

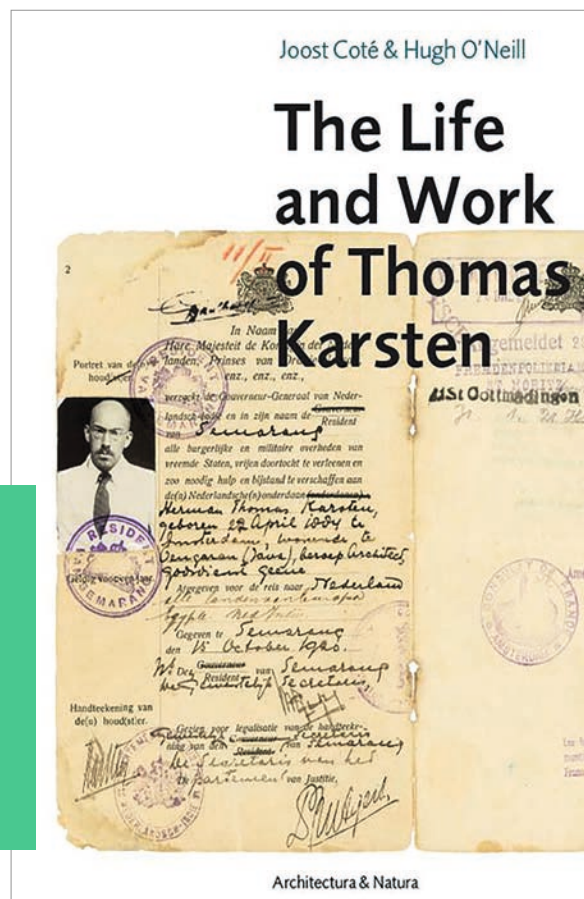
In search of modernity: urban planner and architect

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Reviewed title:
The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten

Joost Coté and Hugh O'Neill. 2017.

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The Dutch architect and urban planner Thomas Karsten lived and worked in the Dutch East Indies from 1914 until his death in a Japanese detention camp near Bandung in 1945. Trained at the Polytechnic School of Delft he started his career as an architect in the mid-Javanese town of Semarang. Soon, however, his interest extended to the young field of town planning. In this capacity he advised many governments of the rapidly expanding towns and cities in the colony, and moreover he became a thriving force behind the institutionalisation of the management of urban planning. His writings – in periodicals, reports, and diaries – together with several Indonesian and Dutch secondary sources form the basis of this book on Karsten, ‘the first extensive, holistic study of the man and his multifaceted life and work’ as Joost Coté and Hugh O'Neill conclude (p. 325). Indeed, the ten essays in the sizeable book cover a wide range of aspects of Karsten's life and are presented to the reader in a definitely positive setting. Pauline van Roosmalen writes on his role in defining and establishing town planning in the Dutch colony and Helen Ibbitson Jessup on his detailed involvement in Javanese architecture. The remaining eight essays are written by Coté (Chapter 4), O'Neill (Chapter 3) and one by the two authors together. They cover his architectural activities and ideas, preceded by chapters on his education and brief overviews of different parts of his life.

(American) modernity

As an architect, Karsten created a number of offices and similar buildings, in a functional style and ‘above all, rational’ in O'Neill words in his chapter *The Architect at Work* (p. 147) and he was not shy in applying new technologies such as reinforced concrete. However, he took care to bring forms and spatial principles of the essence of Javanese architecture and European traditions together under the banner of universal laws of ‘good form’ as a bulwark against ‘the “brutish” colonial world’ (p. 82). O'Neill describes in much detail a sizeable number of his buildings, accompanied by many page-size old and new photographs and drawings, while Jessup has focused in detail on Karsten's search for a blend of Western and Javanese architecture primarily based on his work of alterations to the palace of a prince of the pseudo-independent state of Surakarta on Java, again with an abundance of illustrations.

Digging a bit deeper, the authors came across Karsten's uneasy position in the last and turbulent decades of the Dutch colonial society. His ideal was, as Coté and O'Neill put it in their conclusive essay, ‘to secure a better world’ where ‘wise leadership, a supportive technology’ would govern over ‘a community of self-reflective individuals ...

to reform a harsh, exploitative, and selfish world’ (p. 324). This ideal was, according to Coté and O'Neill, not translated into a radical political position though and he certainly did not have a politically independent Indonesia in view. Karsten rather foresaw, in the words of Coté in the introduction to this book, that ‘Westerners like himself could provide Indonesians with the necessary leadership to point the way to the future’ (p. 16). Karsten focused on the improvements of the daily lives of the inhabitants of the expanding cities in terms of improved standards of housing and other buildings, and ‘good form’ – carefully designed houses, offices, markets, neighbourhoods, and cities. Coté notes, however, in his essay *Defining a Cultural Blueprint*, that Karsten ‘must have recognised quite soon that something more than modern buildings was required if a modern harmonious society was to emerge’ (p. 88). The authors occasionally deal with, though invariably briefly, the sources of inspiration in this blend of form and societal structure in Karsten's thoughts. Both Coté and O'Neill stress the importance of his *Wanderjahre* in Germany after his graduation in 1909 until he went to Semarang. His contacts with the *Deutscher Werkbund* – a group of artists, architects, and craftsmen who aimed to qualitatively improve production by initiating collaborations between the arts, industry, and crafts – form a key to understanding Karsten's work for the authors. Hence, a lengthy article of the young Karsten on the *Deutscher Werkbund* has been included as an annex in this book.

