

Dutch colonial architecture and town planning  
(Research, preservation and present use)

I The 17th century

The newly formed Republic of the Seven United Provinces was the base from which trading posts were founded in what are now 15 different countries in Asia, Africa and America. Today, there are still numerous tangible reminders of this colonial background in the form of street patterns and buildings. There are also names, such as New Zealand and Cape Horn, to evidence the fact that Dutch seamen filled in plenty of other blank spots on the world map.

The old centres of huge conurbations such as New York, Recife, Cape Town and Jakarta still retain the structures of the 17th-century settlements known as Nieuw Amsterdam, Mauritsstad, Kaapstad and Batavia. The last mentioned of these cities was the first to be founded, in 1619. It grew rapidly to become the largest European town in Asia, and was referred to as the 'Queen of the East', although it was in fact the riches offered by the Moluccas, then called the Spice Islands, which led to the foundation of the United East India Company in 1602.

Towns like Willemstad (on Curaçao, founded in 1634) and Paramaribo (Surinam, 1667), on the other hand, both of which were under the dominion of the West India Company, grew at a much slower pace. Even today, they still illustrate the difference between the compact type of town, enclosed by water and walls, and the more expansive, open layout which had just one point at which there was a fort to defend it. Willemstad still provides a living picture of what New Amsterdam must have looked like in 1664-67, when it was captured by the British and renamed New York.

Malacca (Malaysia) and Colombo (Sri Lanka), by contrast, are not Dutch towns by origin. They were captured from the Portuguese, in 1641 and 1656 respectively, and it was not until they were rebuilt and extended that they acquired a distinctive Dutch character. Settlements were also captured from the Portuguese in the Gold Coast (now called Ghana), one example being Elmina, with its enormous St. George's Castle, which fell in 1637. Although the Dutch built new forts and adapted some of those already in existence, the only place where any sort of town building occurred was Elmina, and even there it was only on a very modest scale. The islands of Gorée (Senegal) and Mauritius (to the east of Madagascar) were both lost to the French, in 1677 and 1710 respectively. In 1654, the Dutch part of Brazil returned to Portuguese rule. However, before that happened, the painter Frans Post (1612-1680) had had time to produce a record of the area that is without parallel in the whole of the colonial world.

There were also a large number of trading posts founded along the Indian coast. In addition the Dutch had a settlement in Taiwan up to 1661. But the most extraordinary of all the smaller settlements was undoubtedly that on the island of Deshima near Nagasaki. For more than two hundred years, from 1652 until Japan was effectively opened up in 1856, Deshima formed the sole contact between the Western world and this most mysterious of countries. Attempts are now being made to re-create in Deshima the situation as it was during the time of the Dutch.

As for the towns, there did not exist any sort of standard plan for them. Nonetheless, they shared a number of common characteristics. In the first place, all layouts show one dominant direction which is accentuated, where possible, by one or more canals. Secondly, the street plans are, in contrast to Roman, Spanish colonial and modern American towns, not rigid, but follow the local topography. Lastly, the squares are usually fairly informal and the plots of land in the towns are often some 20 to 25 feet wide, which is narrower than in most other towns.

There was (or is) generally either a 'Herenstraat' or a 'Herengracht' ('Heer' is a patrician gentleman) running in the dominant direction of the town, and most towns also had a 'Prinsenstraat' or 'Prinsengracht' of slightly less grandeur. Although the 'Stadholders', the Princes of Orange who were the chief magistrates of the former Dutch republic, did not play a prominent role in the East and West India Companies, many forts were named after them: Orange, Nassau and William all figure on the list, for example. And so it also was that the island of Mauritius received its name as far back as in 1598. In settlements in the western hemisphere, there was frequently a 'Bredestraat' running between the town's residential area and the fort. In New York, it is a name that has survived as 'Broadway'.

With the exception of a number of forts on the three continents referred to, there are not many 17th-century buildings still standing. The most remarkable of those left is the Town Hall of Malacca, which was built before 1656. There are plans to have this building restored and converted into a museum. Surinam is where one can find the painstakingly preserved ruins of the oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere, built in Jodensavanne in 1685. The grounds contain an impressive cemetery.

Jakarta has its 'Portuguese Outer Church', a building with an extremely beautiful interior that was erected right at the end of the 17th century. Despite its name, it is a Protestant Church, and bears many similarities to Dutch churches of the same period. Another Indonesian remnant of the 17th century is the fort church of Fort Rotterdam in Ujung Pandang.

