The Hermeneutic of 'De Amsterdamse Poort te Batavia': Re-reading the spirit of the nation through historical architecture

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Abstract. Hermeneutic is a science of understanding a focal point of a cultural system; which in the field of history is known as the spirit of the people. The spirit transforms into objects – such as art - displaying the object maker’s thoughts or state of mind. This research began as an attempt to apply hermeneutic onto historical architecture object; on the understanding that architecture is an example of the production of art. The chosen object was the Amsterdam Gate of Batavia (Dutch: de Amsterdamse Poort te Batavia) built in mid-18th century in VOC-era Jakarta. The gate underwent several transformations before it was demolished in the 1950s, yet records of its existence; including photographs, lithographs, and journals are still widely accessible today. The historical events including those directly related to the transformations as well as general situations of the town and the ruling government are analysed. The research revealed a probable relation between the physical condition of the architecture and the sociopolitical situation of the nation, written in simple phrases to assist readers in envisioning the state of mind behind the concretized built environment.

1. Introduction
The Amsterdam Gate of Batavia was a stand alone structure often became the object of photography of late nineteenth - early twentieth century Batavia, now Jakarta, in the Dutch East Indies. The structure consisted of two walls decorated with pillars on its facades, connected by an arch at the top. It is of a sizeable measurement, standing tall equivalent to at least a modern two stories building. The architecture of the gate reminds us of Roman triumphal arch, because of its shape and the Roman god and goddess of war statues placed in its concaves and the urns on its roof. The gate was built in mid-eighteenth century by Governor General to the Dutch East India Company, Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff (1743-1750). Later, the gate’s accompanying buildings were demolished by Governor General Daendels (1808 – 1811) along with Batavia Castle. Daendels left the gate’s opening and the semicircular walls on both sides but diminished the second level of the gate. Fifty years later, the semicircular walls were gone to make ways for tramrail. During the Japanese occupation in 1940s, the Roman gods and goddess statues were demolished then the government of the newly independent Republic of Indonesia decided to completely demolish the structure in 1950s [1].

Some changes made towards the gate can be considered as radical; it changed the style, the form, and the function of the original structure; yet others were more symbolic, thus making the gate a piece of art and a reflection of the actor behind. This research began by questioning the architectural events, the social political condition, and the actors: from a colony, then a foreign force, and later a nation;
prompting questions: is there a connection between the social political condition of the people and the gate’s architecture? What are the meanings of each transformation? What are the states of mind behind those?

2. Method
This is an historical architecture research which analyzes available primary and secondary sources of the historical object. Primary sources are photographs, lithographs, and maps related to the structure. Others such as private journals and reports from the period are scrutinized and sorted to narrow the description of the gate, and the social politic of the people in that particular period. This is considered as part of the Hermeneutic approach. In Hermeneutic, understanding a state of mind is equal to the effort of reconstructing a creative process that produced the art [2]. It should not focus on the technique or material only but also to understand the space, events, and history [3]. The transformation of the art is considered as added discourses that generates new meanings to the art itself. Therefore by looking from the artists’ point of view; in this case of a business establishment, a colony, or a nation; an interpretation of the state of mind was produced.

3. Result
The word ‘Gate’ in Batavia refers to two categories: (1) the gates of the fort surrounding Batavia Castle, and (2) the gates of the walls of Batavia Town. Batavia Castle was located adjacent to the Java Sea, acting as the center of administration for the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The castle was built by Governor General Jan Pieterzoon Coen, in office for two terms in 1619-1683 and 1627-1629. From a little fort and warehouse called Fort Jacatra into a castle and town of Batavia was the result behind his thinking that the company should show its power and be prepared for war to be able to fully control the trade business. Port Jacatra was chosen as it was a more strategic location compared to Banten, where VOC also held post [4]. At the time Chinese immigrants dominated the population, they were willing to settle more than Dutchmen who came to gain some wealth for several years only to return quickly to their homeland. The Chinese settled easily as they are accustomed to the concept of a walled city in their homeland China.

Coen also assigned Captain for the Chinese to manage their administrative affairs in relation to the Dutch, allowing the Chinese to dominate especially in the economy aspect of the city, through the gained privileges. They were able to expand their business to agricultural at the outskirt of the city. The business went well and the population of Chinese doubled quickly, but was without supervision from the administrative office in Batavia. The businesses attracted illegal Chinese immigrant who, being unregistered and labelled as outlaw, became the object of corruption by fellow Chinese from Batavia as well as the Company [5]. The continuous conflict between Batavia and the illegal residents reached its peak in 1740 when fifty Dutch soldiers were killed. Then Governor General, Valckenier, carried out armed force to deal with the conflict and released an amnesty. Unfortunately rumors of the rebellions were used by the Dutchmen and other ethnicities that were consumed with jealousy towards Chinese. They started a riots, openly robbing and killing Chinese people in Batavia. These went on for fourteen days in 9 – 22 October 1740, today known as the Chinese Massacre. Later Valckenier was accused as the cause of the massacre, and was put to trial then confined in the castle by his replacement, Governor General Gustaat Willem Baron van Imhoff.

