

Cool on the Hill

The former Dutch hill station of Bandung in Indonesia is an intriguing showcase of a unique colonial architecture genre termed 'Tropical Art Deco'

Yenni Kwok in Bandung

Once upon a time, in a colonial era not so long ago, hill station towns were an indispensable thing. They were where the Europeans who ventured far to the Far East would retreat to escape the intense tropical climate of the lowland cities and enjoy a way closer to home. The British in India had Darjeeling and Simla, the French in Indo China had Da Lat, and in the Dutch East Indies, as Indonesia was once known, the Dutch had Bandung.

It was to this colonial town that our train from Jakarta headed to, swerving gently among the mountain slopes. The coaches glided on the 120-year-old railway – remnants of a feat of Dutch engineering that defied gravity with its tracks and bridges perching high on the Preanger highlands of West Java. As far as our field of vision could see, there were spectacular views of soaring mountains and deep ravines, luscious green terraced paddyfields and cool sparkling river streams.

Our destination is Bandung, a hill city 180km south of the Indonesian capital. It is famed for many things from its beautiful maidens (its nickname 'the City of Flowers' is believed to be an attribute to the beauty of its women, rather than real blossoms) and gentle people to its refined Sundanese food and fresh mountain air.

It is also famous for the rich architectural heritage of the bygone colonial era. The Dutch may have left Indonesia six decades ago, but traces of their colonial legacy still abound in Bandung. Indeed, as soon as our train rolled into Bandung's main station, ending the two-and-half hour ride, we were immediately greeted by a fine example of the Dutch architecture. The train station is as old as the railway track and was also built by the colonial masters of then the Dutch East Indies.

While heritage buildings are hardly visible in larger Javanese cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya, there are still plenty colonial edifices in Bandung. A large number are Art Deco buildings from the 1920s and

1930s, but other designs such as neo-classical, neo-gothic and Indo-European, a locally adapted European design, also proliferate.

One of such buildings is the Grand Hotel Preanger. Its current look is due to the 1929 renovation by Java-born Dutch architect, Charles Prosper Wolff Schoemaker. Freshly returned from working at the offices of famed American architect Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park, Illinois, Schoemaker changed the old Indische Empire style of the hotel, concentrating on the Art Deco style that was in vogue at that time.

“One could see many Wrightian features and nuances of [Wright’s] Imperial Hotel in Tokyo,” says Frances B. Affandy, executive director of Bandung Heritage Society, which campaigns for the preservation of heritage buildings in Bandung.

Schoemaker, a lecturer of Bandoengsche Technische Hoogeschool (now the Bandung Institute of Technology or ITB), also employed one of his students as his draftsman. His name was Sukarno, the man destined to become the founding father and first president of Indonesia.

Despite a major expansion in 1988, which saw the addition of a 10-storey tower in the main building, the hotel still retains the original Art Deco elements and geometric decorations in its façade, lobby and lounge bar. A number of Art Deco rooms are also still available on the two wings of the hotel, which continue to be a hit especially among the Dutch guests. (An art-deco bar on the ground floor, however, has recently been turned into a faux English pub).

“The Dutch guests stayed here for a taste of the yesteryear,” says Asep Saepudin, the public relations manager of Grand Hotel Preanger. “Some people even came because their parents lived in Bandung or spent happy times in the hotel.”

The Dutch East Indies created the city of Bandung in 1810, as part of the Groote Postweg (Great Post Road) that stretched from Panarukan of eastern Java to Anyer of the west. Located 768-1,000 metres above sea level, this hilly town was blessed with the cool, temperate mountain climate, and soon became the urban centre for the Preangerplanters, who ran tea and quinine plantations in the surrounding highlands.

In its colonial heyday, Bandung was the weekend refuge for the homesick plantation owners and their families. The completion of a direct railway link between Bandung-Batavia (Jakarta) in 1884 spurred an explosion of

development. European residents eager to escape the stifling coastal climate of Batavia (now Jakarta) also flocked to Bandung on their days off, a time-honored tradition continued by the current residents of the capital.

