From *Bahay Kubo* to *Bahay na Bato* to ...  

by Robert Gardner

"Houses have their own ways of dying, falling as variously as the generations of men, some with a tragic roar, some quietly, ... while from others ... the spirit slips before the body perishes."

("Howards End", E. M. Forster, 1910)

Wherever I traveled in the Philippines, I always enjoyed the old wooden houses that lined the streets especially in out-of-the-way provincial towns. A few years ago I began to notice that many of these houses were either abandoned or disappearing altogether--victims of changing family fortunes, good and bad--and the ravages of nature and time.

In their places, new houses are being built of concrete, cinder block and stucco. The dwindling use of wood in construction can be blamed on the loss of the great forests that once covered the islands with a seemingly endless supply of lumber. Along with the change in building materials, the shift in architecture has moved toward western influences--both European and American. I've seen subdivisions that could have been named "California-kitsch".

Our original ancestral home, and still the home of Filipinos in rural areas, is the *bahay kubo*, or "nipa hut" (prob. from Spanish *cubo*, cube). The prehispanic architecture was perfectly adapted to the climate and could be easily repaired or rebuilt after the frequent typhoon, flood or earthquake using simple tools and native materials.

"Their houses are constructed of wood, and are built on planks and bamboo, raised high from the ground on large logs, and one must enter them by means of ladders. They have rooms like ours; and under the house they keep their swine, goats and fowl."

(Antonio Pigafetta, 1521)

After colonization, the Spanish brought their architecture but quickly learned that stone buildings didn't last very long in an earthquake-prone country. As towns and plantations grew, more substantial homes were being built by the rising upper-class. These *principalia* and *ilustrados* combined the structural features of the *bahay kubo* with stylistic elements from Europe and
Asia. The result was the *bahay na bato*, literally "house of stone", that served as the model for townhouses from the 19th century until World War II and for many is considered the quintessential Filipino house.

"The third and final stage in the development of the Spanish-Filipino domestic architecture retained the wooden supporting structure but restricted the use of brick and stone to the lower level; the upper level consisted of an enclosure in vertical wooden siding which left ample openings for sliding windows. Capiz shells were often used as window panes. What emerges is a Spanish-Filipino house."

(Architecture in the Philippines, Winand Klassen, 1986)

The old houses are as unique as the families that lived under their roofs and there are a wide range of styles between the *bahay kubo* and the mansions of the *hacenderos*. There are also some regional differences but they all have some features in common. Typically raised or two-story, the main living area is on the upper level. To take advantage of cooling breezes, large windows surround the upper floor. The window sashes commonly have *capiz* shell panes and can be opened wide or closed for privacy or in stormy weather. Vents above the windows, protected by the roof eaves, let air in even when it's rainy. Small shuttered windows below the large windows, called *ventanillas*, are screened with balusters or grillwork and can be left opened when the large windows are closed such as at night.

As the name implies, the lower walls of the classic *bahay na bato* were traditionally finished in stone or masonry. More modest homes have wood walls for both levels and in more recent times, cinder blocks have been used to enclose the lower level. This space, the *zaguan*, was used to store the family carriage and processional cart in the old days and nowadays often function as office, shop or the family's *sari-sari* store.

I find it interesting that the word *bahay*, "house", is similar to the word *buhay*, "life". And that the word *bahay-bata*, "house-child", is the word for uterus; where life begins. It wasn't long ago that a baby was delivered with the help of a midwife in the home of her parents. She would grow up there and her love interest would make a "house-calling" (*umaakyat ng bahay*) to seek permission of her parents to court her. Even in death, the wake is often held in the home of the deceased with black and yellow curtains hung in the windows.
"The dinner was being given in a house on Anloague Street which may still be recognised unless it has tumbled down in some earthquake. Certainly it will not have been pulled down by its owner; in the Philippines, that is usually left to God and Nature. In fact, one often thinks that they are under contract to the Government for just that purpose."

("Noli me Tangere", Jose Rizal, 1887)

Like an endangered species, these wood and stone houses are vanishing toward certain extinction. What once embodied the character of the urban landscape and the heart of Filipino life will be blown away by the winds of progress. Already many towns are looking like cluttered strip malls and subdivisions provide homes without character. The capiz, that naturally filtered light, has given way to glass and the large open windows have been replaced with air-conditioning. Homes that shared a street or square are now isolated in gated compounds. Such is progress and it's no wonder that a modern-day Rip Van Winkle wouldn't recognize his surroundings upon awakening twenty years from now.

After noticing the demise of these old homes, I thought it would be an interesting photo subject and quickly used up a roll of film on one trip. Afterwards, I did some research and found the book "Philippine Ancestral Houses", Zialcita and Tinio, 1980, which covers the subject in wonderful detail. This is a book to peruse with its many photos and drawings if you're interested in the subject. Another good book is "Filipino Style" with a chapter about traditional houses also written by Zialcita.

You can find good examples of these homes in the quieter provincial towns. A few towns have made an effort to preserve their architectural heritage. One such place is Vigan in Ilocos Sur. The National Museum in Manila has a display of photos and architectural drawings of Vigan's ancestral homes (as of July 2000). The town of Taal, Batangas, is also notable for its preserved buildings. Good examples of the hacendero lifestyle can be found at the Balay Negrense in Silay, Negros and Villa Escudero in San Pablo, Laguna. There are still some fine old homes in Quiapo and Binondo; parts of Manila that weren't destroyed in World War II.

Ref: [http://www.aenet.org/photos/bahay.htm](http://www.aenet.org/photos/bahay.htm)