The history and culture of the Philippines are reflected in its architectural heritage, in the dwellings of its various peoples, in churches and mosques, and in the buildings that have risen in response to the demands of progress and the aspirations of the people.

Architecture in the Philippines today is the result of a natural growth enriched with the absorption of varied influences. It developed from the pre-colonial influences of our neighboring Malay brothers, continuing on to the Spanish colonial period, the American Commonwealth period, and the modern contemporary times. As a result, the Philippines has become an architectural melting pot-- uniquely Filipino with a tinge of the occidental.

The late national hero for architecture, Leandro Locsin once said, that Philippine Architecture is an elusive thing, because while it makes full use of modern technology, it is a residue of the different overlays of foreign influences left in the Philippines over the centuries: the early Malay culture and vestiges of earlier Hindu influences, the more than 300 years of Spanish domination, the almost 50 years of American rule, the Arab and Chinese influences through commerce and trade over the centuries. What resulted may have been a hybrid, a totally new configuration which may include a remembrance of the past, but transformed or framed in terms of its significance today.

The Philippine's architectural landscape is a contrast among small traditional huts built of wood, bamboo, nipa, grass, and other native materials; the massive Spanish colonial churches, convents and fortifications, with their heavy "earthquake baroque" style; the American mission style architecture as well as the buildings of commerce with their modern 20th century styles; and today's contemporary, albeit "modern mundane" concrete structures of the cities.

Construction of rural native huts has changed little in the centuries. Design vary by region, but common features include steep roof over a one-or-two room living area raised on posts or stilts one to two meters above the ground or over shallow water. Some huts have balconies. Floors may be of split bamboo to allow dirt and food scraps to fall through to pigs and poultry. The space beneath the hut may be used for storage or as a workshop; it also allows air to circulate and safeguards against flooding, snakes, and insects. As families become more affluent, they frequently replace the thatch roof with galvanized iron which lasts longer but makes the house hotter and aesthetically more mundane. The bahay-kubo (nipa hut) is a typical traditional house found in most lowlands all over the Philippines. Originally built as a one-room dwelling, the nipa hut changed as family needs become more diverse. Modern urban dwellings, on the other hand, are typically two-story structures with a concrete ground floor, sides of brick, concrete blocks, or wooden slats, and an iron roof. During the 19th century, wealthy Filipinos built some fine houses, usually with solid stone foundations or brick lower walls, and overhanging, wooden upper story with balustrades and kapis shell sliding windows, and a tiled roof.

The Rizal house in Calamba, Laguna and the Luna house in Badoc, Ilocos Norte are good examples. Vigan, Ilocos Sur as well as Taal in Batangas have the best surviving Spanish quarters. The city of Manila, Iloilo and Cebu also have some notable old houses. Other areas of the country present different forms of tribal architecture as compared to the low-land bahay kubo which is influenced greatly by culture, and in some cases, climate and the environment. In the upland regions of the Cordillera Mountains, the houses, though still using native materials, is a bit more secured. Where the low-land bahay kubo is ventilated on all sides, the mountain huts, Bontoc, fayu; Ifugao, bale; Kalinga, binayon; Kankanay, binangiyan, and others typify a more insulated dwelling. The Maranao torogan, on the other hand, is designed for royalty and thus built with much ornamentation and elaborate details. Being an isolated and wind-frequented area, the Batanes Islands, exhibit the most different of all traditional architecture in the Philippines. The Ivatan’s rakuha is built solidly on all sides, made of a meter thick rubble work covered by thick thatch roofing to withstand gales which frequent the area.

The arrival of the Spaniards in 1571 brought in Antillian architecture. Though not specifically suited for the hot tropics, European architecture was transposed via Acapulco, Mexico into a uniquely Filipino style. The style traces its roots from the Antilles, in Central America rather than from mother Spain. The Christianization of the islands created the need to establish religious structures to support the growing number of religious organizations. Though they don't compare with those seen in Europe or in Latin America, Philippine colonial churches are unique in their own sense. Some of the best preserved colonial churches in the country are found in the Ilocos Regions, as well as those in the provinces of Laguna and Batangas, as well as the Visayan islands of Panay, Cebu and Bohol. These colonial churches were typically designed by anonymous friar-architects and built between 1600 and 1750. Most were initially constructed with bamboo and nipa, but the friars realized that to instill a sense of awe, as well as to caution against
the terrible menace of fire and earthquake, more grandiose buildings had to be erected. In spite of technical and material limitations, they managed to erect massive structures that often took years, even decades to complete, that have survived to the present.