In 1917, the colonial government planned to move the capital permanently from the sultry Batavia to a cooler place, sparking a further architectural boom. Dutch colonial administrators and businesses enlisted European architects and town planners to transform the city. It became “an open architectural laboratory”, sparking a boom of daring, innovative designs, be it Art Deco or other styles of the era.

In the golden decades of the 1920s-1930s, the city was known as “Parijs van Java”. Fashion shops with the latest Parisian mode, bakeries and cafes, lined the streets of Pedatiweg (now Jalan Braga) and Groote Postweg (Jalan Asia-Afrika). Elsewhere in the city, rich folks and retirees built holiday houses and retirement villas.

“There was a kind of spirited gaiety in the use of art-deco, not unlike in Miami Beach,” says Affandy. “People building holiday homes in Bandung did not stint on having fun with their vacation designs, while they probably lived in fairly sober designs in Batavia.”

One of the most prolific architects was Schoemaker. On Jalan Braga, his creations include Majestic cinema (now Asia-Afrika Culture Centre) and the neighbouring Societeit Concordia club house (currently Gedung Merdeka), while the neo-gothic, Art Deco Catholic Cathedral St Petrus stands on Jalan Merdeka. Cipaganti mosque (Jl. Cipaganti) and the Protestant Bethel church on Jl. Wastukencana exemplify his attempt to combine European and local styles.

Schoemaker’s masterpiece is Villa Isola on Jalan Dr Setiabudhi, built in 1933 as a residence of millionaire D.W. Beretty, later turned into a hotel and now used as the main offices of a university. This architectural jewel, considered by Affandy as “Indonesia’s greatest contribution to the world of art-deco”, boasts curvaceous shapes that integrate beautifully with the terraced garden landscape.

“I regard Schoemaker as the father of Bandung,” enthused Dadan Nugraha, secretary of the Bandung Heritage Society as we sat and admired the exquisite design of the villa. “Thanks to him, we have so many beautiful buildings.”

Equally prolific was Albert Frederick Aalbers. Born in Rotterdam, the Dutch architect moved to Bandung in 1928 to try his luck in the Dutch East Indies. The architect's signature style – streamlined deco on the outside and tropical deco inside – can be seen on Denis Bank (now Bank Jabar on Jalan Braga), and the nearby Savoy Homann Hotel. “Old style, I mean, oude stijl, very comfortable and gezellig,” a hotel staff once described Aalber's design. “We call it ‘Tropical Art Deco’.”

In his residential designs, Aalbers also adjusted his style to the demand of tropical climate, yet, he was not the only one. An eclectic collection of styles – Spanish Moor, Italian renaissance and Hindu temples – is the signature of J. Gerber's government house, completed in 1920. It is more popularly known as Gedung Sate (the ‘satay building’) because of its skewer-like antenna. The fabulous twin halls of the ITB, designed by Henri Maclaine Pont in 1920, were inspired by the traditional West Sumatran house.

Yet, what is the current state of affairs? While many heritage buildings are maintained well, many more have become victim to demolition, over-eager renovation and neglect. Many were knocked down to make ways for roads, shopping malls and offices. In the 1970s, there were an estimated 2,500 colonial-styled buildings; by the 1990s, the number had shrunk to just 206. Scores of buildings on Jalan Asia-Afrika, Jalan Tamblong and Jalan Braga have been left empty and neglected for years.

While the Savoy Homann Hotel still maintains its Art Deco structure and geometric ornaments, and has preserved a few vintage rooms, a thoughtless renovation programme by its new owners – the Bidakara Group, part of Bank Indonesia – have spoiled much of the interior. Some of the original fixtures, old stained glass and gardens have been stripped from the property. “Some of the guests found it spooky to be surrounded by the old furniture,” says a member of staff when asked why they had disposed of the antique furnishing.