## 2 The 18th century

The 18th century saw a smaller number of new settlements, but a spreading of the influence established in the territories still in the possession of the Dutch. Although one or two new towns were built, such as Philipsburg on Saint Martin, it was rather a question of a great deal of building work going on in towns already in place. Fortunately, many important fruits of this labour have been preserved in towns all over the world. Most of these buildings are considered without reservation by the local authorities as being of great historical value, and some of them are listed as protected buildings. Today, many of the large houses built by the Dutch are in use as museums or offices, housing either government departments or private organizations.

Curacao, one of the islands of the Netherlands Antilles, is well known for its striking town and country houses built during this period. It is also the home of the splendid Mikve Israel synagogue, built in 1732 and now the oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere that is still in use. The Beth Chayim Jewish cemetery contains a remarkable collection of sculpted tombstones. On St. Eustatius, the fascinating ruins of the buildings erected during the island's golden age, which reached a peak at the time of the War of American Independence, have been preserved.

Most of the former Governor's Residence in Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam (now in use as the Presidential Residence), dates back to about 1770. The town also contains a number of magnificent, all-wooden 18th century houses. Fort New Amsterdam, an earthen structure erected in 1747, was restored during the sixties and converted into an open air museum, but has unfortunately now reverted to a state of neglect.

In Ghana, a number of forts were refurbished during this period, whilst in South Africa, a large number of handsome town and country houses - later to become one of the country's distinctive features - were built, in line with the trend seen on Curaçao.

The houses built in Asia (i.e. in Sri Lanka, Malacca and Indonesia) were frequently of relatively very large proportions. A number of cases are known in which houses were built to a width of 96 Amsterdam feet: 27 meters! The

former Town Hall of Batavia dates from 1705 and now houses a historical museum following its restoration. Some of the old warehouses of the United East India Company fulfil the same purpose today. Apart from a large number of forts, Sri Lanka also boasts of several 18th century Dutch churches still in use, an orphanage (restored to house a Dutch Period Museum) and a Dutch hospital.

Among the outstanding topographical draughtsmen whose work it was that left us with a detailed description of the local configurations, particular mention should be made of Johannes Rach (who died in 1783), who first stayed in South Africa before spending a long time working on Java.

### 3 The 19th and 20th centuries

After the end of the Napoleonic era, a wind of change swept through the Netherlands. The Republic became a Kingdom. The overseas settlements were no longer managed by the trading companies, but by the national government. Guyana, to the west of Surinam, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Malacca and the posts in India were all lost to the British. The settlements in the Gold Coast followed by treaty in 1871. What then remained as Dutch territories were Surinam (which became independent in 1975) and the Netherlands Antilles in the West, and Indonesia in the East (held until the Second World War). The Indonesian archipelago was welded together in the 19th century to form one large, amalgamated country comprising a myriad of different cultures.

Government buildings in the classical style sprang up in many places in both East and West (the recently restored theatre in Jakarta, built in around 1820, being a fine example), although that were generally much less 'grand' than those built in British-controlled territories. More distinctive, however, are the 19th-century churches strewn all over the world. Earlier than other 19th-century edifices, these churches and synagogues were regarded locally as buildings with a clear historical value worthy of preservation. There are two interesting extremes of styles: the austere, highly classical domed Dutch Reformed church in Jakarta (1839) and the spacious, airy neo-romanesque Roman Catholic in Paramaribo, dating back to 1883. Another remarkable building in the same town is the large wooden national hospital.

In the West, house-builders often tended to continue along the same paths that had been laid out in the 18th century, whilst the trend in the East was more one of adapting to local traditions: many houses were built with just a single storey and with wide, shady verandas. Building traditions there were, of course, often extremely rich and varied and became the subjects of growing academic interest.

Interest also began to grow on a serious scale in the Hindhu and Buddhist antiquities in Indonesia, the most important of which date back to the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries. As early as the beginning of the 20 century, Th. van Erp carried out an extremely, conscientious initial restoration of the Temple of Borobudur, working in accordance with principles that were stricter even than those applied in the Netherlands. Other temple restorations followed, based on the principle of anastylosis. In 1925, the magnificent country house of Reinier de Klerk, who was later to become Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies, was restored and turned into the home of the National Archives, a function which this 1760 building still fulfills for the Republic of Indonesia as the country later became. Even at that time, there was a National Antiquities Department in operation and in 1931 (nine years earlier than in the Netherlands!), a bill was enacted to preserve buildings of outstanding historical value. The act, still in force today, was primarily conceived with the purpose of saving indigenous antiquities, but it was also enforced to preserve important Dutch buildings from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Around 1920, Indonesia became the breeding ground for a number of daring versions on contemporary Dutch architectural and town planning themes. Although the developments taking place in the Netherlands were a focus of

international attention right from the very outset, the Indonesian parallels (which were in many cases more lavish) remained relatively unknown. Various architects and town planners in Indonesia expended a great deal of their energy on the salient elements of regional traditions, which were then still very much alive. This is a period which is now receiving much attention from researchers.

