

# Modern Indisch town planning

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Attracted by the growing career opportunities emerging in the Dutch East Indies around the turn of the twentieth century, an increasing number of young, ambitious and well-trained professionals from the Netherlands set sail to the Dutch colony. Amongst them was a growing community of architects. Inspired by a new sense of social responsibility, and in tune with the aesthetic and perspectives of the new cultural and social movements then sweeping Europe, they came inspired to introduce the latest modern ideas and approaches to the practice of architecture and urban reform. Thomas Karsten was one of this band of pioneers. A strong personality, with an incessant energy and firm ideas about the future directions his profession should take, Karsten soon became one of the leading voices in the development of modern town planning in the Dutch East Indies.

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Town planning first was included in the curriculum of Delft's Polytechnic (*Technische Hoogeschool*) in 1924. See chapter *Education and inspiration*.

## The first modern town plans in the Dutch Indies

As *chef de bureau* in Henri Maclaine Pont's Semarang architectural firm, Karsten was responsible for the design for a new residential neighbourhood from the Semarang municipal council. As Karsten had not studied planning at Delft<sup>1</sup> and was still relatively unfamiliar with the colony having barely been there for two years, the assignment must have been a considerable challenge. In 1916 only a few modern town plans were planned and (being) executed in the Indies: in Batavia, a the plan for the new residential area Menteng-Nieuw Gondangdia developed in 1910 by Piet Moojen; in Surabaya, a 1914 plan for the Darmo district south of the city developed by Maclaine Pont; and a social housing scheme, kampong Taman Sari, developed by the Batavia city council in 1913.

The main rationale behind the development of these residential areas was to address the dire housing shortage. With the exception of the Darmo-plan, these early *Indisch* town plans paid little attention to urban development beyond the immediate details concerning the site: they neglected the needs of future developments, or organic traffic flows, which came to play a central role in later approaches to

town planning. Instead, they focussed on the number of houses to be built and the trajectory for necessary roadwork. For inspiration and guidance to tackle the commission in Semarang, Karsten therefore presumably have depended on his brief experience in the Netherlands and Germany, what he had been able to glean from professional literature and the plan Karel de Bazel designed for Semarang in 1907.

### Town planning in the Netherlands

Modern town planning, where the central tenet was the creation of aesthetic, harmonious and healthy cities, was in its infancy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Architects and town planners in the Netherlands – as in other European countries – were only just beginning to invent new ways of responding to new needs, new demands and newly defined objectives. In the Netherlands this had received a dramatic impetus with the implementation of quite radical legislation in 1901: the *Woningwet* (Public Housing Law). The law was a response to a growing number of “insistent reports on the ‘misery, filth and immorality’ [...] and] the struggle for survival by the gigantic population crowding in urban ghettos”.<sup>2</sup> The Public Housing Law enabled municipalities to demand house owners to improve their property and, if they refused to do so, to declare houses unfit for habitation.<sup>3</sup> It also had extraordinary implications for town planning since it stipulated that it was mandatory for municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants and municipalities with a growth rate of over 20 per cent in 5 years, to prepare an expansion plan. By forcing municipalities to control the development of their cities, the Dutch government hoped to end the practice of the random construction of new neighbourhoods that had resulted in unplanned land speculation in the late nineteenth century evident in urban neighbourhoods, such as *De Pijp* in Amsterdam, *De Schilderswijk* in The Hague and *Het Oude Westen* in Rotterdam. These neighbourhoods were characterised by long narrow streets lined with crowded tenement blocks and little private or public open space, and failed to consider future expansion or articulation with the existing urban setting.

One of the new urban design concepts that became immensely influential around the turn of the century was the ‘garden city’, a concept developed by the British urban theorist Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928). It incorporated the social ideals of early planners responding to the unhealthy slum conditions of England’s industrial cities. Howard envisaged the development of healthy and aesthetically pleasing environments separated from busy urban centres, offering workers comfortable and affordable housing in proximity to the revitalising influences of nature.<sup>4</sup> In the Netherlands, this concept was soon

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Polano, *Hendrik Petrus Berlage* (1988) 165.

