Through trial and error. Public housing in the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies around 1900

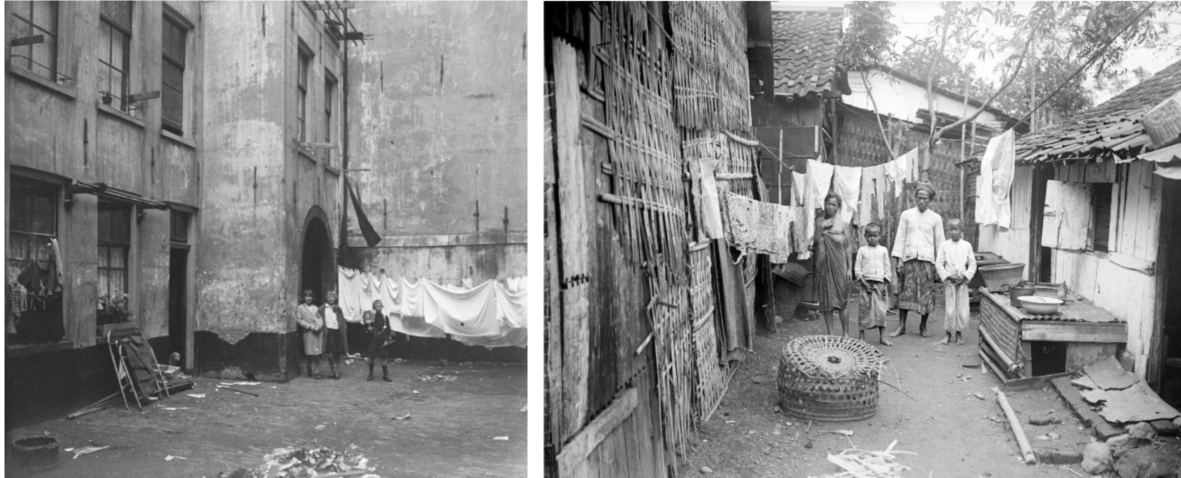
Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen

Housing in the Dutch East Indies

Housing in colonial Indonesia around 1900 was a challenge. First, because of the lack of houses: the demand for accommodation in rural, and notably urban areas, far exceeded supply. Second, because the condition of much of the pre-existing available housing stock was substandard: it didn't meet the growing European demands of health and hygiene. And last, because much of the nineteenth century was dominated by liberal politics which meant that housing was left to private speculators and philanthropists. The combination of these three conditions resulted in a situation whereby many people, specifically those with low to low-middle incomes, were left without access to decent, affordable, and fit-for-purpose accommodation.

In the years leading up to 1900, the Dutch East Indies' central government in Batavia (Jakarta) choose not to address the issue. However, due to the growing influence of socialist ideas, and the arrival of increasing numbers of Europeans who settled permanently in the colony from the 1870s onwards, along with periodical outbreaks of typhoid, cholera and pestilence, the government begrudgingly acknowledged housing was a problem that needed to be addressed in a more coordinated manner. Even so, despite this acknowledgement, the government remained reluctant to intervene. It therefore wasn't until the 1920s before the government finally introduced some measures to fully consider the issue.

In the meantime, local councils and interested professionals, including architects and health practitioners, approached the issue in different ways. Some looked at cost-per-unit solutions, whilst others explored construction techniques suitable to the tropical climate or looked at local customs and vernacular solutions. And although the housing projects weren't always successful and rarely met the demand for low-cost housing that supported the health and well-being of their occupants, they were instrumental in understanding what aspects played into low-cost housing and potential ways how to deal with them.



