During my first years as an Interior Design student, histories and stories of the different periods of world art and architecture fascinated and confused me at the same time. In the course of our study, we should be able to recognize the different motifs that identify the different stages and period styles. We should be familiar with the distinction between each style and how a certain period had developed, flourished and declined.

Most of us tend to be swept by foreign designs we had seen and studied. When designing, we immediately resort to books and magazines showcasing designs of other countries to get ideas. One time, a professor in one of my design classes told us to come up with a design that is Filipino. Most of us came up with designs that used bamboo, wood, rattan, and other indigenous materials. Maybe it is because when Filipino design is the issue, we would see those materials in the design. Then during deliberation, we were asked, “Why did you use those materials? Are those the only things that define Filipino style? What made you think those signifies Filipino style? How about the spatial arrangement, the design elements, how would you say that it is Filipino?” These questions struck us. In our design deliberation, the reason most of us relied on was that those materials we used were the materials used in houses built during the early periods of Philippine civilization. But, come to think of it, how about now, and the time between that early periods and now?

Philippines had struggled for centuries to establish its own identity especially in design and architecture. Unlike an isolated art in a museum, architecture is experienced by everybody. It is “subject to social, political or cultural influences”. It reflects the values of the society. Architecture is a “living history” (Hellman 4). It is a witness to the incessantly changing society.

In defining and explaining the architectural style, Lichauco said:

…it is important to consider the origins…. The development of a style should be based on a transformation of the origin. This transformation takes into account the properties of the materials to be used, the technical process that is to be applied and the function that the object is to perform (III par.12).

Using this statement, tracing the evolution of the built environment and space in the Philippines from the pre-colonial to contemporary periods will establish the ground of this study.

The pre-colonial period architecture is defined by adaptation to the environment, to the natural setting. Synthesis and contradiction characterize the native architecture during this time – “systematic clutter”, simple lifestyle but complex familial set-up. People used their means of living as basis in choosing the place to settle down. They adapt their built environment with the natural setting (Manahan 9).

Then, for several hundred years, Philippines had been under foreign rule. This had caused major transformations in the socio-cultural aspects of the country. Colonizing countries that had inhabited the Philippines had left vestiges that made Filipino culture a mixture of different cultures (Noche, par.2).
The start of Philippine Architecture was defined using the native houses during pre-colonial period or the *bahay kubo*. Every region has its own version of *bahay kubo* but share common features like the thatch roof over an area raised above ground by posts or stilts. Predominantly, these huts are consists of two basic areas, the sleeping area or the private area where occupants change clothes and store their belongings, which is raised above the ground, and a kitchen which was either an extension of the roof of the sleeping area or a detached area built on the ground (Yap, 3.1). The sleeping area is sometimes termed also as the *sala* or the living room and served a multi-function depending on the time of the day.

In the day time, when guests would be received, the sala would have a living room type setting. At meal time, a large table or a mat would be brought out where the family would gather for meals. At night, woven straw mats are laid out and the mosquito nets would be hung and the room would be transformed into a bedroom (Lichauco, II par.3).

The materials used for building are gathered from the natural environment. *Nipa* is used for the roof and sometimes as walls also, *sawali* or woven bamboo for the walls, and split bamboo or wood for the floor. These materials are tied to bamboo poles or wood frames. The space beneath the house served as storage or as a workshop, or as a place where pigs and poultry are tied or caged. The raised flooring of the house also allowed air circulation and guards the occupants from floods, snakes, and insects (Noche, par.5). As simple as it is, a *bahay kubo* served a simple lifestyle of the people during that time.

Since architecture depicts the values and customs of the people, Filipino traits are reflected in the ways they define spaces. Filipinos are family-oriented. Here in this family is where other values also take root – respect and high regard for the elderly, spirituality, and hospitality among others (Mayo 7). An extended family setting is attributed to strong kinship among Filipino families. Group dwellings are also noticed during early periods. People build their houses near their relatives’ thus, creating a small community of their own. Furthermore, during early periods, people believe in spirits of nature. Rituals to appease the spirits are performed when constructing houses. They believed in countering the forces of nature that may bring calamities and disastrous effects like floods and earthquakes through offerings of animal blood to the deities of nature.

Filipinos are said to be fond of chatting and gossiping. They make it a point to communicate with other members of the household and their neighbors. A place for conversation is typical of a Filipino house. It can be a foyer or just a bench located at the entrance of the house. Integrating the outside environment with the inside is also noticeable by creating spaces that directly lead to an open area and by providing big windows (Fajardo, I.par.22).

Then the start of the colonial period came. The more than three hundred years of Spanish colonization had tremendously affected the culture and lifestyle of the Filipinos. They bring with them new beliefs and ideologies. The most important of these is Christianity. People, from polytheists and nature-worshippers started to believe in One Supreme Being. These beliefs had been manifested in the way houses are built and towns are planned. Massive churches, convents and
fortifications are built. Families become affluent; they became “social people”. Houses are built using sturdier materials like stone and brick. These noble houses or the bahay na bato derived its form from the old bahay kubo in its spatial arrangement.