“They indiscriminately made changes to the original fabric,” regrets Affandy, who was the general manager of Savoy Homann, once a model of heritage preservation. “They had their own idea and no understanding of the heritage values in the property.”

Despite the uphill struggle of Affandy and her dedicated colleagues at the Bandung Heritage Society, they managed to rescue a number of outstanding buildings from the sledgehammer, including the old Denis Bank, convincing owners Bank Jabar of the aesthetic value of its art deco

property. The society recently also restored the colonial courthouse, which will be turned into a museum.

The Society also provides free architectural consultation and tirelessly lobbies media, businesses and government officials. The increasing awareness of the city's architectural values signals that their persistence is paying off. Trendy cafés and factory outlets have moved into many old buildings, while creative entrepreneurs have organized a Heritage Walk for tourists. The Grand Preanger Hotel is considering creating an exclusive Heritage Club.

“We are a noisy bunch,” quips Affandy. “This has been a largely successful strategy – saving one building at a time.”

ENDS

OF COFFEE AND COOKIES

The Dutch East Indies might have been long gone, but their trail can still be seen in Bandung. Aroma Koffie Fabrik, literally ‘coffee factory’, still uses the old machinery from the day the shop opened in 1930 and the original wrappings, with instructions in Dutch.

Widyapratama, the second-generation owner, would be happy to show visitors around his shop and factory compound housed in a Dutch-period building on Jalan Banceuy 51 (tel. +62-22 423-0473). The dedicated 54-year-old entrepreneur sources coffee from organic farms and later stores the beans for several years: eight years for the Arabica variety, and five for the Robusta. “It decreases the acidic level of the coffee,” explains Widyapratama, who also teaches economy at universities in Bandung.

Opened since 1929, Het Snoephuis (Jalan Braga 20-22, tel. +62-22 423-6638) may have adopted an Indonesian name: Sumber Hidangan, but they still serve various Dutch cakes and cookies such as *bokkepoot* and *krentenbrood*.

Perhaps no city in Indonesia has a higher number of cafés per capita than Bandung. Located in a refurbished art-deco house, Potluck Coffee Bar & Library (Jalan Teuku Umar 3, tel. +62-22 250-1332) is a café-cum-library that has become a hit among Bandung youngsters.

Bandoengsche Melk Centrale (Jalan Aceh 30, tel +62-22 421 5442) still serves the wonderful milk and yoghurt drinks fresh from farms on the city's outskirts as well as regular meal dishes. Better known as 'BMC', the restaurant was founded by a pair of Boer businessmen, Louis Hirschland and Van Zijl in the 1930s and still occupies the original Art Deco buildings (although the recent renovation unluckily has spoiled the original interior).

The highlands around Bandung also home to various restaurants and cafés, providing both culinary satisfaction and fresh mountain air. As the name promises, Kampung Daun ('leaf village' in Indonesian; Jalan Sersan Bajuri KM 4.7, Villa Trinita No. 88, tel. +62-22 278-7915) evokes village-styled eating in thatched huts surrounded by leafy green trees. It serves Sundanese cuisine as well as a few Dutch specialties, such as *bitter ballen* (croquet-like meatballs) and sweet *poffertjes* treat (pronounced by the locals as "poppercis").

BANDUNG HERITAGE

The Bandung Heritage Society (Jalan RE Martadinata 209, tel. +62-22 723 4661, www.bandungheritage.org) has brochures and other information about the heritage buildings, shops and cafés housed in colonial structures, as well as related activities.

Bandung Trails (www.bandungtrails.org or email bandungtrails@yahoo.com) organises tours and visits to heritage buildings.

Grand Hotel Preanger
Jalan Asia-Afrika 81, tel. +62-22 423-1631
www.preanger.aerowisata.com

Savoy Homann
Jalan Asia-Afrika 112, tel. +62-22 423-2244
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