[Fig.1] Poor housing conditions in Amsterdam (left, 1930) and Semarang (right, c. 1910).[1]

Housing in the Netherlands

Housing for low-income groups wasn't only a challenge for the Dutch East Indies. The Netherlands, the colonial 'motherland', also faced huge challenges regarding housing its less fortunate citizens [Fig.1]. And because local councils and professionals in the colony frequently turned to the Netherlands for solutions, it's worthwhile to briefly discuss the situation in the Netherlands before exploring the corresponding situation in the Dutch East Indies.

in the Dutch East Indies, housing in the Netherlands gradually moved up the political agenda as a result of economic, social and political developments throughout the nineteenth century. In cities, where large numbers of people lived in overcrowded, rundown unhealthy and structurally unsafe accommodation, politicians gradually – though no less reluctantly than in the Dutch East Indies – accepted that housing couldn't be left solely to private initiative.[2] In the interest of society at large, administrators accepted they needed to address the housing issue and take some control, in particular for people of very limited means.

The result was a Housing Act passed by the Dutch Government in 1901 which was deemed crucial to the betterment of the housing situation in the Netherlands. Firstly, because it required local governments to define and implement regulations houses needed to adhere: choice of sites, construction, materials, position and plan of the houses, etcetera. Secondly, because it obliged city authorities with more than 10,000 inhabitants to prepare their own expansion plans. By forcing local governments to anticipate the future spatial development of their city, the Housing Act ensured local administrators were in control of these developments rather than playing catch-up to speculators. And thirdly, because it offered organisations that were solely dedicated to public housing the possibility to apply for funding for low-cost housing projects.

It was thanks to the Housing Act that decent and affordable housing for the working class no longer depended on philanthropy. Local governments were now able to put an end to slums and

houses unfit for human habitation – by force, if necessary. The low-income houses and residential neighbourhoods built in the wake of the act's implementation, were steeped in contemporary notions of health, hygiene and community [Fig. 2]. They were a far cry from the dark, dank and depressing living quarters they replaced. As such, even though the construction of public and social housing was slow and rents were not always within everyone's budget, the Housing Act was an important step in addressing the housing issue.

[Fig. 2] Early twentieth-century public and social housing projects in the Netherlands. Top: Vreewijk Garden City in Rotterdam (1913) and the Spaarndammer neighbourhood in Amsterdam (c.1920). Bottom: Beton Village in Amsterdam (c.1925) and Kiefhoek in Rotterdam (c.1930).[3]

Challenges in the Dutch East Indies

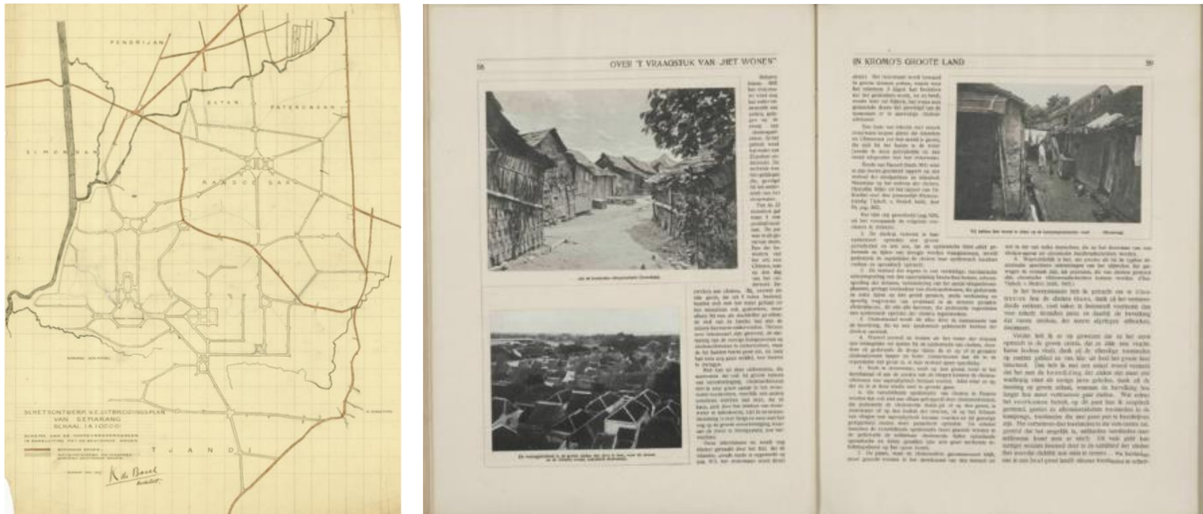
As with many other developments, housing in the Dutch East Indies was addressed somewhat later than in the colonial homeland. A lack of awareness (or a blind eye being turned) due to insufficient funds and instruments, along with incompatible political views all played into the delay. However, there were also similarities to the situation in the Netherlands at the time. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when liberal politics gradually made way for a more social political attitude, the start of the new century witnessed some ideological and administrative reforms that paved the way to address the dire housing situation in the Dutch East Indies [Fig. 3]. One such reform was the decentralisation of power from the central government in Batavia (now Jakarta) to local councils, a reform that resulted in a more direct form of government. This

