Modern Architecture in the Philippines and the Quest for Filipino Style

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to clarify the characteristics of the modern Filipino style which was introduced by leading architects following World War II. The primary questions examined herein are as follows: 1) what is the background of the quest for Filipino style, 2) what are the sources of design connected with this tradition, and 3) how modernists designed structures according to their own design methods. Among leading Filipino architects, Leandro V. Locsin and Francisco Manosa are outstanding figures who embraced the possibility of a Filipino style that was based on their culture and gave clear direction to modern design.

Keywords: Philippines; Leandro V. Locsin; Francisco Manosa; regionalism; modern architecture

1. Introduction

The modern architecture of the Philippines following World War II has been strongly influenced by the modern architecture of the United States, as compared to Southeast Asian and European influences. Traces of Filipino modern architecture can be seen in the contemporary mainstream Filipino architectural scene. This phenomenon may well explain the cliché: architecture as the symbol of progress. Many building owners express their success through their buildings, which often have some relation to the progressive architecture in the United States. As a result, several cities are crowded with buildings that are direct copies of buildings in New York or Chicago. Architects that have no strong objective or talent often have great difficulty in designing buildings with a domestic touch.

The quest for Filipino style has been considered since the 1950s, in response to the strong American influence on architecture and other cultural fields, such as literature and painting. The American modern architecture of the “International Style” left no room for domestic expression. However, in the late '60s and '70s, a world-wide wave of regionalism in modern design emerged.

Regarding the domestic touch in modern architecture before World War II, although this was nothing more than a distant hope at that time, particularly in the '50s. From the '60s onwards, a number of important building structures were erected by the government to express the Filipino style. These include the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) (Fig.1), the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) (Figs.2 and 3), both by Leandro V. Locsin (1928-1994) and Tahanang Pilipino (Figs.4 and 5) by Francisco T. Manosa (aka Bobby Manosa) (1931- ). Both of these architects have been leaders in terms of the Filipino style, and, at the same time, have been influential in the architectural society.

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Filipino style, which expresses the cultural identity of the Philippines.

Fig.1. Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), Manila, 1969

Fig.2. Philippine International Convention Center (PICC), Manila, 1976

Fig.3. Entrance Canopy of PICC

Fig.4. Tahanang Pilipino (Coconut Palace), Manila, 1980

2. Traditional Model

There are considered to be two distinctive models of traditional architecture for most Filipino architects: *bahay kubo* (Fig.6) and *bahay na bato* (Fig.7). Even major modernism architects such as Locsin and Manosa have always referred to the significance of these models as the traditional architectural heritage of the Philippines\(^1\). The *bahay kubo* is the most indigenous domestic house and the *bahay na bato*, which appeared in the 19\(^{th}\) century as the domicile of choice among the wealthy populace, is a product of the three centuries of interchange between the Filipino and Spanish peoples.

The *bahay kubo* is basically a raised hut resembling a “floating mass”, similar to traditional Malaysian huts and other traditional tropical huts in South-east Asia. The Tagalog word “bahay” means “house” and the word “kubo”, derived from the Spanish word “cubo”, is “cube” in English. The main space consists of the raised floor, which is composed of two or more rooms, according to the scale of the hut. The hut is covered with local materials or products such as wood, bamboo, nipa, grass, and as such has advantages with respect to moisture prevention, and protection from mosquitoes and sudden floods due to torrential tropical rains. The wall is covered with large openings and the floor is slatted to enable sufficient ventilation. Moreover, the simple and light structure of this hut enables a group of residents to move to a location that is more beneficial. The construction of the *bahay kubo* is based solely on the local conditions, and a true and strong domestic touch can be seen in the *bahay kubo*, which has attracted the attention of modernists.

Fig.5. Interior of Coconut Palace

Fig.6. *Bahay kubo* (Source: Philippine Ancestral House)
“Bahay na bato” means “house of stone” and refers to a house that is composed of a stone-walled ground floor and a wood-structured upper floor. The bahay na bato was developed by the Spanish through virtually the same process as that of the English in the development of the bangalow of India. When the Spanish first arrived in Manila, they built their houses in the local manner. But after several fires, they built stone-structured buildings, such as churches, government facilities, and houses after the fashion familiar in their own countries. However, many of these structures suffered earthquake damage, or sometimes collapsed entirely. The Spanish then tried to adapt their buildings to the natural conditions of the Philippines. Houses in particular required thermal comfort as well as structural stability.

The composite structure of the bahay na bato has an advantage in earthquake conditions due to the light structure of the upper floor. The living quarters are on the upper floor, which contains the large “sala”, the primary central space of the house. The ground floor is usually used for storage or as a work space. The upper wooden structure has another advantage in that the use of wood allows the inside space to be ventilated by large openings. Such openings are generally composed of an upper part, which is a window with capiz shells that allows sunlight to enter the rooms, and a lower part, which runs from under the windowsills to the ground and is called the “ventanillas” (ventilation slits with sliding panels). This composite opening is quite unique to the Philippine domestic house.

