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Architecture & Finance

2019/20

eabh (The European Association for
Banking and Financial History e.V.)

Dutch functionalism in the tropics: The factory of the Netherlands Trading Society

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Today's ABN AMRO Bank is mainly a Dutch business. A dozen years ago the bank could still boast a worldwide network, with roots sometimes dating back nearly two centuries. Especially in Indonesia, formerly known as the Dutch East Indies, the bank's architectural heritage can be found all over the archipelago. Prominent among these is its former Asian head office in Jakarta, which stands proud to this day. It is a monument to Dutch functionalism in the tropics.

One of the oldest and most prestigious predecessors of ABN AMRO is Netherlands Trading Society (Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij) or NTS. The company was founded on 29 March 1824 on the initiative of the Dutch monarch, Willem I. It was set up as a general import and export company with the principal purpose of stimulating the nation's economy, particularly through trade with the Dutch East Indies. Although it was not officially a successor to the Dutch East Indies Company or VOC, the NTS certainly continued many of the activities of its famous predecessor. From 1830 to 1870 the NTS served as banker, commissioner and carrier to the Dutch state. It was responsible for storing, selling and shipping colonial products such as coffee, tea, sugar and spices that were collected in kind as a form of taxation by the state. Because of the enormous distance that separated the East Indies and the Netherlands, the NTS set up a complete administrative hierarchy to run the colonial operation. This was based in Batavia (now: Jakarta) at what was known as the Factory (Factorij), following its establishment on 27 February 1826. The name Factorij – in imitation of the trading posts of the VOC which were called factories – was given to both the institution and organisation itself as well as the actual building in which it was housed.



*The spacious and airy banking hall on the ground floor in 1933, shortly after opening
(copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)*

As the Dutch government's economic policies changed in the late 1800s, so too had the NTS. It concentrated increasingly on banking and opening new branches throughout Asia, far beyond the East Indies. Yet, the bank still remained under the direction of the Factory. Since East Asia was practically the NTS's only area of business until well into the twentieth century, the Factory, as the company's Asian headquarters, was involved in almost all its transactions and operations. It was only with the rise of the NTS's banking business in the Netherlands in the course of the twentieth century that this emphasis began to shift, while Asian business continued to remain important for many years. This also applies to the so-called plantation business of the Factory which consisted of a large clientele of plantation owners as well as sugar-, tea-, and coffee-plantations owned by the Factory itself, mainly as a result of bankruptcies that occurred frequently in times of agricultural crisis in the Dutch East Indies.

Following the German occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940, the NTS moved its head office to Batavia. Two years later, when the Japanese occupied the Dutch East Indies, the company officially moved to Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname and Holland's second major colony. All the NTS's East Indies offices were closed for the duration of the war and the company's business came to a virtual standstill. The following period of decolonisation increased the difficulty of Dutch company operations in Indonesia, eventually making them impossible. Then in May 1959, the NTS's Indonesian cultivation company was nationalised, followed in December 1960 by the nationalisation of the Factory and all the agencies under its control. Not long after this, the NTS merged with Dutch rival Twentsche Bank to form Algemene Bank Nederland or ABN, which, in 1991, merged to become ABN AMRO Bank. Meanwhile, the NTS's Indonesian banking business was taken over by an Indonesian state-owned bank which, after changing its



The Factorij in 2004, transformed into Museum Bank Mandiri (copyright Bank Mandiri)



*Architect Cees van de Linde ca. 1930
(copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)*

name several times, merged in 1999 with three other banks – two of which were also former nationalized predecessors of ABN AMRO Bank – to become today's Bank Mandiri, Indonesia's largest bank.

Old design for a new building

The building in which the Factory ended its days in 1960 is not where the company started operating in 1826. For over a century it operated from the neighbouring Kali Besar, Batavia's old commercial centre. It occupied several addresses there before settling in Kali Besar East number 26, Jl. Teh and south of Jl. Kunir, later renamed Factorijstraat. Like many other commercial buildings along this canal at the time, the NTS building consisted of a wooden top floor, projecting over the pavement, and standing on slender iron posts. Over the years adjacent buildings were bought, demolished and rebuilt, which was necessary for expansion but also a necessary means of minimising fire hazard and the threat of white ants. By the early 1900s it was clear that drastic renovation of the old building or a completely new building was needed. Continuing decay, which is typical to the tropics, as well as a growing need for space due to the Factory's increased focus on banking, created a demand for facilities offering presentable cash counters and fire-proof safe deposits.