resulted in more awareness and a greater sense of urgency to deal with local issues – housing being one, and by no means the easiest, of them.

Although local councils were eager to improve housing conditions, they were prevented from doing so because their mandate excluded the provision of housing. Another was the Indigenous Municipal Ordinance from 1906, which meant that any neighbourhood predominantly – though not exclusively – inhabited by Indonesians, i.e. *kampungs* or *desas*, fell under Indonesian authority, and consequently outside the jurisdiction of local councils.[4] The consequences of these limitations were far-reaching. Until the dualistic administrative system was abandoned in 1918, it actively hampered local councils attempts to address the housing issue, whether within or outside kampungs.

Another significant drawback from the local councils' point of view was the absence of a general legal framework that stimulated and steered the housing issue. While the Netherlands Housing Act demanded and even supported local councillors and architects in addressing this issue, their Dutch East Indies counterparts were left without anything of the sort. Arguments to undo this disparity in the colony by creating a Dutch East Indies Housing Act didn't persuade the in Batavia. Although the issue was investigated, and a draft of a national Housing Act was presented in 1916, the central government did not consider it to be in alignment with the concept of a decentralised government.

Another important political consideration was that any ministry responsible for the implementation of such an act, lacked the means and the expertise to implement the acts directions – and thus would make the Indisch government look weak. Above all though, the colonial government anticipated that the demolition of substandard houses, one of the most powerful tools of the Dutch Housing Act, would worsen rather than improve the housing situation in the colony. For while many pre-existing houses were of substandard quality, it was still better to live in a bad house than in no house at all. Because the government was already unable to keep up with the demand for houses, demolishing houses without replacing them would only increase the housing shortage, complicating the housing issue even more.[5]



[Fig. 3] To advance the housing situation in Semarang, W.T. de Vogel and H.F. Tillema purchased land to the south of Semarang. On his own accord, De Vogel subsequently invited Dutch architect K.P.C. de Bazel to sketch an urban expansion plan for the area (left). De Bazel's plan was not executed. Tillema self-published the book series *Kromoblanda. Over het vraagstuk van "het Wonen" in Kromo's groote land* between1915 and 1922 about housing conditions in the Dutch East (right).[6]

Kampungs

Although kampungs traditionally were organically grown settlements inhabited by Indonesians, it's important to keep in mind that kampungs weren't exclusively inhabited by Indonesians. Dutch East Indies administrators predominantly used the term 'kampung' to distinguish Indonesian neighbourhoods from European, Chinese and Arab neighbourhoods. Regarding kampungs it's relevant to note that they were also inhabited by less affluent Europeans, Indo-Europeans and other ethnic groups. As far a house ownership in kampungs was concerned, it's relevant to note that residents rented as well as owned the house they lived in. The situation in kampungs during the colonial era was, in other words, ethnically and socioeconomically more complex and nuanced than often perceived.[7]