3. Reference to Traditional Methods

Since the early '60s, several influential buildings adopting traditional methods have been designed mostly in the area of residential facilities, which require comfort for living and natural ventilation throughout the interior, as well as the control of sunlight. The calado and the ventanilla are typically referenced structures among Filipino modernists.

Leandro V. Locsin designed several residences and hotels adopting these traditional methods. Although he designed surprisingly modern structures, such as the Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice (Fig.8) with RC shell construction in 1955, his interest remained rooted in contemporary Filipino style. Locsin’s interest in Filipino culture is not limited to architecture, and he is particularly interested in Filipino ceramics. Locsin is famous for his collection of early ceramics and, in 1967, together with his wife Yulo, wrote a book entitled “Oriental Ceramics discovered in the Philippines”. Locsin’s deep understanding of traditional Filipino culture and his sophisticated sense of design has helped him to synthesize traditional idioms into modern architectural idioms.

His most important residential work may be his own house, which was completed in 1963. The house features a spacious interior and trellis partitions (calado). Also, in the renovation of the Manila Hotel, one of most prestigious old hotels in Manila, he designed fine calado in the reception hall so as to retain the atmosphere of the traditional Filipino style. At the time, the use of calado as a partition by a modernists was seen as somewhat unusual; however,
4. Domestic Materials

In terms of domestic building material for modern architecture, concrete is the most common material, due to its widespread use in the country. Among the three major materials used in modern architecture, i.e. steel, glass, and concrete, concrete is the only material that can be produced locally in the country. Therefore, due to reduced construction costs, reinforced concrete construction is considerably cheaper than steel construction, as steel must be imported from abroad and requires a well-trained labor force. This is one of the main reasons why Leandro V. Locsin decided on RC construction as the material of choice in his design and explored the possibilities for the application of this material throughout the course of his career.

Concrete block is also an important domestic material for modern construction and has a huge variety of both quality and usage. High-quality block can be used in load-bearing walls, but other concrete block is usually used in non-load-bearing walls. Even for external walls of high-rise buildings, concrete block is used due to the low cost. Generally, the variety of quality and usage results in construction methods that are well-adapted to local conditions.

Adobe and Pinatubo stone are other materials that are widely used by modernism architects. Pinatubo stone is an important material used to achieve a stone finish. Pinatubo stone is a kind of volcanic rock having a porous surface and complements concrete structures well. A number of fine examples of the use of Pinatubo stone can be seen in the main hall of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. This structure was designed by Locsin, who used designed this material for the interior walls of the living room of his residence.

Apart from the materials mentioned above, it may be instructive to refer to the “three A’s” of Bobby Manosa, who is an enthusiastic of the Filipino style. He explains the meaning of the three A’s with respect to the establishment of the true Filipino style: awareness of the materials available in the country; acceptance of the use of the these materials, and assimilation of these materials in our design method. Manosa used various domestic materials in his design, including coconut, bamboo, banana leaf, Pinatubo stone, and capiz shell.

The best example of a structure built using domestic materials may be Tahanang Pilipino (Coconut Palace) (Fig.4), which was built by Manosa in 1980. Manosa went to great effort to construct Tahanang Pilipino using processed coconut tree material as both structural parts and panels. As the name implies, the “Filipino home” incorporates several indigenous materials, including capiz shell, rattan, marble, bamboo, hardwoods, and textiles.

Compared to other modernist architects, Manosa is fastidious in his use of domestic materials. However, a kind of cultural resistance among various classes exists concerning the use of the same material throughout a society. For example, plyboo, a plywood-like material created using folded bamboo sticks, was devised by Manosa and has excellent strength and cost characteristics. Unfortunately, among the common people of the wealthy class, plyboo is deemed an unsuitable material for their dwellings, just as the use of galvanized corrugated iron sheet is seen as unsuitable for roofs. The difficulty of prevalence of his thoughts to the public especially in terms of the assimilation of domestic materials can be comprehended as the limit of material usage in modern architecture.

5. Quotation from Traditional Form

One of the most comprehensible expressions of domestic style is the direct quotation of traditional shape, for example the roof-line or other unique shape that is particular to an area. Sometimes architects design modern buildings with traditional roofs as a means of expressing their understanding of domestic culture. There are abundant examples of this pattern all over the world.

In the 1950s, when modernism design was in its heyday, most modernist architects were hesitant to design a pitched roof that was entirely different from the modern flat roof, which was thought of as a kind of hallmark of modern design. Even when adopting a pitched roof, they preferred the butterfly roof, which had no traditional or regional context. However, from the late 50s onwards, accompanied by post--modernism, the pitched roof has had its honor restored.

The shape of a roof always has a basic design justification. For example, in hot-humid tropical areas, protecting the interior space from heavy rain (and ash-fall in the Philippines) is essential. Beyond such
functional or practical reasons, the pitched roof has become part of the Filipino heritage. Among the early works of Bobby Manosa, the ex-Sulo restaurant, built in Manila in 1962, was thought to be an exemplar pitched roof design. The steeply pitched roof became a symbolic landmark in a newly developed region.

