

## SOEJOEDI AND ARCHITECTURE IN MODERN INDONESIA: A Critical Post-Colonial Study

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### **Abstract**

*Post-Colonial buildings characterize architecture of modern Indonesia. How such buildings are distinguished from the colonial ones. As one of first generations of modern architect in the archipelago, Soejoedi (1928 -1981) is considerably an important figure who tries to deal with the liberation of architecture in Indonesia from Dutch colonial traces. This study is to disclose his works and their relationship in the context of modern culture and development. Despite his trainings in Western Europe, this essay argues that Soejoedi Wirjoatmodjo was an original thinker and designer with a strong conviction that architecture is a sign of presence and contemporary awareness of current circumstances with the deeply rooted spirit of locality.*

**Keywords:** Modernity; architecture; Soejoedi; culture; Indonesia.

### **MODERNITY AND ARCHITECTURE IN INDONESIA**

Since 1960-s Southeast Asia areas and Pacific rims have been experiencing a dramatic change of architectural scenes that challenge the Western hegemony with regionalism, and nationalism. The emancipation of non-Western cultures is one of the most globally movements of architecture (Tzonis & Giannisi 2004: 13). The movement has been obvious in Southeast Asia as an integrated part of the search for national identity and nation building (See also Abel 2000, Kusno 2000).

The archipelago of Indonesia has been well known by historians and cultural anthropologists as a land and people with a long-standing building tradition for wet tropical climate made of bamboo and wood construction. Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Indic civilization had influenced on local culture with masonry construction. The development of Indic influence was obviously shown with the significant number of Hindu and Buddhist temples in Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Kalimantan. Architecturally speaking, the Indic civilization had transformed the landscape of some areas and regions in the Central Java, with monumental and magnificent buildings,- such as Candi Borobudur and Candi Prambanan. On the other hand, the carpentry and masonry had worked hand in hand in the construction of palace and residential buildings as a hybrid of construction between the woodwork and stonework.

Court architecture in various places such as in Yogyakarta and Surakarta shows how the fusion of construction has worked at their best. The arrival and colonization of European powers in the period between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century,-Portuguese, Dutch, and British Empire-, had enriched, elaborated, and improved local building construction with various designs, industrial building materials: steel and glass, and rational methods of erection and fabrication. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch colonial rule established numbers of technical schools and colleges that prepared and delivered skilled workers and professionals for modern building industry in East Indies.

The Holy Grail of modernity in the early Post-Colonial architecture in Indonesia is probably not about style and form. Rather, modernity is more about political resistance and struggle for national identity and pride. Historically, modern architecture in the former East Indies colony was undoubtedly featured, represented, and characterized by the buildings, orders, and institutions of

the Dutch colonialism. Even though the end of the Pacific War in 1945 was the turning point for a political transition from colonialism to a republican independent state, it was not the case for the architecture of the country; the image of towns and cities of Post Colonial Indonesia remained the same until the early of 1960 which was being dominated by the legacy of the Dutch modernity in the Far Eastern Colony since 1830-s as the compulsory cultivation system was implemented in Java and Sumatra (Fasseur & Elson 1992). Towns and cities as well as hinterlands were built and developed to support the export of commodities from the East Indies colony to the mother land, the Netherlands. Architecturally speaking, European like modern compounds in the middle of tropical forests would have attracted investors from the continental for their business in the Far Eastern archipelago.

However prior to the Pacific War, the presence of Westerners,-Portuguese, Dutch, and British-, in the tropical islands was a story of conquest and domination over the natives. The peak of the exploitative Dutch colonialism was through cultivation system of: sugar, coffee, tea and rubber between 1830 and 1870 that brought about the irony of development: the prosperity of the Netherland and the poverty of Javanese and Sumatran farmers for decades afterward. Humanists, socialists, and liberalists in the Netherlands and East Indies felt guilty and uneasy for such harsh Master-Slave relationship between the colonial and the colonized. The Speech from the Throne in 1901 and political pressures from the socialist group and left wing parties pushed the Dutch colonial rule in East Indies to put an end totally the cultivation system, and implement the Ethical Policy (see also Bloembergen and Jackson 2006: 224). The basic idea of this policy was nothing but the politics of culpability out of guilty feeling and shame.

