

BAMBOO OR BRICK:  
The Travails Of Building Churches  
In Spanish Colonial Philippines

by Regalado Trota Jose  
Ayala Museum, PHILIPPINES

Introduction

Four hundred years ago this year the oldest stone church in the Philippines began to be built. The construction of this church, San Agustin in the walled city of Manila, reflects in many ways the history of church building in the country. The church was destroyed by fire three times (the first by Chinese pirates) in a span of fifteen years. The first three churches were of light materials; weary of seeing their bamboo temples end up as torches, the Augustinian friars commenced work on a stone church in 1587, completing it before 1607. In 1861 a new set of twin towers replaced the old ones; earthquakes in 1863 and 1880 so damaged one of them it had to be torn down.

The fires, earthquakes and pirates that ravaged San Agustin were just a few of the conditions with which the church builders had to contend with in three centuries of Spanish rule in the Philippines (1565-1898). In very brief and general terms, this paper will attempt to do two things. First, describe the conditions which influenced church building in the country during the colonial era. Second, describe the colonial Filipino church, whose characteristics are a result of said conditions.

I. Church building in the Philippines, 1565-1898

We may discern at least seven major considerations which affected the course of church building in the country: 1) choice of location; 2) church functions; 3) building materials; 4) natural calamities; 5) native or foreign hostilities; 6) lack of professional architects; and 7) introduction of foreign styles and influences.

1. Choice of location.- On each new townsite a chapel was erected. It was not unusual for the early towns and their churches to change sites- due to such reasons as flooding, volcanic eruption, or piratical raid -hence each new transfer was a lesson in experience, and the new church was a little bit better built than the one previous. The church being the primal institution in each town, it occupied one end of its central space, or plaza, which was bounded by the other important public buildings and the residences of the wealthier citizens. There are many exceptions to this general rule, however; it would be quite interesting to delve into the reasons for such deviations.

2. Church functions.- The roles of spiritual guide, timekeeper, vigilante, and teacher, among other things, found their physical expression in the church building proper, together with its churchyard, belltower, and convento or priest's quarters. (In the Philippines, convento refers to the residence of any priest, whether

regular or secular; its deviation from the original meaning, a monastery or a community of friars, reflects the fact that most Filipinos were christianized by friars.) Religious structures may be classified, according to their primary functions, into cathedrals, parish churches, monasteries, pilgrimage churches, cemeteries, and visitas (country chapels). Due to the scarcity of priests and to the greatly scattered population, the visita system was set up wherein small chapels were erected in far-flung communities, to be visited by missionaries every so often.

3. Building materials.- Churches derived much of their character from the materials used. The earliest temples were of bamboo or wood, roofed with thatch; to this day provisional structures and visitas continue to be built of these materials. An edifice of stone however was every friar's dream; since the native Filipinos had no experience in working with stone, the art of masonry was slowly introduced in the islands, beginning with Manila in the 1580s. Adobe (volcanic tuff, not the same as the Hispanic block of dried clay), coralstone and bricks were the most used building materials. Native technology was innovative. Tabique pampango walls were made of bamboo or wooden slats woven together then plastered with mortar. Duck eggs and plant juices are documented as having been used to strengthen the mortar.

4. Natural calamities.- The frequency of fires, the destructiveness of typhoons and the susceptability of wood to termites made builders opt, usually after the third or fourth ruin, for a stone church. The ever-present danger of earthquakes however caused them to adopt a heavy, bulky architecture. Churches developed squat proportions, thick walls and massive buttresses. High-pitched roofs hastened the downward flow of rainwater, as well as aided in the ventilation.

5. Native or foreign hostilities.- Relentless piratical or enemy raids in places such as the Visayas islands necessitated the building of fortress-churches with thick walls, ramparts, watchtowers and high windows; or else they were located in or beside forts. Some conventos were provided with slits in the windows through which arrows could be fired.