In 1921, a strategic location became available on Stationsplein, today's Pintu

Besar Utara, which is located behind Kali Besar South. It lies opposite the city's central train station near the offices of other colonial banks as well as directly beside the head office of Javasche Bank or the central bank of the Dutch East Indies (now known as Bank Indonesia). The Factory invited three leading East Indies architectural agencies to submit designs for the new building in a limited competitive tender. Although the architects were free to make their own suggestions regarding style, the building had to convey what was termed 'a respectable, monumental air for the bank building as a whole, and especially for its public areas'¹. At the same time, the list of requirements included an efficient and simple interior layout, ample provision of light and fresh air and every possible modern comfort. In addition, it was emphasised that the building should be designed to accommodate future growth, so that the Factory staff should be allocated fifty per cent more space than at the old building. This was hardly a surprise given the chronic lack of space at the old Factory building. Each of the three submissions was designed in a historical revival style that referred back to the West European architecture of the preceding centuries, particularly the Baroque and Classical periods. This was a popular genre in the commercial world of the East Indies and in fact

¹ National Archives of the Netherlands (The Hague), Archives of Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij (Netherlands Trading Society), inv. nr. 2956 (letter 22-03-1922).



View of the court yard from the ground floor (copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)



Galleries ensured both natural ventilation and protection from the sun (copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)

dominated its architecture well into the 20th century. These were modern constructions built with reinforced concrete and the latest technical innovations hidden behind historical façades of columns or pilasters, housing prominent roofs with domes or towers and plenty of sculptural decoration. Several NTS-buildings were designed in this style, such as their offices in Bandung and Weltevreden (today's Menteng district of Jakarta). However, the construction then underway of the new NTS head office building in Amsterdam was already straining the company's resources. As a result, the construction plans were shelved.

New design for a new building

Six years later, in the spring of 1928, circumstances had sufficiently changed for the NTS Amsterdam head office to give the go-ahead for a new Factory building. This time there was no question of a competitive tender.

It was decided to directly commission Kees van de Linde (1886-1941), an architect who had already made an excellent impression on management in the Netherlands. Van de Linde had worked for several years as office manager under the famous Dutch architect Karel de Bazel (1869-1923), who designed the NTS's new head office building, when the latter suddenly died in 1923. After De Bazel's death, Van de Linde played a key role in the completion of the building in 1926. As Van de Linde had no experience in construction in the Dutch East Indies, he was assisted by Maurits Tideman (1888-1969), who had worked for Batavia's department of public works.

The wide-ranging list of requirements for the Factory was based on those of 1921. In addition, as in 1921, the design had to cater for a potential fifty per cent expansion of the current staff level of 186 employees, as well as a hermetic separation of public areas and those reserved for personnel only.

However, top priority was given to adaptations for the local climate. With an average temperature of around 30 degrees centigrade and an average humidity of over 83 per cent, Batavia was not the most pleasant environment in which to work in the age before air-conditioning, especially for European employees. After some local research, the so-called open system – with deep, open galleries surrounding the building and floors of around six metres in height that had been used at Javasche Bank – emerged as the preferred solution. A continuous double façade with galleries would ensure both natural ventilation and protection from the sun. At the same time, it was decided to orient the building on an east-west axis so that the tropical midday sun could be avoided. The ventilation system used at the NTS's head office in Amsterdam was adapted to Batavia: double floors with a gap between a supporting under floor and an actual surface



*The gate in the main entrance allowed for extra ventilation throughout the banking hall.
(copyright: ABN AMRO Art & History)*

floor, which comprised a system of ventilation shafts, as well as channels for various cables and wires. In this way, as Van de Linde commented, he hoped 'to create a gentle, not unpleasant atmosphere in harmony with nature by using a system to allow air to pass in and out²'.

The general layout and plan of the Factory building that was eventually realised was in many respects based on one of the designs submitted in 1921. It comprised a square ground plan around a rectangular courtyard, allowing air to pass right through the entire building with a continuous double façade of open galleries and a huge public hall as wide as the façade.

