



C.J. van Dullemen, ***Tropical Modernity: Life and Work of C.P. Wolff Schoemaker***

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Charles P. Wolff Schoemaker (1882-1949) ranks among the most important Dutch architects who radically modernised the urban landscape in colonial Indonesia. Arguably his most famous works are the Villa Isola, the Jaarbeurs Exhibition Building and the Grand Hotel Preanger, all in Bandung. After twenty years of intermittent research, art-historian C.J. van Dullemen has completed a book about this architect, enriched with hundreds of pictures, sketches and drawings. The first part of the book consists of a 152 page essay on the life and work of Wolff Schoemaker; the second part is a chronological overview of his designs.

Wolff Schoemaker, a Eurasian born in Indonesia who trained as an architect in the Netherlands, began his career as a military engineer in the Dutch East Indies and later became head of the Department of Public Works of Batavia. He and his brother, Richard Schoemaker, opened an architectural bureau in 1918. They closed the company in 1924 and Charles became a full professor of architecture at the Technische Hogeschool in Bandung. He continued to work as an independent free-lance architect and his best-known works stem from this period. As an artist he won commissions to create sculptures, drawings and paintings.

Wolff Schoemaker led a somewhat unusual life. He converted to Islam (but reverted to Catholicism on his deathbed) and kept a black panther and snakes in his house. He married five times: two of the marriages followed so quickly on each other that the first child of his fourth marriage was born before the last child of his third marriage. What eventually made him an outcast from the European community was his lasting friendship with Sukarno, a former student of his, even continuing after the Proclamation of Independence.

Wolff Schoemaker's first designs (1918-1920), built in reinforced concrete, were functionalist, modernist and quite European in character. These designs were influenced by his visit to the United States, unintentionally prolonged by the American entry into the First World War. In the subsequent period (1921-1924), Wolff Schoemaker added more indigenous ornamentation to his buildings. During these years he was engaged in a polemic with fellow architects Maclaine Pont and Karsten, who were attempting to use and develop vernacular architecture. Opposing this, Wolff Schoemaker wanted to preserve a Western construction as the core of his buildings with Asian decoration added

purely as embellishment. He claimed that 'Java does not have an architecture as we understand the term' (60). In a final phase (1924-1940), the Asian decorative elements disappeared, but the shape of the buildings incorporated horizontal and vertical lines and layered domes borrowed from Indian stupas. Wolff Schoemaker had learnt about these forms from his study of Javanese and Indian Hindu temples. The reason that, despite his clearly defined ideas, his buildings sometimes lack a distinct style is explained by his custom of taking the wishes of his clients very seriously.

The second part of the book lists the 62 works that can be attributed to him with certainty (although often drawn with the help of others), and 52 works that might have been designed by Wolff Schoemaker, but for which Van Dullemen did not find conclusive evidence. Van Dullemen reports every object, the city, the year of the design, the source of the information and the final status (design only, constructed and demolished, or constructed and still standing). The list shows that Wolff Schoemaker devoted most of his time to public buildings, including office buildings, churches and shops, but also a school, social club, mosque, cinema and the Bosscha Observatory in Lembang. The villas he drew were all big if not immense (their building costs surpassed those of the Jaarbeurs Exhibition Building in Bandung). Unlike some of his contemporary fellow architects, Wolff Schoemaker was not interested in public housing.

Van Dullemen has written a self-contained analysis of the architecture of Wolff Schoemaker, paying scant heed to the wider society and, for instance, completely ignoring the actions Wolff Schoemaker took as a member of the Bandung municipal council. This narrow focus is both the strength and major weakness of the book. The author deserves high praise for the way he has unearthed such an enormous amount of material. He has not only searched in the obvious general archives but also, for instance, in the archives of the Nederlands Architectuur Instituut in Rotterdam and the Hollandse Beton Maatschappij in Rijswijk. He has collected letters in private archives, interviewed three family members and a young neighbour of Wolff Schoemaker's in the period 1945-1949. Nevertheless, it is amazing what still remains unknown, for example whether Wolff Schoemaker was responsible for the unusual design of the Sukamiskin Prison in Bandung. The almost inevitable flipside of this meticulous search is some irrelevant details, such as a brief bibliography of D.W. Berretty, who commissioned Villa Isola, or the registration number of Cadet Willem Dudok in the Royal Military Academy (it is worth knowing though, that Wolff Schoemaker and Dudok were in the same company in Breda). The scientific value of the study is reduced by the absence of references in the text (perhaps in order to improve the readability).

Indonesian cities today suffer from a homogenisation of urban space. Examples of colonial architecture, or shared architecture as it sometimes euphemistically dubbed, can play an important role as landmarks that help to give the cities a sense of place. If this book were translated into Indonesian and published locally in a less luxurious format it could play a role in building respect and subsequently preserving the works of Wolff Schoemaker.

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