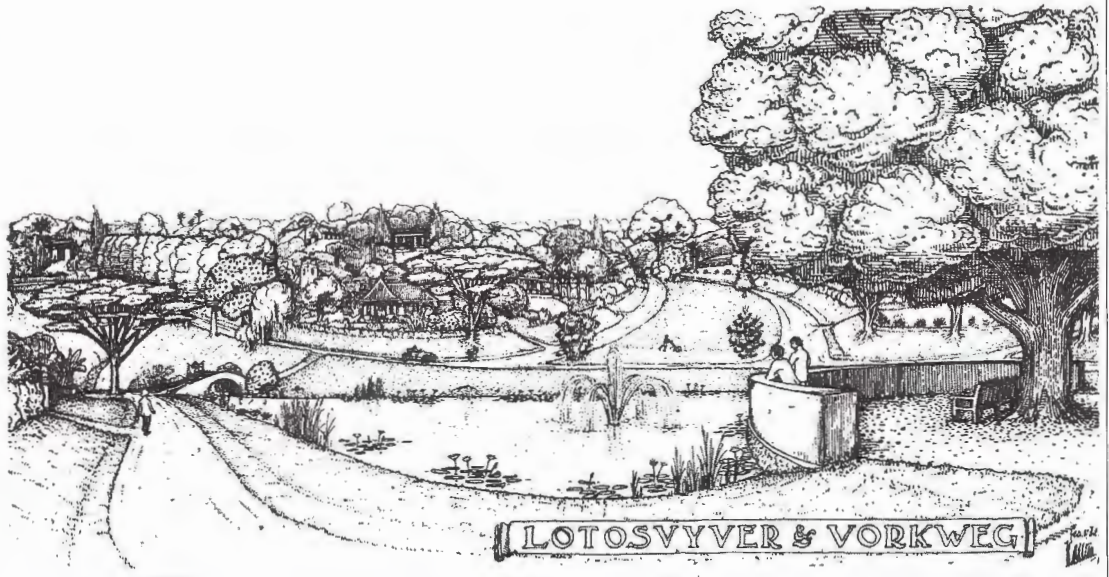
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Wagenaar, *Town Planning in the Netherlands since 1800* (2011) 210.

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Howard, *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898). Reprint: *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (1902).

LOTOSVIJVER, GEZIEN VAN DEN ZUIDWESTELIJKEN OEVER AF IN NOORDOOSTELIJKE  
RICHTING NAAR DEN VORKWEG.



Artist impression of the Lotus pond in New Candi, Semarang, 1916



*Semarang.*

*View of Semarang and Lempengsari*

Semarang's expansion plan New Candi in the hills south of the city, with European houses on the hill and kampong Lempoengsari in the valley, 1917

of the contemporary Dutch East Indies society. It implied his broader vision for creating a more unified, multi-ethnic society in which socio-economic rather than ethnic criteria defined one's position, a vision that characterised his future work as town planner.

Karsten's approach to planning in Semarang proved highly successful. His New Candi design convinced the Semarang municipality that the hills could indeed be developed into residential areas, albeit for an entirely different group of citizens Tillema and De Vogel initially had intended.<sup>14</sup> Early criticism, notably from Maclaine Pont, that the plan included excessive attention to aesthetics and insufficient attention to traffic flows, soon seemed forgotten.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1920s, most colleagues and other professionals expressed their enthusiasm for Karsten's Semarang expansion plan. Rückert, who had worked closely with Karsten in 1919, wrote "one does not always have to be in America, to witness American conduct."<sup>16</sup> Given that America was seen as exemplifying modernity *par excellence*, the reference was no doubt intended and understood as a compliment.

