

Notes on *Indische bouwkunst* by Obbe Norbruis*

by Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen

During a jovial meeting in Amsterdam last spring, Obbe Norbruis presented his imposing *Indische bouwkunst. Architecten en hun oeuvre in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië in de eerste helft van de 20^e eeuw* [*Indisch architecture: Architects and their work in the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia during the first half of the 20th century*]. Following earlier the publications by Huib Akihary in 1988 (published by the then *Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg*) and 1990 (an edition by Walburg Pers), it is the third publication of its kind. In addition to the Dutch language book published by LM Publishers, an Indonesian digital version is also available free of charge.

In the introduction as well as the first chapter, Norbruis briefly outlines the context of his research and the history of building construction in the archipelago. In later chapters he identifies a variety of more and less acknowledged *Indisch* architectural styles. Like Akihary's publications, the third and final part of Norbruis' book, which covers no less than 250 pages, is an overview of *Indisch* architects and their oeuvre, including at least one printed reference about every listed project. As befits a good reference book, the text is provided with references ('notes') and an overview of those references (bibliography). In addition, the book is also well illustrated: with exception of the notes and bibliography, every page of text is set off by a page of images.

Advancing attention and accuracy

Norbruis' stated motivation for writing the book is that *Indisch* architecture warrants more attention and research, and because, according to the author, the inadequate classification of *Indisch* architectural styles results in inadequate assessments of *Indisch* built heritage, which results in its neglect and, ultimately, its demolition and loss. In and of itself a valid motivation, if it was sound; unfortunately though, notably the second part of Norbruis' it far from sound.

While Norbruis correctly states that many colonial buildings are poorly maintained and consequently physically deteriorate and ultimately are demolished, his suggestion that this situation is created by inadequately identified architecture styles is not only overly simplified but misleading. For, in addition to style, various other arguments and considerations are also considered to define the importance of a building, and whether a building deserves to be preserved or not. Aspects such as the history of the building in relation to general (cultural) historical developments, the history of the building proper (who commissioned the building, who inhabited or visited the building), the status of the building in the oeuvre of its designer, its position within the urban fabric, and matters such as innovative building techniques and materials are no less important. The decision about a building's preservation or demolition is therefore more nuanced and complex than Norbruis posits.

If only an accurate identification and determination of an architecture style would suffice to determine the significance of a building, heritage and preservation would be straightforward. If this were the case, it would make sense to carefully identify and determine architecture styles. But it's not that simple. Heritage worldwide, including Indonesia, is a multifaceted subject that, in addition to the professional considerations, is also influenced by socio-economic matters and the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. Because Norbruis is unquestionably familiar with all of this – besides an established career as urban designer he has also ten years of research experience in and about Indonesia – one wonders why he deprives his readers of this insight, by reducing the preservation of Indonesia's built heritage to an issue of styles.

Classifying colonial architecture

Regarding his plea for a more accurate and rigid classification of architecture styles in Indonesia, it's ironic Norbruis' interpretation of the often used designation 'colonial' and/or 'empire' in connection to historic buildings is inaccurate. For, contrary to Norbruis' suggestion, these adjectives are not generally used as a reference to the architecture style of a building, but to the period in which the building was designed or built. They therefore don't illustrate the alleged nonchalant approach undertaken by Indonesians in their classification of architectural styles, but rather the rash character of a fair number of Norbruis' remarks and conclusions.

Norbruis' suggestion that architecture styles within *Indisch* architecture to date lack nuance and distinction, furthermore also dismisses – or ignores – the work of other researchers. To illustrate this,

simply consider two early inventories of colonial buildings in Indonesia. The first inventory dates from 1989 and was compiled by the Dutch architect Cor Passchier at the request of the Bandung Heritage Society. The inventory is an overview of buildings in Bandung built during the colonial period and distinguishes no less than twenty styles, ranging from Traditional to Modernism and from Romanticism to No (Specific) Style. The second inventory, which was put together by the local Diponegoro University in 1994-1995 on behalf of Semarang's local council, describes 177 colonial buildings in down-town Semarang. In addition to brief descriptions of the architecture styles of these 177 buildings, the Semarang inventory, like the Bandung inventory, also describes aspects such as location, typology (a building 'type': house, shop, office, etc.), (building) history, technical construction, condition, and sometimes materials and colours. The Bandung and the Semarang inventory are far from unique: from the late 1980s onwards, numerous Indonesian local councils have compiled or commissioned similar inventories to identify significant historical buildings and, in so doing, provide arguments for, or against, their preservation. A given that defies Norbruis' assumption that in Indonesia historical buildings is stylistically predominantly classified as 'colonial' or 'empire'.

