

The Ideal House in the Colony Decorating Tips for the Houses in Dutch East Indies

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ABSTRACT

Houses for the Dutch people at the end of the nineteenth century Dutch East Indies were mostly provided by the Public Civil Work Department or *Burgerlijke Openbare Werken* (BOW). The Dutch newcomers had to do something to the house to create a comfortable living for the family so they could live in harmony. They needed to consider that because living in the colony was different from their previous life in Europe. This paper discusses how did the Europeans—especially the women—decorate their houses in the colony. I use the theory of comfort by Peter Vink, the household manual book in Dutch East Indies *Ons Huis in Indie* by Johanna Catenius, and *Het Leven van de Europeesche Vrouw in Indie* by Jans Kloppenburg Versteegh as a source of decorating tips. The discussion is focused on the development of houses in the Dutch East Indies during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth-century and its relation to the decorating style for the house. This research aims to understand the colonial houses in the Dutch East Indies by looking at its interior decoration.

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1. Introduction

Living in a colony such as the Dutch East Indies was not easy for the Dutch people, especially the woman. Thil Delprat, who left Netherland in 1879, could not imagine how to live in the Dutch East Indies. She was not the only one; many Dutch women arrived in the colony for work or became a wife of government civil servants or businessmen. The newcomers who had just come to the Dutch East Indies usually complained about the warm weather and strange insects [1]. The climate was different from Europe, and they had to make some adjustments to adapt to the tropical land. They also had to face a new social life and local culture. They needed to learn the colony so they could live in harmony.

Since 1870, the colony was experiencing the Liberal Economic System, which had an impact on the increasing number of foreign business people and workers in the country [2]. The Dutch colonial government opened free access to the private sector to start a business in the colony to raise its economic growth. 80% of the European population was concentrated in Java. The number of European people who lived in the Dutch East Indies from 1903—1940 was increased from 3.000 to 15.000 people [3]. Female emigration between 1890 to 1920 had risen by 300%. The number of Dutch-born women or *totok* (not Indies-born) in the age of 30 to 39 was dominating the group. The increasing number was due to a colonial policy that forbidden Dutchman from marrying the native woman. It was also indicated that there were some available jobs for Dutch women in the colony. There was a new policy at the

beginning of the 20th century that had known as Ethical Policy. In this era, education for every class was significant, including education for women and the locals [4].

When the European arrived in the Dutch East Indies, they needed a place to live. They usually got a house from the company or government, and some had to rent a house. The newcomers struggled to adapt to their “new but old” house. As a response to this, some household manual books intended to help them. The books promised that what looked uninteresting outside the house would change to be a pleasant feeling after the homeowner entered it, as long as they could change the boring layout and dull space with some decorating tricks [5].

This paper discusses the house decoration in the Dutch East Indies at the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Architecture in that era had started to change because of the arrival of the professional architects due to the liberal economic system in the colony. The architectural changes had often been discussed; however, what was happened in the house interior and domestic life was rarely discussed. Women as the ones who responsible to the house are the main subject of discussion. At the end of the paper, it will answer: how did the Dutch women decorate the existing houses in the colony, based on the household manual books in Dutch East Indies? The purpose of this paper is to understand the ideal colonial house by looking at its interior decoration. The research uses a qualitative method by analyzing the historical sources that are related to house decorating. I use household manual books in the Dutch East Indies as the primary sources of house decorating tips.

2. Material and Methods

The household manual book has already existed in Europe since the nineteenth century. For

example, the book, which is titled *Suggestions for House Decoration* by R & A Garrett, published in London, 1879. The household manual book was made because creating a beautiful house required much hard work. The women or homemakers in England, who were responsible for the house, needed help to clean and decorate their house. Based on their needs, some house experts set up special codes for behavior at home. They began to develop a standard of taste and design for the home [6]. The standard was based on the writer's education and experiences, such as the color scheme, furnishing style, and furniture arrangement. The manual should be practical and easy to follow by the housewives. Today, the manual book not only informed the household standard; we can learn many things.

There were some household manual books in the Dutch East Indies, for example, *Ons Huis in Indie* (1908) and *Het Leven Van de Europeesche Vrouw in Indie* (1913). These manual books covered all the household needs—from how to choose the house to how to treat the servant—but this paper will only discuss the topics related to architecture and space, such as interior decoration tips, selecting furniture, and the changing of the house style. For the technical work like house construction or plumbing, the writers said, did not explain in detail in the book because it was not for the women. Instead, they could give it to the professionals.