Quality as Karsten's hallmark can be seen as a denominator of the essays by the four authors, though it is worded, and perhaps disguised, under the banner of modernity. This term and its derivatives pervade the biography, and are used by the authors in every conceivable context to situate Karsten's actions and thoughts. As such should modernity lead to enlightenment, characterise the mindset of the new Indonesian urban middle classes, shape their new houses with their conveniences in an improved urban *Kampung*, and in newly planned neighbourhoods, and form the future harmonious mix of Indonesians and Dutch. Modernity as an analytical tool is a concept that is difficult to digest, but the authors could have done more to clarify their assessments and observations of the broad spectre of Karsten's mindset. However, they do offer a possible key and justification for their abundant choice for the term ‘modern’ – Van Roosmalen notes in the context of Karsten's 1919 expansion plan for Semarang that ‘America was seen as exemplifying modernity par excellence’ (p. 278), and Coté devotes a paragraph on Karsten's admiration for what he calls ‘American modernity’ under influence of his trip to the United States in 1930 (pp.

111-115). The key is, following Coté's analysis, ‘the modern age of rapid travel, extensive technological change and cultural evolution’ (p. 113). The cultural evolution refers to less tangible and certainly remarkable aspects. America's race relations and his assessments of a strong social cohesion and collectivism as a result of assembly-line capitalism, as I would put it, are mentioned but unfortunately not commented upon by Coté.

Urban planning

Nine of the ten essays in this book deal with Thomas Karsten as an architect. Only one focuses on his contributions to town planning in the Dutch East Indies and thereafter in Indonesia. Van Roosmalen gives an account of the history of town planning, or rather, modern town planning, after the legal formation of urban local governments in the colony in 1903 and the subsequent attempts to control the rapid urban growth and steer it into the best spatial channels. A major and early impetus for urban reform was given by the Semarang-based pharmacist Henry Freek Tillema who forcefully brought the need for measures to improve public health forward with ample supporting documentations and who, to some extent, paved the way for Karsten, who was asked by the municipality to draw a sizeable extension plan. The result (finalized in 1919), according to Van Roosmalen, was a ‘functional, harmonized and organic’ plan, ‘more extensive and comprehensive than any previous town

plan in the Indies’, and reminiscent of the young Dutch/European tradition of urban planning (p. 274).¹

Semarang's plan made Karsten the most influential town planner in the colony almost overnight. Van Roosmalen gives a clear account of the steps taken by several municipalities on the road to sociospatial planning and the roles Karsten played in this respect until the Japanese occupation. A report on Indies town planning, presented at a conference of local administrators in 1920 became ‘an influential theoretical treatise as well as a practical handbook for planners’ (p. 279; included as an appendix in this book). A second report, of which he was a major author, the ‘Explanatory Memorandum on the Town Planning Ordinance for Municipalities on Java’ that appeared in 1938, became the legal and methodological foundation for town planning in Indonesia since 1948 until its replacement in 1992, and has probably been the most influential document underlying Indonesia's urban planning for a long time.² Van Roosmalen concludes that Karsten played a fundamental role in the field of urban planning, and adds lyrically that the ‘tangible evidence of the surviving picturesque lanes and boulevards in cities like Semarang and Malang, will continue to inspire his counterparts in today's Indonesia’ (p. 303).

Finally, an unavoidable remark is that its content does not show clear signs of much editing. An introduction and outline would have improved the accessibility to and coherence in the ten studies in their mutual relation, while various duplicates exist in several essays, e.g. on Javanese architecture. In spite of this observation and of some critical remarks elsewhere in this review, it is a thorough and profound set of essays, written by four of his admirers and brought together in a book that also includes some useful additional background information such as Karsten's bibliography and a few of his publications (translated). Moreover, it is a book on a certainly remarkable man at work in the Dutch East Indies. Apart from the considerations of what ‘made Karsten tick’, important decades of architectural and planning history of the Dutch colony and independent Indonesia have been documented, brought together, and presented to, hopefully, many readers in this book.

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Notes

- 1 However, one has to add that these urban plans did not contain the important component of social housing, as in Europe.
- 2 This report has unfortunately not been included in this book. However, it has been published in an English translation, in: W. F. Wertheim et al. (eds) 1958. *The Indonesian Town, Studies in Urban Sociology*. The Hague and Bandung: W. van Hoeve Ltd, pp.1-76.



Djohar Passage. Market designed by Ir. Herman Thomas Karsten (1884-1945). Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands on wikipedia.