Architectural style

There is hardly any reference to architectural style in the list of conditions and requirements for the Factory's new premises. While evidently being very much aware of the prestige attached to the buildings that

its neighbours and competitors had constructed a few years earlier, the architectural style that was chosen by the NTS stood in marked contrast. Successive drawings showed Van de Linde gradually abandoning the revival style of the earlier designs and radically transforming the building's appearance. An aesthetic decision was taken to replace the conventional pavilion roof with a flat surface once it was realised that there were no practical objections. This was a crucial moment in the design process, since a change in the shape of the roof resulted in a fundamentally distinct and essentially more modern building with a completely different character. All the ornaments, details and conventional elements of the earlier designs vanished one by one in Van de Linde's subsequent sketches. The line and shape of the design became increasingly clinical until it consisted almost entirely of plain walls and straight, square lines, based on the principles of the Functionalism style, also known in Dutch as Nieuwe Zakelijkheid or the Nieuwe Bouwen. This style was particularly popular in the period 1920-1940 and was characterized by a concern with light, air, hygiene

and by a strictly functional use of materials and technology. Functionalism combined a strong aversion for ornamentation on a building with a penchant for the colour white and for right angles and straight lines in its designs, resulting in mostly flat roofs and façade, in glass, steel and reinforced concrete. By choosing the latest architectural style, the Netherlands Trading Society, which naturally had the final say, was making a definite statement: it was dynamic, efficient and modern. The highly traditional building in the historical style that the Javasche Bank erected four years later shows how innovative the NTS's choice was.

The Amsterdam head office was a major inspiration for Van de Linde. It is in the interior especially that the two buildings appear surprisingly alike: particularly the bare concrete columns painted white; the profusion of colourful Venetian glass floor tiles with their meandering patterns; and the long, thin and vertical windows with their stained-glass designs in the central stairwell. The Netherlands Trading Society deliberately tried to create an architectural link between the Factory and the head office in Amsterdam by adopting recognisable elements utilised in the conditions of the East Indies. This particular corporate style was also visible in the NTS branch at Medan on Sumatra, which was also designed Van de Linde around the same time. This resulted in a virtual copy of the Factory. Though half the Factory's size, this NTS branch was designed in the exact same style and with an identical interior design.

As was the case at the bank's Amsterdam head office, the Factory's furnishings were specially designed. The robust, angular design of the remaining original desks, cupboards, chairs, stools, lamps and paneling reveal De Bazel's influence, who was the designer of the furniture in Amsterdam.

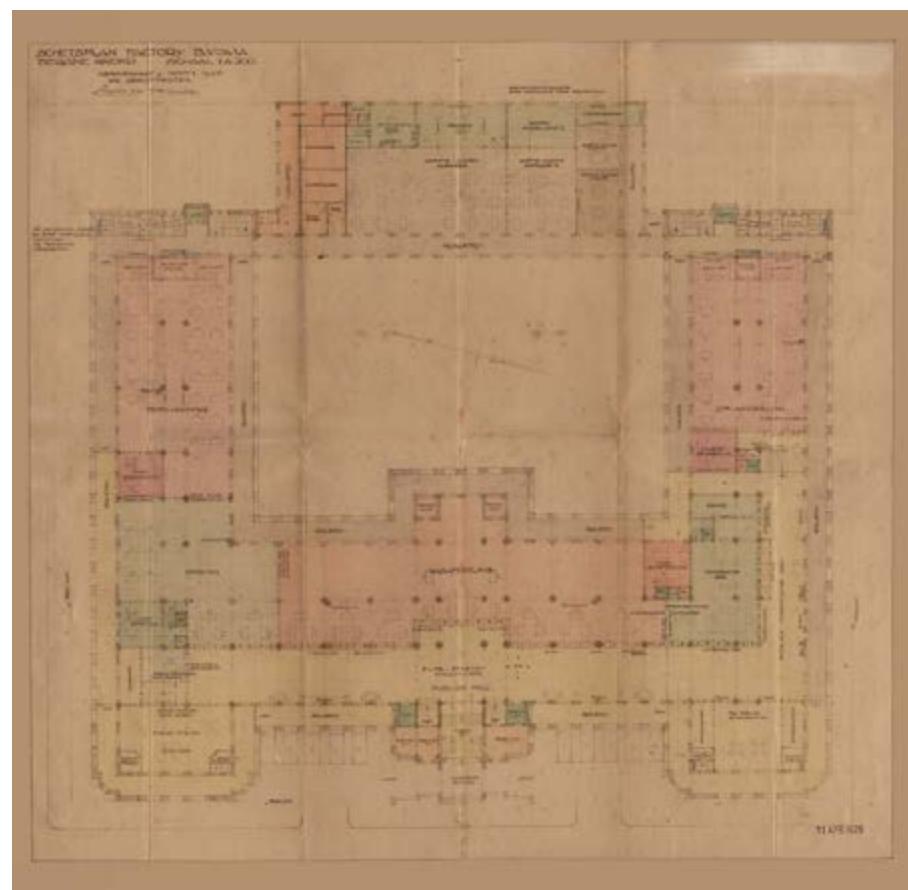
At the same time, the architect was also guided by the practical demands of his client. In addition to requirements stemming from the nature of the company's business, adaptations to the tropical climate had a major impact on the style of the building's design, not least its colour. The walls, painted with white mineral paint, reflected the sun, while the dark socle gave protection against the grime of the street. The gallery columns were included to provide vertical features while the double floors with their