Under the policy, the Dutch rule offered modern education for the children of the ruling class in their colonies in the 1900s. At the first glance, the idea of modernity came up against colonialism, as the spirit of liberation from inequality, discrimination, and injustice based on race, origin, beliefs, and ethnicity. Despite the real politics at those times spoke different tones and meanings on social justice and equal opportunity, the Ethical Policy did work for the privileges though it was for very small number compare to the whole native populations in East Indies. Nevertheless, the young generations of the elites were not blind and deaf for the fact that colonialism brought about latent poverty and social injustice among the indigenous populations. The forced cultivation system between 1830 and 1870 was obvious practice of exploitation by the Dutch colonial rule. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were debates in the Dutch Parliament concerning the welfare and health of people in the Dutch colonies. The pressure of the socialist and communist elements brought about an ethical policy and program in the Dutch Indies (See also Schmutzer 1977: 14). The very idea of modernity in terms of European liberalism and humanism inspired and encouraged the nationalist movement for the preparation of liberation. They understood modernity as the ideologically liberating drive of change and transformation against the domination of the Dutch over the indigenous people. For the people under the oppressive colonial regime, modern idea of universal humanism gave a hope and light for their struggle against any form of colonial domination and exploitation.

The contribution of modernity to the indigenous populations in the Dutch East Indies between 1901 and 1942 was obvious about the awareness of national identity and civil rights; all these were made possible through the literacy program of the Ethical Policy. The modern educated young nationalists were able to learn and discuss the European ideas on French and Bolshevik Revolution, Marxism and Socialism. Based on their readings on Western history of ideas, young educated natives became aware of the fact that modernity was the necessary way for radical change and rational transformation of society and state that included a national movement and revolutionary struggle. It is unsurprisingly to understand why most native educated nationalists in East Indies embraced modernity in alignment with the socialist, communist, and liberal movements. For the conservative Dutch party, of course, such movements were nothing but extremist and terrorist activities.

The liberal political climate in the Netherlands in 1900-s gave the room for the left-wing parties to grow in East Indies. For the leftists, modernity was about the solidarity of working class

struggle with the spirit of socialism and universal humanism for the better world. They shared with the liberation movements the idea of class struggle and concerned on the welfare, education, housing, and health of the indigenous people. Accordingly, the natives should have had their right and voice in the politics; therefore the natives were needed to have representatives for their interest and power in the colonial parliament, *Volksraad*. In matter of fact, the participation of indigenous people in parliamentary legislation did not bring any significant progress and development for the native economy and their civil rights until the beginning of the Pacific War in 1942.

Unquestionably, during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945, the indigenous populations suffered more than before, they sunk into deep poverty. Even though modern buildings in most towns and cities of Java and Sumatra remained as they were before the war, the owners and users of them had changed. Despite the proclamation of independence by the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 that claimed a sovereign nation and state in the former territory of the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch power tried to reinstall their administration in their former colony. Clashes and confrontations with the Republican supporters and international pressure forced the Dutch empire to leave the country in 1949.

Establishing a new nation and state was not an over night process. The newly proclaimed Republic of Indonesia was politically in struggle from 1945 to 1960-s for its nation-state establishment. Ideologically speaking, the newly constructed nation needed a culturally unifying identity for its diverse reality. The main figure of Indonesia at those periods was Sukarno who had a conviction that architecture was not only an embodiment of contemporary spirit, but also a political means and representation (See also Kusno 2000: 49, Mrazek 2002: 61). Indeed, modernity in Indonesian architecture had been indivisible from such awareness and movement in dealing with a nation building and newly emerging modern society of Indonesia.