As a Governor General, Baron van Imhoff was known to have no respect towards the native rulers and customs. This character might be influenced by his own experiences in the East Indies where he first came at only twenty year old, working as a Junior Merchant for the company. His career was notably improved very quickly and soon he was appointed as the Governor and Councilor Ordinary to Ceylon, India, in 1736 for four years. In 1740 he returned to Batavia only to face trial and sent back to Netherlands by Valckenier because of their disagreement in regard to the Chinese Massacre issue. After arriving in the Netherlands, he was immediately appointed as the new Governor General, and then took over the position in 1743. Baron van Imhoff policies during his duty were the construction of the new Governor – General official residence in the city outside of the castle; establishing
newspaper, hospital, and first post office in Batavia [5]; found Buitenzorg (today: Bogor) and built himself a country estate there [6]. He expanded the castle to the south and built the Amsterdam Gate.

In Figure 1, marked with yellow circle is the Batavia Castle’s south gate and red circle is the Amsterdam Canal before the Amsterdam Gate was built. Between them is the Castle’s ground. The castle’s southern gate then was demolished, leaving only two unconnected bastions on both east and west side, marked as yellow circle in Figure 2; and the Amsterdam Gate consisting two rectangular buildings connected by a semi-circular structure was built, red circle in Figure 2. The Figure 2 map’s index wrote the Amsterdam Gate buildings as: de Hoofd Wagt and caferne van de Ruiterije / or office and eateries respectively. The opening of the gate to the south leads to the Prinsen Straat or Prince Street – straight to Stadhuis / Town Hall, not seen in the figures. The gate’s name came from the canal, “Amsterdam”. Some recorded “Kastlepoort” or Castle Gate because it connects Batavia castle to the city; and “Pinangpoort” was either because of the rows of Pinang tree on site, along the canal, or because of it was said to be the “gathering place for Pinang lovers” [7].

![Figure 1](image1.png) ![Figure 2](image2.png)

Figure 1. Enlarged detail from an oil painting of Batavia 1627 ca. 1919-1921. Left side face North. (Source: Westfries Museum)

Figure 2. Enlarged detail from a 1762 map of Batavia. Left side face north (Source: Nationaal Archief)

Paintings made by Dutch painter based in Batavia, Johannes Rach in Figure 3 shows the gate from inside the castle ground, and Figure 4 from the Prince Street at south. Prince St. created axis from the Castle to the town hall and its square in the south. Reviews of the images stated that it was not built for security reasons as apparent in the decorations and the lack of guns. Soldiers are painted in the inside of the castle, while on the outside are mere grenadiers. The two buildings on both side of the gate were barracks which were constructed as part of the extension of the castle as an administrative / governmental area while defenses were placed outwards, focusing on the security to the outskirt of Batavia [8]. The gate underwent its first transformation under the reign of Governor General Herman Willem Daendels, in office 1808-1811. Daendels was appointed by French ruled Dutch, the Kingdom of Holland under Louis Bonaparte (1806-1810), with main tasks: to save Java Island from the British, to clean up corruption in the company, and to reform economic system [9].

Daendels was known to be ‘very French’ in terms of military and politics even before Netherlands fell to the French. His view was anti-aristocratic and he despises feudalism, for example he thinks of Javanese rulers and kings as Dutch officials instead of monarch of their own [10]. He demolished the former Batavia castle, including the warehouses, shipyard, complete neighborhoods, and churches; as well as the walls surrounding the city [11]. He moved the new administrative center in Weltevreden, an hour’s walk from the old town hall in Batavia. The formerly crowded city gradually lose its population as the Europeans are moving south, avoiding the unhealthy environment [12]. The Amsterdam Gate was the only structure left from the former castle site, and it was probably because the gate was considered as part of the city instead of the castle based on its location. The town hall which was in an axis with the gate still functions as prison and government office which one of the
duties was to manage foreign people looking for residences [12]. By leaving the gate, the axis to the town hall remains visible from the port, welcoming visitors who came to the city.

Figure 3. The Castle Gate northern view ca. 1770 (Source: [8])

Figure 4. The Castle Gate southern view ca. 1775 (Source: Atlas of Mutual Heritage)

The buildings on both sides of the gate now demolished, as well as the upper level of the gate itself. What remains are the first level of the arch, and the semi-circular structure once connected the buildings on both sides. From Figure 5 we see that the buildings were replaced by a row of steel and stone fence. After losing its second level, the form of gate at the center now similar to triumphal arch, one famous one was built in France 1806 to commemorate the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Triumphal arch itself was originally Roman, a stand-alone structure built to celebrate war victories. It was used primarily to welcome generals with their troops marching back to the city from the war zone in a festive attitude. The Roman triumphal arches are characterized by two walls with columns connected with an arch on the top. Usually a text informing what event the arch was built for is stated in a plaque attached to its wall [13] but this is uncertain in the case of Amsterdam Gate.

