
The Roots of Our Problems with Our Physical Environment: A Modest Theory

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Abstract

The problems the country faces with regard to its physical environment, particularly in urban areas, may have its roots in the 1898-1907 turn of the century period. Traffic and the accompanying pollution, urban congestion, and the incessant housing problem may all find their roots in a crucial point in our country's past: the end of Spain's rule and America's "benevolent assimilation."

The paper aims to present documentary evidence on the causes of contemporary problems such as the perceived lack of discipline in our streets and the congestion of people and vehicles in urban centers. Particularly, it will discuss the results of past studies on urban public places: the bus stops, sidewalks and urban nodes, and relate it to fundamental flaws in our urban design standards and ultimately in our concept of nationhood.

In relating it to the concept of nationhood, the paper shall point out crucial points in our history where the foundations of Philippine urban design and architecture have taken root and ultimately affect the physical environment, as we know it today. It will attempt to show how the country's policy makers were "seduced" into believing that everything American was "the modern way" and that traditional values should be discarded. Eventually, as the tenets of modernism came under fire, and with the renewed "veneration" of the vernacular traditions, our physical environments put on a "Filipino face," but still retained the Western "bones".

Seen as a whole, our path to genuine nationhood may be seen as a story of interrupted starts and miscues. From the interrupted formalization of our First Republic under Aguinaldo, to the knee-weakening coup attempts in 1987, our story shows we never had the chance to bloom and flourish as a unique culture and that we had to continually battle against Western/ foreign interests and mannerisms.

This second turn of the century for our country may be the last chance we may have in correcting our flaws and forging a new path toward a true people-oriented environment.

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Introduction

Every working day, we turn on the radio or TV and listen to traffic reports. Almost every other working day, we wake up to read about some politician inaugurating a housing project somewhere in the fringes of urbanity, effectively extending the metropolis. Now and then, we hear a pedestrian being

run-over by a vehicle. And almost ceaselessly, we are bombarded with comments of how "undisciplined we Filipinos are."

It is on the sting of the last comment that I have hinged my interest in studying Filipinos in their environment - how we behave, how the environment affects us - in answer to the question-theme: "Are we really an undisciplined people?" This paper aims to thresh out the usual evidences supporting this indictment on our people and show that our perceived lack of discipline is rooted in an erroneous reading or measurement of our behavior. It will also attempt to relate these urban symptoms to the larger picture of our quest for national identity (including architectural identity) and how this can be used (quest for national identity) to straighten out problems with our urban physical environment.

Our Urban Spaces

Urban life is fast becoming a reality for millions of Filipinos. This trend is being fueled by the globalization of economies and the ballooning information society. Growing at a tremendous pace, urban centers often leave its citizens stressed out. Yet, they willingly suffer these "consequences" of growth without much complaint, much less clamor for better living conditions. Despite these conditions, the media and popular thought render our urban spaces as chaotic and our citizens as hopelessly undisciplinedⁱ. Does this public indictment of ourselves carry any weight? Are we really an undisciplined people? These questions formed the crux of studies done on urban public spaces by the College of Architecture in the hope of discovering hidden dimensions of our psyche in relation to our environment.

In a 1995-1997 study on public spaces funded by the U.P. Office for Research Coordination (now the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Research & Development) entitled "*Quezon City Public Spaces: How They Serve the Public*,"ⁱⁱ we concentrated on studying how people behaved around and within public spaces. We studied the bus/jeep stop, sidewalks in residential and commercial areas, and the pedestrian overpass. These spaces are the most common and most utilized public spaces that they were often taken for granted by city administrators, urban designers and even by the public, which they aim to serve.

In a separate paper,ⁱⁱⁱ I continued this thematic study by observing tricycle terminals and *talipapa* ("make-shift markets") and how they often are labeled as urban nuisances. Similarly, these Filipino inventions, deemed

incongruous with urban modern life, may be viewed with more sympathetic eyes if seen in the light of a nationalist culture.

Bus Stops = the Bus Stops Anywhere

At first glance, bus or jeepney stops are a misnomer because the bus or jeep rarely stops within the vicinity of the designated loading and unloading area. Also, people seem to blatantly ignore whatever contraption the government installs to control their behavior and to ensure their safety. Witness how, during rush hour, the dense mass of commuters readily and literally take to the streets. They occupy one or even two lanes in a desperate attempt to capture a ride. This easily contributes to traffic jams as equally desperate bus and jeepney drivers jostle one another for driving space.

A closer look, however, will force one to rethink his or her judgment on commuter and driver behavior.

Unlike in the Western developed countries, bus stops in our country do not have a schedule of arrivals and departures of buses posted on every bus stop. In fact, we often have multiple routes being served by one bus stop. This leaves the commuter with no choice other than to take chances at getting a ride. There is no guarantee that a bus or jeep may pass by at any given minute. However, for sure, a bus or jeep will pass by in about five or so minutes - you just have to wait. This is how, in my opinion, the bus stop came to be known as the "waiting shed." Thus, if one cannot read, one cannot possibly know where a bus or jeep is going because one has to rely on sight to read routes posted on the face of each bus and jeep, or which bus or jeep is full and which isn't.

Sightlines, or lines of sight, now play an important part in the success or failure of a commuter in getting a ride. Observing how commuters form invisible or tacit lines along the street, with respect to acquiring a better line of sight, can prove this. Somehow, it is he or she who sees the ride first, gets to "catch" the ride.

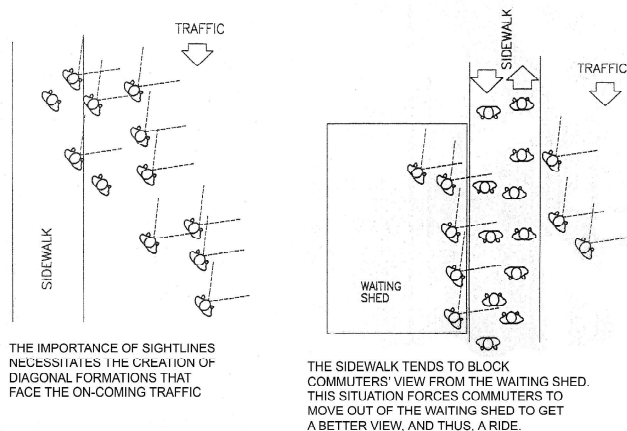


Figure 1 – Commuter Sightlines and Sidewalks

On the other hand, the bus or jeepney driver operates on a similar theme. Bus and jeepney drivers derive their incomes from percentages of their daily fares - the "boundary" system. This is a departure from the Western system where public utility drivers are paid salaries and are ensured of pay regardless of whether they fill their vehicles or not. In this country, public utility drivers are no longer professionals but rather businessmen on wheels. They sell their rides. They decorate their vehicles, they install music, and they attract attention. They compete for the same set of passengers. Little wonder then that jostling for positions in the vicinity of pedestrian crossings and bus stops take place.

Commuters and drivers are therefore left at the mercy of each other's discretion. Their environment, a Western model, simply cannot respond to the indigenous system of getting a ride. There simply is not fit between the system (or lack of it) and the environment imported to cater it.

Overpass: For Athletes Only

The sight of pedestrians risking life and limb to cross a busy street, when a few meters away, an overpass stands slightly used, save for a few beggars and vendors, is common in Metro Manila. These pedestrian overpasses were designed and built by the government, courtesy of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH). Why is this sight so common? Why would people risk life and limb and ignore the overpass that is theirs to use?

We inspected a typical plan of a pedestrian overpass and measured a few of them. We found out that one major reason is that the stairs leading to the platform on top is too steep. Each step has a rise (height) of about seven inches (7"), and a run or width of about ten inches (10"). This proportion gives us a slope of 70% or 35 degrees. A check with the Architectural Graphic Standards by the American Institute of Architects (AIA), a reference book popular with architects in the country, shows that exterior stairs should be "not as steep as interior stairs" because "more dangerous conditions exist (ice, snow, rain)." This provision of precaution cannot be found in our own building code. Our building code merely provides minimum and maximum sizes with no mention of conditions where precautions should be taken. Although the overpass complies with our building code, it still does not ensure the safety of its users.

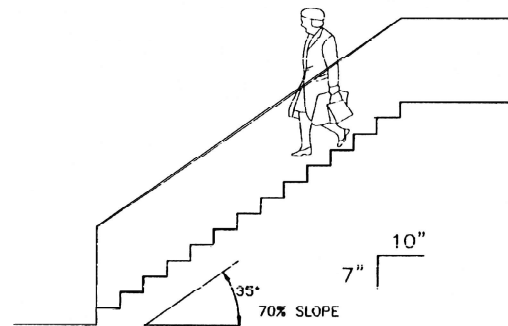


Figure 2 – Existing Design

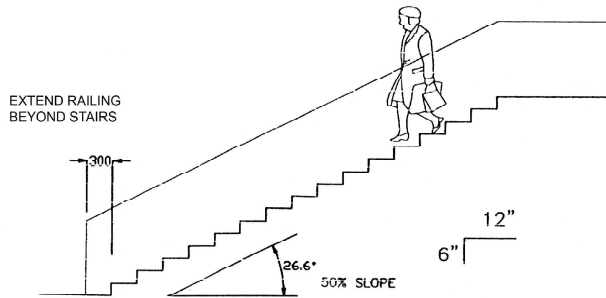


Figure 3 – Recommended Design

It is no wonder then that the people carrying heavy grocery bags or baskets, think twice before ascending an overpass because they face a harder challenge descending it. Truly, pedestrian overpasses are for athletes only.

Sidewalks: Where People Walk Sideways

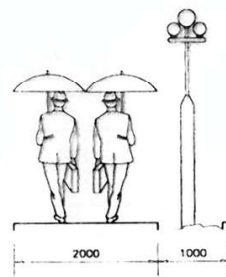
Sidewalks are where people walk sideways. This, I concluded, after documenting sidewalks in residential and commercial areas in Quezon City.

The legal document that controls the design of our streets is the National Building Code (NBC). Scrutinizing the NBC, we see a list of conditions of how wide a sidewalk should be, depending on the width of the street it is on. In short, the sidewalk is a mere proportion of the street. No mention of usage is ever made nor where should public utility companies like Meralco plant their electric posts, or where MWSS should erect fire hydrants.

Thus, we see our sidewalks littered by lampposts, electric posts, street signs, fire hydrants, telephone junction boxes and the like. What's left of the sidewalk is so narrow that people have to walk sideways to avoid injury. Or worse, seeing an arduous path, pedestrians just decide to walk on the road at risk of being sideswiped by vehicles. Clearly, pedestrians were not thought of when these provisions were approved.

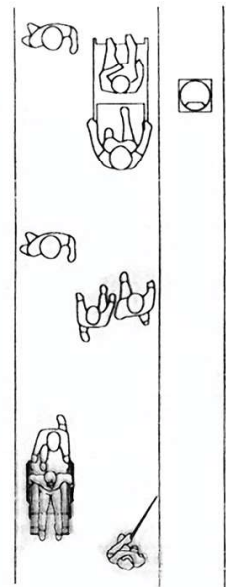
Would it not have been more sensitive for our government to design sidewalks with people in mind? In a country where it rains more than half of the year, and where umbrellas are a common sight, wouldn't it have been more appropriate to make the umbrella as the basis for designing our streets instead of just vehicles? Would it be too hard to realize that when drivers alight from their vehicles, they become pedestrians, too?

THE 2-UMBRELLA CONCEPT



A 2.00-M WIDE SIDEWALK, WILL ALLOW 2 PEOPLE, BOTH CARRYING UMBRELLAS, TO PASS EACH OTHER WITHOUT HAVING TO FORCE ONE OUT OF THE SIDEWALK.

A 1.00-M WIDE PLANT STRIP AT THE OUTER EDGE OF THE SIDEWALK WILL BE ABLE TO ACCOMMODATE PUBLIC UTILITIES SUCH AS LAMP POSTS, SIGNS, HYDRANTS, ELECTRIC POSTS, PHONE BOOTHS, AND THE LIKE.



BABY CARRIAGES WILL BE SAFER AND EASIER TO MANEUVER ON A WIDER SIDEWALK;

GROUPS OF TWO CAN BE PASSED BY A PERSON WITHOUT BEING FORCED OUT OF THE SIDEWALK;

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WILL BE MORE SAFE AND BE ABLE TO TRAVEL WITH MORE CONFIDENCE IN AN UNOBSTRUCTED AND WIDE SIDEWALK;

Figure 4 – The 2-Umbrella Concept

The Tricycle and *Talipapa*: Fruit of Our Follies

Not a few private vehicle drivers have at one time cursed tricycles because they obstructed traffic or became too reckless for comfort. Tricycles are here to stay and have become ingrained in our city culture.

The *talipapa* is a mobile and informal market system of loosely organized vendors. The stalls are lightweight and simple for easy disassembly. The lightweight construction of the stalls is due to the fact that the stalls are erected on "illegal" areas and are meant to have a semblance of transience.