Modernism from Western Europe and North America in early of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been inspiring and motivating youths of Independent Movement (*Pergerakan Kemerdekaan*) in Dutch Indies for its activism for equal opportunity, social justice, and liberation from domination (Kahin et al). Sukarno, Hatta, Sjahrir, and Tan Malaka did not belong to the first generation of Independence Movement, but that after the Youth Oath in 1928. Unlike the first generation, Sukarno's generation understood modernity as political tool for establishing and confirming the newly independent nation and state of Indonesia. For the first generation of Independence's Movement, such as Soetomo, Tjokroaminoto, and Wahidin Sudirohusodo, modernity was more about ideologically encouraging spirit for independence and self-determination; they adopted and implemented modernity for educating young Indonesian generation with patriotic awareness and social solidarity among the natives.

For the first indigenous generations of Dutch schooling system, modernity was understood and experienced as acculturation of formal education based on European Dutch literacy and civilization. The native response to such Europeanization of the Javanese culture came from Soewardi Soerjaningrat or Ki Hadjar Dewantara from Yogyakarta. He responded this Dutch colonialism through educational system by establishing a Javanese elementary school system in 1922, known as Taman Siswa (Garden of Students). The Javanese way against colonialism was subtly indirect but intentional and powerful in terms of self-determination.

Prior to the Pacific War in 1942 -1945, the architectural scenes of the towns and cities in the Dutch Indies were characterized by modern buildings. The American Prairie School of Frank Lloyd Wright, the German *Werkbund* and *Bauhaus* as well as the Dutch school of *De Stijl* found their echoes and traces of influence in Batavia, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, Medan, Yogyakarta and Surakarta. The last two towns were well known as centres of the Javanese culture and tradition. The Dutch practicing architects in the Far Eastern Colony were heavily criticized for being ignorant and arrogant in dealing with local building culture and tradition. One of the criticism came from the renown Dutch modern architect, Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856-1934).

As a former student of Gottfried Semper, Berlage concerned the tectonic relationship between material and construction. Accordingly, modernity in the context of the use of building materials based on their truthful and appropriate relation to the system of structure and its intrinsic properties. Berlage visited the Dutch East Indies in 1924 and gave critical comments on a bluntly imported European architecture in a tropical country. Indeed, prior to Berlage's visit, East Indies as a sociocultural entity was likely not discovered as a reality of architectural theme and context (See also Frijhof and Spies 2004: 89).

However, at least three Dutch practicing architects had been already demonstrated their sensibility for locality before the Berlage's visit: Thomas H Karsten, J. Gerber, and Maclaine Pont; their works had demonstrated a significant contribution of the Dutch architects to the architecture in East Indies. Gerber's Gedung Sate building, -built in 1924 in Bandung-, and Maclaine Pont's East and West Aula buildings, -built in 1925-6 in the campus of Institut Teknologi Bandung-, are considerably masterpieces of modern architecture in the tropical archipelago (See also Fletcher & Cruicksahank 1996: 1604). Prior to Soejoedi's enrolment as a student of Building Department of ITB in 1950, modern architecture in Bandung was flourishing with various features and traces of Art Deco, Bauhaus, and contextual ingenuity.



Figure 1: West Aula, Institut Teknologi Bandung (Source: Author).

### SOEJOEDI AND HIS ENCOUNTER WITH MODERNITY

Soejoedi was neither the first nor the second generation of Indonesian movement for independence. He was born in 1928; it was the year when the youths of most ethnic regions of Dutch Indies declared their oath, *-Soempah Pemoeda-*, that they are one nation, one language, and one country of Indonesia. However, the realization of the oath took 17 years that brought about the Republic of Indonesia as an independent country in the former Dutch East Indies. The times between the end of the Pacific War and 1959 were crucial moments for the existence and establishment of the young Republic of Indonesia either by external interventions or internal conflicts. As many in his generation, as a young man, Soejoedi joined Student Fighters of Brigade 17 in his hometown Surakarta for Indonesia's Independence against the comeback of the Dutch power from 1945 to 1949.

