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Casa Boholana: Vintage Houses of Bohol

Romeo B. Galang, Jr.

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Book Reviews

ERIK AKPEDONU AND CZARINA SALOMA

Casa Boholana: Vintage Houses of Bohol

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011. 470 pages.

Erik Akpedonu's architecture degree from the Lippe University of Applied Sciences in Detmold, Germany, and coauthor Czarina Saloma's PhD in sociology from Bielefeld University in Germany and BA in sociology from the University of the Philippines place them in a position to embark on a study of Philippine heritage structures, underscoring not only the architectural elements but also their social importance. Their study is crucial as the country is beset by problems in cultural heritage preservation. Many iconic structures have already been lost and countless other structures face threats, including opposition from stakeholders, misdirected redevelopment plans, poor urban planning, apathy and neglect, and outright demolition.

The same problem affects domestic architecture, a widely and intimately familiar but largely neglected component of urban heritage. Literature concerning its history and social context is sadly lacking. Fortunately Akpedonu and Saloma's *Casa Boholana*, which focuses on houses in Bohol, helps fill this void as it seeks to raise awareness and foster the preservation of the country's vernacular urban architecture. By documenting all aspects of the province's heritage houses, the book succeeds in identifying the threats to these houses and the steps to address such threats.

The introductory chapter analyzes the history of Bohol's built environment, which followed a trajectory different from those of other provinces. Twenty towns in Bohol were burned during the Philippine–American War, which accounts for the dearth of Spanish-era houses at present. However, Bohol is unique in having been spared from destruction during the Second World War; hence, outstanding examples of American-era houses remain today.

The methodology, limitations, and assumptions of the book are clearly delineated, a step that is crucial in establishing familiarity with the houses and their sites. The discussion of the methodology also enables other field researchers to either replicate the study or broaden its scope by covering houses not included in the book.

The results of the research reveal features common to Bohol's houses. These features include the wooden- or *sawali*-walled ground floor. In some cases, ground floors do not even have walls. Bohol's houses also follow the same footprint for both the ground level and the first-story sections, contrasting markedly with the overhanging upper story of houses elsewhere in the country. Moreover, clay-tiled roofs are rare in Bohol, where the preferred roofing materials are thatch and galvanized iron. This feature of Bohol houses may be due to lack of funds, preference for the coolness brought about by the use of thatch materials, the absence of good material for clay tiles, or the undocumented replacement of old with modern materials.

Bohol's houses embody the spirit of the times when they were built. As such, houses from particular historical periods share certain characteristics. Since classification is one of the main features of the study, technical terms abound in the section on “History of Bohol and Evolution of the Boholano House” to refer to parts of the houses that are typical of the period. A glossary, when used together with photographs of the houses in part two, “300 Boholano Vintage Houses,” is of great help in understanding and visualizing these terms. Referencing would have been easier though if the glossary also had illustrations. Nevertheless, photos of houses typical of each era are provided, which, together with the equally illustrated section on “Classes of Houses,” help readers get a good grasp of domestic architecture.

The chapter entitled “Profile of Boholano Vintage Houses” further orients readers to Boholano houses. The distribution of houses shows that,

although older towns generally have more vintage houses than newer towns, there are exceptions to the rule, like the town of Guindulman, which does not even have a single vintage house despite having been established in the eighteenth century. Also, the social significance of vintage houses may be gauged by the profile of the original owners. Most of the vintage houses were built by professionals, businessmen, and landowning families. The rest were owned by politicians, artisans, and other groups. Some clans also have descendants who own houses in various towns. Meanwhile, the type of ownership is a factor that decides the fate of the house. In some cases affluent members of a clan subsidize house maintenance. In others, apathy and neglect lead to deterioration and demolition of the house.

Through the years Boholano houses have undergone changes, which have had considerable impact on their preservation. One change concerns the houses' usage. Formerly ground floors were used as bodega or spaces for keeping farm implements or animals, and rarely as residential quarters or office spaces. However, in recent years ground floors have been used as residential quarters and commercial spaces, while upper stories have retained their function as living quarters. Another change concerns the structure of the houses. Modifications range from the laying of cement on the ground floor to the total demolition of some sections of the house. As a result the appearance of a number of houses has changed dramatically. These houses have also faced great threats to their physical structure, which can be undermined by leaking roofs, insect infestation, rotting walls or windows, and structural problems. Ultimately these dramatic changes affect the integrity of the houses, and future generations may no longer have an idea of their original appearance.

The succeeding chapter examines vintage houses in the present time. Threats vary and depend on how vintage houses are being adapted to the current milieu—whether they are being maintained, renovated, remodeled, or recycled. The current times pose additional issues that need to be addressed, such as the owners' views regarding vintage structures, provision of amenities, compliance with safety standards, coping with rapid urbanization and its accompanying problems regarding noise and pollution, as well as threats arising from insect infestation, earthquakes, typhoons, and floods. Moreover, the very structure of the vintage houses may soon be at risk, as competent carpenters who are adept at traditional

house construction are no longer engaged in the trade. Some of the threats to vintage houses lie within the government itself. By being ill-informed regarding the value of vintage houses, government officials inevitably contribute to the loss of heritage houses, with roads made to cut through town centers and wooden houses declared as fire hazards.

Nonetheless the government plays a major role in the preservation of vintage houses. Although a tedious process, the classification of structures as heritage houses or historical landmarks leads to their preservation. The local government can help by declaring relevant sites as heritage structures or even heritage zones at the municipal level, as in the case of Sitio Ubos in Tagbilaran City. Furthermore, tax incentives may be given to vintage house owners to help subsidize the maintenance of these structures. A review of municipal ordinances is also needed to amend potentially harmful regulations such as those that lead municipal engineers to declare wooden vintage houses as fire hazards.

The second part of the book is a guide to Boholano houses. A historical perspective provides a backdrop for the dearth or density of urban structures in any town center. With the main road to the town as anchor point, the narrative describes houses encountered along the way from the outskirts to the town center. Each house is described in detail, from the roof down to the ground story walls. Unique or outstanding architectural elements of the house are compared with other houses within the town as well as those beyond. In this part, architectural details that have been described in the preceding chapters are pointed out and described for each house that bears them.

This part also shows how towns developed. Some towns or cities like Tagbilaran initially had port areas that witnessed an economic boom during the Spanish period, but later experienced a decline as construction shifted to the central square. However, most towns have a linear plan where houses line the main road that cuts through the town square. The other coastal towns that follow a linear plan did not develop a distinctive port area. Baclayon is one example, and it also boasts of a great number of vintage houses. However, as noted in the limitations of the study, this number may have been bloated by the inclusion of other houses outside the town center.

The book is a valuable contribution to Philippine vernacular urban architecture. Its field studies build up a picture of Bohol's houses, their patterns of distribution, and their architectural styles and elements. The book rekindles interest in vintage houses by looking at their construction patterns, materials, and decorations. It also provides an in-depth study of the social context of vintage houses. The foregoing inevitably fosters an awareness of the cultural value of these houses. Moreover, the field data gathered will be invaluable in the restoration of damaged structures in the wake of the 15 October 2013 earthquake. Nonetheless, everything will depend on what course the province will take in relation to the preservation of its built heritage.

Romeo B. Galang Jr.

Department of Literature and Humanities
Far Eastern University
<rgalang@feu.edu.ph>