In the West, commissions were more modest and contemporary trends had less impact. Although the oil industry brought prosperity to Curaçao and Aruba in the period following 1920, the new-found wealth did not generate much exciting architecture (although there are several new residential areas near Willemstad on Curaçao which definitely deserve the epithet 'attractive'). After the Second World War and against the background of a burgeoning tourist industry, interest began to emerge in various forms of conservation. An active preservation society was founded on Curaçao in 1954, and the small island of St. Eustatius followed in 1974 with its own Historical Foundation. In Surinam, a great deal of restoration work was carried out during the period from 1960 to 1975 but, despite a large number of promising initiatives, no legal framework for preservation has ever come into being either on the Antilles or in Surinam.

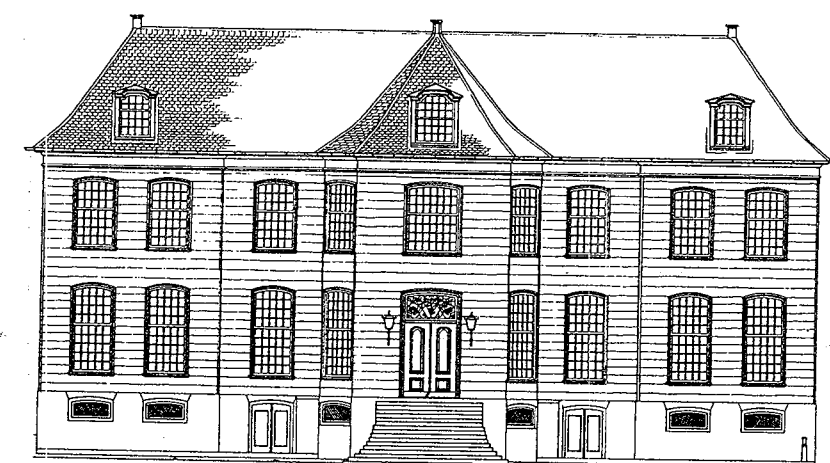
In general, despite wide divergences (Ghana, for example, is facing enormous financial difficulties at present), the level of care for town structures and historic buildings dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries is reasonable to good but, as far as the 19th and 20th centuries are concerned, research and preservation work are in many cases still in their infancy.

It goes without saying that a great deal has been written on these topics. However, this type of information is frequently difficult to get hold of outside the Netherlands and the area to which it relates. For this reason, it would seem more expedient to list below four bodies in the Netherlands which are able to provide this kind of information and are indeed regularly consulted for this purpose:

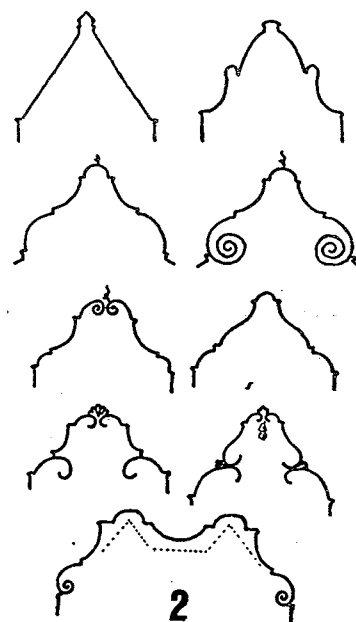
- 1 Het Algemeen Rijksarchief (The State Archives), Prins Willem Alexanderhof 20, 2595 BE The Hague.
  - 2 Stichting cultuurgeschiedenis van de Nederlanders Overzee (Foundation for the Cultural History of the Dutch Overseas), c/o Rijksmuseum, P.O. Box 50673, 1007 DD Amsterdam.
  - 3 Centre for the History of European Expansion, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden.
  - 4 Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg (State Department for the Preservation of Monuments and Historic Buildings), Broederplein 41, P.O. Box 1001, 3700 BA Zeist.
- N.B. The author may be contacted here or at 2.

