

Indonesian Modern Architectural Styles During The Late Colonial Period

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Article History:

Submitted: September 12, 2025

Revised: November 27, 2025

Accepted: January 18, 2026

Published: March 9, 2026

Abstract

During the late period of colonial rule in Indonesia, many buildings of various styles emerged in major cities, especially Jakarta, Bandung, Cirebon, Semarang, Solo, and Surabaya, in which the government and Dutch architects played an important role. This study aims to explore the architectural styles of modern Indonesian buildings in the late colonial period. The method employed is a comparative-descriptive approach that combines a literature study and field observation. The descriptive method was applied to buildings by Dutch architects, who were considered prominent. The analysis was conducted by comparing several buildings based on modern Western architectural references. The results of this study indicate that there were numerous modern buildings in various styles, which can be grouped into 5 styles: Neo-classical, Neo-rococo, Art Deco, Vernacular, and Modern Tropical. These styles are the result of a tug-of-war between modern Western and Indonesian traditional architectural styles.

Keywords: *Art Deco; Modern Architecture; Neo-Classical; Neo-Renaissance; Vernacular.*

Introduction

In the history of architectural development in Indonesia, there was a heated debate among Dutch architects regarding the application of modern Western architectural styles in the colonial country, "Indonesia", in the late colonial period, as is known. Western civilization, introduced by colonial powers (the VOC, French, British, and Dutch), has helped shape Indonesian civilization.

During the late period of colonial rule in Indonesia, many buildings were constructed in major cities, particularly in Java. The Ethical Policy or Politics of Reciprocation (Dutch: *Ethische Politiek*) from the Dutch East Indies government, which had been started and fully supported by Idenburg, the Minister for Colonies (1902-1905), and the Governor-General (1909-1916), became one of the drivers the main development of cities in Indonesia, as a moral responsibility for the welfare of the *Bumiputera*. At that time, almost all of the city planning and building designs were done by Dutch architects. They took part in the development of cities in Java with various designs.

They seem to bring Western architectural design ideas to Indonesia, where the people still glorify traditions. The tug of war between modern Western and traditional (vernacular) architectural styles was inevitable. One of the pioneering architects of modern architecture in the Netherlands, Hendrik Petrus Berlage, who had designed buildings in the Netherlands and came to Indonesia, emphasized the importance of developing Dutch East Indies (Indonesian) architecture that is not merely a reworking of vernacular styles or an imitation of European designs. This idea sparked

a significant debate in Dutch East Indies architecture in the 1920s. Berlage deeply inspired the architects in the Indies in their design philosophy.

The conflict between modern Western Indonesian traditional (vernacular) architectural styles, in the end, resulted in a mixed architectural style - hybrid architecture, known as *Indies Architecture*. Drawing on the design ideas of Dutch architects, this research will examine the Indonesian modern architectural style in the late colonial period, around the first four decades of the 20th century. This study focuses on the architectural style of buildings designed by Dutch architects, which are scattered in major cities in Java, such as Jakarta, Bandung, Cirebon, Semarang, Solo, and Surabaya. In describing the building styles, this study emphasizes the importance of the influences of architectural styles that developed in the West. To understand how it affects the architecture of buildings in Indonesia, Western Architecture is used as a reference. This study will examine the prominent buildings created by Dutch architects in Indonesia during the late period of colonialism in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Modern architecture reflects human freedom to create architecture on this earth. Humans seeking to discover their true selves needed a guide, and that guide was found in Greek and Roman civilization. This period is known as the Renaissance, which began with new concepts from Italy in the 15th century and continued to spread throughout Europe (Ashadi, 2020). The end of the Renaissance era was marked by the occurrence of the Industrial Revolution in England, which was immediately followed by revolutions in all aspects of life, not only in the West but also throughout the world. In architecture, fundamental changes occur, among others, regarding beauty. At the end of the Renaissance, decorations for beauty in Classical architecture were still considered important, but the mixture of various styles and decorations (eclectic) was very prominent. (Francis D.K. Ching & Prakash, 2017; Salura, 2018).

The discovery of new construction materials and technologies in the 19th century helped change the history of architectural developments. The first is the development of iron and steel that can be worked and used in construction, beginning in the mid-19th century. (Chen, 2023). The second is the discovery of reinforced concrete construction at the end of the 19th century (Abastillas et al., 2023). With these two discoveries, the architectural form underwent major changes, not limited by its width, length, and height. Furthermore, the development of modern architectural buildings is dominated by steel construction. In every development, architecture is always supported by advances in design engineering and building construction practices (Fu, 2023).