Figure 5. The Amsterdam Gate ca. 1857-1872 viewed from the north (Source: Tropenmuseum)

Then semi-circular walls and the fence on both side of the gate were demolished to make ways for the first horse-tram line running from “the northern end of Prinsenstraat – Molenvliet – Harmonie” established on April 20th 1869 [14]. Together with the statues and other decorations, this transformation has made the appearance of the gate to be more similar to the triumphal arc. Figure 6 and 7 shows the tramrail making its route on the sides. The side by side images presents the difference between the north and south, with the north being more decorated compared to the south. Urns, Roman god and goddess of wars statues, and the Corinthian pillars at southern side as well as the Doric at the northern side, are considered as the triumphal arch characteristics. The site where the gate stands however is not as grand as how it was then. The area, named Kota Intan, was said to be a
gloomy and messy place. Once the gate together with a drawbridge was the access to the Castle Square, then it became the only structures left which proves the Castle Square existence [15].

![Figure 6. Northern view c.1890 (Source: KITLV Digital Collection) and Figure 7. Southern view 1910 (Source: Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands)](image)

The statues in the gate then were destroyed by the Japanese in 1940s, who occupy the Dutch East Indies to secure oil supply after the US oil embargo even though the country was not included in their initial war scheme. This invasion to the East Indies, despite of pure economical greed, was justified by their propaganda on colonialism; that colonialism was basically a tiny group of colonist living in luxury with the cost of the natives / Asian. Being part of the same race the Japanese believed that it was their duty to invade colonized Asia to safe fellow Asian, making “man” out of them again [16]. This thought was spread to the invaded countries as well by promising them their anger and past loses will be avenged [17]. Destroying the statues was a symbolic act based on this propaganda.

Later in the 1950/51, the gate was finally demolished by the Government of the newly independent Republic of Indonesia, to accommodate traffic [14]. Batavia, now Jakarta, in that period has received migrants, the prediction was of over a hundred thousand people per year since 1948 from rural areas. These people believed they would receive a better living in the city despite the urban poverty [18] and by this Jakarta was preparing herself to welcome another influx of migrants for many years to come. This means the city needed to provide settlements to accommodate its new citizens. After the independence, the country also changed Dutch street and place names into Indonesian – usually using the names of national heroes yet Prince Street where the gate was located changed into Jalan Cengkeh (“cengkeh” = cloves). The regular name might also be the factor of the demolition, as the structure itself was not seen as something important even more something that should be kept.

4. Discussion
The interpretation of events surrounding the gate is summarized in the following table.

| Year       | Architectural Event                                                                 | Actor  | Hermeneutic Interpretation and the States of mind                                                                 |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1743       | Construction. Multi storied buildings connected with a semi-circular structure in the middle and the two storey gate in Rococo style. | van Imhoff | Business establishment era. The gate as an entrance to the city. The architecture represents wealth of the 18th century business empire and the sovereign power of the East Indies. |
| Ca. 1808 - 1811 | Removal of buildings on both side and the second level of the gate. Semi- | Daendels | Colonization era. The sizeable and decorated structure was reduced leaving its lower part as a symbol of eradication of the corrupted company and |
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6. Conclusion

The interpreted meaning of the Amsterdam Gate of Batavia presents the position of the ruling government as follows. The gate’s construction in mid-18th Century under Gov. General van Imhoff marked the castle’s expansion to the south. The expansion, the axis with town hall, the Rococo architecture, and the sizeable buildings attached to the gate can be seen as a statement of the company’s wealthy business empire. The gate structure was reduced by Gov. General Daendels in early 19th Century from multi level rectangular building crowned with a dome into a single level wall structure similar to triumphal arch. This is considered as statement against the company’s tradition also that the company has colonized larger area instead of living in a secluded manner near the port only. The triumphal arch was an ode to the French’s Empire Style, in which Daendels was a supporter. The triumphal arch theme was enhanced by the removal of semi-circular wall to provide space for tramrail in 1869. Even though this is a more practical approach to support the town’s development, nonetheless it was done with regard to the historical aspect; at the very least the triumphal arch. At this point of time the gate has lost its function as a land border or a protection and instead it has become a memorial. The removal of the Roman god statues by the Japanese in 1940s was merely a sentiment. It did nothing towards the gate structure but has reduced its value as the triumphant symbols are removed. Lastly, the gate demolition in the 1950s under the Government of Republic of Indonesia is their way to be independent from the remnants of the colonization. This symbolic movement was covered by the practical needs of the road system’s modernization.

The Hermeneutic approach analysis on this subject revealed the relation between the gate’s physical creation, transformation, and demolition, with the state of mind behind them. From a display of wealth and power, the gate was transformed into a symbol of new era and a sentiment to another empire, then reduced as a memorial, then another sentiment in a war, and was demolished under the pretense of modernity of the newly independent country. Future research on this subject may focus on investigating other colonial structures which underwent similar transformation or to use other approach than Hermeneutic to explain the phenomenon behind the transformation of the Amsterdamse Port te Batavia.

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