It is of immense importance that, although the buildings in question are of colonial origin, the local people are prepared to regard them as being part and parcel of their own history and culture. And there is every reason for doing so. After all, if one compares 18th-century houses in Jakarta, Cape Town, Paramaribo and Willemstad, then what strikes one is not just the similarities, but particularly the great differences. Every historic building is in the first place a reflection of the country in which it stands!

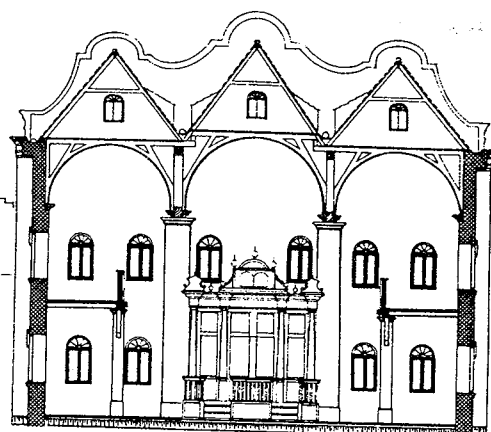
Professor dr. C.L. Temminck Groll



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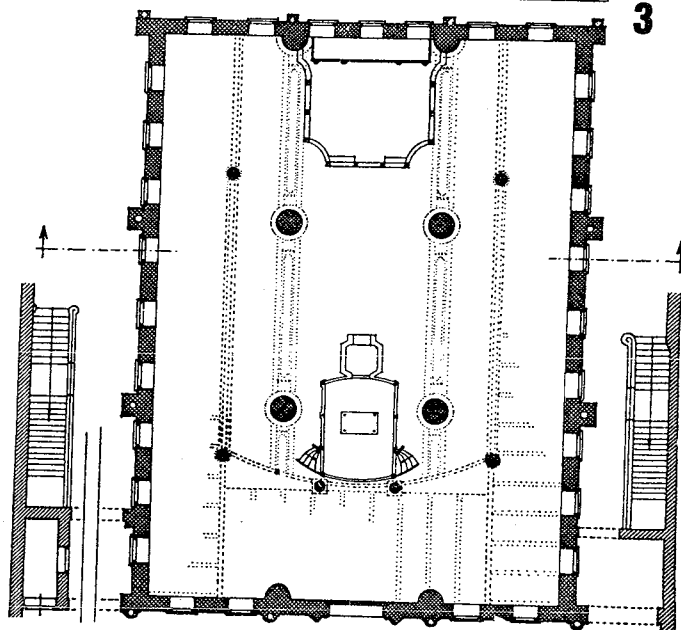
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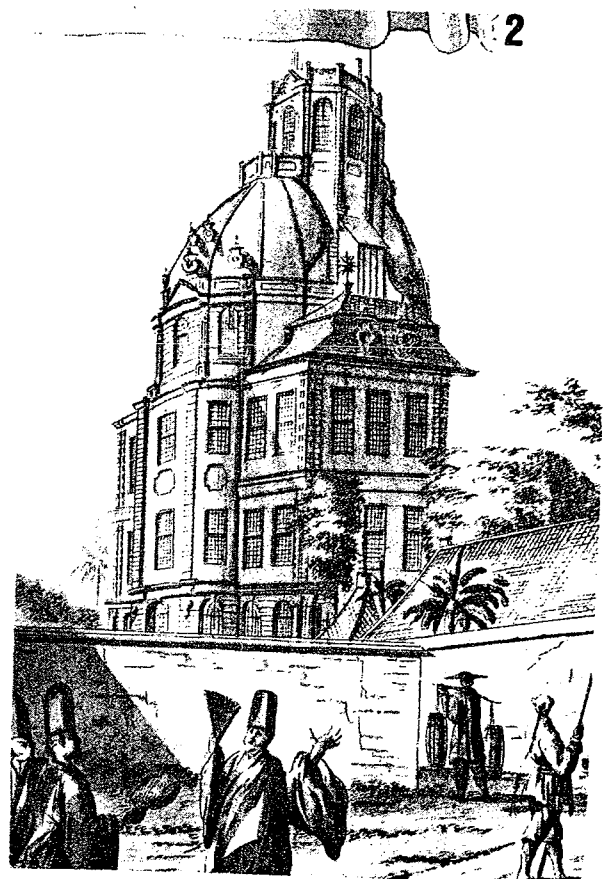
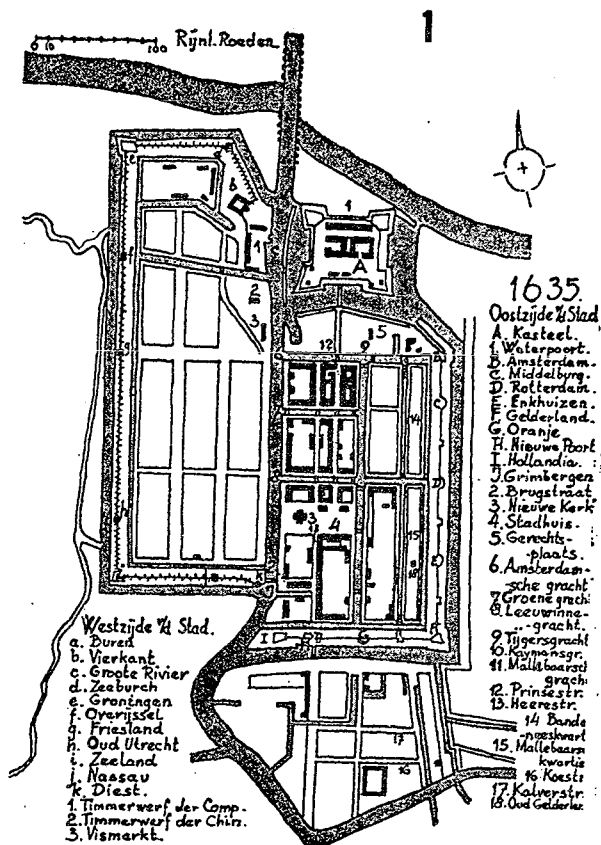