Figure 1: The manual books in Dutch East Indies, *Ons Huis in Indie* (Johanna Catenius-Van der Meijden) and *Het Leven Van de Europeesche Vrouw in Indie* (Jans Kloppenburg-Versteegh).
Source:

Discussion about comfort was the main topic of the books, especially in decorating the house. In the domestic context, comfort in the book is related to privacy, convenience, leisure, and ease. However, it is not easy to define a comfort itself because comfort has evolved through history, in response to social, cultural, economic, and technological influences [7]. Comfort for one person is not the same as the others because they have different backgrounds and experiences.

To understand the house comfort in the decorating, I need to interpret what kind of comfort that the writers wanted to tell the reader. I discussed the interpretation of comfort with the theory of comfort and design by Peter Vink, an expert in comfort (well-being), performance, and health from TU Delft [8]. The word “comfort” has its root from the Old French “force” means to strengthen [9]. As a verb, comfort means to give strength or hope [10]. As a noun, comfort is a strengthening aid that supports something. It also can be a feeling of relief or encouragement and content well-being. The other meaning of comfort as a noun is a satisfying and enjoyable experience. The different purpose is the one who gives or brings comfort.

All the meaning of comfort suggests some favorable conditions that support a person to have a well-being life. Vink has made a resume about the definition of comfort from the dictionaries; he said that comfort or comfortable means that you do not have to worry too much. He also said that comfort is a subjective phenomenon; it depends on the individual to react to the product. It means the construction of comfort may vary because it depends on the individual experience. Vink said that history is one of the elements that influenced the level of comfort [11]. To find the discourse in house decorating and domestic life, I learn from the colonial history archives in Dutch East Indies at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century—mainly that related to housing and women..

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Houses for the Dutch

The wave of migration from Dutch to its colony in Dutch East Indies was detected in three phases, military movement (1815—1906), Creole migratory circuit (1850—1940), and expatriate migration (1919—1940). In the early years of the twentieth century, most immigrants came to the colony to respond to a growing economy in a liberal economic system. The Europeans who had just arrived in the Dutch East Indies usually got the house from the government, their company, or sometimes they had to rent a house. The existing houses Dutch East Indies were made by BOW (*Burgerlijke Openbare Werken*) [12]. They rarely bought a house because renting was dominated by the housing market, even the kampong houses [13].

The colonial government established BOW or the Department of Public Civil Work in 1855. This department had a responsibility to maintain, repair the existing building, and build new construction—from design until its implementation [14]. Not only for a public

building but also the houses for staff. Before BOW existed, military engineers helped the officers to build their houses. Akihary noted that in the 19th century, there was some private construction sector, but they were not the real architect or contractor. Everyone who had experience in the building can claim themselves to be a house maker. There was no professional architect in Dutch East Indies before the twentieth century.

House style in the mid-nineteenth century Dutch East Indies was not talked about. In general, the building was dominated by Neo-Classical style that had been popular in Europe revival movement during the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The design's characteristic was white plastered structures with porticos or colonnades (mimicking the classic greek architecture) with classical details. It had a large overhanging roof, and there was a large opening for ventilation [15]. However, when the style was applied in the Dutch East Indies, the engineers could interpret it in a freeway. It might result in inaccuracies in detail and proportion of the building.

European newcomers usually would feel strange with the existing house when they saw it for the first time. Catenius noted what they were thinking about their current house: *...from outside, it looked like a massive house with dark-colored wall hanging, thick draperies at the door, a narrow space.* It then became the main reason why she made an efficient manual book about house decorating.

The problem of the existing house was the Europeans did not consider it as a comfortable house. It happened because of some reasons, such as BOW engineers, as the housemaker did not have an artistic background. In colonialism, the engineers had to put cost-efficiency and building functions in the first place [16]. They did not consider the comfort or aesthetic as an essential aspect of the building. The other reason was the engineers built the house

according to the building construction manual, for example, *Bouwkundigen en Industrielen in Nederlandsch Oost Indie*. The manual was made to fulfill the high demands of building in the Dutch East Indies. With the manual, the engineers did not need to design every building to speed up their work. However, they could make a minor improvisation if they met a different contour on the site.



Figure 2: Middle class house by BOW, 1910 Source: *Bouwen*, 1923

At the beginning of the 20th century, BOW had significant development in its organizational structure; there was an establishment of *Afdeeling Gebouwen* (Building Department) in 1912. Architect Simon Snuyf headed the new division. It was said that the new department was the result of many critics from the Dutch architects about the poor quality of building design in the Dutch East Indies. For example, PAJ Moojen criticizes BOW about the lack of architecture education for engineers responsible for designing the public building in Dutch East Indies [17]. He then suggested BOW create the architecture division. The new division was causing a significant development in building design; for example, the Neo-Classical style was replaced by modern rationalist design, prioritizing building function, and using new technology in materials.