Started as purely made of stone, a Spanish period house had evolved into a wood and masonry house. It is typically consists of two floors: the ground floor is made of stone or brick and the second floor was generally wood. There is only one entrance. There is an inner courtyard, usually a grand staircase leading to the second floor, a caída or vestibule or the antesala. The antesala is used to welcome guests and to hold informal meetings. The main living room or sala is enclosed and is only used to entertain special guests on special occasions. The bedrooms open into the caída and sala. Towards the rear of the house are the dining room and the kitchen. Sometimes, the kitchen is detached from the main house typical of the bahay kubo. There is also a dispensa or pantry adjoining the kitchen. Near these areas also are the bathroom and toilet. A terrace or azotea is an important area of the house, which usually located at the back. “It is where the family could enjoy the cool evening breezes” (Yap, 4.1). The principle of open ventilation and allowing natural air circulation seen in bahay kubo is retained. Windows are big, only this time instead of awning sawali or nipa windows, there are the sliding windows made of capiz. The use of capiz softens the immense and cold appearance of masonry.

Religion also played a big part in the spatial arrangement of the house. Filipinos became so ingrained with their faith that they tend to collect things that has something to do with it. Statues of saints are collected and placed in a niche inside the house that served as the altar. These collections of saint statues, analyzing politically, can be viewed as a status symbol, a way to show off the affluence of the family.

Houses did not change immediately when the American period came. Space patterns are the same as the Spanish period houses. Then as time passes, permanent changes started to take root. Some of these are the provision of toilet and bath adjoining bedrooms and the incorporation of the kitchen into the house which used to be separated from the main structure of the house. During this time also, new technologies started to came in. The introduction of the automobile also started the building of garage (Yap, 5.1).

The Spanish influence in architecture is very much evident. When they gave up the Philippines to America, they left massive structures made up of native masonry and timber. Analyzing the scene, it can be said that Spanish influence centered on religion, as the church is the core of every town and everything radiates from it. This is not the case in the American rule. America instigated the building of schools, hospitals and capitol buildings. It symbolizes America’s aim of “nation building” (Manahan 15-17). Shortly after, reinforced concrete was used in building. The result was “a hybrid of the old Spanish masonry technology with the application of a distinctive roof line, openness in fenestrations and the mediation of wood to soften the brutality of the artificial stone” (Manahan 17).

The Japanese occupation of the Philippines during 1942-1945 also initiated a change in architectural style. They emphasized the focus on indigenous features and materials. Although this has not matured to be a recognized movement that time, it has brought new light to the value of “oriental culture” after the war (Manahan 38). The Japanese prefers empty space as an “affirmation of the Zen spirit of meditation and union with the infinite” (Sakili 45) as opposed to the Hindu’s belief that space evokes a sense of “multiplying and swarming forms leaving no area or space
uncovered” (qtd by Sakili 45). An empty space is viewed as a sign of poverty by the Filipinos. Influenced by the Hindus, Filipinos is said to have a fear of empty spaces or horror vacui. The abundance of decorative motifs expresses the festive, warmth and munificence of Filipinos. Accumulating objects that served as memorabilia depicts the Filipino’s being sentimental.

There are also other factors that brought great influence on architecture but are not usually mentioned. Before the Spanish period, trade and commerce with our neighboring Malay and Chinese brothers are existent. They brought in some of their beliefs and were absorbed by the Filipinos. They were skillful workers and artisans. They were the ones hired by the Spanish to build those stone houses.

One of the remarkable influences of the Chinese in the Filipino architecture and design is the belief in feng shui. It is the principle that the surroundings is composed of good and bad energies that affects the behavior of the people through the orientation of the house, the placement of the furniture and the composition of the elements of the house. Filipinos made this a basis of their everyday living, thus, affecting the way their environment is built and arranged.

Another important cultural influence is brought about by the Muslims. Their impact on Philippine architecture and design are very much visible in the southern part of the country especially in Mindanao and Sulu. Islam is the center of the life of every Muslims. In order to understand their concept and use of space, one should approach the Islamic doctrines.

In the arts, whether in architecture, painting, arabesque, calligraphy, ukkil carving, cloth or mat weaving, an inspired Muslim or non-Muslim artist who works under the tutelage of a Muslim ruler always seeks to create a state in which the transient and the temporal characters of material things are emphasized, and in which the vacuity of space of an object is accentuated (Sakili 47).

Transfiguration of materials is done to take away the temporary and worldly characteristics of the materials and “draw the imagination away from human nature and towards the contemplation of the Divine” (Sakili 47). Patterns of elaborate coverings hide the basic structural materials. Mother-of-pearl inlays, intricate carvings and colorful paintings “transform wood and stone into a lace-like covering” (Sakili 47).

Islam has become the religion of the 13 groups of Philippine Muslims – the Tausug, Maranao, Maguindanao, Yakan, Samal, Badjao, and seven other small groups found mainly in south and southwestern Mindanao and Palawan (Sakili 49).