It is the low-income earners, who cannot afford goods sold in an otherwise legitimate venue, who sustain *talipapas*. Although a legitimate market may be nearby, patrons of the *talipapa* still favor it because the travel to and from the legitimate market will cost them more in transport fare. Thus the *talipapa* spells convenience for its patrons as it is right along their route to and from home.

The *talipapa*, to remain viable, must be highly visible, must be along major pedestrian routes and should provide the basic needs of food and clothing. In occupying public spaces,

talipapa vendors “borrow” space from the public with the excuse of providing a “public service.” Inaction by government seems to acknowledge its own shortcoming, hence, the apparent condoning of the practice.

The tricycle acts as the feeder vehicle to main public transport routes. In the absence of a secondary public transport system, entrepreneurs step in to fill the gap: voila, the tricycle.

Again, government seems to acknowledge its incapacity to provide this basic service by granting permits to operate to tricycle owners and drivers. However, no adequate loading-unloading area or a terminal for tricycles is ever provided.

Despite the prevalence of these incursions into public spaces, government seems reluctant to incorporate these factors in its planning processes. This enables us to assert that the tricycle and *talipapa* are natural consequences of poor planning.

Architecture and Development

Architecture can be said to be the stage setting of development. It is supposed to support and promote development by providing order and meaning to the environment that holds people. If what have been described above can be considered as symptoms of disorder in our environment, what development could be borne out of it? Should we consider the resulting development as weak as the architecture that supports it?

The answer to that seems tied to the very notion of nation-building and national identity. The architecture of any country goes as deep, or provides as deep meanings to its people only as far as its people provide depth of meaning to its concept of nationhood. The story of architecture is derived from the story of a nation.

A Nation That Always Almost Was

Floro Quibuyen’s book “A Nation Aborted” uses the same theme in reading the history of nationhood founded from the ideas of Rizal and the Katipunan, and how these ideals have yet to see their fruition or manifestation. The declaration of independence in Kawit, Cavite was in fact an empty exercise as this independence never really took root as it was preempted by the arrival of new conquerors: the Americans.

In my own study of Philippine architecture, I have likened our nation’s birth to a blooming that never occurs. In so many instances, almost at the brink of something significant, something disrupts the process and forces everyone to start anew. The same thing can be said of our architecture, always almost flourishing until something disturbs its growth and the process begins anew.

Of Missed Chances and Disrupted Bloomings

At the time when the Katipunan was founded, an architecture unique to this country has been slowly developing and taking root: the *bahay na bato*. Although founded on the Spanish

architectural language, its adaptation to local climate and culture by our people makes it truly our own. With the arrival of the Americans, however, our people were seduced to accepting the *modern* way of life with its appendages. The development of the *bahay na bato* into a formal architectural language of its own has been aborted.

During the brief period of the Japanese occupation of the country, a renewed interest in our own culture was encouraged and supported by Japan’s “Asia for Asiatics” policy. Indeed, specifically in music, Filipino themes and ideals enjoyed much attention. This brief incursion paved the way for a renewed interest and search for a truly Filipino expression in the other arts, architecture included.

After the war years, and the rebuilding that took place, the country’s next bright hope in architecture came in the mid-1950’s. This was when a young idealist heralded a new era in Philippine architecture through a circular, saucer-shaped chapel: the Church of the Holy Sacrifice (1955) at the Diliman Campus of the University of the Philippines. The Architect was Leandro V. Locsin. Locsin’s entry paved the way for new forms and new ideas about Philippine Architecture. Although Locsin rarely wrote down his thoughts and beliefs, his works opened new avenues for aspiring architects to explore. His interpretation of indigenous architecture offered a genuine and promising response that sprang out of a critical approach to Philippine architecture.

Locsin’s Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) (1969), in Manila, is considered his finest distillation of the essence of Philippine architecture. His abstraction of forms worked well within the era of Modernism and yet transcends being dated to a certain era and style. The singular, horizontal massive rectangular box “floating” above a podium is derived from the qualities of the *nipa* hut: massive yet light. This seeming paradox is again used in the nearby Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) through the use of huge horizontal concrete slabs made to float on thin walls of glass.

Just as Locsin inspired many Filipino students of architecture of the potential for the realization of an architectural identity, a number of events conspired to prevent its blooming. One was the unprecedented control of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos of the economy, culture and society. Various programs were instituted that, although not inherently bad on their own, sought to prescribe a way of life, a definition of culture and art in ways that hinder other worthwhile explorations and experimentation. For example, the CCP was seen as a venue for the rich and not as a place where people from all walks of life can go to appreciate the various cultural aspects of the country. Ethnic traditions were featured more for their tourism-generating potential and not as a critical tool of explaining identity and heritage.

