

Bandung's Parisian Influence Seen in Art Deco Style



Wahyuni Kamah

Nicknamed by the Dutch as *Parijs van Java* (The Paris of Java), Bandung lives up to its namesake's reputation, attracting tourists — foreign and domestic — with world-class art, factory outlets, culinary delights and inexpensive garments.

Others have attested to the West Javan capital's Parisian influence in seedier respects, as one Twitter user did recently — describing Bandung as a “a city full of trash and whores.” (An irate mayor pledged to report the user to police for slander, provoking a public outcry.)

Less often do visitors pause to consider Bandung's architectural influences, which betray a heritage tracing back to Paris, the birthplace of Art Deco.

In fact, Bandung ranked among the top 10 World Art Deco cities in a list published by Globetrotter magazine in 2001. It is the one and only Asian city on the list, boasting one of the last and largest collections of Art Deco buildings in the world.

Art Deco is a style of visual design that is characterized by geometric shapes, color and ornamentation. It evokes early 20th-century modernism and often utilizes upscale materials. The Empire State Building is among the most well-known examples, in terms of architecture. But finding local expertise on Bandung's Art Deco influence proved difficult.

Even a Bandung native like my driver, Adi, admitted, “I am not familiar with all these [Art Deco] buildings, and I bet my other friends are not either.”

I started my Art Deco building tour on Jalan Asia Afrika, where most the Art Deco buildings are well-preserved. The street was initially called Groote Postweg, which translates from Dutch as the Great Post Road. Bandung's segment of Groote Postweg was just one part of a much larger road build under an epic construction project by Governor General Herman Willem Daendels in early 1800s, connecting Anyer in modern-day Banten to Panarukan in East Java.

Two historic Art Deco hotels still stand on this street, Grand Hotel Preanger and Savoy Homann. Both hotels cemented their place in history in 1955, when they accommodated delegates to the Asian-Africa Conference, which was an important step toward the Non-Aligned Movement.

Hotel Preanger was formerly a hotel with Dutch Indische architecture. It was renovated in 1929 by C.P. Wolff Schoemaker, a famous Dutch architect born in Indonesia. He was assisted by his student, Sukarno, then Indonesia's first president. The hotel was later expanded with a more modern addition. However, the original hotel's facade of horizontal lines and geometric boxes remains unchanged.

The Savoy Homann was originally a small old hotel of Dutch Indische archi-

Art Deco emerged in mid-1920s Paris, and its architectural influence remains visible in Bandung, one of the top 10 Art Deco cities in the world. JG Photo/Wahyuni Kamah

ecture belonging to a German family, the Homanns. In 1937, Dutch architect Albert Aalbers renovated it into a building with a streamlined, modern architectural style. It has a horizontal balcony with a curving canopy. The hotel's name was later changed into the Savoy Homann.

The most historical Art Deco building on the street was originally called Societeit Concordia, erected in 1895 as a clubhouse for rich people in and around Bandung. After a renovation in 1926 by Architects Van Galen Last and Schoemaker, the building had a name revamp just before the Asia Africa Conference was held: Sukarno changed its name to Gedung Merdeka, or Independence Building. It now houses a museum commemorating the Bandung conference.

Less than 100 meters away is Gedung Bale Sumur Bandung, so called because of a well considered sacred on the building's ground floor — which now serves as electricity company PLN's local headquarters. Designed by Schoemaker in 1933, its Art Deco features are well-preserved.

Another Bandung street that bears witness to the city's Art Deco past is Jalan Braga. According to historian Haryoto Kunto, the word “braga” comes from the Sundanese word “ngabaraga,” meaning to show off (a dubious assertion, since “brag” has been attested in English as a French-derived word since 1377). In the 19th century, it was an area for the people to see and to be seen. At the same time, the road was reconstructed with cobbled stones and its name was changed from Pedatiweg to Bragaweg.

The 800-meter-long Jalan Braga was Bandung's commercial top area where people shopped, ate, watched movies and did business. On Jalan Braga we can find the first cinema in Bandung, Majestic, which was built by Schoemaker in 1925. This Art Deco architecture has a local flavor where Schoemaker put Batara Kala on the top facade of the building. Batara Kala is the god of the underworld in Javanese mythology.

The eye-catching Art Deco building on Jalan Braga housed the former DENIS Bank. The building now belongs to Bank Jabar Banten (BJB). It was designed by Aalbers in 1935. Like the Savoy Homann, DENIS Bank also has a curving facade and vertical tower. Aalbers was asked to renovate the hotel because his bank's architectural design was impressive.

A former oil factory is another attraction on Jalan Braga. First built in 1917 for N.V. Olie Fabrieken Insulinde, Schoemaker renovated the building in 1921, which later assumed several different functions and now houses the BJB Syariah office.

The glory of 1920s-era Jalan Braga as the center of exclusive shops and boutiques has now largely disappeared beneath the dominance of large commercial signs for factory outlets. But beneath are beauties of Art Deco architectural design, waiting to be seen.



I am not familiar with all these [Art Deco] buildings, and I bet my other friends are not either

Adi,
Bandung native



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