
Review Essay

Filipinos, Americans, and Re-envisioning Urbanism in the Philippines in the Early Twentieth Century

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Cities and Nationhood: American Imperialism and Urban Design in the Philippines, 1898–1916. By Ian Morley. (Honolulu, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018. 260 pp.)

American Colonisation and the City Beautiful: Filipinos and Planning in the Philippines, 1916–35. By Ian Morley. (New York, Routledge, 2019. 268 pp.)

Known as the “Pearl of the Orient,” Manila is among the densest, largest urban centers in the world. Like other capital cities, it is a metropolis featuring elements of modern planning and design. Upon seizing control of the archipelago from Spain in 1898, Americans during U.S. colonial rule played a fundamental role in shaping Manila’s built environment well into the twentieth century. Despite Manila’s cultural, economic, and political significance in Asia, there is minimal scholarship on its urbanization process and how Progressive Era politics informed its evolution. Ian Morley’s *Cities and Nationhood: American Imperialism and Urban Design in the Philippines, 1898–1916* and *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful: Filipinos and Planning in the Philippines, 1916–35* shed light on these subjects.

In *Cities and Nationhood*, Morley provides a thorough overview of the ways in which American settlers and colonial government leaders influenced the development of Manila as well as Baguio, a city in the Philippine uplands that was envisioned by American elites as a summer destination. According to Morley, “if it is understood that Manila was planned by Daniel Burnham in 1905 so that it would become the modern US capital in Southeast Asia, then Baguio must be appreciated as the jewel in the colonial urban environmental crown” (p. 86). Americans built upon the infrastructure left behind by the Spanish, who ruled the islands since 1565. At the same time, following Spain’s exit with the Treaty of Paris, Americans dramatically transformed a landscape dominated by *plaza mayors* (main spaces) and churches. Americans implemented “monumental boulevards, classical-design capitol buildings, and sizable green spaces” to exhibit

“a visual character and spatial logic of the modern age” (p. 2). The City Beautiful Movement inspired urban planners not only to “modernize” Manila’s built environment, but also to “westernize” it—terms and ideas they understood as interchangeable. Americans and Filipinos supportive of these endeavors wanted to signify that Manila and Baguio—and by extension, the Philippines as a whole—were en route toward civilization and a mode of sophistication purportedly absent from its current state. Along with the introduction of American-style governance, medical and public health practices (e.g. nursing), and educational systems, urban planning was promoted as yet another example of how the United States was fulfilling its promises of “benevolent assimilation.”

One of the most intriguing elements of Burnham’s 1905 plan (four years before his famous Plan of Chicago) was connecting Manila to Cavite, a critical port town in the region. The linkage, along with beautification projects, were to evoke the Philippines’ increasing cosmopolitanism to natives and visitors alike. As Morley notes, the “ploy had propaganda value for the Americans: it was to help them demonstrate to the local population the transition from colonial world to another and thus the shift from the ‘backward’ to the ‘advanced’” (p. 58). Burnham’s plans of radial streets and diagonal arteries in and around Manila were partly inspired by his experiences in U.S. cities like Washington, D.C., a place Burnham considered dysfunctional and inefficient. Ultimately, Burnham and his contemporaries were building on the spirit of the Progressive Era. Across urban America, wealthy and middle-class whites were increasingly disenchanted with the status quo. Under the guise of cultivating a refined, learned, democratic citizenry, they cited political corruption, capitalist greed, and a poor quality of life as reasons to push for major reforms. Discussions and trends in cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Kansas City, and Pittsburgh made their way across the Pacific, thus paralleling how Americans engaged with urbanism in the Philippines.

Morley continues this arc of research in *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful*. Unlike the former—which is a broader study of Philippine urbanism and Americans’ intentions in the early colonial period—this book emphasizes the importance of urban development between 1916 (when the Jones Act was passed) and 1935 (when the Philippine Commonwealth was founded). Rather than understanding this moment as one exclusively run by American colonial settlers, Morley asserts that this was a time when Filipinos themselves held great power and played a pivotal role in implementing a City Beautiful agenda. Morley’s monograph “repositions comprehensions of city designing in the Philippines in relation to previous scholarship which, evidently,

needs to be revised so as to account for Filipino influence that came after 1916” (p. 3). While Filipino architects and civil servants engaged with City Beautiful urbanism and Beaux Arts design to “prove” their abilities in self-governance and appreciations for “high-brow” western style, ultimately, they participated because they saw a unique opportunity to build a different Philippines—a country that was seemingly on track toward greater economic growth and increasingly distanced from its former imperial power, Spain. These visions for Manila and Baguio reached beyond the urban core and into the provinces such as Iloilo and Davao, thus speaking to the ways in which Filipino bureaucrats with political clout embraced the objectives of turn-of-the-century urban planning (as described in Chapter 3, one of the book’s strongest chapters).

Morley’s books are meticulously researched. In *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful*, for example, especially impressive was the author’s use of the Bureau of Public Works’ (BPW) Division of Architecture archives, which was “the colonial government office responsible for designing public buildings, spaces, and, when necessary, comprehensive city plans” (p. 2). Morley located the perspectives and policy motivations of its Filipino employees. Moreover, Morley’s transnational research illustrates the ways in which urban planning in the early twentieth century was not confined to American or European circles, nor was it contained within national borders. As I read, I could not help but compare how Manila developed or fared under American rule in relation to other Southeast or East Asian cities impacted by colonialism—namely Hong Kong with the British, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) with the French, and Macau with the Portuguese. At times in both books, the repetition of background information regarding U.S. colonialism’s intentions, for instance, distracted from the force of the author’s incisive arguments. Overall, Ian Morley’s *Cities and Nationhood* and *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful* are tremendous contributions to the histories of urban planning, Philippine urbanism, and U.S. colonialism. They are recommended reading for scholars and students interested in Philippine history, U.S. history, and transnational American Studies.

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