Norbruis' *Indisch* architectural styles and architects

The above aside, Norbruis' plea for a more nuanced classification system for *Indisch* architecture and his overview of *Indisch* architects are interesting, though equally not beyond dispute. What to make, for example, of Norbruis' description of a style he labels 'Indisch Functional': a style that, according to Norbruis, takes its cue from the idea that the design of a building was 'based on functional considerations' and 'architecture was superfluous'. Because of this, he directly links the style to the economic crisis in the 1930s; a decade during which there was little alternative but to 'build functionally and efficiently' and when hospitals and schools, if built at all, 'had to meet minimum functional requirements in order to be eligible for subsidy at [the] department in question'. Norbruis' description, again, raises various questions: Does Functionalism indeed arise from the idea that architecture is superfluous; why single out hospitals and schools; were these the only buildings designed in the Indisch Functional style; what is the relevance of subsidy with regard to the selection of an architecture style; was subsidy indeed the only reason hospitals and schools applied this style; what corroborates these assertions, and what arguments underpin the description? Relevant questions, not least because Norbruis also mentions that buildings in the Indisch Functional style consist of a maximum of two floors and are equipped with a large roof, small windows and open verandas. A characterisation that applies to so many colonial buildings in Indonesia, that it is far from clear how and why these features are characteristic for the Indisch Functional style.

Unless, of course, they are also characteristic of other Indisch styles. Which raises the question whether a specific style characteristic can occur with more than one style, or whether these are not style characteristics at all? Because the other styles Norbruis suggests are equally arbitrary, half-heartedly defined and hence vague, his classification of *Indisch* architectural styles remains ambiguous and consequently unapplicable.

Of much more interest, on the other hand, is the most extensive part of the book: the overview of architects and their work. Although Norbruis doesn't describe his selection criteria nor explains why over 70 names listed by Akihary are left out – including 10 Indonesian names – and why over 50 new names – including one Indonesian name – are included, it's a useful update of and addition to Akihary's earlier list for those interested in Indisch architecture.

Researching *Indisch* architecture

It is unpleasant having to make these kinds of comments about a reference book like *Indische Architecture*. Being the relentless searcher for yet unknown sources, Norbruis makes important contributions to ongoing research about this topic. The material he traces and used for *Indisch architecture* and for his earlier research on the Ed. Cuypers, Hulswit and Fermont Architecture Bureau demonstrate this; however, what is problematic about *Indisch architecture*, is its potentially unambiguous interpretation of those sources.

Take, for example, Norbruis' critique of Helen Jessup's PhD-thesis. A work in which Jessup, according to Norbruis, used information from Akihary's 1988 publication without verifying that information. An insinuation that is hard to substantiate but, for insiders, equally hard to digest. First, because Akihary's publication was not available when Jessup finished her dissertation, it's dubious whether Akihary could or would have shared information prior to his book being published. Second, because Jessup in 1988 was an established and acknowledged authority in the field of *Indisch* architecture. Indeed, she

completed a MA-dissertation on the *Indisch* architect Henri Maclaine Pont as early as 1975. In the following years Jessup published at least eight articles on *Indisch* architecture. According to the notes in his 1988 publication, Akihary was familiar with Jessup's publications. Contrary, Jessup doesn't refer to Akihary in her PhD-thesis: not in the text, not in the notes, not in the bibliography and not in the acknowledgments. An omission that, knowing Jessup, doesn't originate from sloppiness but simply from the fact that, in defiance of Norbruis' suggestion, she didn't use nor consult Akihary's publication.

Of course, mistakes occur, that's not the issue. What is of concern is that Norbruis frequently, and often unwarranted, is disrespectful of the scholars and dismisses their work. For those familiar with the topic, this is not really a problem because they will be aware of the content and character of these scholars' work and their approaches. However, for those less familiar with the 'ins and out' of *Indisch* architecture, Norbruis' interpretation of data and events creates a narrative that, although tempting and convincing, certainly doesn't do justice to these data and events.

Historical research is a proven method to identify, analyse, and to interpret sources and use those sources to argue that interpretation. It acknowledges and accepts that a researcher's knowledge, background, and perspective colour their interpretation and that, consequently, absolute objectivity can never be fully achieved. If all is well though, research findings and publication are carefully considered interpretations of historical events and developments. The methodology also works from the premise that historical reconstructions are not set in stone; when new information emerges earlier interpretations and narratives may require revision. This is not a problem, if others are able to understand what has led to this revision. That is how historical research works and how a reliable body of knowledge is created and maintained as relevant.

Considering Norbruis' research is historical, one wonders whether Norbruis fully understands and appreciates this methodology. Identifying sources is an important aspect of a historian's job, but it's not the only aspect. What is equally, if not more important, is the creation of a credible narrative. Something that's not easy to achieve, but for all the good reason, it's what historical research is all about. Because Norbruis misses the mark a few times too often, *Indisch architecture* unfortunately is neither the credible nor the comprehensive publication it could and should have been.

Obbe Norbruis, *Indische bouwkunst. Architecten en hun oeuvre in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië in de eerste helft van de 20^e eeuw*, LM Publishers, s.l., 2021.

Images

Two pages from the list of architects and their work: on the left information about over Nanno Kruizinga and Eddy Kühr, and on the right several examples of their work.

Two examples of the Indisch Functionele style Norbruis discerns: the office of the Zustermaatschappijen (1931) in Semarang by Thomas Karsten and Abraham Schouten, top, and the governor's residency (1939) in Medan by Hubert Breuning.

* This text is a loose translation of 'Kanttekeningen bij *Indische bouwkunst* van Obbe Norbruis' published in [Indies tijdschrift](#) (2022)