NV Volkshuisvesting

Because low-income housing didn't yield a high enough return on investment, its execution in the Dutch East Indies was left almost entirely to the government. Appeals to commercial organisations to get involved fell on deaf ears. To counter this problem and bypass the councils' restrictions, commercial construction companies a.k.a. Public Housing Ltd. (*N.V. Volkshuisvesting*) were created in the 1920s. These Public Housing Companies were joint ventures in which national and local governments respectively owned 75 and 25 per cent of the shares.[8] In addition to building low-income housing, they were also expected to formulate building criteria for

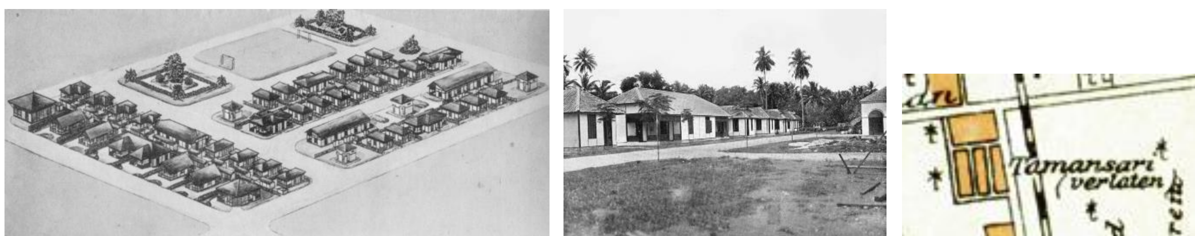
houses built and subsidised by the government and to mediate between the organisations involved in their construction. As the funds allocated to low-income housing remained limited, it was no surprise that the contribution of the commercial NVs towards solving the housing issue remained minimal.

Three Dutch East Indies low-income housing projects

Batavia

While the Batavia local council failed at its first attempt in 1906 to improve living conditions in some of its kampungs, for all the above reasons, it remained undeterred. In 1913, rather than improving existing conditions, the council embarked on a different course: the construction of Taman Sari, a completely new kampung situated just off one of Batavia's main arteries [Fig. 4].

Conceived as a model kampung, Taman Sari aimed to set a standard and example for future low-cost housing projects for Indonesians. Taman Sari met all the requirements deemed necessary from the council's European perspective: a strategic location, sound construction, various housing types with corresponding rental charges, and public facilities like communal baths, open spaces, and small shops. Unfortunately, the council's aspirations bore no relation to everyday reality. Presumably because the spatial arrangements of the various housing types (situated according to size and price rather than according to the social position of its occupants) and the layout of the houses (efficient but, for example, lacking a dedicated room to receive and entertain guests) didn't observe local social hierarchy and customs, Indonesian residents were reluctant and refused to relocate. Only a few years after it was built, kampung Taman Sari was deserted and only a name on a map.