Despite the Dutch rule left the country in 1949, Dutch teachers still stayed and taught Dutch and native students in the colleges and schools. One year later, Soejoedi became a student of Building Department at the Technical College in Bandung in 1950. His passion and interest in design found its home in this school. From the quality of his works, Soejoedi was

nominated and won as a talented student scholarship from French government for a study in *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Paris in 1955. After a year, he did not feel comfortable to pursue his education in this institution for personal reason of homesick. His mentor in Bandung, Prof. van Rommondts arranged his further study at the Technical College of Delft, in the Netherland. Based on van Rommondts's recommendation, Soejoedi was able to continue his study at this institution. At the *Technische Hoogeschool Delft*, Soejoedi did not need to start from scratch. His subjects of study at the Technische Hoogeschool Bandung were acknowledged and accepted at equivalent level. During his study, he mostly spent his time for doing his design assignments. He had opportunities to encounter the works of several leading Dutch modern architects such as Jacob Bakema and Aldo van Eyck. However, he did not work his design thesis at this institution. Instead, he worked part time as draughtsman at a small firm, *Kraijvanger Architecten*, for the reconstruction of the city in Rotterdam.

However, Soejoedi had to leave Delft in 1957 without being able to pursue his degree in architecture. The political circumstances forced him to leave Delft and find somewhere else for the completion of his academic qualification in architectural engineering; then, he moved to Technical University of Berlin to pursue his qualification in the same year. He studied well with extraordinary marks for design subjects. He eventually graduated from TU Berlin in 1959 with a design thesis on Islamic boarding school and training center, *pesantren*, with the best marks. Meanwhile the political relationship between the Dutch and the Republic of Indonesia was on the rock that was the consequence of President Sukarno's policy for taking over all foreign companies by the state corporations. Sukarno believed that modernity needed a radical transformation and independence from foreign resources. Consequently, higher education institutions suffered the most because their teaching staffs were mostly the Dutch nationals. The country needed people like Soejoedi for qualified staffs in colleges and other institutions. Indeed, from early on in the school, Soejoedi was eager to engage in the higher education and training for native Indonesian generations.

In 1960, Soejoedi came back from Germany to Indonesia. He stayed and worked in Bandung as lecturer. After few months, he was promoted as the head of the department of architecture at the Institut Teknologi Bandung. During his tenure as academic staff and head of department, he laid the foundation of architectural training with an emphasis on the use and exploration of modern technology for building construction and material, especially concrete and steel structure. However, artistic approach to design was always his best interest in terms of method and pedagogy of design. Accordingly, form, function, and material are necessarily to be integrated as a geometrical and sculptural composition that works for specific purpose and context, a strong embedment to site and its surrounding setting.

According to his former students, the state of the art of building design for Soejoedi lies in the quality of its pure geometrical composition. In order to achieve this quality, designers need to improve and develop their intuitive skills in terms of learning by doing. Indeed, he realized all the time that architecture is not a pure work of art; it is a public and utilitarian endeavor with respect to aesthetic and human experience such as: safety, comfort, and health. In this regard, Soejoedi always tried to open the dialogue between reason and intuition; for him architecture is the field and playground for both human faculties in the search for something humanly useful and beautiful.

Soejoedi began his national career as a practicing architect in 1964; it was when he was called by the President Sukarno to be in charge as chief architect for national architectural projects in the capital city of Indonesia, Jakarta. For this call, he brought some colleagues and students from ITB to work with him in Jakarta. Prior to his departure to Jakarta for the large-scale projects, Soejoedi designed and built several buildings and family houses in Bandung between 1960 and 1964. As a nationalist person, Soejoedi took seriously the call of duty from the state for participating in the national design projects of Indonesia. He established his own firm, pt. Gubahlaras in 1969 with a vision of unveiling modern Indonesia through architectural endeavor.