Karsten's 1922 design for a residential neighbourhood for the *N.V. Volkshuisvesting Semarang*, is in many ways reflective of his planning philosophy. His 1925 plan for *Mlaten*, that provided for just over 660 houses for almost 2,000 inhabitants and was part of the revised 1919 expansion plan, clearly incorporated his vision of town planning contributing to the creation of a harmonious multi-ethnic society. It was to accommodate a mix of socio-economically differentiated Eurasian, Chinese and Indonesian families. Housing styles varied according to size, floor plans and facilities to reflect a related sliding scale of rental costs. The complex also paid attention to landscaping to provide a "pleasant environment" and provided a range of community needs such as small shops, a sporting field, and communal bathing and water facilities.<sup>17</sup>

### Karsten ideas on Indisch town planning

Karsten presented his first extended overview of his town planning philosophy for the Dutch East Indies in a 95-page preliminary report (*preadvies*) entitled *Indiese stedenbouw*<sup>18</sup> (Indies town planning), to the annual Decentralisation Congress of the *Vereeniging voor Locale Belangen* (Association of Local Interests) in Bandung in May 1920.<sup>19</sup> The Decentralisation Congresses were organised from 1911 to 1942 – every year in a different city – and brought together professionals from all parts of the colony. They were very well attended and provided an important opportunity to discuss and exchange ideas and experiences related to local administration, including town planning. As important as the congresses, was its bi-weekly journal, *Locale Belangen*,

<sup>14</sup> The development of New Candi into a residential neighbourhood for the well-off was a far cry from Tillema and De Vogel's initial ambition to designate the hills for the financially less well-off. Their vision was unrealisable because of the high cost involved in the daily commute between the hills and downtown Semarang was too high for Semarang's working class.

<sup>15</sup> Maclaine Pont, 'Een algemeen uitbreidings- en verbeteringsplan voor de gemeente Semarang' (1918).

<sup>16</sup> Rückert, 'De uitbreidingsplannen van de gemeente Semarang' (1921) 437.

<sup>17</sup> Westbroek, 'Exploitatie en bebouwing van het land Mlaten Semarang' (1932) 16.

<sup>18</sup> Karsten used *Indies* or *Indiese* consistently. This spelling is a conscious deviation from the then, and now preferred spelling of the word *Indisch* or *Indische*.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 2. Karsten wrote the report at the invitation of the *Vereeniging* which had been initiated by several members of the Semarang municipal council during the first Decentralisation Congress in 1911 and established in 1912.

<sup>20</sup> *Locale Belangen* contained short items about the wide variety of issues related to the colony's local administration, from labour to laws and from public health and public space.

<sup>21</sup> Ghijsels, leading partner of the *Algemeen Ingenieurs en Architectenbureau* (AIA, General Engineers and Architects Office) based

in which, by way of addendas, the papers and reports presented at the congresses were published.<sup>20</sup> From the mid-1920s, the *Vereeniging voor Locale Belangen* was to become a driving force in the development of planning in the Indies. It became an important critic of the central government implementation of the decentralisation policy, and played a vital role in convincing the central government to recognise the important work of municipal administrators and to be more accommodating to their requests to fund more rational and comprehensive approaches to town planning.

In 1920 Karsten was one of the few architects in the colony directly engaged on the design of towns, which made him a leading candidate to be invited to introduce the topic of town planning to the Bandung conference. Two other likely speakers on this topic would have been Maclaine Pont and Frans Ghijsels. Ghijsels had come to prominence with his plan for the expansion of Bandung, which was being proposed as the colony's new administrative and scholarly centre. Designed at about the same time as Karsten designed his plans for Semarang, the execution of Bandung's expansion plan was several years under way at time of the Bandung conference.<sup>21</sup> Maclaine Pont was invited to present his views on town planning at the General Engineers Congress (*Algemeen Ingenieurs Congres*) in Batavia that was held two weeks prior to the Decentralisation Congress in Bandung. Due to bad health though, Maclaine Pont never completed his text. It was published by *Java-Bode*.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the apparent simplicity of Karsten's text *Indiese stedenbouw*, it was, and proved to be for many years, an influential theoretical treatise as well as a practical handbook for planners in the Indies. It provided Karsten's colleagues and those to come, with insights and directives about the day-to-day practice of the emerging discipline and its application to colonial cities. More than half the paper was an account of the various components essential to the make-up of an effective town plan and how to design them: the definition of neighbourhood zones for residential, commercial or business purposes; the various typologies of roads and buildings and their corresponding design characteristics; the nature and purpose of public and green spaces and the use of plants; and the relevance and treatment of special elements such as squares, singular buildings and sports facilities.