In time, the friars' task was taken over by Filipino and Chinese master-builders. These craftsmen have sometimes left their native stamp in the decorative motifs: tropical vegetation by Filipinos, lions and dragons by Chinese. The churches were built with an adjacent convento (priest house and office: also served as school, tribunal, prison and evacuation house during calamities), attached or detached belfry (as seen in the Ilocos Region where the belfry was built a couple of meters away from the church structure, this to anticipate a collapse of the belfry in times of earthquake) and walled forecourt. The large three-story belfry, affording a good view of the surrounding land and sea, were used as watchtowers for approaching enemies. Individual churches vary in the amount and style of their interior and exterior decoration. Many have an ornately carved facade and reredos, backdrop of the altar). Today, some churches are in their original form, while others have been spoiled by tasteless renovation. Many churches are the result of successive restoration and renovation projects which superimposes on earlier foundations. The Spanish colonial period also brought with it military architecture as seen in the fortifications they built all over the archipelago. Foremost of which is Intramuros in Manila. Intramuros which literally means within the walls, is a defensive network composed of raveling and bulwarks to protect the Spanish city from attack. It also contains the foremost military outpost during the Spanish reign, Fort Santiago named after Spain's patron saint.

Commercial structures which developed only during the latter part of the Spanish period evolved primarily from the typical Filipino noble house or the Bahay na Bato. The Bahay na Bato is a derivation of the traditional Bahay Kubo with more sturdier materials as the main form of construction. Using the same spatial arrangements of the Bahay kubo, the Bahay na Bato continued the principle of open ventilation and elevated apartments as that of its predecessor. The only difference being that the Bahay na Bato, which translates as Stone House, is made in most cases of stone instead of the more traditional bamboo. Other versions of the Bahay na Bato would be constructed of a stone- or brick-supported lower level and a hard wooden upper level covered by tiles or in later cases galvanized iron. The window of the house is unique in architecture for it opens not just from mid-level but from floor to ceiling. This enables tropical wind to circulate freely into the structure enabling the house to be ventilated tropically. The upper level, or the piano noble of the house contains the most luxuriously furnished apartments, this level overhangs the ground level which contains mostly storage and carriage depots.

Other structures developed during the Spanish Period were schools and hospitals (Ateneo Municipal, University of Santo Tomas, Colegio de Letran, Hospital de San Juan de Dios). Though most often attached to the church, these structures eventually developed into their own following the tropical baroque style of architecture popular at the time.

The Philippine Revolution of 1887 led to the declaration of independence from Spain. This, on the other hand, was superceded by the transfer of power from Spain to the United States as part of the settlement entered by the Kingdom of Spain with the United States after the Spanish-American war. The Americans came to the islands in 1898. With the arrival of the Americans came a new breed of architectural structures. Foremost of the American contributions to the country was the establishment of civil government. This led to the erection of government buildings from the city all the way to the municipal level. Government houses dotted every community. Designed in the most respectable manner, these government houses resembled Greek or roman temples complete with porticoes and pediments.

The revival period, popular at the turn of the century, became the foremost architectural parlance of the era as seen in such buildings as the Government Post Office Building as well as the Legislative House. Education of the masses also became the thrust of the American regime, as such, public education was established, foremost of which is the University of the Philippines. With American rule firmly established in the islands, the military government at the time invited the noted Chicago architect and town planner Daniel Burnham to develop the city of Manila and found a summer capital in the area of Baguio. Burnham's arrival led to the formation of the Burnham Plan which identifies the city of Manila as a uniquely European city in the tropics and as such opposed to develop its architecture in line with the existing style. The style of architecture, as suggested, varies little from existing architecture at the time as typified by The Manila Hotel. New structures continued the use of conventional motifs but were made of more durable materials such as concrete. This style of architecture prevailed even after the turn of the century.

The eclectic style, a mixture of historic styles, also found its way in some of the commercial establishments rising in the business district such as the Regina Building along historic Escolta. The
emergence of Art Nouveau also gave some samples in the central business districts (Uy-Chaco Building along Calle Rosario and Plaza Cervantes) as well as in stately homes of the well to do (Casa de Ariston Bautista in Calle Barbosa, Quiapo). By the mid 20’s to the eve of the second world war, Art Deco became the bi-word for Philippine Architecture with works such as the Metropolitan Theatre along Plaza Aroceros, Perez-Samanillo Building, Crystal Arcade and Capitol theatre along Escolta, State and Avenue Theatre along Avenida Rizal, Lide and Times Theatre along Quezon Boulevard and others.

The aftermath of the second world war left nothing but destruction in its wake, and a time of rebuilding ensued. The modern era dawned on Philippine architecture using the simple straight lines of the International Modern Style as a chief mode of expression. By the 70’s a new form of Philippine architecture emerged with the filipinization of architecture. The Filipino style found its way in the re-emergence of traditional motifs, the bahay-kubo and the bahay na bato became popular forms to be copied and modernized (Batasan Pambansa, BLISS Housing projects). By the 80’s the country’s architectural idiom was swept by the tide of Post Modernism, a hearkening back of some sort to the romance of classical architecture. Today, architecture in the Philippines continue to be vibrant and with the country opening up to the world, more first rate architecture is pouring in.

About the Author:
Manuel D. C. Noche took up masteral studies at the Bartlett School of Architecture & Planning, London majoring in Environmental Design and Engineering. His love for travelling and photography eventually led him to the doors of the country’s historic churches, which he hopes to someday catalog in a book. He is currently the principal architect for Art, Architecture, and Design.

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