He believed in architectural modernity as a tangible affirmation of Indonesian independence with its ingenuity. Thus, locality for him was not simply imitating and recalling traditional icons, forms, and styles. Rather than superficial eclecticism, Soejoedi tried to go beyond the formal system in the search for the spatial principles of Javanese spatial category: outside (*jaba*)-inside (*njero*), as well as the gradation of values from preliminary, *-purwa-*, intermediate, *-madya-*, and inner sanctum, *-utama/dalem-*.

He was undoubtedly one important figure of the Post-Colonial native architects from the former Dutch Colony of East Indian archipelago who could be considered as a proponent of modernist architects and designers. However, according to his notes on his design for the MPR/DPR complex circa from 1970, he believes that there is a strong relationship between architect's personality and his/her design (Sukada 2011: 44). The question leads this study to investigate the Soejoedi's case further into the sense of his originality, especially in dealing with the main streams of ideological movement of modernism.

### SOEJOEDI AS A PERSON

Friends and families know well Soejoedi as a thoughtful and quite person; he just talked to his friends and colleagues the necessary things or matters. He undoubtedly was also an artist and designer with fine sensibility of composition, proportion and scale, as well as a designer with imaginative power, a hard working individual, and a man of principle. However, he was a soft spoken and polite person with high faculty for listening and observing things that matter for architectural presence.

Friends and colleagues respect him without reserve. Based on all these qualities, Soejoedi was undoubtedly considered as a well-integrated person and original designer. Unsurprisingly, if his important mentor, Prof. van Rommondts chose him as his protégé and prospective successor for the head of Department of Architecture, at Institut Teknologi Bandung. In matter of fact, Soejoedi was not only a talented student, but also a strong intellectual leader in the field of architectural design. Even though he did not write any book on architecture, his message in his works is clear and lucid that architecture was part of his personality.

As a Javanese educated person, Soejoedi was well known among his friends and colleagues as an intelligent, sensible and quite person. Professionally, he was always a highly regarded person with self-discipline, hard-working, and considerate attitude. He was never complaining and blaming others or circumstances. Instead, he always worked out everything based on careful consideration and reflection. However, He also showed deep respect to others. For things he did not know or were doubtful he just passed them on in silence.

As a Javanese person, he was trained to be modest in dealing with materialism. Modernity of German Bauhaus school has something in common with Soejoedi's Javanese approach to architectural design. Accordingly, only the essentials deserve special treatments for representing and incorporating ideas and functions. The Javanese tradition values elegant, determined, subtle and fine manners in action, communication, expression, articulation, and interaction. Furthermore, sophisticated ideas and forms in a well-organized system belong to Javanese signs of maturity and establishment. For Soejoedi, modernity and Javanese culture stand hand-in-hand in the search for the essentials.

### SOEJOEDI AND POST-COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

One important project of modernity in Continental Europe and especially in Germany was to liberate architecture from the dominance of bourgeois social milieu; this was considerably an activist movement toward a modern society based on democracy and social justice. To what extent such a program became an inspiration and direction for Soejoedi? Until recently, the question of the relationship between European modernity and Soejoedi's position remains open. However, from his design works, modernity for Soejoedi is likely indispensable a means and vehicle of liberation from the traces of Colonialism; his architecture stands out from the works of modern Dutch architects such as Albers, Karsten, Maclaine Pont, and Schoemaker. One

important proof of this is his work for the Conference of the New Emerging Forces, -*Conefo*-, and his project for Duta Merlin in 1970. Many friends and former students, such as Humar and Han Awal, confirm Soejoedi's rational approach of modern design, but from beginning of his architectural study in ITB and TH Delft he was very passionate to integrate the locality of Indonesia in all his works. The way Soejoedi incorporates the locality is never at superficial level in terms of appearances, forms and styles. Rather, he adopts the local character of Javanese architecture at philosophical level that both, the Javanese tradition and modernity, value the essentials in terms of use and cost effectiveness.

