Kotabaru and the Housing Estate as Bulwark against the Indigenization of Colonial Java

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Introduction

With the passing of the Agrarische Wet (Agrarian Law) in 1870, which provided the legal structure for a more liberal economic development of the Netherlands Indies, the number of foreign companies and Europeans arriving in the colony steadily increased. By 1930, the European population in the Indies had grown to around 300,000 in a total population of approximately 60 million. In the cities, their ratio was much higher; in some cities, Bandung is a good example, the European population amounted to as much as twelve per cent while even in other, more native cities, as for instance Yogyakarta, it had amounted to around 4 per cent in 1930 (Volkstelling 1930 1936, VIII:2, 78–81).

The upshot of the emergence of European communities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was the creation of small civil societies within the cities. These were composed mostly of European men, educated in Europe, who possessed technical and managerial skills. This was one reason why these colonial cities became the first sites of autonomous local administration in the Netherlands Indies. Another reason was the need for local authorities to address the crises in housing and sanitation. The centralist bureaucratic structure of colonial government clearly hampered the capacity of the cities to provide its citizens with such amenities essential to modern living as paved roads and clean water. The Decentralization Act of 1903 changed this situation radically and the first cities to acquire some form of autonomy in 1905 were Batavia, Meester Cornelis, and Buitenzorg. Legal autonomy in the understanding of the Act meant the creation of a gemeente or municipal government, with a town hall and, initially, an appointed municipal council composed mostly of European men who could make recommendations to the central government through the channels of the regional bureaucracy. This sort of advice pertained to the allocation of funds disbursed to the city. It also authorized the collection of local taxes (such as the Dog Tax) to generate local funds for its own use (Schriek 1918:184–217).

This was also the period in which the peculiar modern fetish for hygiene and cleanliness appeared on the scene in the Netherlands Indies. The concept of bacteria and viruses and their association with disease and the environment
was becoming more generally understood. Uncovering the secrets of the deadly tropics and how white men could avoid succumbing to the diseases that lurked there became popular knowledge. In 1913, W.J. van Gorkom, a well-known doctor in the Netherlands Indies, published a book about the requirement of hygiene in the cities of the Netherlands Indies, especially the colonial capital, Batavia. Van Gorkom urged Europeans to put the information acquired about health and hygiene into practice in their cities. He was especially concerned about health in the native quarters in the cities and the necessity of creating a municipal board of health to tackle these matters (Van Gorkom 1913:156–165).

This recommendation coincided with the movement towards greater urban autonomy; cities had to be able to take control of their own space so as to improve the hygiene of the city for the benefit of everyone. The emergence of a new type of European, often newly arrived from the Netherlands and well educated, who was punctilious about not being seen in a sarong, who lived in European-style houses, read newspapers containing articles about travel, European theatre and the latest fashion from Paris, was a significant shift from the older type of colonialist (Mrázek 2002:129–154). The older type of European in the Netherlands Indies had grown up in the land in which they had been born and who had had a much closer relationship with indigenous people. In the older cities, the spatial structure meant that, of necessity, European and indigenous urbanites generally rubbed shoulders with one another.

Modernity and its fetishes produced a new type of city design, which allowed for greater space and separation. This in turn meant that their inhabitants could distance themselves further from the land. Dirt roads were paved and the traditional linear Indies town development, which had provided opportunities for significant contact with kampong people (because kampons were usually located behind main roads lined by European houses) (Wertheim 1956:171), was discarded in favour of one, which consisted of compact, insular housing estates producing a concentrated European environment. This development also exerted an important influence on the emergence of the housing market. There were now enough people constituting a middle-class in the Indies to represent a housing market sufficient to motivate developers to embark on the construction of housing estates. My purpose in exploring the history of one such housing estate, Kotabaru in Yogyakarta, in this chapter is to see how the development of housing estates affected the idea of the house in the Indies, how it intruded on the relationship between the Javanese and Europeans, and how, with the establishment of the government of the Republic of Indonesia in Yogyakarta, the colonial era estate continued to