

# VIGAN AND ITS ANCESTRAL HOUSES

*by Carmen R. Punzalan*

History has often been decided by geology, fate of men, its urban configuration, and making particular reference to its evolution in the past.

The historic analysis of Vigan actually begins millions of years ago when changes in the earth's crust eventually led to the formation of the Philippine archipelago on the vast expanse of the Pacific.

It is believed that this group of islands was originally a part of the Asian underbelly and gradually isolated at the events of time.

The island of Luzon, a narrow strip of sandy, semi-arid region that runs along the coast of China Sea, lies bounded on the east with the mountain ranges of the Cordilleras, the Ilocos. The earliest Ilocos man was like the rest of the human family of his time. Geographically confined in an environment where struggle is a context of determination between men and nature, the isolated Ilocanos, hardy and industrious developed into a highly ethnocentric group possessed with an intense sense of regional identity.

The house on stilts otherwise known as the native "bahay kubo" was all of Vigan's architecture then. Although this original Filipino dwelling cannot be acknowledged as architecture by many today, it claims an ancient lineage and a vast domain. Long before Christ, images of these were already inscripted on the Dongsum drums of Vietnam.

To keep the bahay kubo safe and comfortable from the tropical ground at all seasons was always the more immediate concern. The bahay kubo's response to stress is ambiguous. During an earthquake, it holds

fast for the pliant materials fitted together into a skeletal frame sway with the shock. Repeated shocks however can collapse the bahay kubo and the strong winds of the typhoon can knock it down. Its materials, nipa and cogon easily catch fire. Lack of durability is another problem of this dwelling. Its rafters last no longer than five years and the bamboo slats become brittle in a decade.

Large bodies of water branching out from the China Sea attracted a new population: the slim brown, lank haired Malay from the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia. And soon afterwards, porcelain, precious spices and timber trade flourished. The town of Vigan became a trade center in Northern Luzon because of its ideal location at the estuary of the Abra River where Chinese and Malays traded their wares from the highlands.

In 1574 however the expedition led by Juan de Salcedo undertook the conquest of Luzon. Almost immediately the indomitable conquistador established a settlement for the Spaniard in the town of Vigan. This was later called Villa Fernandina in memory of Prince Fernando, the first-born son of King Philip of Spain.

To Vigan, the Spaniards brought not only their religion but also the adjuncts of their culture, their customs and habits, their educational system, their aristocracy, and the aura of the western world.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century the Augustinian friars were established securely, were building churches, residences, cemeteries, schools and tribunals, roads and bridges. They founded missions in the towns and villages along the coast, they taught the people Christianity and introduced the making of bricks. In due time, the "bahay kubo" of nipa thatch, timber and planks either disappeared from the

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Christianized regions or metamorphosed into the traditional townhouse now ubiquitous in Vigan Town.

The layout of Vigan Town was designed in typical Spanish style. Here, the grid town zoning separates the people from one another - another variant of the Spanish policy of divide and rule. One will note the aristocracy of the "babknangs: (the rich) against the "kailianes" (the ordinary town folks). In a small town, a house address gave a clue to the family's social standing for the elite house stood on the plaza beside the church and the tribunal.

All structural adaptations in the Philippine environment were articulated. And this brought about the emergence of an all-weather house, a functional building to live up to the context of the tropics. Although shaped closely to peninsular models, its features were adopted to suit the environment, all possible Philippine contest and needs.



Thick walls, hardwood floors, high ceiling, tile roofs make these old houses of Vigan venerable looking and formidable as forts.