The *Conefo* was built within the period between 1964 and 1983; Soejoedi incorporated President Sukarno's creed and call for the totality of independence from East communist and West democratic capitalist political world Blocks. In this role as the man in charge for the architecture of the New Emerging Forces of formerly colonized countries, Soejoedi proposed a modern complex with no recognizable traces of precedent buildings. The similar design approach was invoked for Duta Merlin Hotel project. The project was designed to replace the previous hotel of *Des Indes*, which was on the same location; the well-known Dutch architect, F.J.L. Ghijsel designed the hotel with an extraordinary adaptation of modern art-deco architecture in the tropical climate of Java. For Soejoedi, establishing a new architecture for a national pride was probably more important than maintaining an old building with pathetic roots and traces of colonialism of the past.

Soejoedi was, of course, not alone in establishing a new architecture for the newly emerging Republic of Indonesia; Fredrick Silaban was part of this undeclared movement. Silaban and Soejoedi were great architects with their own ways for the nation building of Indonesia. In contrast to the grandeur form and style of Silaban, -who designed the Istiqlal Mosque-, Soejoedi understands monumentality in terms of classical architecture with strong geometrical form and sophisticated proportion, composition, and juxtaposition; he likely attempted to push modernity to the edge of its possibility with a clear cut and abstract composition and less tolerant for ornamentations. However, patterns and textures play an important role in his façade design. His treatment for material was not simply for the sake of form and function. Rather, Soejoedi tried to explore the relationship of design between them, -material and function as well as material and form-, by revealing the possibilities of temporal connection between material and light through patterns and texture. His designs for ASEAN secretariat, Ministry of Transportation, Forestry and Agriculture complex show these explorations. Furthermore, his intention is to manage massive areas and surfaces by breaking them into human scale elements.

Moreover, in his works, Soejoedi was very careful and diligent to deal with the site and location. The spot of his building was considered by him as the stage and platform that provides him with an effective display for his architectural message: liberation from colonial elements and move toward a new era. As any person in his generation, the existence and Indonesia as a nation and state was not simply a matter of political independence from the Colonialism. Rather, he and his generation were fully aware of the necessity for the proof that Indonesia was able to stand and sit together with other nations on equal and respectable position. As an architect, Soejoedi conceived the nation building of Indonesia was a call of consecrated duty. For him, architecture was more than just a public art; it is an embodiment of the spirit of his nation and state; all this was based on strong conviction in universal humanity and the spirit of contemporariness.

In many cases, his public buildings, -such as ASEAN Secretariat Building, Department of Agriculture complex, Department of Forestry Tower, and the Republic of Indonesia's Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, stand elegantly establishing landmarks and iconic statures. However, the monumental quality of his buildings is considerably sophisticated and subtle that is genuinely persistent without falling into gigantic and megalomaniac exposition. The monumental eminence of Soejoedi's works might be rightly said as elegant endeavors that show a strong sense of spirituality and ingenuity. How can his buildings iconic and monumental if they are not the outcome of original ideas? Heuristically comparing and interpreting his works could have diminished the nature of his works as part of his personality and originality.



Figure 2: Secretariat of Association of South East Asian countries, Jakarta Indonesia (Source: courtesy pt. Gubahlaras).



Figure 3: Former Conefo Complex, now DPR/MPR/DPD (Source: courtesy of pt Gubahlaras).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Contemporary architecture in Indonesia is indebted to the works of Soejoedi Wirjomatmodjo. One important thing of this indebtedness is his architectural legacy of struggle for a nation state with character and integrity. Modernity in this sense becomes clear and simple that it is not about architectural style and fashion. Rather, modernity in Soejoedi's architecture is a statement and engagement for being aware of the contemporary problems, challenges, and opportunities of the modern world. In dealing with its specific circumstances, architecture for Soejoedi is necessarily

responsive in terms of ready for delivering excellent designs. Accordingly, form, function, material, and cost can be managed together to bring about the healthy, safe, and attractive built environment.

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