

The houses we live in
leave some of the most
lasting impressions on us:
the atmosphere of our family
life, the issues we take on
throughout our lifetime.
Behind these old walls that
separated us from the world
outside, the family grew up,
and we lived through joys and
sorrows as the years went
by so unrelentingly.

Brazilian Modernist Oscar Niemeyer, in *The Curves of Time*, translated from the Portuguese
by Izabel Murat Burbridge, London: Phaidon Press, 2000, p. 7

Critical Ambition: THE PHILIPPINE “BIG HOUSE”

Until thirty years ago the Philippines could offer many well-preserved examples of Spanish architecture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Intramuros, the old walled stronghold of Manila ... which was once a treasure-house of ultramarine Hispanic art, suffered irreparable damage in the Second World War.
- Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*, London:
The Athlone Press, 1975, p. 1114

If the Philippines has figured in historical architectural accounts, it has chiefly been as a footnote to Spanish or American architectural traditions – or a fleeting mention such as that above from Sir Banister Fletcher's magisterial *History of Architecture*. Such passing references do scant justice to the rich architectural legacy to be found across the archipelago – particularly in the houses of Iloilo, Negros Occidental and Pampanga, its main sugar-producing provinces.

These “houses that sugar built” have been described in local publications. However, they have yet to receive the international exposure achieved by equally distinctive groups of residences outside the Western architectural canon – possibly because their poise and assurance places them somewhat outside the field occupied by their contemporaries and near-contemporaries elsewhere. Although financed from the profits of a lucrative primary industry, they are not as outlandish as the extravagant palaces of early 20th-century Baku's Caspian “oil barons”; nor are they as obsessively varied as the nationalist confections of Cairo's 1920s Garden City. And although mostly situated well into the 20th century, they are not as achingly modern as the villas of the El Pedregal estate, Mexico's showcase for “starchitects” like Luis Barragán.

Nonetheless, they are important in two crucial ways. Firstly, although swiftly classified in terms of architectural style – and virtually every owner spoken to is eager to learn which category their house falls into – upon experiencing the buildings themselves there are almost always layers of additional influence. An Art Deco villa may exhibit strong traces of Purism or Bauhaus-derived tendencies in its massing. A conventional Neoclassical mansion might, upon venturing inside, reveal a world of Mannerist extravagance.

The second aspect is that this assured blending of styles reveals what we might call a Critical Ambition – a desire on the part of their patrons to participate in an international

architectural culture. Their relatively overlooked location did not stop the sugar barons responsible for these houses from undertaking a 20th-century form of the Grand Tour of Western capitals, returning with a craving to bring the latest trends from Paris or Vienna to the provincial Philippines, or to partake of the latest streamlined “Moderne” style from the USA. In our complacently globalised world, it is important to remember the scale and ambition that would have underpinned this cultural commitment in the early 20th century.

As Gina Consing McAdam's description here highlights, the Villanueva family of Bacolod referred to their home – listed here as the Generoso M Villanueva Mansion – as “Daku Balay” (“Big House” in Ilonggo). Ireland-born photographer Siobhán Doran was intrigued to note that this term shares its Iberian directness with the Anglo-Irish name for such residences – the “Big House”. (The English, by contrast, tend towards the more verbose “country seat” or “stately home”.) Valerie Pakenham, herself custodian of a “family castle” in the Irish Midlands, recalls, in her 2000 book *The Big House in Ireland*, one definition of owning such a residence as “something between a predicament and a *raison d'être*”. Siobhán's photographs in this volume aim to show off the Philippine houses in all their variety. Her architectural background makes her ideally suited to get “beneath the skin” of these unique residences.

Owing to her family history and intimate connections with many of these mansions, Gina is able to highlight some key points in their family histories and to enrich the house profiles with anecdotes shared by owners and heirs. Her memoir aims to set the dwellings within their social and historical context, and her individual house descriptions transport us back to a time when these residences were in their elegant heyday. Nonetheless, it is evident that they were essentially family homes – domestic havens from the outside world.

Ian McDonald's overview aims to place the “houses that sugar built” alongside other examples within a broad architectural spectrum. It investigates three main areas that confront similar non-Western structures: the “commodity-house” aspect of these residences (their grounding in a profitable trade in a commodity), their possible role in the search for a national style and their relationship with the local vernacular. In doing so, Ian hopes to pay tribute to the critical ambition demonstrated by these extraordinary houses.