
What Is Filipino Landscape Architecture? Dimensions of a Cultural Landscape

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Objectives

- To discuss the history of human interaction with the landscape, and the manner by which man used the landscape as a vehicle for socio-cultural expression;
- To discuss the physical as well as psychic/symbolic dimensions of the cultural landscape in general, and the Filipino landscape in particular;
- To forecast the future of Filipino landscapes and how to secure its place in the global culture.

Landscapes in History

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS. This familiar adage articulates every human being's contentedness for that safe and comforting place in this planet we call our home. Home could mean various things; it is usually a house, but it could also mean a town, a city, a province, or a school, or where man feels happy and loved and safe and secure. Sometimes, it could be where he feels most powerful. In totality, home is a physical, geographical setting that man creates or arranges to enable himself to interact with fellow human beings and the environment surrounding him, and develop the life-long values that will provide him the roots to his ground and bring about the contentedness that makes life good and strong.

The landscape as a home has no less been accorded great importance in human lives throughout history. Human interaction with the landscape dates back to the biblical beginning of time when God created humankind in Adam and Eve and settled them in a home called the Garden of Eden. In earlier ancient history, the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon was built by King Nebuchadnezzar as a symbol of his magnificence and immense power. Even the Taj Mahal, a famous monument in Agra, India, which more renowned in the world as a foremost example of architecture with the most perfect proportions, was set in a least renowned landscape of monumental gateways and fragrant gardens and the familiar reflecting pool that provided it not only its picture perfect beauty but also the perfect landscape setting for this gift of undying love of the Mogul emperor Shah Jahan for his wife.

All of the above underscore the fact that religion, philosophy, economics, politics and aesthetics have directed the course of human activity in the landscape, and the landscape, to date, continues to serve as an important vehicle for man's socio-cultural expression. It is in this context that designing the landscape as a cultural space

becomes absolutely important. For hasn't man always considered the environment and the ecology as prime factors for molding the space that enclose human activity? Thus, without disregarding the science of space, we shall endeavor to explore the culture and humanism of space.

Dimensions of the Cultural Landscape

By socio-cultural expression is meant the ability of man to articulate his innate human values, customs, and traditions in terms of size, shape, color, texture, location of the space that surrounds him. These dimensions may be physical, and psychic/symbolic, or both.

The Physical Dimension

Physically, these dimensions refer to actual size, shapes including all visual and tangible qualities like color and texture, and the manner they are arranged in the landscape. The first important landscape design dimension of scale or breadth or vastness, which was meant to celebrate power and wealth, was a significant contribution of the style. For example, Italian and French gardens, which, in early 1400's, epitomized the new landscape order based on urbanization and free market economies that evolved in Western Europe from the patronage of wealthy families, featured the parterre (meaning "planting bed"), that familiar neatly manicured, uniformly sized and spaced clipped-hedge gardens laid out in formal, geometric patterns over a vast landscape space. In England, estates were designed for fox hunting, and a star pattern landscape of radially laid-out wooded paths, with specific bearing distances from a designated assembly center, was developed to satisfy the Englishmen's love for this sport. Likewise, the Romantic age of gardens in England contributed the concept of picture-pretty landscapes that combined, in "painting"-style, colors and textures and play of light of natural as well as man-made elements, necessarily viewed from a distinct point at a distance. Again, size and distance were necessary dimensions.



Figure 1 - Visual tangible qualities like color & texture



Figure 2 - The manner they are arranged in landscape

A second important physical dimension prevalent in cultural landscapes is the enclosure. This is especially characteristic of Islam and Oriental cultures, as evident in the Alhambra Palace, Spain's finest example of Moorish architecture, as well as in many Persian, Indian and other middle-eastern cultures. High-walled gardens and cities often give no indication of the vibrant array of fragrant flowers and plants and tiled courts and air-cooling fountains and pools that lie beyond their elaborate gateways. It is interesting to note that the word "paradise" is derived from the ancient Persian word *pairidaeza* meaning park or enclosure.

Truly, this combination of geometry, scale, breadth, and physical arrangement has successfully articulated the culture of the west, helping to preserve and promote their history.

The Psychic/Symbolic Dimension

But physicality is NOT the context in which culture is cultivated in Asia, this land where RITUALS and SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS are a way of life.