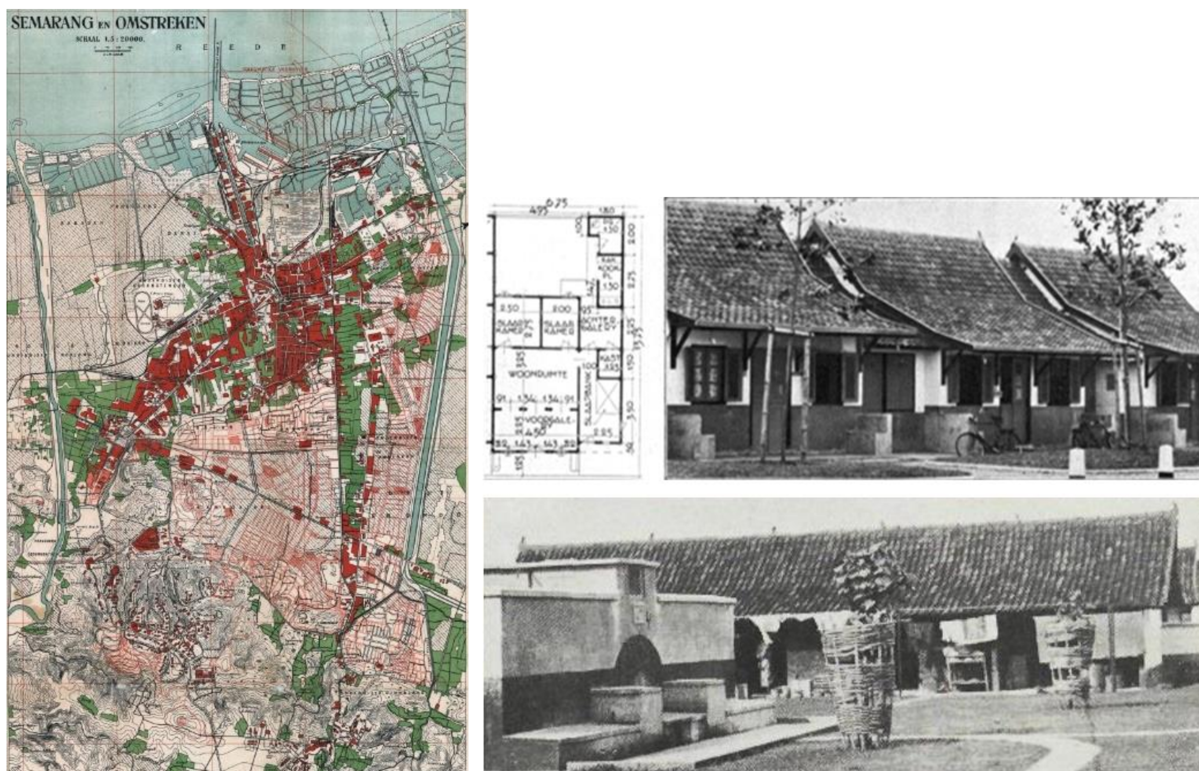
[Fig. 4] Kampung Taman Sari in Batavia was built in 1913 but was not very successful. The addition of the word 'verlaten' on a map of Batavia from 1919 confirms the settlement's complete desertion within a few years of its construction.[9]

Semarang

Considerably more successful were the kampungs initiated by the Semarang government between 1915 and 1925. These kampungs were an integral part of an extensive municipal expansion plan and situated on terrain that either fully exploited the irregular geographical conditions of that terrain by creating a scenic townscape, or on flat plains that allowed for a systematic street pattern with generous common open spaces [Fig. 5].

The kampungs were built for low to low-middle income residents.[10] In the least expensive kampungs, the houses comprised a simple floor-plan. For a large part, they were built with locally sourced natural building material. Because many of these houses lacked private bathrooms, communal bathing and washing facilities were provided. The more affluent kampungs were furnished with *kleinwoningen*: 'small houses' that featured brick walls, clay roof tiles, designated rooms (living room, bedroom, kitchen, etc.) and often, though not always, a private bathroom.

Because the houses and the overall design of the kampungs took local customs into account, they were much sought after from the start. As such, the kampungs in Semarang demonstrated that good and appropriate public housing could be achieved if housing was not merely approached in a technocratic and socioeconomic manner.



