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The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten. Amsterdam: Architecture & Natura, 2017, 384 pp. ISBN 9789461400598, price: USD 51.00 (paperback).

The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten is the first book-length study of Karsten as both architect and town planner, but perhaps most importantly, as an intellectual and an Indies (family) man who worked to shape the socio-political milieu of colonial Indonesia in which he lived. The book, sponsored in part by Karsten's family, brought together the most prominent researchers and scholars in the field associated with the world of Karsten: Joost Coté, Hugh O'Neill, Pauline Roosmalen, and Helen Jessup. What emerged from this collaboration is an unusually thorough and sensitive account of Karsten. It is represented in over 380 page narratives along with photos, letters, and drawings, many of which are rare. The book also includes useful appendices and a complete list of publications by Karsten. Meticulously researched and insightfully analyzed, *The Life and Work* is a total representation of Karsten which includes previously unknown information, much of which is striking, about Karsten and his private and public worlds. The book is organized around Karsten as a man who occupied four intertwined worlds: Karsten as an architect (by O'Neill and Jessup); as a planner (by Roosmalen); as an intellectual (by Coté); and as a family man of his time (by O'Neill). Cumulatively, the work offers more rigor and depth than most architectural books dedicated to the works of twentieth century masters.

The Life and Work considers Karsten's subjectivity and locates him within the milieu of colonialism and yet it sees Karsten as working for Indonesians in order to shape their aspirations for modernity. The book has all the major themes one could associate with (post)colonial questions of "identities", "positionality", and "colonial modernity" (even though there is no documentation or commentary about the "subaltern", such as construction workers—the *tukang* who built buildings for Karsten). As such, it is largely an academic book, although it should also prove valuable to students of architecture and planning who may be accustomed to studying theories and positions from authority without an understanding of the figures and historical contexts from which they emerged.

What follows are some commentaries which derive from my appreciation of this extremely valuable book; I seek to enrich conversation and to keep the story open as a form of paying tribute to Karsten himself. To begin, as the book could have made clearer, Thomas Karsten was not a typical Dutchman who would fit with the framework of the "self/other" relation that has become a theoretical typology of postcolonial analysis. His identity was hybrid (one

might call him a cosmopolitan Sino-Dutch), born in Indonesia and married to a Javanese woman, in what one imagines would be a complex Indies household. As such, his story and perspective cannot be reduced to the simple binary of colonizer and colonized. As a colonial “middle”, his political position is not easy to pin down. He might be considered a social democrat in Europe, but he could equally be an enlightened conservative in the colony. He believed that colonial cultures that stemmed from a collaboration between the colonial state and the Javanese elites were problematic and they ought to be reformed, but he also believed that colonial power should not be overthrown. Karsten is best understood as someone who worked simultaneously for and against colonialism. He despised the colonial order (for it only created chaos and instability) and yet he saw no alternative outside the colonial state. Only under a reformed colonial power, so Karsten believed, could Indonesians play a meaningful role in the governing of their future. Architecture and planning served as tools to shape subjectivities, to produce Indonesians who would take over their own world under colonial rule.

Second, the focus on Karsten is such that the book allows an in-depth understanding of Karsten and the circumstances surrounding the formation of his identity and knowledge. Yet such a focus also tends to de-emphasize the broader architectural and planning paradigms that were then in circulation in different western colonies. The idea of using the colony’s own architectural sources for cultural uplifting, for instance, was not so characteristically Indies. In different parts of colonial Asia and Africa, especially during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, anthropology and archeology had been extensively used by Western empires as tools for inquiring into the colony’s vernacular buildings and townscapes in order to recompose them into new forms. The aim behind the construction of new colonial architecture and settlements was to produce a stable space where different races, customs, and practices could cohabit what would eventually become a more homogenous socio-economic environment. And certainly, this experiment in architecture and space was never represented by the architects and planners as a self-conscious defense of colonialism. It was carried out under the name of “culture” with ethical consideration to achieve productivity, provide welfare, and create a healthy modern society under an “enlightened” colonial government. *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten* does not make reference to this “global” strategy of empires at the time.

Third, students of comparative colonialism might appreciate a reflection on different empires to account for the specificity of Dutch colonialism. Iconographically, Dutch colonial town planning was never very ambitious. There was nothing like Edwin Lutyen’s British Delhi, or American Bagio and Manila by

Daniel Burnham, or French territorial planning in Indochina. The town designs of Karsten for Malang, Solo and Palembang, the new settlements such as those of Candi in Semarang, and the Koningsplein of Batavia were all too timid compared to the colonial urban planning schemes of the British, the French, and the American empires. Had the Dutch created spaces of power? Or perhaps power was differently presented in the Indies?

Fourth, more could have been said about the difference between the metropole and the colony, a difference that Karsten was perfectly aware of—as exemplified by his dismissal of the international movement within the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne. It is nevertheless worth emphasizing that unlike in Europe, municipal reforms that emerged across Europe in different variants in the last decades of the nineteenth century did not take place in the colony. The formation of municipality in the colony revealed only the continuous lack of political will, sustained neglect, and obvious reluctance of the colonial government in taking seriously matters concerning urban planning for society as a whole. As residents of a colony, the urban majority were subjects, not citizens, so there were no pressures or incentives to support Karsten's proposals for an overall planning to be applied to all geographies of the city and the country. The colonial state saw no benefit in investing in the costly and risky planning for the whole city. There was a serious lack of urban knowledge and institutional support for the city government to exercise urban planning. Karsten, for his part, seemed to be aware of this difference between the metropole and the colony, as we did not see his prominent tribute to socialist housing in the Netherlands as something he could rework for Indonesian workers in the colony.

The profit motivation of the colonial state did not match Karsten's intent to uplift Indonesians morally and materially through space and culture. Urban planning in the colony was only applied in partial and limited ways to certain areas covered by market and property ownership and extended to certain *kampung* in order to prevent outbreaks of plague and potential political challenges. The Indies town could never receive a comprehensive infrastructural ideal known to European cities. Karsten's design-planning solution thus appeared incremental or provincial, and certainly lopsided. His new towns remained a bit bourgeois because the greatest number of his clients were (those who aspired to become) the middle class. Under these circumstances, the socioeconomic zoning Karsten proposed served only the principle of class status. As the colonial state continued to depend its rule on sharp level of inequality and extreme level of exploitation, Karsten's great architectural and planning experiments that range from *Indische architectuur* to Indies town planning could thus never shake off colonial conditions.

Finally it should be noted that today, the name of Thomas Karsten has increasingly been mobilized by various groups beyond the school of architecture: activists in their defense against demolition of old buildings; city government to promote urban heritage tourism; and soon, one could expect, developers to brand their version of new town. Yet, while Karsten has become a brand in his postcolonial Indonesia, thanks to this colonial legacy, city governments continue to be weak and urban planning is largely in the hands of business groups. Because of such concern too, *the Life and Work of Thomas Karsten* is an invaluable contribution to start learning about the life and work of an architect as a series of collisions and collusions with power relations.

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