The changing of building style in that era was also in line with the arrival of a professional architect from Netherland. They started to practice in several big cities in the Dutch East Indies, like Batavia, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, and Malang [18]. They brought modernism in building design, including the houses. The first professional architect in Dutch East Indies is Marius Hulwitts from Fermont and Cuypers bureau. P.A.J. Moojen came in 1903; he built several houses in Menteng.



Figure 3: A modern house in Batavia, designed by P.A.J. Moojen
Source: *Ons Huis in Indie*, 1908

At the same time, Catenius noted a changing style between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The new house was turned to be a very European style. She added the term “modern,” to mention the new house style made by a Dutch architect. The polished furniture was no longer wanted; natural polished was considered as modern. Since the era of liberalization in the economy, there was a transition when the private sectors started to open their business in the Dutch East Indies. The successful businessmen grew up to be the new elite middle class in the city that brought a new style and lifestyle, including their houses. They wanted to upgrade their house to maintain their status and existence. In modern society, the style was necessary, it helped the individuals to find their own identity. The style would make the individual uniqueness general,

but through style, the individual could get his/her existence in the mass [19].

The new house style was then changing the family lifestyle. The new style had a smaller house size, a simple design, and easy to maintain, even the homeowner does not need a servant. The older house was no longer suited for the Dutch because it was too large and expensive because the design had a large tile roof, colonnaded veranda, and a spacious garden. Catenius called the change as a *style reform* because what people thought about their house comfort was different from the previous era.

3.2. House Decorating Tips

Tagline “My House is My Castle” had been introduced in the household manual book in Dutch East Indies. It was indicated a house as the best place for homemakers among the other places. However, the existing house was not easy to decorate. First, it usually had a square or symmetrical house plan. In her book, Catenius told the reader what looked uninteresting outside the house would change to be a pleasant feeling after they entered the house if the homeowners decorated their house. The example of a decorating tip was: “..we need to change the boring house layout and dull space with some decorating tricks, such as put a valuable painting in the large plain wall and arrange the furniture in asymmetrical order. It was also challenging to decorate because of the large size of the house created a big empty room inside. The challenge was to fill the entire room with a lot of stuff.

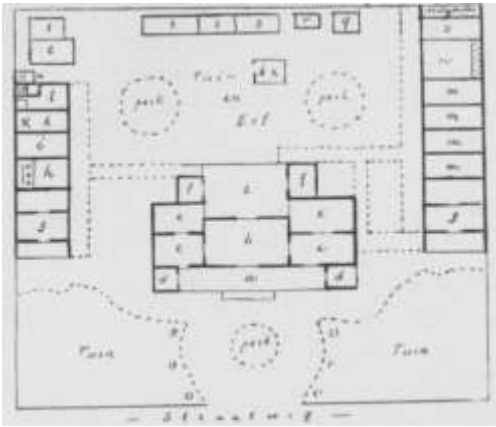


Figure 4: A gentleman's houseplan, a: front gallery, b: central gallery, c: back gallery
Source: *Ons Huis in Indie*, 1908

There was also a problem; for instance, it was not easy to find furniture and decorating items for interior in the local market. Buying furniture in the nineteenth century Dutch East Indies was hard because its variety was very limited. The Europeans could buy the furniture in the Chinese shop or join the house auction. The auction or *vendutie* was common in that era when the homeowner had to move or leave the country; they usually sold their furniture, the glassworks, and other household products because it would be very expensive to be taken to the new place [20].



Figure 5: A modern interior design for dining room.
Source: *Ons Huis in Indie*, 1908

The European usually bought furniture gradually, depending on the availability in the shop. The problem was every time the new furniture was released, it often had different

styles with the previous one. Europeans called the situation “chaos” when they found this fact because it was different from the condition in Europe. She said that if the homeowner had enough money, they could go into several shops and directly match it. However, a different style and color of the furniture in a room were also not easy to handle. She suggested that the reader creatively match the furniture, such as by grouping furniture in the same tone colors or by choosing the decorating element in the same theme for all furniture.

Since it was not easy to match the different furniture and other interior elements, the more natural way was to buy or to make decorating stuff, such as put some lacework and crochet tablecloth on the furniture. Crocheting was popular since the nineteenth century among Dutch women that had been brought to Dutch East Indies. Catenius called them *petit reins* or little things that looked less important but actually could create comfort. It was only a small thing but could provide a very high level of coziness that contributed to the whole pleasant home. Versteegh also encouraged the readers to make their decoration pieces in their spare time [21].

