

THE PHILIPPINES

Augusto F. Villalon

The Filipino bahay kubo, where form does not necessarily follow function

What people in other countries call vernacular architecture we call folk architecture here, but mostly we identify the rural *bahay kubo* (literally a 'cube' house, as taken from the basic form of the structure) as a 'native' house.

Vernacular architecture goes beyond the *bahay kubo*. From its origins as a rural bamboo and thatch house, it evolved into the urban *bahay na bato* (house of stone) during the Spanish colonial era, and from there certain features evolved once again into the houses built in the early part of the 20th century during the American regime.

The traditional feature of the 'native' house has always been the steeply pitched roof supported by wooden post-and-lintel construction that allowed the raising of the single room of the dwelling on stilts above the ground and provided an open space directly underneath. The house is very simple: usually a square or rectangular structure built of bamboo, wood, and roofed (and sometimes walled) with thatch that encloses a single room small enough to shelter just a man and his wife, or on the other hand, it could be large enough to sleep the patriarch and matriarch of an extended family including their children and their children's families.

There is a wealth of folk knowledge that surrounds the *bahay kubo*, folklore and beliefs determine the orientation of the house on a site, rituals accompany its construction, communal ties bring neighbours together to construct the house, and custom dictates the lifestyle lived within the small confines of the structure.

So it can be said that these houses are shaped in response to the local culture. However, geography and climate, available natural building materials and local construction skills could also be said to be the determining factors of the *bahay kubo*. Responding to the climate, the most dominant element of the house is its thick roof of thatch that insulates the interior against the tropical sun, rain slides off its steep roof and wide overhangs protect the walls from water, the floor of bamboo slats conducts air into the house even if all openings are shut.

The houses, therefore, are a result of many influences: cultural, environmental, and technological. This is a case where form does not necessarily follow function because the form of the house dictates how its inhabitants function within it.

A way of life evolved in response to the single main room within the *bahay kubo*. In the book *Cebu, More than just an Island* (Ayala Foundation, Makati, 1997), respected Cebuano architect Melva Java describes the *Cebuano payag* (*bahay kubo*):

"The dwelling consists of one main room of *guinlawasan* which comprises the main body of the house. It is usually left bare except for a long bench that is attached to an adjacent wall. This is the family room, the centre of activity, where residents eat and spend the night huddled close to one another."

"To achieve privacy, the Cebuanos have devised a meaningful body language. One 'disappears' or becomes 'no longer present' by simply looking away. This is done when a daughter is in the company of a suitor, or when one changes clothes, or when a son sits by the window to be alone with his thoughts."

The interior of the single-room dwelling illustrates the sophisticated Filipino approach towards space. Unlike the western



concept of space where each space is assigned a function – sleeping, dining, cooking, etc, Filipino space is open and multi-functional. An eating area is cleared away at night and sleeping mats rolled out for the family to sleep on, or where turning one's back on the central shared space of the room creates privacy. It is a simple open space but its usage complex – where walls are not necessary for privacy, where spaces layer upon each other, where a big communal space gives way to smaller individual spaces.

Rodrigo D. Perez III writes of the *bahay kubo* in *Folk Architecture* (GCF Books, Manila, 1989): "The utter simplicity of the house is all the more impressive in the perfect correspondence of exterior form and interior space. The exterior form defines the totality of space in the one-room dwelling, while the interior space enjoys the full expanse of the structure. There is no dead or buried space within."

"Though small in scale, the native house reveals a sense of architectural mass. It embodies an appreciation of the power of simple volumes – pyramids and the combination of rectangular and triangular masses."

One can speak of the *bahay kubo* in architectural or cultural terms, even look at it as something that we have in common with our neighbours since it appears in one form or another in all Southeast Asian countries.

However, in this day and age these traditional houses have become an anachronism. Over time and generations the more fortunate residents have built new houses of cement with galvanised iron roofing. It matters little that the new house is not safe from floods, that it is oven-hot in the summer and that typhoon rains deafen the residents as they drum on the thin roof. The concrete house is the supreme status symbol.

The less fortunate have moved to the fringes of cities, where they live in urban versions of the *bahay kubo*, temporary shanties constructed of whatever material they have salvaged.

The traditional *bahay kubo*, or *payag* in Cebuano, stands either alone or in small clusters in rural areas, some of them a distance away from the nearest road, without water supply and sewage, without electricity and communication. Life in a *bahay kubo* is not easy.

It may be time to take a good look at traditional architecture, to find ways for rural life to continue in the *bahay kubo* and to bring in elements of the 21st century so that the residents will not feel left out of the mainstream. If steps are not taken, then we may as well write an epitaph for traditional architecture.