6. Lack of professional architects.- The Philippines being the farthest outpost of the Spanish empire, there was always a lack of skilled professionals such as architects. Instead, engineers and masons doubled as construction supervisors, resulting in the "naive" appearance of many churches. Instead of complex, many-sided structures, most churches adopted a simple, box-like shape, with a rectangular floor plan. The near-absence of rules in design as propagated by architects encouraged the free interpretation of Western design elements; these, combined with local and oriental motifs, led to the evolution of a rich manner of decoration.

7. Introduction of foreign styles and influences.- The Philippines occupies a unique place in art history in that numerous influences from both East and West enriched its artistic heritage. Among the best examples of this union are its colonial churches. As

the building of stone churches gradually replaced that of bamboo, most of the major styles in Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century- Plateresque, Baroque, Rococo, and Revival -began to be represented in the Philippines. These were of course modified in the Spanish and Mexican idioms and ultimately tempered by the region's own peculiarities.

Standing guard quite comfortably in front of Western-derived porticoes in many colonial churches are Chinese stone lions. Chinese influences can also be discerned in the cloud patterns on the raking cornices of some churches, while a number of belltowers- octagonal in plan, with graduated tiers -closely resemble certain Southern Chinese pagodas of the Ming dynasty. Influences from neighboring countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia are more difficult to detect, perhaps because ties between these countries and the colony were virtually non-existent under the Spanish regime.

It must be recognized however that, for all the different kinds of influences brought to these shores, local conditions and the Filipinos' own tastes selected and modified whatever elements were adopted. For example, the building of the airy espadana belfries and tall spires was made especially risky because of the frequent earthquakes, and only a handful of either structure were ever built. The Churrigueresque style, together with its corresponding estipite (inverted obelisk) column, popular for a time in Spain and especially in Mexico, hardly made its appearance here. Perhaps the predilection for towering, overwhelming decorations did not quite suit the Filipino's temperament. Or should we say temperaments, because among the colonized Filipinos there were eight major ethno-linguistic groups, along with a number of smaller groups, each speaking a language unintelligible to the other.

## II. Characterizing Colonial Filipino Churches

With the above themes in mind, we may now attempt to summarize some basic characteristics of Philippine colonial churches. We may distinguish between two types of characteristics: those related to form and those related to decoration.

### Characteristics related to form

Characteristics related to form include: 1) Central or dominant location; 2) Simple, rectangular floor plan; 3) Low, squat outline and adoption of other earthquake-proof devices; 4) Graduated, octagonal belltowers; 5) Presence of defensive constructions; and 6) other details. Characteristics related to decoration include: 1) Innovative use of foreign-introduced design elements; 2) Persistence of certain design elements over long periods of time; 3) A tendency towards flat, not fully-rounded decorative carving; and 4) In churches with stone carvings, a partiality for vegetal ornamentation.

1. Central or dominant location.- The church structure, being the material reminder of the most powerful authority in the land, occupied one end of the plaza which was often located in the center of

town. Invariably, to one side of the facade stood the belltower; to the other, the convento, which was what the Filipinos called the priest's residence, as mentioned earlier.

2. Simple, rectangular floor plan.- Throughout the three hundred years of Spanish rule, and despite all the changes in decorative style, the floor plan of the church remained virtually unchanged. The basic plan was a long rectangle, in many cases varied with the addition of a transept; chapels were rarely added, except in the monastery churches and cathedrals. This longitudinal axis served to enhance the purpose of the interior decoration, which was to focus the devotee's eyes on the main altar.

3. Low, squat outline and adoption of other earthquake-proof devices.- The outline of the facade was characteristically squat, with a shorter height in relation to its width; in many examples this was achieved by reducing or "stunting" the second level, which corresponded to the choirloft behind it. Avoiding great heights was one precaution learned soon enough to minimize damage during earthquakes.