The rapid development of steel as a primary building construction material also led to the emergence of "new" ideas in architecture. Dogmas and slogans began to emerge to reinforce these ideas, one of the most important being Sullivan's "form follows function." Functionalism was placed at the forefront of architectural design. (Ntieni, 2025; Wang, 2024)

Functionalist Architecture is often called Rationalist Architecture because it is based on logical thinking (Dal Falco, 2019). Theory, concepts, and old forms are trying to be abandoned and cut off, replaced by new forms that are pure without decoration, so that it is often called Purist Architecture (Morra, 2017). The architectural form is simple in the form of a composition of planes, squares, and cubes. This architectural form is a unified whole so that it is often called Cubist Architecture (Chizzonity, 2017; Liu et al., 2024).

In response to the dominance of the decorative arts, Art Nouveau emerged in Brussels, Belgium, and in Paris, France, in the 1890s. It is often inspired by natural forms such as the meandering curves of plants and flowers. Other characteristics of *Art Nouveau* are a sense of dynamism and movement, often given by asymmetrical lines, and the use of modern materials, especially iron, glass, ceramics, and concrete, to create unusual shapes and larger open spaces. From Belgium and France, it spread throughout Europe, taking different names and characteristics in each country. In England, the Modern Style appeared; in Germany, the Jugendstil; in Italy, it was often called *Arte Nuova*; and in the Netherlands, it was called *Nieuwe Kunst*. *Art Nouveau* had a huge influence in Europe and the United States until 1914. *Art Nouveau* is widely regarded as a significant transition to *Art Deco* (Čavlović et al., 2020; Goriunov, 2016).

World history entered the era of colonialism in the 17th century, when some European nations, particularly the British, Spanish, French, and Dutch, engaged in trade and also controlled and colonized territories in America, Latin America, Australia, Africa, and Asia. The colonization of countries, especially in Africa and Asia, including Indonesia, lasted until the middle of the 20th century. Colonialism in Indonesia can be grouped into five periods: VOC (1603-1798), French-Dutch (1800-1811), England (1811-1816), Dutch (1816-1942), and Japan (1942-1945).

Since the 1870s, coinciding with the implementation of a liberal economic system, many European private entrepreneurs have come to the Dutch East Indies; they want to contribute to the development of a country renowned for its natural resources and perceived prosperity. Many of them have become involved in plantations and urban development. (Widjanarko et al., 2023).

At that time, the Dutch government had many important buildings up and built, especially in important cities such as Batavia, Surabaya, Bandung, Cirebon, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Solo, Malang, and Medan. During this period, there was a significant cultural influence on the colony. Various concepts and forms of Western architecture were applied in the colonies. These cities gradually became the landscapes of colonial urban life in which schools, churches, clubs, shops, hotels, stations, cinemas, banks, and offices played an important role. (van Dullemen, 2018). Not only Dutch architects or their descendants (born in the Dutch East Indies), but also Chinese architects played an active role in the development (van Roosmalen, 2020).

At the end of colonialism, many Dutch architects took part in the development of cities in Indonesia with various designs. Marius J. Hulswit was the first architect to come to the Dutch East Indies. Hulswit arrived in the Dutch East Indies in 1890. Together with architect Eduard Cuypers (who came to the Indies in 1908 at the invitation of the then managing director of *De Javasche Bank*) and civil engineer A.A. Fermont (who joined in 1910), Hulswit formed an architectural firm. The name of the firm was *NV Architecten-Ingenieursbureau Hulswit en Fermont te Weltevreden en Ed. Cuypers te Amsterdam*, formed in 1908. They received major assignments from *De Javasche Bank* to design branch offices in various cities. (Norbruis, 2020).

After that, Dutch architects flooded Indonesia, helping to build cities in this country. Some of them play an important role in the development of big cities. Moojen planned and designed the Menteng area (*Nieuw-Gondangdia*), Jakarta, which became known as the Moojen Plan. Ghijsels, with some of his colleagues - F. Stoltz and Hein Von Esseen, founded AIA - *Algemeen Ingenieurs en Architectenbureau* (General Engineers and Architects Bureau) in 1916. Until 1929, Ghijsels worked for AIA and was responsible for its architectural design. AIA's work included urban planning for the city of Bandung, which was planned to serve as the new capital of the Dutch East Indies. Meanwhile, Citroen was the architect for the construction of the city of Surabaya, Karsten planned and designed the suburb of Candi Baru, Semarang, and Schoemaker designed many buildings in the city of Bandung. (Ashadi, 2025).

