

# Quezon City: Asia's Lesser-Known Planned Capital City

Ian Morley



Fig. 1: A westwards aerial view of the Quezon Memorial Circle and Commonwealth Avenue in Quezon City, December 2019. Source: Ian Morley.

Despite nowadays having a population of almost three million people,<sup>2</sup> and in consequence being the largest municipality in the Philippines, scholars have tended to neglect the early development and urban planning of Quezon City. Broadly speaking, what has been said of the settlement's plan is that it builds upon the American City Beautiful paradigm. The city's layout conforms to the grand spatial forms introduced to the country in 1905 by the American architect-planner Daniel Burnham. However, this narrative underplays a number of significant contextual matters. Firstly, during the 1930s, Filipino architects put forward new ideas and new solutions in order to resolve ongoing social and environmental challenges.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, akin to developments in other Asian nations, Filipino innovations in architecture and urban design were perceived to enrich the concept of citizenship. Thirdly, by the late-1930s the phenomenon of transnational city planning practice was well-established.<sup>4</sup>

Against the backdrop of political, cultural, and environmental design advancement, Quezon City was never meant to be an ordinary community. On the one hand, its layout was not influenced by the 19th- and early 20th-century exemplars of Washington, DC and Paris, France.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, as the "mother city" of the soon-to-be independent Philippine nation, the city was to be the postcolonial site where Filipino democracy was depicted, where culture was augmented, and where heroes were acclaimed. It was to be the nucleus where Filipinos could create their own destiny and, in that context, display their unique spirit.<sup>6</sup> Housing arrangements, not just public edifice and public space design, were important to this process.

## Planning for social betterment

Quezon City's original plan was composed in June 1941 by the American Harry Frost with assistance from Juan Arellano and Alpheus Williams. Whilst representing "a joint Filipino-American achievement,"<sup>7</sup> the plan merely laid out residential districts in a grid-type pattern. However, subsequent to national independence (July 1946), such utilitarian configurations were redrawn. As *The Master*

*Plan for the New Capital City* (1949) reveals, in the early-postcolonial milieu, state-sponsored city planning was to operate with noticeable social purpose: Quezon City was to comprise economically productive, self-contained communities known as "neighbourhood units," and these were to be spatially organized around the activities of the modern Filipino family.

Within the restructured urban form,<sup>8</sup> parcels of land were cut into approximately one kilometer square (100 hectare/245 acre) segments. To help nurture social "efficiency," land in each neighbourhood unit was divided along clear-cut lines: 60% dedicated to low-rise housing (sited in 400 sq. metre, 800 sq. metre, and 2,000 sq. metre plots); 3% for school premises; 12% for parks; 18% for roadways; and, 7% for shops and the community hub.<sup>9</sup> Facilities such as health centres, recreational halls, community halls, police stations, fire stations, and more were recognized as being vital to the city's and, so, nation's development. Put simply, activities occurring within the bounds of Quezon City were to synchronize with the course of national evolution.

Given that the late-1940s city plan purportedly offered something more socially beneficial than its early-1940s counterpart, it is worthwhile to assess why, by 1949, spatial forms hitherto unseen in Philippine urban planning were utilized in Quezon City. Notwithstanding geometrical approaches to city planning being used in the ancient past – e.g., by civilizations in China, India, Greece, and Rome – it is my belief that during the 1940s, leading Filipino urbanists were stirred by planning discourses in not only Europe and the United States but also in Latin America. For example, in 1947, a delegation of Filipinos visited North and South America to develop ideas and plans for the future capital.<sup>10</sup>

## International modernity and the planned capital city

As to why there is a need to reappraise Quezon City's early planning character, it is commonly overlooked that Modernism was judged in many Latin American countries to contain "native elements." Modern design was recognized in Central and South America as being truly national and

contemporary. Critically, it also presented, and represented, the reorganization of urban living so that citizens could have a better quality of life than was previously possible. That said, within Asian historiography, barely any attention has been given to the correlation between plot patterns, the Philippine Government's remit to beget social justice, and the cost of constructing new modern urban neighbourhoods. Yet, by way of example, two works – Thomas Adams' *The Design of Residential Areas* (1934) and the Federal Housing Administration's *Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses* (1936) – supply empirical data that demonstrate how planning methods, such as those developed/practiced in places such as the Philippines, could maximize social benefits. In the view of Adams, when land is arranged thoughtfully and functionally into large-sized divisions (of 200 acre area), it supplies economical arrangements for housing design (i.e., it produces houses affordable to the masses). Likewise, the Federal Housing Administration recommended the use of curvilinear, courts, and cul-de-sac configurations in modern planning practice: grid plans have "several decided disadvantages when applied to residential areas"<sup>11</sup> – e.g., they increase the need for additional volumes of paving.

