This was the speech I delivered to the student body of the Architecture Department of the College of Saint Benilde – School of Design and Architecture (CSB-SDA) during the National Architecture Week last October 2011. The topic was about Architecture and Human Rights.

Good afternoon, everyone. I was invited by the Student Auxiliaries of the UAP to lecture on the topic: “Housing Design; Filipino Techno Expressionist” under the banner theme of “Architecture and Human Rights”. I initially hesitated to accept the speaking job as the topic assigned to me seemed irrelevant to the theme of human rights and housing. We always refer to housing in the same vein as human settlements with an undeniable social and economic dimension; hence human rights.

But you see, I am immersed in the field of design – high design, in fact where human rights are concepts that are merely abstracted or deconstructed to be used as a platform for spectacular and intelligent architecture. My design language, therefore, of technological expressionism seem to just mundanely hover way above the real concerns of the typical Filipino and his basic human right for shelter. It is further pointless for me to ramble about a topic that I have no expertise on, and I do believe I was invited to stand here in front to contribute on an issue where I have full control and a firm grasp.

It is by this reason that I had to sway the topic to another angle. And by my exceptional convincing – or coercive powers, I now would like to talk to you about The Filipino House: An Endangered Architectural Specie.
Apart from our standard and basic human need for shelter, Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights tells us that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Housing, after it fulfills the basic necessity to protect you from the elements, becomes what it truly is now, the lone but more permanent expression of individuality, through its higher form which is architecture. As opposed to clothing – or fashion, in the higher sense, shelter assumes more permanence. It has a more lasting effect on the subconscious and a lingering effect on the conscious. The architecture of shelter influences you more potently in your daily grind just as the flit of a butterfly in South America will influence the waves in the Australian Great Barrier Reef half a planet away.

The architecture of shelter, more than a venue for individual expression, is the platform for a nation to express her identity and showcase her uniqueness among the league of cultures in the international community. No other architectural typology expresses culture more than housing. No other architectural typology reveals the passion of a nation to its identity more than the architecture of shelter. Through no other architectural typology will a nation give away her shame and denial for and of her own true self than in the realm of domestic design.

I would now like to bring everyone to a monopolized discussion on how we, as a collection of individuals who profess to belong to one national consciousness, express ourselves through the platform of housing design. Monopolized discussion, because I will have the floor until this lecture ends but you won’t. You may ask questions later though.

History of Architecture was never my weakness, and it may be, as it were, one of my strengths as I can remember trivia and form surprisingly well. I forget faces and names but I won’t forget an architectural form or its designer. What stopped me from teaching it was the undeniable fact that the subject elicits in a student this irresistible urge to yawn, which we all know, will climax in this exceptional talent called sleeping while keeping your eyes open so professor can keep yapping away and not suspect a thing. I am not creative enough to transform history to an engaging subject as design is.

But let me not disappoint you today and let us quickly relish how the Filipino – we, have expressed himself as a nation through his house design. According to Gerard Lico, in his book “Arkitekturang Filipino”, the Filipino house went through about six stages of morphosis.

Filipinos, Lico admitted, are descendants of the Austronesian race who came from Southern China, jumped to Taiwan, then to the Philippines through Luzon and went on to disperse itself through Malaysia and Indonesia. These peoples eventually scattered up to Australia and Hawaii. This happened way back 6,000 years ago. The legacy of our ascendants – The Stilt House – or “Bahay Kubo”.

“Morphologically, the house is constructed using wooden structural components configured in the post and lintel framework, which supports a steeply pitched thatched roof. The dwelling is distinguished by a living floor raised on sturdy stilt foundations with a voluminous, well-ventilated
roof cavity above, providing a straight forward solution to the environmental problems imposed by the humid tropical climate coupled with seasonal monsoon rains.”

The Filipinos in Muslim Mindanao did not have to reinvent the wheel for their domestic architecture to work. They simply followed the same structural and architectural type and infused strong Islamic symbolisms like the “panolong”, a wooden beam-end decoration that often carries a serpentine pattern; and the “tadjuk pasung”, a roof finial expressing a bird or a dragon.