Inevitably, there is a tug of war between Western and traditional Indonesian architectural styles. The struggle between two styles, Modern Dutch and Traditional Indonesian, gave rise to a hybrid style. In the early period, however, elements of Western architecture were more dominant, resulting in Western architectural styles. However, in the late period, local elements predominated, resulting in the Vernacular architectural style. Building styles emerged, including Neoclassical, Neorococo, Art Deco, Vernacular, and Modern Tropical.

Methodology

This study uses a comparative descriptive method with historical and architectural approaches through literature studies and field observations. In this study, the descriptive method is used to characterize the historical and architectural aspects of the study objects. The comparative method is used to compare buildings with each other to find out what the characteristics of the building style are.

The research design is structured as follows:

- Collecting data through literature studies in the form of papers and books (both Electronic and Hard Files) related to the focus of the study, and through field observations by observing the study object buildings and their surrounding environment.
- Analysis is done by:
 - Tracing the history of the buildings of the object of study and their background;
 - Sorting and classifying the buildings of the object of interest of buildings that have a certain architectural style (based on initial assumptions obtained through tracing the history of the development of architectural styles in the Western World);
 - Comparing the style of one building with another building in a group that is "presumed" to have the same architectural style. This comparison is carried out to "validate" the characteristics of the building that are characteristic of its architectural style. The assessment is carried out based on the state of "presence" and "absence" of building elements, which reinforce the character of the architectural style of the building.
- Interpretation of analysis results. The interpretation is built based on the results of the comparison of the study object buildings; it refers to the state of "there" of building elements, which reinforce the character of the architectural style of the building.

Result and Discussion

1. Neo-Classical Style

The influence of the Western Neo-Classical architectural style in Indonesia may have originated from the French-Dutch rule in this country (Palmer, 2011). Indonesia was a French-Dutch colony from 1800 to 1811. Perhaps the single greatest example of the Neoclassical style in Indonesia is the Bank Indonesia Museum, which was completed in 1913. The building has evolved over more than a hundred years, but still retains its original Neo-Classical style. Bank Indonesia (BI) (now Bank Indonesia Museum), formerly known as De Javasche Bank, was designed by Cuypers & Hulswit and completed in 1913; later renovated in 1935. Rows of ordered Corinthian columns, one of the Classical column types, are very prominent on the facade of the building, at the front, sides, and back. The building's symmetrical plan is clarified by placing the entrance at the center, which appears to divide the building into equal right and left halves. Bank Indonesia in Cirebon and Solo also shows a Neo-Classical style. (Figure 1). The figure shows that the elements of the Neo-Classical style present in the three buildings are classical Greco-Roman columns, flat facades, and pediments.



Figure 1. A. BI (Museum) Jakarta; B. BI Cirebon; C. BI Solo

Source: Author

2. Neo-Renaissance Style

The Neo-Renaissance was a style that took inspiration from Palazzos of Italy. "Palazzo style" buildings of the 19th century are sometimes referred to as being of Italianate architecture, but this term is also applied to a much more ornate style, particularly of residences and public buildings. The Neo-Renaissance style was characterized by symmetrical facades; the elevation commonly features distinct horizontal divisions, often marked by belt courses. Arched openings are frequently present in Neo-Renaissance Style buildings. (Bruculeri, 2016; Bruculeri & Frommel, 2015; Martinis & Rossetti, 2022). There is an important element in colonial buildings, namely "Dutch Gable", which had developed in the Netherlands and England in the 17th century (Louw, 2009).

The earliest building was presented in Indonesia at the end of the colonial period, i.e., *Algemeene Maatschappij van Levensverzekering en Lijfrente*, known as "Lion Building" ("*Gedung Singa*") or *Aperdi* Building; It is located in the "European Village" area of Surabaya, precisely in the *Jembatan Merah* area. This area is similar to the *Kali Besar* area in Jakarta Old City, but on a smaller scale. Eduard Cuypers designed the *Algemeene* Building, but there is the *Berlage signature*, so he is considered the architect.