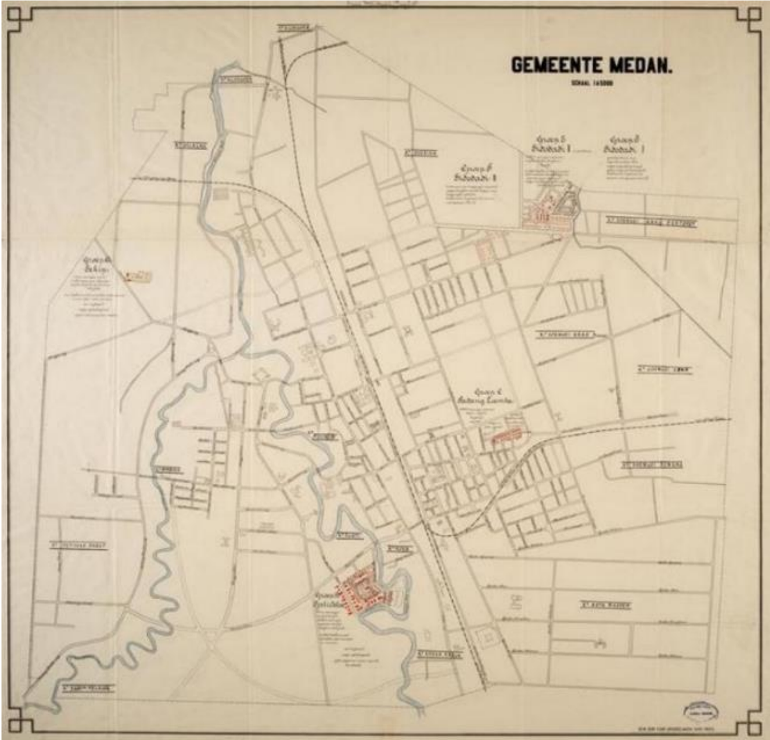
[Fig. 5] The 1919 map of Semarang shows the revised expansion plan in red. It included several kampungs, including Mlaten. Mlaten was designed by T.H. Karsten and developed by NV Volkshuisvesting Semarang (Semarang Housing Ltd). The southern section of the neighbourhood was reserved for 'small houses' for more affluent kampung dwellers (top right). Although many houses were equipped with a private loo, communal loos and bathing facilities were also provided houses without this facility (bottom right).[11]

Medan

In Medan, the construction of four new kampungs in the early 1920s was equally successful (Fig. 6). Medan's council took its cue from the approach adopted in Semarang, but also introduced something new: the involvement of residents in the design and the construction of their new dwellings.[12]

Because this participatory approach was new, the first kampung was devised as a pilot study. The aim was, on the one hand, to understand residents, customs and desires and, on the other, to explore what was financially, legally and socially viable. To test the grounds, the council built four permanent and seventeen semipermanent houses in Sekip, an area northeast of the existing town centre.[13] The of the pilot were beyond the council's expectations. They not only showed the residents were very happy with their houses, but also that permanent brick houses, although initially the council's preferred option and expensive, were not what the residents' preferred choice.[14] Following the findings of the trial, the council subsequently completed kampung Sekip by constructing another 19 semipermanent houses, 2 communal bathing facilities, 15 communal kitchens and 1 shop.

In the wake of kampung Sekip's success, the council successively developed kampungs Djati Oeloe, Sidodadi I, Padang Loemba and Sidodadi II. In Sidodadi I, the council took the participatory experiment one step further by asking future residents whether they preferred moving into a house provided by the local council or rather build their own. As the response was overwhelmingly in favour of self-build, the council agreed to provide financial support for the purchase and transportation of the necessary building materials. And although the houses, according to local supervisors, left a lot to be desired in terms of aesthetics, construction and maintenance, something else was deemed even more important: the sense of fulfilment and pride the project engendered in the residents and was expressed by the name the residents gave to their kampung: 'Sidodadi' – 'we did it'.



[Fig. 6] Between 1922 and 1925, Medan's local council built four new kampungs on the outskirts of the town centre: Sekip (northwest), Djati Oeloe (southwest), Sidodadi (northeast) and Padang Loemba (southeast) (left). The majority of the houses were simple, semi-permanent, self-built properties for low-income residents (top right). Kampung Djati Oeloe also included several modest but slightly more expensive European-style houses with brick walls and fired roof tiles (bottom right).[15]

Housing in the colony

Despite the many good intentions, efforts and initiatives to improve the housing situation in the Dutch East Indies, supply never caught up with the vast and unrelenting demand. As a result, the housing issue, and notably that affecting low-income groups, was never truly resolved.

As for the design of the houses: although their appearance was a concern, their architecture or style wasn't considered of the utmost importance. If houses met elementary requirements regarding health, safety, culture and funding, much was gained already. Not because their designers didn't care, but because the means and the expertise were tight and highly deficient in relation to the task ahead.