Decorating a house was not a simple activity because the homeowner needed to understand the tropical climate, for example, in using the carpet to enhance the interior. It would be great, but try not to pick the thick rug. The thick carpet was luxurious in Europe, but it would be dusty and in Dutch East Indies dump. Catenius recommended the local product, such as rattan or woven mats, because it was neat and had a shiny look, as she had found in Japan.

In decorating the house, the woman was the one who responsible for decorating and cleaning their house. It was a part of the ideal family concept in the Dutch East Indies by the colonial government. At the end of the nineteenth century, the government began to encourage the

marriage of its officials with Dutch women to reduce the common concubine lifestyle that was popular among the Dutchmen in the previous era [22]. With the new concept, the goodness of the house was provided by the “legal” wife. Once Dutch women got married, they should learn how to decorate the house and educate their house servants. In her manual book, Versteegh emphasizes that the servants were doing all the household work. Dutch women also considered weak due to the tropical climate, so they had to depend on the native servant to help them run households [23]. However, they still had a responsibility to make sure the household works were done well.

The ideal family concept had strengthened the house as a leisure place for men away from work. In the nineteenth-century household manual book, every decoration standard for a home should create a house that would be the antithesis of the work environment. The argument was in line with the impact of the industrial revolution that had separated the human roles by its gender. The domestic role was for women, and everything connected to the public was the role of man [24]. The colonials portrayed the women (both Europeans and locals) were not educated enough to be interested in any aspect of life beyond the domestic life.

3.3. Creating Comfort in the Tropics

Arthur S. Walcott, a British man, wrote about his experience while traveling to the Dutch East Indies in 1914. He said that the houses in Weltevreden (Batavia) had already considered health and comfort. The roomy dwellings with garden had impressed him, especially the coolness and comfort of the house that became the top priority for Dutch people in their colony. He then compared it with people on the British colony that less healthy than the Dutch people [25].

Health and comfort were becoming prominent in Dutch East Indies due to the tropical climate that could create discomfort for living, and even the worst, it was causing an outbreak of the plague. According to Vink, comfort is often mentioned in climatic research regarding thermal comfort in the building. Two factors, environmental and personal influence thermal comfort. Humans cannot control the environment factor, such as air temperature and humidity, but they can adapt to the existing condition. The Dutch who lived in the colony had learned from what happened in the eighteenth-century Batavia. The famous “Queen of the East” of old Batavia had turned into “White Man’s Grave” because the citizen left the city due to horrible plague that had caused half of the population to die. People have believed it was due to unhealthy living because the Dutch, in their old days, built a closed, well-sealed house and created high humidity that made them sick.

The decorating suggestions in Catenius’s book also correlated with a tropical climate and its impact on people’s health. She wrote the comfort inside the old house was possible to make even though there was tropical heat outside the house. Her first tip was the homeowners should pay attention from the basic, such as the house safety and security, the completeness of the house (doors, windows, rooms), and the water resource. Without considering the basics, it would be impossible to create comfort in the house. Second, Catenius told the reader about some decorating problems that might appear, and she gave some advice to deal with it. Discussion about house problems and how to avoid or fix it dominated the content of the manual book.

To create comfort as a response to the tropical heat, Catenius recommended the reader to decorate the front and back gallery (veranda). The front and back gallery has first existed since the eighteenth-century *landhuis* (garden house). The room was a half-open space in the front or back part of the house. People created this space to get shade from the sunshine and feel the fresh and cold air because it was too hot to be inside the house. During the day, the family liked to spend their time in the veranda, even their breakfast and lunch were also done in the back gallery [26].



Figure 6: A back gallery of Jutting's family house in Batavia

Source: *Collectie Tropenmuseum*, 1897

To decorate the front gallery, Catenius suggested putting an oval marble table in which the size depends on the gallery space. Around the table, she wrote, set six or eight rocking chairs. The wooden rocking chair was so popular in Dutch East Indies in the nineteenth century. She continued, “..in the corner, a homeowner can put a marble or mahogany coat hanger (*kapstok*) or large palms in Japanese flowerpots. Put a few statues at the back wall then complete it with chandelier lamp above the center table...” The arrangement of the front gallery was formal for guest reception. Meanwhile, the back gallery was used for family activities, so the decoration was less formal, but still fully furnished.