This is why the espadana- a free-standing wall, popular in Spain and Latin America, either constructed over the facade to simulate a height greater than that of the nave, or pierced with large openings from which bells were hung -was rarely built here. In most Philippine colonial churches the silhouette of the pediment closely followed, and was only slightly higher than, the pitch of the roofline. Thick walls supported by heavy buttresses added to the "earthquake proof-ness" of the church. Masonry ceilings and domes were replaced by lighter, wooden structures. Roofs were of thatch or tile, but when light, galvanized iron sheets were introduced in the nineteenth century, parish priests lost no time in having these replace the older, heavier roofing materials. Builders saw to it that the roof was not so heavy that it needed cumbersome masonry supports and arches below. As a result, many churches although sporting wide, lofty roofs have airy, uncluttered naves, the only arches being the arco toral separating the sanctuary from the rest of the nave, and the single or triple arch by the vestibule supporting the choirloft. While on the subject of arches we should point out the peculiarly low, oval arches- not fully rounded as in Classical architecture -which were quite popular here, appearing on arcades and over doors, windows and other openings. I have not yet analyzed how these low arches evolved.

4. Graduated, octagonal belltowers.-Belltowers adjoined the facade, singly or in pairs. Perhaps to avoid the danger of crashing over the church during an earthquake, quite a number of belltowers were built separately and some distance away from the church. To be able to erect towering edifices and yet get them to withstand earthquakes, the various levels were graduated so that the largest was the lowest, and the smallest the highest. The floor plan was in many cases octagonal, in others quadrangular, and still in others octagonal over a quadrangular base. Developing into bulky, over-sized edifices, Philippine belltowers appear very similar to those of Nicaragua and the other "earthquake baroque" churches of

Central America.

5. Presence of defensive constructions.- Churches and belltowers developed thick walls not only because of earthquakes but also because of the piratical raids that were the scourge of many towns along the coastline. These churches doubled as fortresses, while belltowers were used as signal outposts and watchtowers. If the church was not sufficiently fortified, it was then built in or near a fortress.

6. Other details.- Wall surfaces were usually plastered over with stucco to prevent their being worn away, especially during the torrential rains of the monsoon. In the other regions where the building stone or brick was durable, walls of these materials were often left uncovered. The massive walls were pierced by large windows, which due to the scarcity of glass in the country were composed of panes of thin clams called capiz.

Characteristics related to decoration

1. Innovative use of foreign-introduced design elements.- As is usually the experience of a colony vis-a-vis its colonial master, only certain artistic motifs from the "old world", or the colonizer, are imbibed by the "new world" or colony; these imbibed artistic motifs are later interpreted according to the colony's own artistic perceptions, often with extraordinary results.

For example, it is interesting to note that architectural decoration on churches was usually limited to the facade and to the side entrance, the rest of the walls being bare or sparsely decorated. Carvings around doors, windows, and niches were particularly emphasized. In many instances the architectural vocabulary of engaged columns, capitals, entablatures and such were understood not as supportive or constructional devices, or as components of a structure with order and proportions, but as decorative elements and space fillers. Thus we have engaged columns that do not support anything because they don't even reach up to the cornice. There are pillars that bulge at the bottom and look like sausages. Rules of proportion (possibly the builders did not even know they existed) are utterly disregarded, as seen in columns and pilasters being stretched, stunted, or simply cut short according to the native artist's compositions.

Since studies on the selection of "old world" artistic motifs and their interpretation and incorporation in colonial Philippine church art are quite few and limited in scope, I can only present some examples of this phenomenon. It would be important, then, to analyze the process by which the colonial Filipino selected and interpreted artistic motifs because this could lead to a better understanding of colonial Philippine artistic persuasions, and perhaps even to some inferences on pre-Hispanic art (not much is yet known on early Philippine design).

2. Persistence of certain design elements over long periods of time.- Dating colonial Philippine churches by their decorative

elements could be a tricky problem. It has been pointed out that certain designs and styles such as the Baroque proved to be favorites among the local artists even as new ones were developing. For example, the rocalla forms of the Rococo first appeared in the Philippines about 1750, but they were still appearing in the early years of the nineteenth century, long after the style had become obsolete in Europe.