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### The West Indies

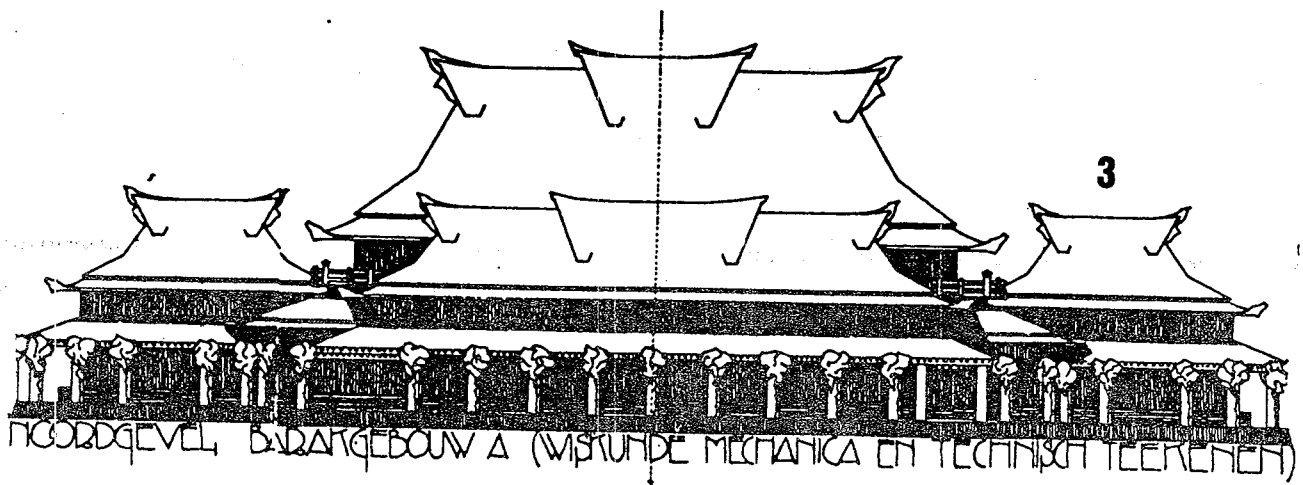
1. A monumental wooden house of 1774 in Paramaribo, Surinam, built for J. Nepveu; ministry of general affairs since the restoration of 1962, Garden façade and cross section.
2. Some typical Curaçao-gables, often comparable with those in South Africa.
3. The synagogue Mikve Israel of 1732 in Willemstad, Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles, the oldest one in use in the Western Hemisphere.





### Indonesia

1. Plan of the former Batavia, now Jakarta, as it was in 1635, 16 years after the foundation.
2. Drawing by Johannes Rach From ca 1710 of a very rich 18th. century house, owned by J.M. Mohr, theologian and astronomer.
3. Design by the architect H. Maclaine Pont for one of the main halls of Bandung Technological University, 1920. Still in use.