In Chinese culture, where almost every facet of life is governed by *Feng Shui*, plans of cities and gardens express a particular preference for east-facing entrances, and ceremonial moon gates, and dragon figures keeping post at

the steps of temples and palaces, to keep prosperity in and ward off evil spirits. For example, the Forbidden City of Peking built in 1406 during the Ming and Qing dynasties, is an example of the ritualistic manner that the buildings were arranged on site. While seemingly magnificent in area, the use of gilded bronze lions at the first gate of the south-facing entrance and the dark-green figures of dragons, phoenixes and other geometric figures decorating its architecture speak of religious as well as mystical beliefs in these symbols. Two more layers of gateways securing the entrance to the Great Palace of Peace depict a ritual of awe and respect for the leader of the Dynasty.

But the real symbolic or psychic dimension of Asian culture can be best exemplified in the Japanese Zen Gardens, where the entire garden is designed in observance of the Zen Buddhism philosophy that "true beauty could be discovered only by one who can mentally complete the incomplete."ⁱ Hence, every little detail of raked sand and rock formation and sheared hedge have suggested meanings, allowing the mind to multiply the possibilities of perception and thus expand the scope and richness of the suggested experience.

Significantly, the study of dimensions of cultural landscapes present discernible differences between western and oriental cultures, where western landscapes are usually magnificent in scale, characterized by a visual play of solids and voids, while Asian landscape design constitutes a "language of line, edge, mesh and shade."ⁱⁱ

Dimensions of the Filipino Landscapes

Such is the language of Filipino Landscape Architecture. The first two National Symposia on Filipino Architecture and Design conducted in 1995 and 1998 by the UP College of Architecture revealed, among others, that:

- The Filipino space is multi-layered, articulating the varying degrees of use and transparency;
- The Filipino ornamentation is characteristically *makulay*, *makintab*, *may naka-usli*, *may nakalawit*, to illustrate the vivacity of Filipino life; and
- The Filipino patterns, like our traditional songs, have a story with a beginning and an end, and where rhythm may be repeated without repeating details, to express the characteristic romance in the Filipino culture.

Perceptively, in Design, They Translate as Follows

SPACE: The traditional *balkon* (porch) or the modern *verandah*, is the first layer of landscape space. It is that part of the house that is an external extension of the *sala* (living room). It is the place where the family greets visitors or acquaintances, and draws them into cozy conversation. The *balkon* is that space where favorite Filipino pastimes like *inuman*, *chismisan*, and the *ligawan* occur. It is also the place

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where the family members avail of an afternoon breeze, or take a nap without feeling too exposed. When inside this space, it is understood by all that there is no need to get into the more private *sala*.

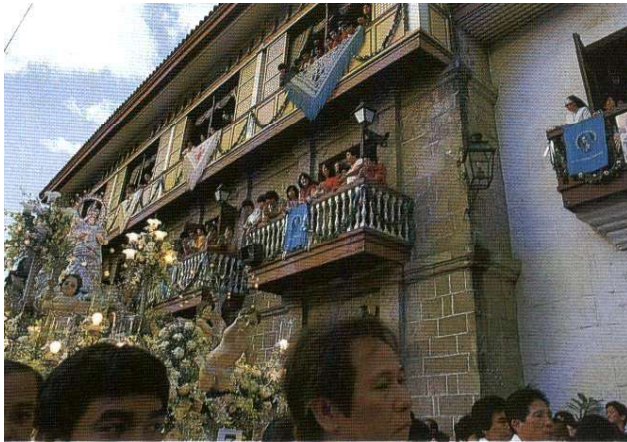


Figure 3 - The Typical Filipino Balcony

The second layer is the *hardin*, or the garden which, in the rural context, could constitute the edible garden, that essentially produces PRODUCE –fruits, vegetables, and livestock, or just that most desired patch of green where children play with chicken and goats. In the more urban sense, it would be the front lawn, where children play (sans livestock) or where the family holds parties, in full or partial view of the public, thereby establishing a strong presence in the neighborhood.

The third layer is usually the street, or the space outside the gate, where neighbors conglomerate, play basketball, where little children play well within shouting distance of their mother and where the community holds processions and the roving rosary or stations of the cross. It is not uncommon to find a small grotto of Mama Mary at a strategic corner for quiet, little prayers for a birthday and other such occasions, when a *capilla* or church is not within reach.