Approaching the study of the evolution of architecture in the Philippines through its history gives us a glimpse not only of how space and architecture look like in the early years but the transformation of the social behavior, the social structure and the acculturation of culture.

19th century came. Filipino culture was very much tinted with things European. The philosophy of the Enlightenment became apparent and the exploration of the individual took off.
This was supported by what Hume said that “beauty is not quality in the things themselves, but exist merely in the mind which contemplates, and each mind perceives a different beauty” (qtd. by Manahan 13). This thought led to free expression and multi-views of art and architecture.

Manahan cited the four significant movements that greatly influenced contemporary Philippine architecture. First is King Phillip II’s Law of the Indies which states that a town should be planned with a plaza on the center and the principal street passes through the side and the secondary streets will follow a grid pattern. The church will be at the plaza as a symbol of authority (Lico 24). This town planning during the Spanish period became the starting point of urban planning and design in the Philippines.

An architectural expression known as the City Beautiful Movement of the Chicago School that emerged and influenced the first decades of the 20th century is the second. During this time, load-bearing steel frames are used in building. The known product of this school was Louis Sullivan. His follower, Frank Lloyd Wright influenced Filipino architects in his organic designs (Manahan 14).

The start of the American colonialism brought in a more civilized way of life. To replace the existing cultural structure, the Americans instituted a new sociopolitical system and were achieved through architecture and urban planning. Construction of bridges and roads started. New buildings were constructed. The Bureau of Public Works was inaugurated that facilitated all construction works. The Ecole des Beaux Arts style of classical revival became dominant (Manahan 20). Neoclassicism was the official style of buildings which according to Lico served two ideological functions:

1) to attest to the greatness of a newly established American empire and endow

the empire with a civilizing pedigree; and, 2) to create the semblance of democracy

in a colonial social order (28).

Buildings that were made were seen as “ideal metaphors for power, colonial omnipresence, cultural supremacy, and democracy” (Lico 28).

In order to execute the plans of creating an American tropical empire, Daniel H. Burnham was sent to examine Manila and Baguio. Burnham was an advocate of City Beautiful Movement. He envisioned Manila to be a “city equal to the greatest of the Western world” (qtd. in Hines, 1972 by Lico 29). While Burnham devised the plans, William E. Parsons, his successor, designed and built the structures. Parsons, following Burnham’s advise to unite Philippine-Spanish archetypes with that of the America’s neoclassicism, created a hybrid colonial style.

Parsons adapted the horizontality, stasis, and symmetry of the neoclassical style, with hints of California Mission Revival style, to the hot-humid tropical climate. Windows must extend to the floor and be shaded from the harsh tropical sun and sky’s glare, either by metal canopies or by arcades or colonnades. His plans
contrived open spatial arrangements that allowed for maximum cross-ventilation.

One feature of native architecture integrated with classically balanced masses of Parson’s neoclassic rendition was the use of *capiz* shells instead of glass for window panels, thus suffusing the interiors with a soft pearly light (Lico 31).

As the Philippines gradually became Filipinized and looking forward for self-governance, World War II broke out. The battle for freedom from Japanese occupation led to a massive destruction of architectural structures. After the war, an immense reconstruction followed. America stood as the benevolent benefactor by helping to rebuild the wounded nation. This time marked an era in architectural history as during this time, no architectural product was built. “For the first time in four hundred years, the Filipinos were free to reinterpret their identity.” (Lico 36)

Another remarkable part of the history of architecture was seen during the Marcos regime. A desire to revert to the past became apparent. There was a shift towards the vernacular characteristics of architecture and reviving the colonial lifestyle, incorporating it in contemporary designs. New materials and technology are combined with the iconography of the vernacular. “This sentimental longing for the primeval is rooted in the notion that these archetypes are the true fountainsheads of identity…” (Lico 69). Imelda Marcos provided a definition of the new Filipino architecture as “rational rediscovery of traditional shapes, indigenous building materials, methods of construction and usage of space which have proved to be the most suitable to the climate, the culture, and the land” (qtd. in Manuel 1979 by Lico 70). Although the Marcos state architecture is viewed as full of political stain and symbolizes the imposing power of the regime, looking at Mrs. Marcos’ statement, I would say that she has a point. Identity can be established by tracing the roots of the present. Because only then that you can explain why you are what you are today.

Having laid out the path of our architecture history, can we now say that there is really Filipino architecture? The numerous colonial influences that penetrated the Philippines’ culture created an architecture style that is, although hybrid, truly Filipino. It adapts to the Filipinos beliefs and ways of life. Architecture is never stagnant. It is shaped by society and at the same time shapes the society. It follows the changing of people, of generations. A good architecture is appropriate to the society’s lifestyle, enhances the society’s interaction with the environment and helps in the development of a person holistically. In order to understand Philippine architecture, we should first learn about our cultural heritage, and relate it to the present in order to get a picture of the future.

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