The Philippines is an island nation situated in Southeast Asia. With 7,107 islands, it is the second largest archipelago in the world. The Philippines had been subjected under Spanish colonial rule for 333 years. Before the colonial times, the Philippines had primitive inhabitants. With the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores in 1521, and along with them the contemporary meaning and practice of civility, everything from the native Filipino architecture, language, lifestyle, culture, and visual arts had been largely influenced by Spain. But for this post, we are going to focus on the Spanish influences in our architecture and Spanish era buildings in the Philippines which, even if not built by us Filipinos, are part of our cultural heritage, thus making them a part of our identity.

During the pre-colonial times, Filipinos lived in bahay kubos (nipa huts), one of the earliest and most basic type of housing constructed out of bamboos tied together with the roof made up of palm tree leaves.
Nipa huts are still used today in the rural areas far from the bustling commercial cities of the capital region. They are considered the traditional housing in the Philippines. With the arrival of the Spaniards, the bahay kubo acquired some Spanish elements; they became sturdier and bigger, now made out of wood instead of bamboos, but still retaining the classic thatched Nipa roofs.
1.1 Bahay Kubo with sturdier and larger designs

1.2 Inside of Bahay Kubo with Spanish influence
Another notable Spanish influence was the balconies in this neo-bahay kubos.

As the colonial times progressed, the Spaniards built more cities and other infrastructures, most notably Intramuros, the oldest district in the capital city of Manila.

Intramuros, literally “within the walls”, was a city in a city. It was described as such because of its thick high walls (8 feet thick and 22 feet high), to protect the Spanish government against revolts of the native people and the Chinese pirates.
1 One of the entrances in Intramuros
2 Moats around Intramuros for protection
3 One of the entrances to the city within the city
It was based on the star fort or trace italienne design, composed of many triangular bastions specifically designed to cover each other.
Completed in 1606, Intramuros was the center of commerce of colonial Philippines, military power, religious power and indoctrination. The inside of Intramuros had the amenities of any progressive Spanish cities of that time including modern roads, government buildings and of course churches. Church-run universities were also built, one of which is the University of Santo Tomas, the oldest school in Asia, established in 1611 (It has been standing there for 400 years).
7 Façade of the University of Santo Tomas

8 Façade of the University of Santo Tomas - Another view
The Spanish-American war then ensued in 1898. The Americans won over Spain, and as part of the peace Treaty of Paris, the Philippines was to be handed over to the Americans. The Americans also had a profound impact on our architecture and the planning of Philippine cities, but I’m not going to cover it because it will deviate away from the objective of this post.

Intramuros, where the Filipino culture met Spain’s, was destroyed during World War II by the U.S. Air Force. The Americans were trying to rid the Philippines of Japanese occupational forces which retreated inside the walls of Intramuros.

9 Entrance of Intramuros destroyed by military tanks
Intramuros, with its many stone walls and its star fort design, proved to be difficult to navigate and to have a land combat. The U.S. air force then resorted to bombing from the air, destroying much of this relic of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines.

One of the few buildings in Intramuros to have survived nature’s wrath and the bombings of the Second World War was the San Agustin Church. It was built by the Augustinians in 1607, making it the oldest stone church in the Philippines.
It is built in the European Baroque style, characterized by the feeling of movement in the church architecture and splendid sculptures. Baroque touches are present in the church most significantly by the ornate carvings on its doors.
11 Splendid carvings on the doors of San Agustin Church
12 Interior of San Agustin Church

13 Another interior image of San Agustin Church
The church also features trompe l’oeil ceiling, fooling the eye to believe that the ceiling was sculptured, but was actually just painted to look like it was. The church interior was made under a Latin cross plan.
15 Trompe l'oeil ceilings - I thought they were sculpted!
16 Trompe l'oeil ceiling of San Agustin
Intramuros and the San Agustin Church are just two of the many Hispanic antiquities the Philippines inherited from Spain. There are many other Baroque churches and Spanish-era streets and cities in the whole of the Philippines. From the adoption of the Latin alphabet in our language to our strong Catholic faith, Spain has heavily influenced the Philippines’ lifestyle, visual arts, and culture as well.