

Colonial kampungs in Medan

The streets of Indonesia's city centres are lined with colonial buildings. Buildings that often stand out for their architectural quality, and sometimes exuberance. For decades architecturally evocative buildings have been the focus of attention of heritage lovers. But is that all that was built in the colonial era? Were colonial architects and administrators solely interested in designing visually alluring buildings, or were they also concerned about more mundane commissions?

Colonial kampungs

In Medan, kampungs Sekip, Sidodadi, Padang Loemba and Djati Oeloe are a demonstration of the latter. Built between 1920 and 1928, the kampungs are as much part of Medan's colonial history as the post office on Lapangan Merdeka, restaurant Tip Top or the former AVROS building.

At first sight you may not notice anything special about Sekip, Sidodadi, Padang Loemba and Djati Oeloe. When you look again though, you will observe a few features that make them stand out from other kampungs. For example, the carefully conceived arrangement of the streets, their relative width, the generous communal open spaces for sports and leisure, and the houses that align the streets. What makes the kampungs particularly special though, is something invisible to the eye: the participatory way in which they were conceived. An approach the Medan local council employed in response to unsuccessful housing projects elsewhere in the colony. Projects that failed because, despite all good intentions of architects and administrators alike, they failed to consider the habits and customs of their anticipated residents.

Learning by doing

Kampung Taman Sari in Batavia was an early example of a failed low cost housing project. Conceived as a 'model' for future low cost housing projects throughout the colony, the kampung was neatly planned and executed in line with Dutch ideas about safe and healthy living environments. It consisted of a variety of houses, a couple of shops, and communal bathing facilities and water taps. Facilities Dutch colonial administrators and architects considered essential, but were considered too European and therefore uncomfortable by Taman Sari's Indonesian inhabitants. Because they consequently didn't feel comfortable, Taman Sari was soon abandoned and eventually bulldozed.

The failure of Taman Sari's was a wake-up call. Not only for the administrators and architects in Batavia, but all-over the archipelago. The project revealed that solving the rampant housing shortage and improving the quality of much of the housing stock required much more than merely a technological approach.

Housing pilots in Medan

Learning from Batavia, Medan's local council in 1920 embarked on a different trajectory. Inspired by the participatory approach applied in Bandung and Semarang, Medan's administrators decided to involve inhabitants in the development of low cost housing projects. To this end, the municipality ran two pilots prior to embarking on the actual development of the kampungs. The pilots aimed to explore and understand the cultural as well as the technical and financial dimensions of the task ahead.

The first pilot was situated on a small plot of land just off Sekipweg (*jalan Sekip*). It involved the construction of four permanent and 17 different semipermanent houses. The findings were very informative: they demonstrated that permanent, fully brick houses with tiled roofs were not necessarily what residents desired, and would also result in huge costs when built on a large scale. Instead, residents indicated they preferred the semipermanent model: houses with stone foundation, *bilik* walls, tiled roofs and paved floors.

Based on these findings, the municipality completed kampung Sekip by building another 21 semipermanent houses, two communal sanitary units (baths and wc's), 15 small kitchens and a shop. To ensure the houses were accessible and hygiene to the standard required, the municipality also

constructed all roads and drainage. Kampung Sekip proved very successful: the moment the houses were finished, residents moved in; the participatory approach clearly worked.

The second pilot the municipality devised, was a self-build project in kampung Sidodadi, the last of the four kampungs. The project, which consisted of 80 plots, was allocated exclusively for residents from kampung Padang Loemba; an existing but notoriously neglected kampung the municipality planned to be rebuilt in its entirety and therefore needed its residents to relocate. To compensate these residents for the loss of their houses and the aggravation caused by the move, the municipality allowed them to build their own houses on a new location. Provided the new houses met prevailing building regulations, the municipality furthermore granted the residents a discount on the building material and subsidised part of the cost related to transport of these materials.

The residents were very happy with the fruits of their efforts. They even asked the municipality to call their 'Sidodadi': we succeeded. However, the municipality was somewhat less enthusiastic. Not because they didn't appreciate the efforts and the happiness of the residents, but because the pilot demonstrated it was impossible to self-build a structurally and hygienically sound house for less than 400 to 500 guilders (currently 51-63 juta rupiah). Because the municipality's budget was limited, it therefore couldn't but conclude that self-built housing projects in large quantities were financially and ideologically untenable.

Building with and for people

The pilots in Medan proved effective new approach to deal with the colony's housing problems. Instead of deciding top-down what residents needed and forcing houses upon them, it was obviously much more rewarding and efficient to involve residents in the creation of their houses and neighbourhoods. Not only because it involved residents in a practical and emotional way, but also because it provided architects and administrators with important cultural information they lacked.

The only downside to the participatory approach was its drain on time or money. For although the municipality, in the course of eight years, designed four kampungs, 30 different housing types and more than 400 houses, communal bathing and running water, shops, and hundreds of meters of roads and drainage, the initial target of nearly 600 new houses wasn't exactly met. The pressure, in other words, was on, not least because well over 2.000 more houses still awaited improvement or replacement.

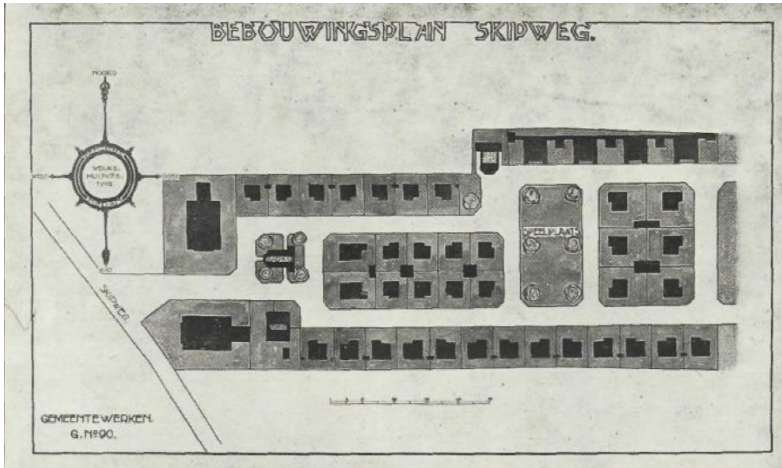
In and of themselves though, the new kampungs were remarkable successes. Their carefully designed lay-out/plan of the kampungs, the variety of houses and the careful arrangement of the houses along the roads – following 1920s planning principles, large and representative houses were situated on main roads while smaller houses were situated along secondary roads – resulted in a spatial and architectural quality unprecedented in Medan kampungs at the time.

Today, Sekip and Sidodadi as well as Djati Oeloe and Padang Loemba therefore are much more than just quiet and green residential areas off Medan's busy city centre. They are also tactile reminders of an interesting but often ignored aspect of Medan's colonial past. A past in which colonial governments and architects, in addition to creating upmarket buildings, also made serious efforts to provide decent low-cost housing for the masses.

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Illustrations



Plan of kampung Sekip, Medan (1920)



Semipermanent houses under construction in kampung Sekip, Medan (1920)



House in Djati Oeloe, Medan (2014, Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen)

[Analisa](#) (16-4-2023)



Open space in Djati Oeloe, Medan (2014, Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen)