

Vigan City: A Peek into Spanish-Colonial Philippines

As part of my PhD dissertation field work last October 2014, I found myself in the western coast of Northern Luzon island in the Philippines where the city of Vigan, capital of Ilocos Sur province is located. This city is famous for its preserved Spanish colonial district. It is 408 kilometers from Manila, with a total land area of 28.86 square kilometers (Vigan CPDO, 2011).



Figure 1: Image of Vigan's Spanish Colonial Houses

Upon arrival, one would immediately notice a strong presence of the town planning tenets espoused by the Spaniards during its three centuries of colonial rule in the Philippines. To be more specific, rules of planning embedded in the Laws of the Indies (Lico, 2008) such as grid-like streets that are centered in the town plaza are very much apparent in Vigan; with major institutions of government, catholic church, and commercial zones are seen to be focused towards the town plaza. Prime residential areas, where the rich and famous are based, are seen to also be measured by its proximity to the plaza.

Vigan became famous because it has the distinction of being one of the last, well-preserved Spanish Colonial towns in the Philippines; with emphasis on the row of Spanish colonial-era houses flanking the town's main roads. This author made it a

point to wake up at four in the morning after arrival, and walk Vigan's main streets in a setting devoid of cars, motorcycles, and tourists. Personally, it is believed that the charm of Vigan is best captured at these early hours of dawn; where most are still asleep and one has a unique opportunity of being brought back in time to see how Vigan (as a typical Philippines town) was centuries ago.



Figure 2 : "Back in Time"; A Glimpse of 19th Century Vigan

Quite interestingly, the people of Vigan have the Japanese Imperial Army to thank for the preservation of their city. As a brief backgrounder, it is worth to know that for three centuries, Vigan grew to become a flourishing Spanish settlement in northern Philippines; a center of social, cultural, and political life in this part of the country during the Spanish colonial era. This luster bestowed on Vigan somewhat diminished during the American occupation from 1901 to 1942, and the Japanese imperial army's governance of the then town for three years from 1942 to 1945. However, towards the end of the Second World War, a miracle actually saved the town of Vigan from total destruction. Taking text from the city's Development Plan document:

As part of their military strategy at the end of the war, the Japanese military were ordered to burn and completely destroy occupied zones before withdrawal. On the eve of their departure from Vigan, the Japanese Commander, Captain Fujiro Takahashi pleaded with procurator of the Vigan Seminary, Fr. Joseph Kleikamp, to take custody of the Japanese officer's Filipino wife and their love child. The priest agreed on the condition that Takahashi and his men would leave Vigan

without burning the town to prevent the town folks from seeking revenge on his family. (At that time, drums of gasoline was already strategically stored at the town plaza, ready to be used in burning the town). Takahashi agreed and left with his troops during the night.

The following morning, the people of Vigan discovered that the Japanese had left peacefully. They immediately spread an oversized American flag at the plaza forestalling the planned bombing by the Americans to flush out the Japanese forces. Thus, Vigan miraculously escaped total destruction, a misfortune that befell other colonial cities like Cebu and Intramuros in Manila (Vigan CPDO, 2011).

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, a series of historical events spanning more than three centuries conspired in the preservation of Vigan's unique Spanish colonial district; allowing the town - and its people - to benefit today from the tangible cultural imprints as embedded in the built spaces forged by its collective history. This author hopes that those who will get to read this article would have the time to visit and experience Vigan; to see the place and catch a relatively authentic glimpse of Philippine history.



Figure 3: Image of Plaza Salcedo, Spatial Center of Vigan; and Catholic Church Flanking it

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