Quezon City: A lesser-known planned Capital City

Ian Morley

Quezon City was founded in 1939 as the future postcolonial capital of the Philippines. Inspired by the social values of the Commonwealth Government (established 1935), the settlement was meant to articulate modernity, equity, and the Filipino soul in architectural and environmental form. Yet, despite the intention to devise Quezon City as somewhere “better planned” and “more beautiful” than any existing urban settlement in the Philippine Islands, it is a place largely ignored within the historiography of Asian urbanism.

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 Alphonsus Williams. Whilst representing “a joint Filipino-American achievement,” 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 to be set so as to be spatially organized around the activities of the modern Filipino family.

Within the restructured urban form, 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 (sold in 100 sq. metre, 800 sq. metre, and 2,000 sq. metre plots); 3% for school premises; 12% for parks; 18% for roads and, 7% for shops and the community hub. Facilities such as health centres, recreational halls, community halls, police stations, fire stations, and more were recognized as being vital to the city’s health, so, nation’s development. Put simply, accordingly (re)organize the functions 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 geographical 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.1

International modernity and the planned capital city
As to why there is a need to reappraise Quezon City’s early planning and its criticality, 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 livelihods, and citizens could gain a quality of life than was previously possible. That said, within Asian historiography, contemporary intention has been to posit the correlation between plot patterns, the Philippines Government’s rent to target social groups, and the cost of producing new modern urban neighbourhoods. Yet, by way of example, two works – Thomas Adams’ The Development of Residential Areas in the Philippines, and the Federal Housing Administration’s Planning Neighborhoods for Small Households (1938) supply empirical data that demonstrates 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., architecturally affordable small houses). 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” — e.g., the need to add to the need for additional volumes of paving. All in all, Filipino bureaucrats and urban planners no doubt benefited increasingly cognizant of the Modernist concept of efficient urban design: homes for work, leisure, and recreation.2 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 perceived the “idea” of planning as a state-sponsored endeavor not only offered a means to overcome existing social problems, but was a tool too to advance Filipino social ideals borne within the decolonizing political and cultural framework, 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 understood self-rule for the first time since 1898. 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 endow liveability, culture, and democracy.3

Evidently, there is still much to learn about the form and meaning of Asian urban places, especially within the framework of postcolonialism. With Quezon City purposefully formed as a space/place – “Tundok na maganda, maagang, maunlad at makatutulad” (“a city that is beautiful, orderly, prosperous, and modern”) – life within it was to supply “an atmosphere of dignity, freedom and human harmonies.”4 Today, the connection between planning, urban morphology, and quality of life is well known. But how this association was formed in past eras, especially when nations experienced colonialism and philosophical transition, offers much for scholars of Urban History and Asian Studies to explore and, by extension, historians of city planning explicitly demonstrate that there are many avenues still in need of exploration.

Notes
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-
6 Arguelles, Isidro, and Angkatib mourn Quezon City’s urban history is Michael Pantegà’s A Capital City at the Margins. ‘Firesworn’, The Masterplan: Journal de Manila Press (2019).
7 Calo Caceres, Quezon City, A Stage of Progress. Quezon City, Cultural and Tourism Affairs Office (1992), p. 35.
8 As the Report of the Committee on Capital City Site (1947) expresses, numerous Filipino architects—e.g., Juan Arellano, Antonio Teodoro, Cesar Concio, Juan Nakpil, Pablo Antonio, Fernando Ocampo, and Antonio Kayaman—were involved in the process of laying out the city and designing its public and private buildings.
14 Isabelo Cricostomo, op. cit., p. 9.
15 Allan Chay, The Masterplan for the New Capital City, p. 5.

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References
Graeme H. C. A. Adams, The Life and Work of Daniel Burnham. With a Preliminary Survey of His City Beautiful paradigm. The American City Beautiful paradigm. The Broadly speaking, what has been said of the American City Beautiful paradigm. The settlement’s plan is that it builds upon the American City Beautiful paradigm. The planning practice: grid plans have “several grid plans have “several grid plans have “several grid plans have “several grid plans have “several grid plans have “several
degress in other Asian nations, Filipino innovations in architecture and urban design were perceived to enrich the concept of citizenship. Thirdly, by the late-1940s the phenomenon of transnational city planning practice was well-established.

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.1 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 deplored, 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.2 Housing arrangements, not just public edifice and public space design, were important to this process.

In December 1935, the Philippine Government (established 1935), the settlement was meant to supply “an atmosphere of dignity, freedom and human harmonies.”15 Today, the connection between planning, urban morphology, and quality of life is well known. But how this association was formed in past eras, especially when nations experienced colonialism and philosophical transition, offers much for scholars of Urban History and Asian Studies to explore and, by extension, historians of city planning explicitly demonstrate that there are many avenues still in need of exploration.

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