Illustrative of the guidelines is Karsten's view on roads. In his opinion roads should have a clear and intuitive hierarchy, so road users would not be confused about the function and the course of every road in a town. To indicate and differentiate main roads, local roads, etc., Karsten stressed the need to apply unambiguous visual distinctions of trajectories and profiles. Main roads, for example,

in Batavia. His northern expansion plan for Bandung was in response to a 1916 proposal to relocate government departments from the unhealthy capital on the north coast of Java to the inland and much cooler city of Bandung in preparation for Bandung to become the colony's new administrative and scholarly capital. Van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad* (2008) 49-51, 58-63.

<sup>22</sup> Maclaine Pont, 'Stedenbouw in Indië I', 8 May 1920 and 'Stedenbouw in Indië II', 11 May 1920. Additionally Maclaine Pont published his reflections on the Bandung expansion plan in the *Pre-angerbode*: 'Een algemeen uitbreidings- en verbeteringsplan voor de gemeente Semarang' (1918); 'De Bandoengsche uitbreidingsplannen I', 22 May 1920 and 'De Bandoengsche uitbreidingsplannen II', 27 May 1920.

*planologie* (town planning), while no doubt a significant honour, must nevertheless have been somewhat disappointing and does raise some questions. Was it, as his children have suggested, because of his leftist political orientation? Or was the reason more personal and prompted by the fact that while very able, dedicated, diligent and intelligent Karsten was also considered very opinionated and consequently not much liked by colleagues, or a combination of these factors? Whatever the case, this final addition to Karsten's record of service was only short-lived and left little tactile evidence: all that survives from his role at the Polytechnic in Bandung is a blueprint of some teaching material.

This example of the critical reception Karsten received towards the end of his career may explain the relative absence of celebratory memorials following his death, although undoubtedly the turmoil in the immediate post-war years was also to blame. One obituary was written by a colleague who had worked closely with Karsten in the thirties, the civil engineer Jacobus Pieter Thijssse (1896-1981).<sup>48</sup> Thijssse recognised that Karsten was a man whose passion for planning was driven by his profound interest in creating a society in the broadest sense of the word, and in all its manifestations.<sup>49</sup> It was this interest that, according to Thijssse, had motivated Karsten to move away from architecture in order to concentrate on town planning, with its emphasis on the development of society and community. The fact that Karsten almost single-handedly founded the profession of town planning as a discipline in the Indies, was, at least from Thijssse's point of view, due to his diligence, the explicitness with which he expounded his views, the thoroughness of his methodology, and his relentless energy. Yet, even Thijssse made reference to his stubborn character, his dominant personality and his individualistic omnipresence in the colony. These observations by a former close colleague confirm the impression of Thomas Karsten as an extraordinary diligent, intelligent visionary with both positive and less positive character traits.

### Karsten's legacy

This outline of Karsten's contribution to town planning in the inter-war period is concluded by examining briefly the legacy of his town planning work in post colonial Indonesia. While, except among a few architectural and town planning historians, most Dutch professionals are unfamiliar with the name and reputation of Thomas Karsten, the situation in Indonesia is very different. In Indonesia his name and the work he left behind, both in architecture and in town planning, are treasured and often referred to.