The Marcoses’ mishandling of the economy, coupled with the world oil crisis of the 1970’s, abetted the slowdown of building activity. The well-known and established architects cornered the few buildings that were built. However, the oil crisis spurred a worldwide introspection of the optimal use of energy. This brought to fore anew the climate-sensitive and appropriate forms of indigenous architecture. Architects soon found

themselves reinterpreting these climate-bound responses in a modern way.

The increasing openness of the country's economy to global trade has also brought its woes to Philippine architecture. The drive of big business to remain competitive and internationally acceptable has allowed a proliferation of buildings designed by non-Filipinos. These buildings, apart from being marketed as designed by an American or a European – an exploitation of the prevailing colonial mentality – have become also increasingly devoid of cultural identity, as some nationalist-architects would often point out. However, another school of thought supports the idea of foreign design influx to the country as this could further push the locals into improving their own craft and thus remain competitive. Indeed, the debate on the virtues and vices of globalization and a homogenous culture still rages on even in the field of architecture.

Should it be a surprise then that architecture truly reflects its society's values and follows the same beat of a nation's history?

Philippine Architecture: Search for Its True Identity

The story of Philippine architecture is very like the quest for what it is to be Filipino. Today, more than ever, is this issue so relevant as national boundaries become obscured by the emerging global economy, and a global culture threatens to subdue whatever nationalist values people have. Today, there is a heightened awareness about what makes us Filipino. How do we differ? How are we the same? What distinguishes us from other Asians?

Philippine architecture grapples with the same questions. There are those who dismiss this issue as a necessary rite of passage for every architect.^{iv} After going through each tried argument, the supposedly "non-issue" is to be left to die a natural death. But if it is a non-issue, why are so many fascinated by the debate? The arguments surrounding the issue prove that it is not a dead issue but alive as the debate on nationalism and nationhood.

Always about Form

There are those who would argue that architecture is about form. Hence, the quest for the holy grail in Philippine architecture becomes a quest for the ideal form or style – amid pre-colonial structures, colonial-inspired dwellings, and abstracted essences. They see architecture as mere containers of people and their activities.

Filipino Sense of Space

On the other hand, there are those who would seek architecture in the intangibles. They seek to describe the Filipino sense of space and the meanings attached to space and from thereon build a language of architecture that can be said to be truly ours.

Meaning and Space

Leonardo Mercado^v wrote that we Filipinos measure or value space by its meaningfulness to us and not in terms of size or shape. It matters not that one's house is small or big, simple or elaborate but how meaningful it is in one's life.

Symbol and Medium Are One

Yet, meaning and space are inseparable. We do not dichotomize between an object and its meaning to us. A vase is not just a container for flowers but may be the symbol of a loved one's undying devotion. Hence we mourn a little if that vase is stolen as it signals the loss of a symbol of love. No other vase, no matter how identical, will be able to replace that original. According to Mercado, Filipinos have a "non-dualistic or synthetic world view wherein the subject is in harmony with the object."^{vi}

This view is also held by social scientists and cultural workers.^{vii} We see the world as an interconnection of everything and everyone. Nothing is separate from another.

The Roots of Our Problems

And here is where our problem stems from: we have lost this world view amidst our supposed advancements in keeping in stride with our neighbors. Nowhere is this more vivid than in the way we treat our pedestrians. We have marginalized ourselves from our streets. We have alienated our own people from their culture by subscribing to foreign models of growth and development.

In June of this year, our top urban planners and architects were invited to a lecture by Andres Duany, an American Architect, on, of all things, Filipino Township! Duany was hired by a local real estate development firm to design a "Filipino subdivision." He based his design on a few coffee table books on Philippine architecture, stayed in the country for a couple of weeks or so, and proceeded to lecture on how to build Filipino communities. And yet, so many architects went to listen. This is colonial mentality at its worst. Have we given up the right to think for ourselves?

We have given up our core values of *kalayaan*, *katuwiran* and *katauhan*, the very essences of the Katipunan was founded on.

In his book "Ang Kartilya ni Emilio Jacinto at ang Diwang Pilipino sa Agos ng Kasaysayan,"^{viii} Professor Zeus Salazar illustrates how the Katipunan grew out of a genuine people's initiative to self-rule and reliance. The indigenous values were used as a basis for forming an ideology of a nation. And that nation was not based on any geographic or physical reality but on a people's collective soul. In short, the Katipunan was not just a military-political organization but had deep spiritual-moral ideals first. Salazar then asserts that the future of this country will hinge solely on the fruition of these ideals as we come to terms with our own realities and our search for a national identity.