3. Tendency towards flat, not fully-rounded decorative carving.- Much representational carving on stone was done in low relief. The three-dimensional aspect was not fully developed nor sought after, and so pillars, faces, garlands and other decorations usually looked flattened if not a bit squashed. Perhaps this may have been due to a lack of experience in working on stone, as wood reliefs were more robust and deeply carved.

4. In churches with stone carvings, a partiality for vegetal ornamentation.- The best stone carvings in churches are those of the eighteenth century, wherein lush vegetal forms- leaves, vines, flowers, shrubs, and even whole trees -festoon facades, doors, windows and other openings. Such decorative carving diminished and almost disappeared in the nineteenth century, changing from a "sculptural" to an "architectural" mode. However a small number of churches in this late era still utilized floral motifs in their carved decorations.

Ironically, today floral carvings have virtually vanished from contemporary church architecture, which ranges from straight-lined futuristic to pseudo-colonial kitsch. Cement and hollow blocks have replaced adobe and brick, and bamboo chapels can only be seen in the hinterlands. Many old churches are deteriorating, and countless others have been deprived of their artistic treasures. I sincerely hope that for all the earthquakes, fires, raids, typhoons, and termite infestations these churches went through to be built, they will not succumb to man's ignorance and selfish desires! As the friars light the candles celebrating four hundred years of San Agustin church, may they never forget that first bamboo church.

#### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Coseteng, Alice M.L. Spanish Churches in the Philippines. np: UNESCO National Commission in the Philippines, 1972.
- Diaz-Trechuelo Spinola, Maria Lourdes. Arquitectura Espanola en Filipinas (1565-1800). Sevilla, 1959.
- Jose, Regalado Trota. "Rococo church art in the Philippines". The Art Collector (Manila), Sept.-Oct. 1984, pp. 16-22.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Simbahan: An Introduction to Colonial Church Art in the Philippines, 1565-1898. Manila: Ms., 1986.
- Kelemen, Pal. Art of the Americas: Ancient and Hispanic, .New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969.
- Klassen, Winand. Architecture in the Philippines. Cebu City: University of San Carlos, 1986.
- Kubler, George and Soria, Martin. Art and Architecture in Spain and Portugal ... Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd., 1959.
- Rodriguez, Isacio R., OSA. The Augustinian Monastery of Intramuros. Makati: Colegio de San Agustin, 1976.

BAMBOO OR BRICK: The Travails of Building Churches in Spanish Colonial Philippines. by Regalado Trota Jose ; Ayala Museum, PHILIPPINES.

The Philippines, a Spanish colony for over three centuries (1565-1898) has a wealth of colonial churches, a heritage yet barely studied. In very brief and general terms, this paper will attempt to do two things. First, discuss the conditions which influenced church building in the country during the colonial era. Secondly, describe the colonial Filipino church, whose characteristics are a result of said conditions.

We may discern at least seven major considerations which affected the course of church building in the country.

1. Choice of location.- As it was not unusual for the early towns and churches to change sites, each new transfer resulted in a church built a little better than the one previous. The church occupied one end of the town plaza which was bounded by the other important public buildings and the residences of the wealthier citizens.

2. Church functions.- The roles of spiritual guide, timekeeper, vigilante and teacher, among other things, found their physical expression in the church building proper, together with its churchyard, belltower, and convento (priest's quarters). A visita system was set up wherein small chapels were erected in the many far-flung communities, which were visited by missionaries every so often.

3. Building materials.- The earliest temples were of bamboo or wood, roofed with thatch. The art of masonry, previously unknown to the early Filipinos, was introduced in the 1580s. Native technology made innovative use of available materials.

4. Natural calamities.- Fires, typhoons and termites were the most destructive enemies of wooden churches, hence later churches began to be built of stone. The danger of earthquakes however caused them to adopt a heavy, bulky, architecture.

5. Native or foreign hostilities.- Relentless enemy raids necessitated the adoption of defensive devices such as fortress-like structures.

6. Lack of professional architects.- The supervision of construction by engineers and masons instead of architects led to the naive appearance of many churches.