Because of these restrictions, low-income housing projects in the Dutch East Indies are rarely architecture and planning showcases. Unlike the Netherlands, where a considerable proportion of public and social housing complexes continue to be hailed for their innovative and ground-breaking architectural and planning qualities, those in the Dutch East Indies are architecturally generally very modest. Behind these designs though, lurk fascinating and multidimensional histories. And for those appreciative of these histories, Dutch East Indies kampungs and their houses are no less special than their Dutch counterparts.

One aspect of these histories worth mentioning is the steep learning curve noticeable in local and national administrators as well as in architects. Confronted with failures such as the Taman Sari housing project in Batavia, they wasted no time in turning to an approach better suited to the Dutch East Indies rather than persist with one rooted in Dutch cultural values and design principles. Despite all good intentions, failures like kampung Taman Sari demonstrated the need for a less technocratic approach, even if this approach came from the best of intentions. What was needed instead, was an open approach with a keen eye for local cultural requirements.

As administrators and architects in the Dutch East Indies developed greater familiarity with local circumstances, their approach changed accordingly. The initial top-down and rather patronizing process they copied from colleagues in the Netherlands gradually made way for a process that considered, incorporated and reflected locally specific conditions and customs.

In acknowledging low-income housing in the colony benefited from an approach that was sympathetic rather than negligent to local issues, the administrators and architects demonstrated

three things. Firstly, the circumstances in the colony differed from those in the metropole. Secondly, that because of these differences, it was necessary to adjust procedures and approaches if one were to meet set objectives, meaning to improve the housing issue. Thirdly, that a collaborative approach was more effective than a directive approach. As such, the housing issue is an interesting aspect of colonialism. It shows that colonial administrators and architects were neither all-knowledgeable nor all-powerful and that keeping an open eye and mind towards local circumstances was in the best interest of all parties involved.

Notes

[1] Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Inv. No. 5293FO000578; Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Inv. No. TM-10017352.

[2] D.J.A. Westerveld, 'Woningtoestanden onder de Javaansche bevolking te Semarang', *Gemeenteblad* Vol. 8, No. 6, 1914, 335-390, 336.

[3] Stadsarchief Rotterdam, Inv. Nos IX-3141-01, 4202 1978-3390; Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Inv. Nos ANWE00361000045, OSIM00008000789.

[4] Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad. Stedenbouw in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië (1905-1950)*, 2008, 41-42.

[5] D. de Iongh, 'Het Woningvraagstuk', *Locale Belangen Mededeeling* Vol. 5 No. 26, 1918, pp. 1-26; Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad. Stedenbouw in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië (1905-1950)*, 2008, pp. 66-67; Letter dd. 16-7-1917 No. 552/Z from the Advisor for the Decentralisation to the Governor-General (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Archive Algemeene Secretarie BGS 17-10-1918 2712); Letter dd. 15-3-1907 No 698 from the First Government Secretary to the Local Council of Batavia & Letter dd. 20-8-1907 No. 1060/5 from the Governor-General to the Ministry of Colonies (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Archive Binnenlandsch Bestuur, Inv. No. 1691).

[6] Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, Archive K.P.C. de Bazel, Inv. No. BAZE-1158; H.F. Tillema, *Kromoblanda. Over het vraagstuk van "het Wonen" in Kromo's groote land*, 1915-1922, Vol. 3, 58-59.

[7] Freek Colombijn gives four arguments for the (perceived) indigenous nature of kampungs: 'the association of poor living conditions with indigenousness; the actual ethnic composition of the kampongs; the equation of 'indigenous dwelling' with 'kampong dwelling'; and town planning and zoning based on racial segregation'. Colombijn convincingly argues it's more accurate to think of kampungs as lower-class neighbourhoods. In so doing, Colombijn equally convincingly challenges Ann Laura Stoler's argument about the need for European colonials 'to keep up middle-class appearances'. Freek Colombijn, *Under construction: The politics of urban space and housing during the decolonization of Indonesia, 1930-1960,* 2010, 117-123, 368-369; Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad. Stedenbouw in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië (1905-1950)*, 2008, pp. 190-191, 195; *Toelichting op de Stadsvormingsordonnantie Stadsgemeenten Java*, 1938.