Leandro V. Locsin designed a number of structures for the Philippine government, such as the Philippine Pavilion of the ’70 Expo in Osaka, Japan. The pavilion had an impressive roof shape reminiscent of the traditional Filipino house. In addition, in 1984, he designed pitched roofs of huge scale for the palace of the king of Brunei.

Thus, the pitched roof has a clear function as a symbol of tradition when used to express cultural identity rather than for practical function.

6. Modernists with a Domestic Motif

One of the main characteristics of modernism design can be seen in a simplified geometric form that has no historical connotation, such as the Renaissance nor the Gothic Age. The modernism characteristic has played an important role for the wide spread of the box-like international style all over the world, especially in newly independent countries that were colonized by the West for long periods of time. In terms of the expression of modern art, the simplification of geometrical forms is related to abstraction, which has become a dominant theme in the modern art world.

The synthesis of traditional or domestic expression and abstract beauty seems difficult, but this synthesis may be possible in the Philippines. The history of strong sunlight and domestic housing on stilts is important in understanding traditional Filipino architecture. The former causes strong lighting contrast with highlights and shade that leads to design bold shape, and the latter represents the basic composition of the domestic housing that might be expressed through the modern aesthetic.

One of the early important works to blend bold shape and the abstract beauty of the traditional house was attempted by Leandro V. Locsin in his “Holy Sacrifice Chapel”, constructed on the campus of the University of the Philippines in 1955 (Fig.8). The main structure of the chapel is an RC construction shell in which the ground floor appears to float. The main goal of Locsin was to design a chapel which the greatest number of people could access freely, regardless of their position in society, and he designed a circular floor plan. At the same time, he had the idea to express the shape in connection with the traditional Filipino motif. Locsin was touching on the composition of the Bahay Cubo, which is a mass on stilts. At the time, the shell construction was a new technology not only in the Philippines but in other Asian countries as well. Amazingly, the thickness of the top is approximately 10 cm. The effect of the lightness of the structure, reminiscent of the feeling of the bahay cubo, was the objective of Locsin. This work has become a landmark of the modern Filipino style.

Locsin pursued the theme of lightly floating space, and massive floating space, throughout his career. In 1969, he designed the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) (Fig.1), which was commissioned by the government as a new cultural symbol of the Philippines. The original concept was intended for the project of the Philippine American Cultural Center in 1961, but unfortunately was never built. However, the idea of a massive foyer on the ground floor having long extended cantilevers was revived for the CCP. Locsin was given a great deal of freedom by the government so that this project was realized on a grand scale.

After designing the CCP, Locsin’s design expressed not only floating mass, but also bold shapes emphasizing his strong conviction. The Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) (Fig.2), completed in the CCP Complex in 1976, is another impressive work on a larger scale than the CCP in which the effect of the boldness is astonishing. The long extended entrance canopy is rather magical. Other examples of bold shape include the Makati Stock Exchange (1971) (Fig.9), the L.V. Locsin Building (1989), and the Ayala Triangle Tower One (1996).

After the completion of the CCP, a number of important designs, in terms of Filipino style, by other architects have been constructed. The Mendoza Batasan Pambansa Complex (1978) by Filipie M. Mendoza and the Philippine Heart Center (1974) by Jorge Ramos are examples that express the boldness in shape related to the domestic climatic conditions. Although it remains unclear as to whether these architects were influenced by the CCP, their designs are similar to the CCP. This similarity may reveal the existence of a universal modern aesthetic which can be applied to domestic motifs.

Fig.9. Makati Stock Exchange, Manila, 1971
7. Conclusion

Many Filipino modern architectures have little concern with Filipino style and are concerned primarily with American contemporary style. However, two outstanding architects, Francisco Manosa and Leandro V. Locsin, have pursued modern Filipino style and have contributed greatly to the establishment of this style. Although these architects have their own characteristic designs, they share the quest for the Filipino style. Sharing the essentials of the style with other architects, beyond region or generation, who are concerned with their own cultural identity is important in order to understand the activities of these two architects.

What is remarkable is that Manosa and Locsin were contemporary, and worked under similar conditions with respect to, for example, construction technology, economic background, and social needs, whereas most other architects were unable to achieve the Filipino style. The works of these two architects have always clearly reflected the modern condition, while demonstrating the ability to overcome problems through creative endeavor resulting in cultural adaptation. This effort clearly shows the synthesis of insights into each conditions and the necessity of design.

Francisco Manosa and Leandro V. Locsin have a deep understanding of the history of the Philippines. The post-modernism architecture of the world is supported by strong an interest in history, and it may be impossible to establish the Filipino style without such an understanding. The pursuit of architecture as the product of the Filipino culture for the sake of the enrichment of the Filipino culture is an ongoing problem for architects seeking to realize the Filipino style while designing for present-day expectations.

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Notes

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