7. Introduction of foreign styles.- Influences from both East and West were modified according to local conditions and tastes.

Characteristics of Philippine colonial churches may be divided into two types: those related to form and those related to decoration. Form-related characteristics include: 1- Central or dominant location in the town; 2- Simple rectangular floor plan; 3- Low, squat outline and adoption of other earthquake-proof devices; 4- Graduated, octagonal belltowers; 5- presence of defensive constructions; and 6- other specific details, such as stuccoed walls and window panes composed of capiz clams.

Decoration-related characteristics include: 1- Innovative use of foreign introduced design elements; 2 persistence of certain design periods over long periods of time; 3- tendency towards flat decorative carving; and 4- in churches with stone carvings, a partiality for vegetal ornamentation.

CAÑA O CANTO: La Construcción de Iglesias en Filipinas Durante el Tiempo Español. Por Regalado Trota José; Museo de Ayala, FILIPINAS.

Filipinas, una colonia española de más de tres siglos (1565-1898) goza de un gran tesoro de iglesias coloniales, una herencia todavía poco investigada. En frases muy breves, vamos á: 1) discutir las condiciones mas influyentes en la edificación de iglesias durante la época colonial, y 2) describir la iglesia colonial, cuyas características son los resultados de esas condiciones.

Por lo menos podemos hablar de siete consideraciones que influyeron en la edificación de iglesias en este país.

1. Selección de lugar.- Como no era extraordinario para los nuevos pueblos ó iglesias trasladar de sus sitios, cada traslación resultó en una iglesia mejor que la última. La iglesia ocupaba un lado de la plaza mayor, que era destinada por los otros edificios públicos, y por las casas de los naturales mas ricos.

2. Funciones eclesiásticas.- Las funciones de guía espiritual, marcador de tiempo, vigilante, y maestro, entre otros, se realizaron físicamente en el edificio de la iglesia, conjunto con su atrio, campanario, y convento (casa parroquial). Se inició el sistema de la visita, en que se construyeron ermitas en los barrios lejos para que se puedan visitar ocasionalmente por los misioneros.

3. Materiales.- Los primeros templos eran de caña ó madera, y techado de nipa. Como los filipinos no conocían el arte de construir con piedra, la masonería se introdujo gradualmente, empezando en Manila por los años de 1580. Se desarrolló una tecnología que usaba innovativamente los materiales indígenas.

4. Calamidades naturales.- Los incendios, tifones y termites fueron los enemigos más destructivos de las iglesias de madera; por eso las iglesias empezaban construirse de piedra. Para contrariar los terremotos las iglesias adoptaron una arquitectura ponderosa.

5. Hostilidades por los indígenas y por los extranjeros.- Por los ataques incesantes de varios enemigos de los colonos como los moros, ciertos paganos, olandeses, etc., las iglesias tenían que construir fortificaciones para su defensa.

6. Falta de arquitectos.- La dirección de obras por los ingenieros y masones en vez de arquitectos profesionales resultó en un estilo raro para muchas iglesias.

7. Introducción de estilos extranjeros. Influencias del Oriental y Occidental fueron modificadas por condiciones y costumbres del país.

Se pueden dividir los característicos de las iglesias filipinas coloniales en dos categorías: los que pertenecen a la forma y los a la decoración. Los característicos que pertenecen a la forma incluyen: 1) puesto central ó dominante en el pueblo; 2) plano rectangular y simple; 3) adopción de un perfil bajo y corto, entre otros modos contra-terremotos; 4) campanario graduado y octagonal; 5) adopción de construcciones defensivas; y 6) otros detalles particulares, como paredes paletadas, y ventanas compuestas de las hojas de la concha capiz. Los característicos que pertenecen a la decoración incluyen: 1) aplicación innovativa de los elementos de diseños extranjeros; 2) persistencia de unos elementos de diseño durante largo tiempo; 3) tendencia de la tallada decorativa de ser llano, y no muy alzado; y 4) en las iglesias que tienen decoraciones talladas de piedra, una parcialidad para la ornamentación vegetal.