The *Aperdi* building or the *Algemeene* building, which was completed in 1901, is now in poor condition. The building's facade is attractive and distinctive. In this two-story building, the facade of the lower building is dominated by two large arched openings on the right and left, and a smaller one between them with a sloping arch (Segmental arch) that is the main entrance. In front of the main entrance, there is a pair of winged lion statues. The facade of the

upper building is dominated by four arched openings, two pairs on the right and left. At the top of all the arched openings, there is a rustic arrangement of bricks. These arched openings are on the outer side of the building terrace, both on the first and second floors. On the roof of the building, there are three windows (dormer windows); the one in the middle is the biggest.

The presence of a pair of winged lion statues in front of the entrance shows Berlage's attitude of not wasting away the art of decoration; if it has a function, then it becomes an integral part of the building. That's one of the principles Berlage has always adhered to. Another important principle is the use of natural materials. (Berlage, 1996); this is indicated by the rustic brick at the arched openings. Berlage also pays attention to Indonesia's tropical climate conditions by creating a building terrace to block sunlight from entering the room. Overall, the facade of *Aperdi's* building, characterized by arched openings, rustic bricks, winged lion statues, and dormer windows, shows a Neo-Renaissance style. The Neo-Renaissance style with different "degrees" can be shown in buildings: *Lawang Sewu* Building in Semarang (1907, by Citroen), and *Kejaksan* Train Station in Cirebon (1912, by Mojen). (Figure 2). The figure above shows that the elements of the Neo-Renaissance style present in the three buildings are symmetrical, including arched openings, gables, and different features between the lower and upper.



Figure 2. A. *Aperdi* Building in Surabaya; B. *Lawang Sewu* Building in Semarang; and C. *Kejaksan* Train Station in Cirebon

Source: Author

3. Art Deco Style

By the 1930s, *Art Deco* evolved into a more simplified style known as Streamline Moderne or Art Moderne. The emphasis was on sleek, curving forms and long horizontal lines. (Kurnia, 2017). Building architecture in the *Art Deco* style, which was widely discussed in the 1920s to 1960s, is found in many big cities in Indonesia; most of them are in the city of Bandung. One of the monumental ones in Bandung is the Asia Africa Building, or "*Gedung Merdeka*". The building, formerly known as *Societeit Concordia*, was redesigned in 1926 by Wolff Schoemaker, Albert Frederik Aalbers, and Van Galen, with an elegant *Art Deco* style.

The expression of the Asia-Africa building facade is dominated by the firm and continuous lines of horizontal and vertical elements. This building also has a characteristic decorative element of a *makara* (Hindu tradition) at the top of the building, on the right and left corners. The inclusion of ornament that is based on local traditions can also be found in the *De Majestic* Building (1922, by Schoemaker) and the Landmark Building (1921, by Schoemaker). In these two buildings, Schoemaker placed the ornament of *kala* (Hindu tradition) on the building's facade. Another building is the *Prianger* Hotel (1927, by Schoemaker); the stacked motifs (terraced pyramid shapes) are visible on the facade.

The *Art Deco* style also has the characteristic of being dynamic and streamlined, inspired by oceanic flow lines. This type of *Art Deco* style can be found in the buildings by Aalbers, i.e., Bank BJB (1936), Bank BTPN (1938),

and Savoy Homann Hotel (1940). The architectural concept inherent in the three buildings is subconsciously similar in shape, which displays horizontal plastic elements in each exterior of the building. (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A. Asia-Africa Building; B. *De Majestic* Building; C. Landmark Building; D. *Prianger* Hotel; E. BJB Bank; and F. Savoy Homann Hotel

Source: Author

For the analysis, four buildings were chosen to represent the art deco style in two time periods (the 1920s and 1930s): the Asia-Africa building, Prianger Hotel, Bank BJB, and Savoy Homann Hotel. Figure 3 shows that the four buildings have clear differences between the 1920s and 1930s. The buildings in the Art Deco style of the 1920s have the following characteristics: a strong sense of line, terraced pyramid shape, and ornamental; meanwhile, the 1930s: a strong sense of line and streamline shape.

4. Vernacular Style

Vernacular architecture is a style that optimizes local construction technologies and building materials. What distinguishes it from traditional architecture is that the latter still emphasizes the values of traditional society. Vernacular architecture, on the other hand, embodies the life of modern society, embodied in architecture with local forms, materials, and building systems. However, a rigid definition is difficult to provide; it is more about practice than theoretical knowledge. (Halperin, 2016; Vongkulbhisal, 2016).