In the last decades Indonesian professionals and citizens have re-

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From 1921 until 1942, Thijssse was employed by the *Dienst Gemeentewerken* (Department of Public Works) in Bandung. He had also been a member of the Town Planning Committee. In 1946, Thijssse restarted and headed the planning course at the Bandung Polytechnic. Thijssse, 'In Memoriam Ir. Herman Thomas Karsten' (1947) 69-70. For post-1945 developments, see Van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad* (2008) 175-219.

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Thijssse, 'Plannen voor ordening van stad en land' (1947) 8-9.

evaluated their colonial built heritage. As Karsten is one of Indonesia's best known colonial architects and planners, many structures and locations are popularly identified with his name because any association with Karsten adds a level of prestige and value to surviving works.

Claims a particular town plan or building was designed by Karsten, however, often lack the evidence of contemporary sources and regularly seem to be nourished by the desire to have 'a Karsten' than by any available evidence, however small. Although Karsten's name was regularly reported in the *Indische* press in the latter part of the twenties and throughout the thirties in the context of his work, and Karsten himself refers to visits to various cities in his correspondence with his family, references are often sketchy and therefore ambiguous. Since Karsten acted simultaneously as architect, town planner and town planning advisor, it is and will remain difficult but essential to establish Karsten's precise role in the cities he visited, to establish whether he actually designed (parts of) a town plan, or 'merely' acted as town planning adviser.

Considering Thijsse knew Karsten personally, one would assume his reference to Karsten's advisory work for Bandjermasin, Batavia, Cheribon, Djokjakarta, Magelang, Medan, Meester Cornelis, Padang, Poerwokerto to be accurate.<sup>50</sup> To establish whether this assumption is true, and thus to establish Karsten's involvement in these – and potentially other – cities, more and more substantial information is needed. Interesting examples that support the need for more research and sources, are Buitenzorg (now Bogor), Palembang and Soekamandi, a private estate of the *Maatschappij tot Exploitatie der Pamenoekean- en Tjiasemlanden* (Company for the Exploitation of Pamenoekean- and Tjiasem grounds) situated between Tjikampek and Pamenoekeh. Although Thijsse does not mention these designs, other sources suggest, and even confirm, Karsten designed them (in part).<sup>51</sup>

Illustrative examples of ambiguous claims that Karsten designed a city's town plan are Medan (ca. 1918) and Bandung (ca. 1937-1941). For, although *De Sumatra Post* in November 1918 wrote that the Medan municipality had received some documents from Karsten regarding the city's expansion plan, things become blurred when consulting other issues of the newspaper.<sup>52</sup> What to make, for example, of an earlier reference in *De Sumatra Post* of February 1918 that the Medan town plan was nearly finished?<sup>53</sup> Or of the article in *De Sumatra Post* of March 1919 that mentions that although three street plans for Medan that have been designed, the municipality's considers to invite the bureau of Karsten, Lutjens and Toussaint to design yet another street plan – at the expense of 20.000 guilders?<sup>54</sup> Without any additional information, one can conclude Karsten was involved in the design of

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Thijsse, 'In Memoriam Ir. Herman Thomas Karsten' (1947) 69-70. Contemporary newspapers do not confirm Thijsse's reference to Karsten's involvement in Bandjermasin, Djokjakarta, Magelang and Poerwokerto. For Batavia, see *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 21 June 1939. For Meester Cornelis, *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 1 March 1930 and 18 February 1930) mentions Karsten's advice regarding (a revision of) the town plan of Meester Cornelis. For Padang, see *De Sumatra Post*, 27 January 1932; *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 29 April 1932 and *De Indische Courant* 25 November 1938. *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlands-Indië*, 8 April 1932 refers to a *pasar* (market) Karsten designed for Padang. Private correspondence shows that Karsten travelled to Padang by plane at least twice in 1932. Letters 27 February 1932 and 19 April 1932 from Karsten to his nephew Charles Karsten. For private correspondence on Palembang, see Karsten to his sister Barta, 7 February 1933.