ORNAMENTATION: The use of vivid colors and the profusion of details, although typical for equatorial and Hispanic cultures, are not lost in our culture. We take great pride in having developed ornamentation distinctly Filipino in form and materials. One of the best examples to mention is the world-famous JEEPNEY. No other creative genius in the world, not even the Americans, could have invented this work of art out of military surplus than the Filipino. Of course, I refer to that legitimately artsy jeepney with the gleaming graphics and colors on its body, the proud horde of horses on its hood, the array of fog lights that line its roof, and the multi-colored flags and frills that fly in the wind. Truly, it exemplifies the terms *makulay / makintab / may nakalusli at may nakalawit*. Similarly, the delightful *kippings* of the Pahiya, the familiar colorful fiesta buntings, and those wonderful Pampanga lanterns add to the list of distinctly Filipino ornaments. Fortunately, all these have deeply rooted themselves in the Filipino landscape.

PATTERNS: I cannot begin to describe the wealth of Filipino patterns that exist in our midst. They range from the simple checkered patterns of the traditional *banig*, to the lacy string of *sampaguita* buds and blossoms sold in the streets, the delicate weave of baskets adorning the stalls of “*Quiapo Ilalim*,” and the intricate geometry of the *tinalak* and other ethnic woven fabric. The multiplicity and complexity of shapes and colors that occur within a single pattern seem not to follow a clear formula, but nevertheless, there is no clutter, no confusion, and the overall result is beauty and clarity.

You might wonder why all of the above examples pertain to man-made elements and plants do not dominate the picture. Obviously because culture is a result of human activity, and nature, in this context serves only as enclosure. Also, the examples are those that do not normally figure in drawing. That’s probably because we will just be starting to do so. Most of all, I’d like to point out that, owing to the absence of breadth and scale in our cultural landscape, the physical dimensions are diffused, and the psychic or symbolic clearly dominate.

But, to be sure, when we have mastered our language of ornamentation and our palette of patterns, perhaps we will be able to redesign the Christmas look of Ayala Avenue and Roxas Boulevard to reflect a more Filipino culture; when we begin to adorn our pavements, banners, lampposts, and walls and enclosures of our cities and neighborhood using the *banig* patterns, the *sampaguita* blossoms, the *tinalak* weave, then we will have contributed to the propagation of Filipino culture.



Figure 4 – the landscape patterns

Conclusion: The Future of the Filipino Landscape

The Threat

There is one major impending threat to the local and even the regional cultures that is being brought about by “globalization”, the threat of mono-culture on peoples living under varied cultural environments. The implications on landscape architecture can be frightening:

- Indoor spaces that do not connect to lawns and gardens;
- Gardens that are not edible and do not support active children’s play; and,
- Streets that are bereft of human interaction.



Figure 4 – indoor spaces that do not connect to the *hardin*

The Obligation

Landscape Architects have the obligation to uphold local culture, and we can do so by providing the opportunities for culture to propagate and proliferate. We can contribute by first appreciating the true essence of the cultural dimensions of Filipino Landscape Architecture, and then professing and applying them in our designs.

At this point, I would like to quote Prof. Cristopher S. P. Espina in his paper entitled “In the Service of the Nation”:

“The status of the built environment is veritably the ultimate indicator upon which an architect (and landscape architect) should be judged. Where the success of the lawyers is indicated by the state of the justice system in the community, and doctors in the state of the health of our people, that of architects (and landscape architects) must be in the physical state of the community in which we live. The role of the architect goes beyond providing shelter for a single client because he also must see to it that the building (or the landscape) he designs is people-oriented, place-oriented, blends well with nature and the environment and is technologically efficient and sound.”ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 5 – a symbol of Filipino landscape architecture

The Future

A humanized, culturally healthy built environment is our responsibility, our contribution to mankind, a legacy we have to perfect in order to perpetuate a good life, a beautiful home for generations to come.

And there is one sure formula to remember: that the success of the Filipino culture in the landscape lies in the opportunities made available for it to propagate. And the opportunities can only happen if WE provide them.

Endnotes

ⁱ Kakuzo Okakura, *A Book of Tea*, New York, Dover Publications Inc.

ⁱⁱ Tay Kheng Soon

ⁱⁱⁱ “*In the Service of the Nation*,” paper by Cristopher S. P. Espina.

Reference

Okakura, Kakuzo. *A Book of Tea*. New York, Dover Publications, Inc.

Espina, Cristopher S. P. Espina. “*In the Service of the Nation*”.