

The Fabulous Spanish Heritage of Tigbauan, Iloilo

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St. John of Sahagun Church, Tigbauan, Iloilo

Tigbauan, Iloilo history, architecture, heritage. In the larger Philippine cities history has mostly been obliterated, but places like Tigbauan still retain a distinct and important historic integrity. 17th and 18th century Spanish town planning principles live on to an amazing degree in these places. These resources are a source of pride and pleasure to local residents; they can also can draw tourists and investment if well-managed and publicized.

The centerpiece of these old towns is always an imposing stone or brick mission church, probably erected centuries ago on the most prominent geographic location in the town. Invariably, there's a connected convent, one or more belltowers or watchtowers, and a fenced church atrium or plaza. Always there's a market and usually a municipio — a government office building. Taken together, these were the heart and soul of the Spanish mission town, and not just in Tigbauan or not just in the Philippines but throughout the far flung Spanish colonial empire, including hundreds of communities in Mexico, Central America and South America. Remnants even exist in Florida, California and the American Southwest. The similarities are not accidental. Colonial town planning principles were promulgated by Madrid. Before the Spanish came, residents were dispersed. The Spanish wanted to bring residents to town centers; to promote religious education, to more easily collect taxes and tribute. The goal was to have all residents to be within the sound of the church bells. Such was the mission of the early friars when they arrived in these remote islands.

How fortunate we are that the Tigbauan church complex continues as the visual and aesthetic heart of the community, but also that it remains central to the every day life of the community, as it has for over three hundred years. The church still guides the spiritual life of Tigbauan, the extensive Tigbauan market is still where essentials are bought and sold. The plaza is still used and enjoyed.

Of course it has not been easy. The buildings have been wracked by earthquakes, typhoons, fires and war. Only a percentage of the original fabric of old church remains. The National Road slices through the community, reducing the scale, tranquility and dignity of the plaza. The historic interior of the church has been lost. Modern concrete belltowers weigh on the old church. But, despite these challenges, the essence of the church has been wonderfully preserved.

When was the church built? According to the Panublion project, an 1848 report mentions that the Tigbauan church survived an earthquake in 1787. With that, and the architectural details of the church, a 18th century construction date seems likely. Hopefully, more study and research can refine this estimate.

Many of the architectural descriptions of the Tigbauan church focus on the carved stonework at the front of the church. The design is described as “Churrigueresque” or “plateresque”. These exotic terms sends just about everyone to their reference books to figure out what they mean.

Churrigueresque refers to the florid, over-decorated style practiced by a family of sculptors and architects in 18th century Spain, the Churrigueras. The style had some currency in Spain and Spanish America. One architectural dictionary describes Churrigueresque as a lavish piling up of surface ornamentation, especially stone carvings. In Mexico, the Churrigueresque ended up incorporating indigenous themes. Plateresque literally means “silversmith like”, that is intricately carved like a piece of jewelry. This type of ornate carving was popular in 16th century Spain.

The Tigbauan church does have some intricate and quite beautiful stone carving on its principal façade, facing the plaza. Were the friars enthusiasts of the plateresque style, possibly having glimpsed it in Spain or Mexico? There is another possibility. There is considerable evidence in the literature that the skilled building trades in the Visayas were dominated by Chinese craftsmen – they were almost certainly men at the time. Chinese architecture during the Ming and Qing dynasties exhibit fabulous stone carving, not dissimilar from that seen on the Tigbauan church façade.

Since it’s likely that the work was done by Chinese stone masons and stone carvers, was it the friars who wanted add something stylish to their new church working in tandem with Chinese workers who may have been trained in Qing stonework which produced what we see today. The likely conclusion is that the Tigbauan stone carving is another fabulous multicultural amalgam of influences and skills which also produced the stone carving in Miagao and San Joaquin.

A prewar photo of the church shows that it’s freestanding belltower had a very Chinese concave rafter, hipped roof of clay tile very much like what one sees on the oldest buildings in Cebu City. The photo below is very similar to that on the Tigbauan church.



Chinese style tile roof

Below are a few photos, first of the Tigbauan façade and then of some other buildings in Spain and Mexico with carved stone entrances. They're all different in their details, but do you see any family resemblances?



Tigbauan Church Entrance



Tigbauan Church Entrance - Doorway



Tigbauan Church - Entrance Stone Carving



Palacio del Marqués de Dos Aguas in Valencia, Spain



The Casa de Montejo, Merida, Mexico



If nothing else, the comparison shows is just how beautiful the Tigbauan church entrance is, even when compared to well-known international landmarks. Great credit goes to the Augustinian fathers and the residents of Tigbauan for creating this masterpiece and for their 250 years of stewardship of the church.

Further reading:

Be sure to consult the wonderful Panublion project hosted the Ateneo de Manila University. This project is a terrific resource for exploring the cultural resources of the Philippines. See the Panay and Tigbauan pages from the project:

<http://www.ateneo.edu/offices/mirlab/panublion/panay.html>

http://www.ateneo.edu/offices/mirlab/panublion/r6_tigbauan.html

Coseteng, Alicia M.L., *Spanish Churches of the Philippines*, UNESCO, 1972. Out of print but the wonderful Luce Library at Central Philippines University has a copy.

de la Costa, S.J., H, *The Jesuits in the Philippines 1581-1768*, Harvard University Press, 1961. A beautifully written history for anyone interested in Philippine history.

Ref.: <http://myphilippinelife.com/spanish-heritage-tigbauan-iloilo/>