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For Palembang, see *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 2 January 1929 and *De Indische Courant*, 4 October 1929. The reference in *De Indische Courant* corroborates H. Lüning's post-war reference that "the later Ir. Thomas Karsten" designed Palembang's town plan. Lüning was involved in this town plan for approximately 15 years. In his introduction to the Explanatory Memorandum to the 1950 Samarinda town plan, Lüning also mentions that as the problems in Samarinda in 1950 are similar to those in Palembang, the survey

Medan's town plan, but what it was he actually designed will remain unclear unless more information surfaces.

Some clarity as to the nature of Karsten's work as town planner/consultant for much of this period can be gleaned from the evidence available in relation to the Bandung town plan. In the *Gemeentebled Bandoeng* (Municipal Minutes) of 15 March 1930, Karsten is referred to as the Bandung municipality's advisor "regarding the revision of the existing city expansion plans of 1929".<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, there is reference to the fact that the town plans themselves were the work of the Bandung municipal planning department in 1928, which had taken up the task of reviving the ambitious but stranded 1916 Northern expansion plan for the city designed by the *Algemeen Ingenieurs en Architectenbureau* (General Engineers and Architects Office).<sup>56</sup> Ten years later Karsten is mentioned again in the Bandung *Gemeentebled*. This time his role is more clearly and unambiguously defined as Bandung's town planning adviser from 1937 to the end of 1940.<sup>57</sup> An earlier edition of the *Gemeentebled* from 1940, states "Mr. Karsten is not exclusively engaged by the municipality of Bandung since he performs similar services for other municipalities".<sup>58</sup> This reference appears to confirm that Karsten was engaged by many municipalities as a town planning advisor, rather than the town planner.

Observations like these reinforce that circumspection is needed when it comes to claims of Karsten's involvement in local town planning. For a balanced judgement contemporary sources are needed. Ideally one would need to examine in detail the genesis of individual town plans, such as are available for Semarang (1916, 1919, 1922), Malang (1932, 1935) or Koningsplein Batavia (1937). As research on colonial-era town planning continues and sources become increasingly available – not least thanks to digitisation projects – future studies may shed new light to confirm and extend the limited conclusions that can be reliably drawn now.

Based on documentation that has emerged so far, however, it is, incontrovertible that Karsten played a fundamental role in defining the principles of town planning in the archipelago and professionalising the work of its exponents. Moreover, his publications and the tangible evidence of the surviving picturesque lanes and boulevards in cities like Semarang and Malang, will continue to inspire his counterparts in today's Indonesia.

before plan for Samarinda was conducted in a relatively short period of time. To date, no other references to Karsten's plan for Palembang have emerged. Lüning, *Nota van Toelichting op het Stadsplan Kota Samarinda* (1950) 3. For Buitenzorg, see *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 16 December 1929: this article refers to *Kedong Halang*, one of the former private estates the municipality of Buitenzorg acquired and on which Karsten projected Buitenzorg's *Uitbreidingsplan Oost* (Expansion Plan East); Van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad* (2008) 128–130, 135–139. For Soekamandi, see *Het Nieuws van de dag van Nederlands-Indië*, 30 March 1925.

52  
*De Sumatra Post*, 12 November 1918 (I want to express my gratitude to Dirk Aedse Buischool for this reference before Dutch and Dutch East Indian newspapers were digitised); *De Sumatra Post*, 16 November 1918.

53  
*De Sumatra Post*, 11 February 1918.

54  
*De Sumatra Post*, 15 March 1919.

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*Gemeentebled Bandoeng*, 15 March 1930, 302.

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'Naar Boven', 28 August 1927; 'Gezondheidstoestand in het tropisch bergland', 28 August 1927; *Nota inzake de overbrenging van den zetel van de regering naar en de centralisering van landsdiensten te Bandoeng* (1938) 19.

57  
*Gemeentebled Bandoeng*, 13 December 1940.

58  
*Gemeentebled Bandoeng*, 8 January 1940, 135.