eighteenth-century country house: *Bosch en Dal* (Photo by C.L. Temminck Groll, 1991).

Indonesia: The former Batavia Town Hall (1705) in Jakarta (Picture postcard, 1985).

group, which also includes English and Danish forts, is on the Unesco World Heritage list. In South Africa, a large number of handsome town and country houses – later to become one of the country's distinctive features – were built, in line with the trend seen on Curaçao. Many of these houses are in excellent condition, thanks to the care of private owners or of Foundations charged with their upkeep.

The houses built in Asia (i.e. in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia) were frequently of very large proportions. A number of cases are known in which houses were built to a width of 96 Amsterdam feet: 27 metres! The former Town Hall of Batavia dates from 1705. It has been restored and now houses a historical museum. Some of the old warehouses of the United East India Company fulfil the same purpose today. Apart from a large number of forts, Sri Lanka also boasts of several eighteenth-century Dutch churches still in use, an orphanage (restored to house a Dutch Period Museum) and a Dutch hospital. A particularly fine example of colonial town planning is the fortified town of Galle at the south-west tip of the island. This town, like the forts in Ghana, has been placed on the World Heritage List at the request of the local government authorities.

Among the outstanding topographical draughtsmen whose work has left us with detailed descriptions of the local configurations in the eighteent century, particular mention should be made of Johannes Rach, who worked first in South Africa before spending a long time in Java.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries

After the end of the Napoleonic era, a wind of change swept through the Netherlands. The Republic became a Kingdom. The overseas settlements

Sri Lanka: The Reformed Church (1755) in Galle (Photo by C.L. Temminck Groll, 1993).

Surinam: The wooden Roman Catholic Cathedral of St Peter and St Paul (1883) in Paramaribo, designed by F.J.L. Harmes (Photo by H.J.E. de Roy van Zuydewijn, 1974).

were no longer managed by the trading companies, but by the national government. Guyana, to the west of Surinam, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the posts in India were all lost to the British. The settlements in the Gold Coast followed by treaty in 1871. The territories still held by the Dutch were Surinam (which became independent in 1975) and the Netherlands Antilles in the West, and Indonesia in the East (held until the Second World War). The Indonesian archipelago was welded together in the nineteenth century to form one large, amalgamated country comprising a myriad of different cultures.

Government buildings in the classical style sprang up in many places in both East and West (the recently restored theatre in Jakarta, built around 1820, being a fine example), although they were generally much less 'grand' than those built in British-controlled territories. More distinctive, however, are the nineteenth-century churches strewn all over the world. Earlier than other nineteenth-century edifices, these churches and synagogues came to be regarded locally as buildings with a clear historical value worthy of preservation. There are two interesting extremes of style: the austere, highly classical domed Dutch Reformed Church in Jakarta (1839) and the spacious, airy neo-romanesque wooden Roman Catholic Cathedral in Paramaribo, dating back to 1883. Another remarkable building in the same town is the large national hospital (c.1850). This occupies an unusually deep plot on Gravenstraat, the old main street. It has a very modern design for its time: its wings with their broad balconies finished with fine cast-iron balustrades are set around what were then well laid-out gardens.

In the West, house-builders often tended to continue along the same paths that had been laid out in the eighteenth century, whilst the trend in the East

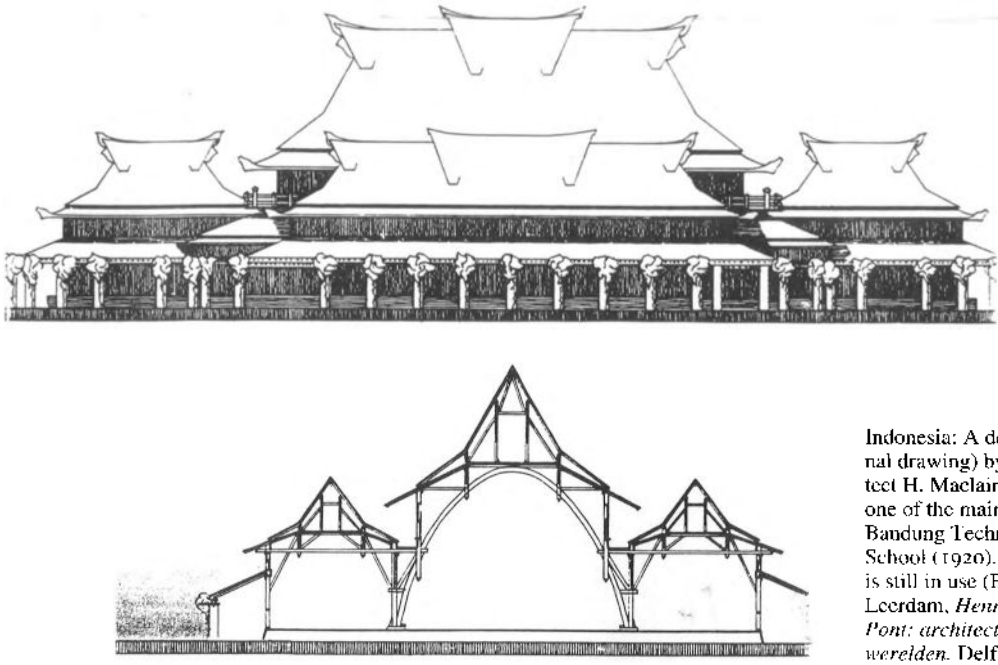
Indonesia: Reinier de Klerk's country house (c.1760) in Jakarta, after its restoration by the Dutch government (1925) and by the Indonesian government (1970). Long the home of the National Archive, it is now destined to become a museum (Photos by C.L. Temminck Groll, 1972).