We were all fine until the Spaniards came. Queen Isabela gave us the Bahay Na Bato. Isabela’s regents thought our poor and primitive race was desperate for technology and magnanimously shoved into our national throats the superior building technology of the Bahay Na Bato. And here started the great divide among the “insulares” and the “illustrados”; and the “indios”. The privileged went on to embrace the new world while the the disenfranchised were tasked to continue on the old. Bahay Na Bato for the rich, and Bahay Kubo for the poor.

The Americans bought us from the Spaniards by the turn of the 20th century. They brought in the “new order” of things, and with it, their architecture of Classical Revival, Art Deco and High Modern. They attempted to fix the city of Manila but failed. Daniel Burnham’s dream for the Filipinos of the “City Beautiful” were frustrated by war and politics. Filipinos embraced the new order without any successful protest for 50 years. The “insulares” left but the “illustrados” stayed and converted their Bahay Na Bato into mansions of stone and concrete articulated in a foreign language; and they called themselves the “elite”. Their servants, whom the “elite” called the “masses”, lived in the still pure form of the Bahay Kubo; and continued to express themselves in this architectural form. But this form is starting to show cracks in the light of the harsh urban elements of air pollution, rapid mass transportation and electricity. They just simply did not have the money, nor the clout to evolve this architecture.

By the time our contemporary history commenced, Marcos has established another “new”: The New Society, or “Bagong Lipunan”. Part of this new society is Imelda’s dream of “the true, the good and the beautiful” for the Filipinos. She fashioned herself as the patron of the arts and commissioned our architectural legends to create the new Filipino Architecture. If there was anything at all that this self-declared Philippine royalty did, was she championed the revival of Filipinism in our national consciousness - and she did so with an iron hand. Perfect representatives of this movement were the Coconut Palace by Mañosa and the National Arts Center by Locsin. Pure domestic architecture mutated to a grand and super human scale for an institutional purpose.

Unfortunately, Imelda’s delusion of the true only remained true for the rich; the good, remained good for the loyal; and the beautiful, remained beautiful for the beautiful to start with. The unbelievably poor, stale and the unattractive remained behind Imelda’s white and green screens of CHB walls. Their once authentic “bahay kubos” now morphed into informal settlements we now call shanties. The true, good and beautiful bahay kubos have moved up in the country side where they lay potential victims to the rape of misguided technology.

And now, the Filipino of the 21st century – we, stand amidst the Architecture of the Spectacular. In the age of the global Filipino, our houses now express a multitude of cultures except ours. My eyes bled at the sight of row upon row of “Chinese” Mediterranean houses in Ayala Alabang during the 80s. My ears bled as I heard my clients insist on having a “Zen” Minimalist house during the 90s.
And now my nose bleeds as I try to understand how we shall ape Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid to express the Filipino House of the 21st century.

My dear friends, we never had olive oil in our national cuisine. We are a maximalist culture, and we’ll clutter any empty space in 10 minutes. The architectural aesthetics of crumpled paper was never part of our national sense of order. But, we embrace all these because this is the new global Filipino – open, tolerant and accepting. We claimed for ourselves the right to shelter, but have we really given ourselves the right to cultural expression?

While we were busy trying to redefine what the new Filipino is, our true Bahay Kubo, which was driven to the mountains in architectural exile now sport GI sheets and concrete hollow blocks. And what happened to the former “indios” who once with pride lived in this true architecture? They are now piled up in rows and rows and floors and floors of boxes with no sense of place, character and individuality we now call mass housing. We have actually given them their basic human right to shelter, but have denied them their human right to expression.

A colleague of mine once asked in a Facebook poll the eternal question: “Is there really Filipino Architecture?” Another colleague answered: “There is a universe of difference between true Filipino Architecture and real Filipino Architecture.”

If you have not noticed it yet, we are now at the opening of another saga in our architectural history. A new century has opened and we are part of it. What we do up here, will be mirrored by the masses in their vast settlements down there. That is the power that we have. From where will you take off – the real, or the true?

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time and good day.


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