All in all, Filipino bureaucrats and architect-planners no doubt became increasingly cognizant of the Modernist concept of efficient urban design: habitation, work, leisure, and circulation.<sup>12</sup> In their efforts, they carried forward the views of progressive-minded urbanists in Europe and the Americas who, during the 1930s/1940s, supplied new directions to rationalize the laying out of urban fabrics. Furthermore, they became aware that city planning as a state-sponsored endeavor not only offered a means to overcome existent social problems, but was a tool too to advance Filipino social ideals borne within the decolonizing political and cultural frame, and to accordingly (re)organize the functions of collective life. In supplying a means to connect with societal organization on Filipino terms, the logic behind modern planning paralleled the transitional ideals of Filipinos as the colonization of their country drew to a close and, from 1946, they undertook self-rule for the first time since 1565.

Thus, the goals of the revised Quezon City plan as specified in *The Master Plan for the New Capital City* echo American architectural pioneer Frank Lloyd Wright when he argued that planning's function is to endorse liveability, culture, and democracy.<sup>13</sup> Evidently, there is still much to learn about the form and meaning of Asian urban places, especially within the frame of decolonization. With Quezon City purposefully formed as a showplace – "*lunsod na maganda, maayos, maunlad at makabgo*"<sup>14</sup> ["a city that is beautiful, orderly, prosperous, and modern"] – life within it was to supply "an atmosphere of dignity, freedom and human happiness."<sup>15</sup> Today, the connection between planning, urban morphology, and quality of life is well

known. But how this association was formed in past eras, especially times when nations experienced profound social, political, and philosophical transition, offers much for scholars of Urban History and Asian Studies to explore and learn. Quezon City's planning history explicitly demonstrates that there are many avenues still in need of exploration.

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## Notes

- 1 Harry T. Frost, "Quezon City. Functional Planning Gets its Chance", *Philippines* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1940), p. 16.
- 2 The Philippine Statistics Authority lists Quezon City's population on May 1 2020 as being 2,960,048 persons. <https://psa.gov.ph/population-and-housing/node/164811>.
- 3 Ian Morley, *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful. Filipinos and Planning in the Philippines, 1916-35*. London, UK: Routledge (2020), pp. 82-172.
- 4 Stephen V. Ward, 'A Pioneer "Global Intelligence Corps"? The Internationalisation of Planning Practice, 1890-1939', *Town Planning Review* 76.2 (2005), pp. 119-41.
- 5 'Plan New Capital to Replace Manila in Philippines', *The Daily Herald* (Provo, UT), October 15 1948, p. 10.
- 6 Arguably the most authoritative book on Quezon City's urban history is Michael Pante's *A Capital City at the Margins*. Quezon City, the Philippines: Ateneo de Manila Press (2019).
- 7 Celso Carunungan, *Quezon City. A Sage of Progress*. Quezon City: Cultural and Tourism Affairs Office (1982), p. 35.
- 8 As the *Report of the Committee on Capital City Site* (1947) exposes, numerous Filipino architects—e.g., Juan Arellano, Antonio Toledo, Cesar Consio, Juan Nakpil, Pablo Antonio, Fernando Ocampo, and Antonio Kayanan—were involved in the process of laying out the new city and designing its public and private buildings.
- 9 *The Master Plan for the New Capital City*. Manila: Capital City Planning Commission (1949), p. 12.
- 10 Isabelo Crisostomo, *Quezon City. Ang Paglikha ng Inyong Lunsod*. Quezon City, the Philippines: Capitol Publishing House (1971), p. 20.
- 11 Federal Housing Administration, *Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses*, *Technical Bulletin No. 5*. Washington, DC: Federal Housing Administration (1936), p. 12.
- 12 Le Corbusier, *La Charte d' Athènes*. Paris: La Librairie Plon (1943).
- 13 Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Disappearing City*. New York, NY: William Farquhar Payson (1932), p. 53.
- 14 Isabelo Crisostomo, op. cit., p. 9.
- 15 'Foreword', *The Master Plan for the New Capital City*, p. 5.