Indonesia: The temple of Plaosan (Java, ninth century), restored in 1961 and protected in accordance with the 'Monuments Act' of 1931 (Photo by C.L. Temminck Groll, 1979).

was more one of adapting to local traditions: many houses were built with just a single storey and with wide, shady verandas. Local building traditions there were, of course, often extremely rich and varied and became the subject of growing academic interest.

A serious interest also began to develop in the Hindhu and Buddhist antiquities in Indonesia, the most important of which date back to the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, Th. van Erp carried out an extremely conscientious initial restoration of the temple of Borobudur, working in accordance with principles stricter even than those applied in the Netherlands. In 1925, the magnificent country house of Reinier de Klerk, later Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies, was restored and turned into the home of the National Archive, a function which this 1760 building fulfilled until recently for the Republic of Indonesia, as the country later became. Even at that time, there was a National Antiquities Department in operation and in 1931 (nine years earlier than in the Netherlands!), a bill was enacted to preserve buildings of outstanding historical value. The Monuments Act, which was updated a few years ago, was primarily conceived with the purpose of saving indigenous antiquities, but it was also utilised to preserve important Dutch buildings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Around 1920, Indonesia became the breeding ground for a number of daring variations on contemporary Dutch architectural and town planning themes. Although the developments taking place in the Netherlands were a focus of international attention right from the outset, their Indonesian parallels (which were in many cases more lavish) remained relatively unknown. Since the capital, Batavia (now Jakarta), was poorly situated from a climatic viewpoint – certainly by European standards – for a considerable time the Dutch had been looking at sites farther inland. This led to the idea of moving the centre of government to Bandung, which was higher up and cooler,



Indonesia: A design (original drawing) by the architect H. Maclaine Pont for one of the main halls of Bandung Technical High School (1920). The building is still in use (B.F. van Leerdam, *Henri Maclaine Pont: architect tussen twee werelden*. Delft, 1988).

and as a result many important buildings were constructed there between 1900 and 1940. These included the Technical High School (now the ITB), the Department of Public Works, several large hotels and commercial buildings, a social club and many fine houses. Both the layout of the town and its architecture were of a high standard. Various architects and town planners in Indonesia expended a great deal of their energy on the salient elements of regional traditions, which were then still very much alive. This is a period which is now receiving much attention from researchers.

In the West, commissions were more modest and contemporary trends had less impact. The building of the Shell Oil refinery on Curaçao, where Venezuelan oil was refined, led to a period of economic prosperity for the island from about 1920. The same thing happened on Aruba ten years later, thanks to Lago. However, the new-found wealth generated little exciting architecture (although there are some magnificent water towers and several new residential areas near Willemstad on Curacao which definitely deserve the epithet 'attractive'). In implementing new construction plans there was a tendency to draw on existing experience from 'Home' on the other side of the world; so that developments in the Netherlands Antilles followed those in Indonesia, on a smaller scale but more colourfully. In Indonesia white still predominated, while the Antilles had a tradition of using colour going back more than a century. After the Second World War and against the background of a burgeoning tourist industry, interest in various forms of conservation began to emerge. An active preservation society was founded on Curaçao in 1954, and the small island of St Eustatius followed in 1974 with its own Historical Foundation. In Surinam, a great deal of restoration work was carried out during the period from 1960 to 1975. Despite a large number of promising initiatives, however, legal framework for preservation is only now coming into being in a practicable way, both in the Antilles and in Surinam.

In general, despite wide divergences (Ghana and Surinam, for example, are facing enormous financial difficulties at present), the level of care for town structures and historic buildings dating back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is reasonable to good. But as far as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are concerned, research and preservation work are in many cases still in their infancy, except for Indonesia where much has already been done in this field.

It is of immense significance that, although the buildings concerned are of colonial origin, the local people and governments are prepared to regard them as being part and parcel of their own history and culture. And there is every reason for doing so. After all, if one compares eighteenth-century houses in Jakarta, Cape Town, Paramaribo and Willemstad, what strikes one is not just the similarities, but particularly the great differences.

There are, of course, similarities with the Netherlands. In town-planning terms this means the presence of canals wherever possible; and invariably there is the dominance of a single direction (Spanish-Colonial towns are based on a grid system). The theories of Simon Stevin (1548-1620) certainly had an influence. The churches are inspired by the clear forms developed by Jacob van Campen and his contemporaries in the mid-seventeenth century. In urban houses it is the comparitively narrow, tall properties topped with cornices or the so-called 'Dutch gables' which remind us of the Netherlands. They invariably have sash windows and entrances ornamented with pilasters; inside, the exceptionally steep staircases are a striking feature.

Country houses in the East often resemble those along the Dutch River Vecht but on a larger scale, while in Curaçao and South Africa, where they are always single-storied, they are more like the 'Havezaten' or large farmsteads of Drenthe and Overijssel. But, above all, every historic building is in the first place a reflection of the country in which it stands.

C.L. TEMMINCK GROLL
Translated by Tanis Guest.

FURTHER READING

It goes without saying that a great deal has been written on these topics. However, this type of information is frequently difficult to get hold of outside the Netherlands and the area to which it relates. For this reason, it would seem more expedient to contact the Netherlands Department for Conservation: P.O. Box 1001 / 3700 BA Zeist / The Netherlands (fax: +31 30 691 61 89).