

Every country, every continent has had its ups and downs, some fared better than the others regaining stability even after the wars. But countries with a colonial past still aren't ranking as high as their motherland conquerors...

Manila is the Philippines' capital city since the start of the country's written history, the Spanish Colonial times. Like the country itself, the different groups that set foot on the city, giving it a multicultural flavor, enhanced the city. Manila is originally the Asian Bastion of Catholicism, and up until now religion plays a pivotal role in the city's socio economic occurrences.

During the pre-colonial times, natives' communities were either near the bodies of water or dispersed around the land they cultivated for farming. One of the most notable creations is the Banaue rice terraces in the Ifugao province, the locals carved the sides of the mountains with just using simple tools and formed terraces so that they could cultivate the land for farming rice.

The Spaniards arrived in the Philippine shores on 1571 and was part of their colony for more than 300 years. King Philip II promulgated a code that served as guide to all colonized territories of Spain. This code, which was applied successfully to the Spanish colonies in the Americas, was known as the Laws of the Indies. The law provided guidelines for site selection; layout and dimension of squares, streets and other land uses; and the main phases of planning and construction.

The royal ordinances dictated that each town should be located on vacant and high ground, properly oriented to sun, wind, and water areas. The site should also be on or near fertile land and accessible to sources of fuel, timber, and water. Because the law is based on the Greco-Roman Renaissance design principles, it favored the use of the gridiron pattern in the establishment of roads and blocks. The plaza was the starting point of the construction, around which were the important buildings like the church, casa real, town hall, bandstand for zarzuelas and other edifices for health and defense. This could have been the Philippines' earliest land use and zoning law and building code.

“...yet still small an area possessing the bay of Naples, the winding river of Paris, and the canals of Venice, Manila has before it an opportunity unique in the history of modern times, the opportunity to create a unique city equal to the greatest of the Western World with the unparalleled and priceless addition of a tropical setting.” – Daniel H. Burnham

From the late 19th century onwards, Manila was actually something approaching a Paris of Asia. It was a thriving trading center, its multicultural mix providing a good entry point into China and other emerging lands. In 1905, Daniel Burnham, the master planner of Chicago, was hired to produce a master plan for the city. His grand vision included Roxas Blvd, which even today, under its somewhat shabby patina, echoes Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. Intramuros and the surrounding districts were busy with business and entertainment and the streets were lined with grand structures, many reflecting the best of Art Deco design.

Burnham's plan for Manila was remarkable in its simplicity and in its knowledge to Philippine conditions and traditions. Concise and straightforward, its technical

recommendations for streets, parks, railroads, and public buildings echoed many of Burnham's ideas for Washington, Cleveland, and San Francisco. Yet, its qualifying details took proper note of the tropical climate and the definite "mañana" ambience of the Spanish-Philippine tradition. "We design to produce a condition, which shall make Manila what the Spaniards used to call it – 'The Pearl of the Orient'." - Burnham

Another feature of the Manila landscape that Burnham saw as unusually promising was the neglected system of canals. "The narrow canals or esteros ramifying throughout Manila, with their almost stagnant water and their unsanitary mud banks, would appear at first sight to be undesirable adjuncts of the city," he wrote. "Yet for transportation purposes they are of the utmost value, and in spite of the serious problems involved in properly widening, bridging, and maintaining them, they should be preserved" He also said that it can become as in Venice, an element of beauty.

WWII changed everything. Many claim the city has never recovered. The month-long Battle for Manila between the Japanese and the Americans resulted in the town's destruction, with over 150,000 locals killed.

Rebuilding was sporadic, and the city was never able to reclaim either its regional importance or its sense of self. Present-day Metro Manila is a conglomeration of 17 cities and municipalities. Many locals complain about the scattered character of Manila; it's true that the various districts feel disunified and there is no sense of a whole. Another thing bringing disunity is the fact that the Philippines is divided into 7,107 islands. There are 3 main islands namely Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. The seat of power is in Luzon, the northern most island. It's hard to govern such a divided country, yet alone make a master plan for it. Restoration of old structures isn't given that much of a priority, development companies usually tear down the structures in order to build new high rises for monetary gain, but it leaves the city at a loss of character.

Manila is still a very traditional and conservative city, with Catholicism as the reigning religion the people are still bound by certain rules and tend to partake on their quest for 'salvation'. The terms Church and State are very much synonymous to each other in Manila because the church always has a say on political matters, which I think seems rather peculiar. We had several issues regarding this, one of them being the law on the RH bill or the reproductive health act. Of course we know where the stand of the church is on this, that's why it took several years before this law was passed. One of the motions in this law is the proper use of contraceptives and education of students regarding intercourse, and with a country facing over population this was one of the ways to educate the masses into proper family planning. Metro Manila has a population of around 12 million people, with it being the center of business and trade in the Philippines people tend to flock here to find a livelihood. With over population comes aggravating the problem of pollution coupled with environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources. Millions of squatter families in Metro Manila alone are aggravating the problem of pollution especially on water resources, worsened by flooding due to the indiscriminate

dumping of garbage (including human waste) along waterways that also cause all kinds of waterborne diseases.

So now how can architecture help in bringing back the vibrant past it once had? Changing the built environment can start shaping a nation; buildings shape our experience and open up or close down possibilities for life. Hardly anyone gets to realize his or her visions for transforming society, but activism through architecture is a place to start. Ways of transportation should be a priority, in a country so divided this is a key factor to merge together a society.

We're currently facing incredible challenges, but we're starting to rise to meet them collectively. I think if we were able to zoom out to a macro level and look at the planet, our race and our history, we would be wise enough to see what would benefit and help change our current situation.