Two Dutch architects who were very concerned with local traditions and values in building design were Karsten and Maclaine Pont. Karsten criticized many previous Dutch architects for their "put Europe in Java" concept. For Karsten, Java was Java, not Holland. (Adiyanto, 2023; Antonius et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, Maclaine Pont, after his experience in handling various temple buildings (especially in Trowulan) made him change his building design concept to try to modernize the local Indonesian traditional building concept. Most of the buildings designed by these two architects are in the vernacular style, an architectural style that takes local traditional forms and materials.

The prominent vernacular-style buildings designed by the two Dutch architects are the Sobokartti Arts building in Semarang (1929, by Karsten), Gedhe Hardjonagoro Market in Solo (1930, by Karsten), and ITB Campus Hall in Bandung (1920, by Maclaine Pont). The buildings take on traditional forms and elements.

Sobokartti Arts building and Gedhe Hardjonagoro Market take the form of a traditional Javanese house - *Joglo*. Meanwhile, ITB Campus Hall in Bandung takes the form of a traditional West Sumatra and the Javanese traditional spatial concept – *Great Sunda* roof style.

Maclaine Pont, the architect who designed the ITB Hall, was a Dutch East Indies architect who was very concerned with local potential, namely traditional buildings, to be juxtaposed with modern architectural styles. His views on traditional architecture (traditional buildings) apparently differed from Wolf Schoemaker, who considered the art of stone temple technology more representative of the superiority of civilization (especially Java) compared to traditional buildings using wood technology. Maclaine Pont emphasized that the architecture of the ITB Hall building was a manifestation of modern architecture in the Dutch East Indies. This mixture of modern and local forms is known as vernacular architecture. (Mahatmanto, 2015, 2002). The form of the ITB Hall is truly extraordinary; Pont called the building a vernacular style, but the building's form does not easily find an equivalent to traditional architectural forms. Some experts call it similar to Sundanese architecture, while others point to the West Sumatra "Rumah Gadang" building. The buildings designed by Karsten and Maclaine Pont above have traditional forms and use local materials and local labor. (Figure 4). The figure shows that the elements of the Vernacular style present in the three buildings are local forms (traditional forms) and local materials.



Figure 4. A. Sobokartti Arts Building in Semarang; B. Gedhe Hardjonagoro Market in Solo; and C. ITB Campus Hall in Bandung.

Source: Author

5. Modern Tropical Style

Tropical architecture works to achieve thermal comfort through the use of design elements. Some of the buildings designed by Dutch architects in modern tropical style, which, in addition to paying attention to the tropical climate, are also plain without ornamentation. Tropical climate accommodation is shown by the front terrace of the building, and windows that are placed deeper, so that sunlight entering the room can be reduced. These buildings are the Ministry of Transportation Office in Jakarta (1918, by Ghijssels), the Bappenas Office in Jakarta (1925, by Ghijssels), and the Surabaya City Hall (1920, by Citroen). (Figure 5). The figure shows that the elements of the Tropical Modern style present in the three buildings are the terrace and windows placed deeper. Dutch architects had to adapt their designs to the tropical conditions of Indonesia; they tried to reduce the heat from the sun and the rainwater entering the room.



Figure 5. A. the Ministry of Transportation Office in Jakarta; B. Bappenas Office in Jakarta; and C. Surabaya City Hall.

Source: Author

Conclusion

The architectural style of modern buildings at the end of colonialism in Indonesia shows diversity as a result of the tug of war between modern Western and traditional architectural styles. The existing architectural styles can be grouped into 5 styles, namely Neoclassical, Neo-Renaissance, Art Deco, Vernacular, and Modern Tropical. The results of the analysis show the characteristics of the architectural style. Neoclassical style characteristics: classical Greco-Roman columns, flat facade, and pediment. Characteristics of Neo-Renaissance style: symmetrical, arched opening, gable, and different features between the lower and upper. Characteristics of Art Deco style: a strong sense of line, terraced pyramid shape, and ornamental (the 1920s); a strong sense of line and streamline shape for the 1930s. Vernacular style characteristics: local forms (traditional forms) and local materials. Tropical Modern style characteristics: the terrace and windows are placed deeper.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all parties who assisted in the implementation of this research. This research was conducted independently and did not receive funding from any institution or sponsor.

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