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Balai Vernacular, by Hila

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Book Reviews and Notes



Balai Vernacular: Images of the Filipino's Private Space. By Ma. Corazon A. Hila, Rodrigo D. Perez III, and Julian E. Dacanay, Jr. 1992. Metro Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 254 pp. Illus.

This is a good example of what can happen when students and teachers come together not as opposite, perhaps antagonistic, forces within the knowledge industry but as partners in the common search for truth. In 1987, "the CCP Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino, together with the United Architects of the Philippines, launched a national student competition. Schools offering courses in architecture were sent letters inviting their fourth year students to document the 'humble dwelling' of the Filipino." All told the Museo received 260 entries by 15 October 1987, the deadline for the competition. The five entries from student groups were chosen winners, twenty others merited distinction. The work of the students went on tour from January to May 1988, accompanied by a lecture given by Rosario Encarnacion. From 13 September to 3 October of the same year the entries were exhibited at the CCP.

The contest required that students "submit photos and drawings with accompanying essays to express their perception of how the Filipino shapes his private space." Documentation included the following:

- Mapping - location map, environmental map
- Exterior space - facades, i.e. front, rear, sides
- Interior volume - space division
- Detail - connections and decorations.

Some time afterwards, CCP decided to give the project a more permanent form through a publication. Three writers were commissioned to write a 25-page-report each based on the documentation but to focus not on the winners but on three shelter types: the ethnic house, the urban shanty, and the *bahay kubo*. Both the project and the publication are collectively known as *Balai Vernacular*. "Balai" means house; while "vernacular" is the term favored by architectural writers to refer to structures built according to tradition.

One approaches this book best not by reading it but by seeing. Essential to *Balai Vernacular*, the book, are the photographs and sketches that appear on the odd numbered pages and are gathered as folios after each section. The compendium of architectural sketches is the most singular contribution of this book to our knowledge of Philippine architecture. Here for instance is the bahay kubo measured to the hundredths of a meter, its parts properly identified. Not the idealized bahay but as they actually exist, built and occupied by people. The sketches range from quick drafts of elevations executed while on field work to isometric sketches drawn with precision in the quiet of the architectural school. The elaborate roof framework of the Cordillera house and the bahay kubo, as well as the serendipitous construction of the urban shanty's roof are clearly sketched. Details of construction, e.g. truss construction, walls, windows, door, joints and elaborate carpentry work are carefully delineated.

Of the three essays that tie together data gathered by student architects, Perez's "Squatter Shanties," pp. 93-159, is the most original because hardly studied. It also has the strongest political agenda. Perez doesn't mince words when he condemns "the squatter house and the squatter community" as "marks of a regressive society. They are clear evidences of neglect, indifference, injustice, exploitation, and massive economic failure." Elsewhere he writes "Scrap wood, scrap metal, scrap cardboard, scrap plastic: the squatter house is an assemblage of scrap. Allowing, if not compelling people to live in houses made of refuse is just a short step from treating them as refuse." Perez wonders out loud or on paper "the squatter house could also be an object of admiration for the cleverness it exhibits in its use of material and methods of construction. Precisely because it can be admired, there is danger of its being romanticized, as one can see in prettified representations of the barong-barong in modern Filipino painting. One wonders whether romanticizing the slum accounts, in part, for its perpetuation." After clarifying the context in which one must view the shanty, Perez begins an architectural description of the house and the community of houses inhabited by the urban poor. Without going into details, it is important to note that Perez sees "the return to primitive patterns" of dwelling and community organization "in squatter housing, whether by choice or force of necessity." He draws a parallel between cave dwellings and shelters found in the urban centers, such as, "under bridges, enclosures within ruins and abandoned buildings." The matter of occupying land is the most primitive — occupation and defense. Materials are gathered from the urban environment just as cultural communities gather from nature. Households range from the nuclear family to an extended family. Communities form along the seacoast or the riverbank. The linear pattern of settlement, traditional in ethnic communities, reemerges. Abandoned roadways and strips flanking railroad tracks also serve like estuaries, houses are built on these strips. All told, Perez's account of the squatter shanty demonstrates the poor's drive for survival

— the poor who cannot rely on government or any grand institution to lift them from the squalor they are forced to live in. The poor somehow survive because of some residue of traditional knowledge that serves them well in the urban jungle.

The subject of Hila's and Dacanay's articles has been treated in previously published books, like *Folk Architecture* (1989) and Dacanay's own *Ethnic House and Philippine Artistic Expression* (1988). But there are some data published for the first time. Hila has a section on the Baluga (Negrito, Ati, Aeta, Dumagat) dwelling and communal space. There is also a discussion of the three types of Mangyan dwellings. Dacanay admits that his ten-page description of the bahay kubo in *Ethnic House* was "based on library research." Since then he has gone on field trips to find "existing structures of the bahay kubo as defined in the literature: all nipa or cogon or bamboo." Since then he has found such a house in Barrio Santor, Bongabong, Nueva Ecija. His own field work has been enriched by documentation done by architectural students. In fact, of the 260 entries submitted to CCP, more than half were on the bahay kubo.

Balai Vernacular, the book, has its glaring limitation. Dacanay admits in the "Introduction" that Hila's account of the ethnic dwelling is limited in coverage. Perhaps, representing the material Hila had to work with. The students' coverage of squatter shanties "seems to be the most thorough and complete. You can attribute this to the fact that these dwellings abound in Metro Manila and other cities where students are," writes Dacanay. Despite its limitations, *Balai Vernacular*, the book, has "so much more to offer than any other book in terms of photographs and architectural drawings." Besides the book's genesis is its claim to originality. One sees balai not from the perspective of the anthropologist or the cultural writer but from the young architect's. The vision is technical as it is daring. *Balai Vernacular*, the project and the book, are models worth emulating and replicating. Perhaps, CCP should seriously consider unleashing another batch of senior architecture students to document the bahay na bato, or the much neglected if not despised heritage of American architecture. Perhaps, the students can document a whole town, in particular those in Pampanga and Zambales in danger of obliteration by lahar. Perhaps, students can be employed on a more or less permanent basis to complete the inventory of the Philippine architectural heritage. This is not a farfetched suggestion. An issue of the ICOMOS bulletin reported how students were successfully recruited to document architectural monuments in the South American continent. Hopefully, documentation can be a permanent part of the architectural school's curriculum and a new breed of writers arise who are not schooled in anthropology, the arts or the humanities, but in architecture.

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