Not only discussed comfort in a tropical climate, but Catenius also told the reader about the tropical disease and some insects or other wild animals around the house that threatened the human. She added the information on how to prevent the diseases by keeping the house clean and healthy.

3.4 Preventing the Discomfort

Issues about health at the end of the nineteenth century Dutch East Indies had a strong connection with hygiene and cleanliness to avoid the tropical disease. Dutch people were trying to prevent the disease by being clean; they started to take a bath twice a day. The Government also created the cleanliness standard for houses and their environment. In 1911, HF Tillema introduced his research in Dutch East Indies houses. Tillema was a pharmacist and the owner of a drinking water company, later he became an official who created the city planning. He had documented the house types and planned in some regions in the Dutch East Indies [27]. In his book, he wrote that the contagious disease in the tropics is usually spread by the bad sanitary in the house. De Bruijn also revised the 1892's template book for building in 1927 to add healthy living materials. Since that, the cleanliness and house sanitary system was the most important in housing, and it had an impact on decorating the house.

The decorating tip by Catenius seems to try to create comfort in the house by avoiding the discomfort that might occur. She started with her experience in the house's problems and warned the reader to anticipate it. Vink said the discomfort in any product design should be prevented or reduced to avoid the negative effect on humans as the user. Instead of measuring the aspect of comfort, it is possible to take a look at the discomfort which usually harmful to humans. The discomfort that Catenius wrote was mostly related to the tropical climate; for example, the high level of

humidity in the Dutch East Indies could grow the green fungus in the wall. The green fungus in the wall was considered a problem that can cause discomfort. It should be avoided because the fungi could damage the wall as well as lead to the family health problem. For humidity issues in the house, the homeowner had to open the windows regularly to let the fresh air and sunshine went through the house.

Another example in response to avoid discomfort caused by tropical climate was when she told the reader about the importance of the front and back gallery (verandah) in the house. The gallery or veranda was a comfortable achievement for the Dutch people to handle the tropical heat problem in the Dutch East Indies. They enjoyed spending most of their daytime here.

Health issues in the Dutch East Indies also had been mentioned in the manual book. For example, she wrote about Tjilatjap (Cilacap, Central Java) in 1884 that was highly unhealthy due to mysterious fevers that had infected the people. She said one of the causes was the canary trees that were too big, and it had closed the air circulation to the house. It also blocked the sunlight and made the house dump. High humidity in the tropic was considered a problem that caused the house to become unhealthy. It would stimulate the fungi to grow in some parts of the house. It also caused health problems for the residents, such as fever. Catenius wrote that the homeowners should understand the important thing when choosing the house concerning family health. First, they need to check the trees and the distance between trees and houses. After that, they should pay attention to the window openings; she said every room must have at least one open access to let through the fresh air.

The Government had started to pay attention to household skills and woman education in 1918. They built two formal education institutions, named *Huishoudschool*, which was established

in Bandung and Yogyakarta [28]. *Huishoudschool* or household school was a particular school for girls that had different educational materials than public schools. The material was all about domestic knowledge, such as cooking, washing the dishes, laundry, and ironing. The household school's purpose was to prepare the girls with proper skills and knowledge to manage their future house and family. The Government's household education program for a woman was a realization of the ideal family concept to improve the colonial society.

4. Conclusion

Dutch East Indies' houses at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were considered by European newcomers—particularly the women—as an old house and challenging to decorate. The household manual books were made to help them by sharing house decorating tips to create a comfortable and ideal house. The house decorating tips was a reflection of the colonial thoughts about the ideal house and domestic life in the Dutch East Indies. Women/ homemakers provided the house's goodness for the whole family with help from local servants.

Creating comfort in Dutch East Indies' houses was mostly done by preventing the problems or other discomforts. According to the decorating tips, we knew that the first thing a European should do was to understand the condition of the existing house. They needed to list the problems; then, they had to fix them. The decorating tips for the common problem in Dutch East Indies' houses were having a strong connection to the comfort in a tropical climate context. For example, they had to avoid extreme heat, keep clean to prevent dusty environment, lower the high-level humidity, and respond to heavy rain. It also had an impact on the material choice that was suitable for the climate.

Knowledge about houses in the tropics was essential because it correlated health issues as well. Tropical diseases should be avoided by creating a clean house and healthy living. The homeowner should be aware of the tropical insects that could harm them, such as mosquitoes and flies. The decorating tips in the household manual book also recorded the changing lifestyle among the colonial society that was more dynamic than the previous era. The new style was also related to the cleanliness, and a healthy lifestyle in the Dutch East Indies that had been changing the house decoration became simpler than before.

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