² 'Nederlandsche Handelmaatschappij N.V. Amsterdam. Bankgebouw "Factory" Batavia', in: Bouwkundig Weekblad Architectura. Organ van de Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Bouwkunst, Bond van Nederlandsche Architecten en het Genootschap Architectura et Amicitia, nr. 41, 10-10-1931, p. 370.

concealed air ducts emphasised the horizontal effect. This resulted in an interplay of open, vertical façade sections and closed horizontal sections. The decision to power the ventilation system with engines located on the roof top was ‘gratefully’ accepted, as the architect remarked, as it provided an ‘architecturally functional accent to the building’s silhouette’³

The Factory according to function

More than four years after the start of the construction work, the architect could finally and formally hand the building over to the board of the Factory on 14 January 1933. Shortly thereafter, the old building on Kali Besar was demolished and the land sold off. Although it was far larger than the old Factory, the new building was soon filled to capacity. The division and layout of the building was strictly functional and based on the Factory’s various tasks. Each of the four storeys had its own principal function: in the basement safes including securities safes were kept. Further, a box safe as well as safe deposit facilities with two hundred boxes and so-called cutting rooms in which customers could deposit, take out or examine their valuable possessions were available. Three metres above ground-level and accessed by a six-metre-wide entrance stairway, the ground floor was dominated by the public hall and the cash counter. Many of the offices there were separated by walls that did not reach the ceiling, thus allowing the air to circulate. On the first floor the Factory had its state rooms and board rooms, which could be accessed via a majestic flight of stairs. The furnishings reinforced the imposing effect of the rooms. These included numerous stone and colourful Venetian glass tiles. The stairwell was lit by five vertical, 9-metre tall stained-glass windows. As in Amsterdam, the director’s offices formed a so-called enfilade: a series of rooms whose doors opened along a single axis allowing easy communication between the directors. Their offices were furnished with every convenience, including a wardrobe, a bathroom with a shower and water basin (*mandiebak*). In the corridor each room had signal lights to indicate whether it was occupied or to call for a member of staff. Besides these imposing rooms the first floor also



Ground floor plan April 1929 (copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)

housed an administrative section with a typing pool. These rooms were furnished with far less luxury. The entire south wing was devoted to plantation affairs. Finally, the top floor was reserved principally for the storage of archives from the Factory’s various departments.

New use

The Factory remained in use as a bank office for Bank Mandiri until 2004. As in so many other cities throughout the world, the historic commercial centre of Jakarta was abandoned by the larger companies for the more spacious and easily accessible suburbs. The fact that the Factory could remain a working bank for almost three quarters of a century without any major adaptations being necessary, is a tribute to its design. Today the Factory stands as an impressive example of banking architecture in the tropics, indeed as a highlight of pre-war colonial architecture and as a monument to the architect

and his team. It is therefore fitting that Bank Mandiri assigned a new function to the Factory building as its corporate museum. It is in fact the building itself which is the museum’s main asset. Completely renovated and open to the public, the impressive building can be admired to this day in its former glory. It has been meticulously recreated by the museum, down to the last details including the furniture. It is well worth a visit. ●

Author Profile

Jaap-Jan Mobron is a historian and art historian who has been affiliated with ABN AMRO Art & Heritage department since 1993. As well as being responsible for the department’s academic, popular and online publications, his activities include arranging exhibitions and tours on aspects of banking history.

³ ‘Nederlandsche Handelmaatschappij N.V. Amsterdam. Bankgebouw ‘Factory’ Batavia’, in: Bouwkundig Weekblad Architectura, nr. 41, p. 370.



One of the three ventilation towers giving the building a distinguishing silhouette (copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)



The bathroom with water bassin or mandi, adjoining one of the director's offices (copyright Bank Mandiri. Photographer: Sri Sadono)



The passageway connecting one of the director's offices with the exterior gallery (copyright: ABN AMRO Art & Heritage)

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