## DUTCH COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE AND TOWN PLANNING

In the 17th century, the Netherlands formed the hearth form which an inconceivably rampant fire of expansion spread to America, Africa and Asia. Many of today's huge population centres, such as New York, Cape Town and Jakarta, still bear witness to their origins in the form of the 17th-century Dutch street pattern of their inner centres. Willemstad on Curacao, which grew much less rapidly, still provides an example of what New Amsterdam must more or less have looked like at the time when its name was changed to New York! Among the buildings in former Dutch colonies which date from the same century are a number of forts, the oldest European town hall in Asia (to be found in Malacca) and the ruins of the oldest synagogue in the western hemisphere (in Surinam). There is extensive documentation on this period and, in the case of Brazil, the paintings of Frans Post constitute a document that is unique in the colonial world.

The 18th century left us with a wealth of interesting buildings all over the world: wooden buildings in Surinam; splendid town and country houses and the oldest synagogue (dating from 1732) in the western world still in use on Curacao; ruins on St. Eustatius; forts in Ghana; town and country houses in South Africa; churches, houses, a hospital, warehouses and much more in Sri Lanka, Malacca and Indonesia, including the town hall of what used to be known as Batavia and is now called Jakarta, which was built in 1705. As is the case with the 17th century, the documentary evidence on the 18th century contains something utterly unique: the topographical drawings of Johannes Rach (of South Africa and Indonesia).

The 19th century left us magnificent churches, houses and government buildings. It was in this century that a start was made in Indonesia with the study of antiquities and of the rich still practised local building traditions.

We then arrive at the beginning of the 20th century. This period saw the first large-scale restoration work in Indonesia, involving the most important of the ancient monuments, as well as the beginnings of a modern architecture (in which local traditions played a strong role) of outstanding quality. However, unlike the architecture of the Netherlands itself during that same period, this phase of colonial architecture never drew its well-deserved attention in international critical studies and journals.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### Architecture coloniale et urbanisme

Au XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, les Pays-Bas furent le foyer vivace d'une expansion irréprouvable vers l'Amérique, l'Afrique et l'Asie. Nombreuses sont les gigantesques agglomérations telles que New-York, le Cap et Djakarta que témoignent encore aujourd'hui de leurs origines dans l'urbanisme de leur centre ville, de caractère hollandais du XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle.

Willemstad-sur-Curaçao, que grandit de façon bien moins rapide, donne encore une idée du genre de ville que devait être New Amsterdam à l'époque où elle fut renommée New York!

Parmi les monuments du XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle que l'on trouve dans les anciennes colonies hollandaises, on compte un certain nombre de forts, le plus ancien hôtel de ville européen en Asie, sis à Malacca, et les ruines de la plus ancienne synagogue de l'hémisphère occidental, au Surinam. On possède une documentation solide sur cette période; pour ce qui concerne le Brésil, les tableaux de Frans Post constituent un document sans égal à propos du monde colonial.

Le XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle nous a légué un trésor de constructions dignes d'intérêt dans le monde entier: des bâtiments de bois au Surinam; de splendides hôtels particuliers et résidences à la campagne et la plus ancienne synagogue (datant de 1732) du monde occidental encore fréquentée de nos jours à Curaçao; des ruines à Saint-Eustache; des forts au Ghana; des hôtels particuliers et des résidences à la campagne en Afrique de Sud; des églises, des maisons, un hôpital, des entrepôts et beaucoup d'autres bâtiments au Sri Lanka, à Malacca et en Indonésie, entre autres l'Hôtel de Ville, bâti en 1705, de l'ancienne ville de Batavia, l'actuelle Djakarta. De même que pour le XVII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, le fond de documentation sur le XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle contient un ensemble tout-à-fait unique: ce sont les plans topographiques que fit Johannes Rach en Afrique du Sud et en Indonésie.

Le XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle nous a laissé des églises, des maisons et des bâtiments officiels magnifiques. C'est pendant cette période qu'un grand pas fut franchi en Indonésie grâce à l'étude des antiquités et celle des traditions de bâtiments indigènes, riches et toujours en vigueur.

Nous voici arrivés au début du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle: ce fut en Indonésie l'époque du premier chantier de restauration d'importance, qui concernait les monuments anciens les plus remarquables; ce fut également l'avènement d'une architecture contemporaine d'excellente facture, où la tradition locale joua un rôle essentiel. Néanmoins, à la différence de l'architecture de la Hollande métropolitaine, l'architecture coloniale de l'époque n'attira jamais l'attention qu'elle méritait dans les études critiques et les revues internationales.

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