I fully agree. If we are to have a genuine and truly responsive architecture, it must stem from our core values as a people. Taking off from Jacinto's Kartilya, I propose a threefold approach in the development of a theory of Philippine Architecture:

Kalayaang^{ix} Mag-isip, Maghayag at Maglinang

We must not allow ourselves to be enslaved by foreign standards and ideologies. They have become our crutch. We must recognize our capacity to think for ourselves, to speak for ourselves and to develop our own culture. We must free ourselves of this self-imposed imprisonment.

We must therefore always seek to free ourselves from the oppressive standards we have made for ourselves. We must be able to develop our own design standards based on our own understanding of our nation and ourselves. We must be able to educate ourselves in a manner that recognizes our values and not in a manner prescribed by foreign institutions or models.

Katuwiranx (Katwiran) sa Pamumuhay

We must always seek the truth and the good in everything. That the good and the truth are a reflection of Bathala, who is present in everything and everyone.

Architecture must therefore reflect what is true to our nature, and what is good for us. We must be able to develop our own standards with which to measure our successes and failures.

Ka-Tao-hanxi sa Lipunan

We must recognize the divinity of each person; that we have one *kalooban*. Therefore, a deeper respect must be given to all because everyone is equal and that this respect be reflected in our communities, our streets and our homes.

Conclusion: Starting Over or Continuing a Revolution

The past Centennial celebrations forced us to look back to where we came from. It also fostered a healthy debate about who we are and where we are going. In focus, the Centennial celebrations highlighted the role of the Katipunan in forming the idea of a nation or *Inang Bayan*.

In those critical times, the Katipunan was founded based on a true people's yearning to break free from the chains of oppression and seek its own destiny. The Katipunan was truly a *pagtitipon* of people, regardless of social stature. It was a mass-based movement and its ideologies were culled from indigenous values. In contrast to the *Propagandistas* who merely campaigned for assimilation and used foreign models of nationhood, the *Katipuneros* used their own culture as roots in forming their idea of a nation.

Would it not be but proper that our architecture follow the same path; that our architecture be based on people's culture and values? We need to discover or remember how we experience our reality. We need to relearn who we are and what we need to become. Architects and architectural educators must contribute to the re-blooming of a national consciousness. We owe it to ourselves and to our people to continue the struggle for freedom from oppressive knowledge, standards, values and traditions.

...Only then can we really be truly free.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Popular remarks such as "Wala na talaga tayong pag-asang mga Pilipino," "Pinoy kasi, eh. Kaya kahit saan na lang tatawid," "Mabuti pa sa Amerika, maayos and mga tao."
- ⁱⁱ Nicolo Del Castillo: Project Leader; Delfin Ballo, Jr., Winifred Banaag, Millet Geronimo, Amanda Sales, Valerose Tinio. This is an unpublished study although publicly presented in 1996.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Nicolo Del Castillo, "Environmental Misfits: Case Study: Batasan Hills." 1999.
- ^{iv} This was argued by Augusto Villalon in his paper presented at the UP College of Architecture, entitled "Philippine Architecture: Four Definitions," 1996.
- ^v Leonardo N. Mercado, "Elements of Filipino Philosophy," Divine Word University Publications. 1993.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} From writings, essay, papers by Felipe de Leon Jr., Serafin Talisasyon, Prospero Covar and Felipa Landa Jocano.
- ^{viii} Zeus Salazar, "Ang Kartilya ni Emilio Jacinto at ang Diwa ng Pilipino sa Agos ng Kasaysayan," Palimbagan ng Lahi. 1999.
- ^{ix} Ibid, Salazar argues that the Kartilya's "kalayaan" is different from the Eurocentric idea of liberty. This kalayaan is based on the idea of the *timawa* meaning "pagkawala sa kaalipinan ng mga Kastila," in today's context: from the clutches of foreign thought and values.
- ^x Ibid, "Katuwiran" implies straight, from the word "tuwid." This value has ethical and moral tones stemming from the belief that Filipinos seek the truth and the good always.
- ^{xi} Ibid, "Pagkatao" is base on the value that all humans are equal, regardless of race, nationality, educational attainment, I.Q., social status. It seeks to define "pagkatao" as the vessel of light (dios, truth, good) and that everyone has the same "pagkatao."

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