[8] 'N.V.'s volkshuisvesting. Een financieele reorganisatie', *Locale Belangen* Vol. 23, No. 7, 1936, 103; L.J.M. Feber, *Nota betreffende het vraagstuk der Volkshuisvesting in Nederlandsch-Indië*, 1927, p. 115 (Nationaal Archief, The Hague, Archive Ministerie van Koloniën 2.10.36.04, Inv. No. 2933); Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad. Stedenbouw in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië (1905-1950)*, 2008, p. 72; H. Westbroek, 'Exploitatie en bebouwing van het land Mlaten Semarang', *Locale Techniek* Vol. 1, No. 1-2, 1932, 10-21.

[9] H.F. Tillema, *Kromoblanda. Over het vraagstuk van "het Wonen" in Kromo's groote land*, 1915-1922, Vol. 5, 874; 'Beknopt overzicht van verrichtingen op hygiënisch gebied in de jaren 1910 tot

en met 1926', *Publicaties der gemeente Batavia* Vol. 1, No. 7, 1927; Leiden University Libraries, Leiden, Inv. No. KIT 03815-A.

[10] Semarang's 1916 expansion plan was designed by architect H.T. Karsten and Semarang's head of Building and Housing, A. Plate. The plan partially covered the area purchased by De Vogel and Tillema. Karsten and Plate's design fundamentally revised the idea that ten years earlier drove De Vogel and Tillema to purchase the area. Instead of situating lost-cost housing on the hills, the 1916 plan located kampungs i.e. low-cost housing at the foot of the hills while situating high end housing on the hills. This fundamental adjustment was prompted by considerations about the cost of transportation between the hills and Semarang's existing town centre. Because the hills prevented the construction of trams, busses would be the only means of public transport to and from the hills. But because busses had a smaller capacity than trams, and were thus more expensive, it was economically untenable to accommodate low-income groups in the hills. The 1916 expansion plan was revised in 1919. The revision concerned the addition of an extensive residential area east of the original expansion plan.Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad. Stedenbouw in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië (1905-1950)*, 2008, 47.

[11] H. Westbroek, 'Exploitatie en bebouwing van het land Mlaten Semarang', *Locale Techniek* Vol. 1, No. 1-2, 1932, 10-21; Leiden University Libraries, Inv. No. Missing.

[12] See Kamil Muhammad's chapter in this book, ''It's like colonialism never ended': A kampung negotiating its space in Jakarta's Kota Tua'. In this article, Muhammad argues that, for the construction of kampung Susun Kunir in Jakarta in 2022, the municipal government applied a similar approach as the Medan municipality in the 1920s.

[13] J. Hogervorst, *De volkshuisvesting te Medan*, 1927, pp. 3-5; H. Wakker, 'Nota over het voorstel tot het bouwen van Gemeentewoningen', *Gemeenteblad Medan* No. 319, 1920, 22-27, 29 (Arsip National Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Archive Algemeene Secretarie, Inv. No. Bogor 6-3-1924 562).

[14] Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, *Ontwerpen aan de stad. Stedenbouw in Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië (1905-1950)*, 2008, p. 78; H. Wakker, 'Nota over het voorstel tot het bouwen van Gemeentewoningen', *Gemeenteblad Medan* Vol. 3, No. 319, 1920, 22-27, 24 (Arsip National Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Archive Algemeene Secretarie, Inv. No. Bogor 6-3-1924 562).

[15] J. Hogervorst, *De volkshuisvesting te Medan*, 1925, s.p.; Leiden University Libraries, Leiden, Inv. No. KK 140-06-03.