

WALKING HISTORY by Michael Xiao Chua

HOUSES. #ItsMoreFunInThePhilippines

Do you know that the first modern skyscraper is inspired by Filipino houses?

William Le Baron Jenney, an American engineer who was the son of a ship company owner, came to visit the Philippines for three months around 1850 in one of his father's whaling vessels. During one of the storms, he observed how the structure of the houses on stilts made it very flexible against the wind. The framing system of the Philippine house according to historian Carl Condit, inspired Jenney in constructing the first American skyscrapers, the Chicago's Leiter Building, and five years later, the Home Insurance Building in 1884.

William, Le Baron Jenney is considered as the "Father of the Skyscraper," a structure familiar with the skyline of many modern cities around the world. Inspired by a Filipino cultural landmark!

Historian Arnold Toynbee's challenge and response hypothesis can be clearly demonstrated with the Philippine House or the Austronesian House, commonly called the Bahay Kubo. Aside from the fact that the house is made of bamboo, nipa, rattan and other materials easily available in our environment, the challenge of a tropical climate for these islands produced a house which will respond to the heat of the day and the cold of the night—large nipa roof to absorb the heat, high ceiling and large windows for the air to easily circulate, and the floor elevated from the ground to protect the occupants from the heat or cold of the floor and wild animals. Although in a recent conversation with Dr. Zeus Salazar, to call it "Bahay Kubo" would be a misnomer. For the famous folk song gives us the impression that they are all small, "kahit munti," when many of the traditional Filipino homes were long houses which can house families.

And as for our common visitor, the typhoon, the Filipino house might fall, but it can easily be reconstructed. But as Jenney himself can testify, bamboo made it possible for the house to just sway and follow the direction of a strong wind if the house is well built.

Anthropologist Carlos Tatel once noted in one of our discussions that the set-up of the Philippine house is different from a Western home, for it doesn't differentiate from public and private space. Might account for the close-family ties of Filipinos and the common practice now of Philippine politicians where their home double as their offices.

Despite change through time, the design and elements of the Ancient Philippine House, "ginhawa" in a tropical country, can be seen in the architecture that followed even during the Spanish Colonization and after—from the Spanish colonial houses in the Philippines (as noted by Dr. Fernando Nakpil-Zialcita and Dr. Vicente Villan), to Cesar Concio's Palma Hall and Melchor Hall, to Leandro Locsin's Cultural Center of the Philippines Main Building, to many bungalows and homes around the country.

And with Jenney's first skyscraper, the spirit of the Philippine house changed the face of world architecture.

I end with the Philippine house's most enduring image: When it's being transferred to another place, it is carried together by neighbors—*bayanihan*. This image became the symbol of unified compassion and action resulting to goals being achieved. Change of address? It's more fun in the Philippines.

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