

Arquitectura religiosa contemporánea en Filipinas book review

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book cover

Arquitectura religiosa contemporánea en Filipinas is a remarkable book in the fullest sense of the word. Its author, Esteban Fernández-Cobián, is a professor at the Universidade da Coruña (Spain) and a prolific scholar in the field of contemporary religious architecture, with a particular focus on the Spanish context. In addition to his extensive publications, Fernández-Cobián has served as the coordinator of the International Conferences on Contemporary Religious Architecture since 2007.

This book stands out for two main reasons: its subject matter and its methodological approach. The topic is particularly significant given the scarcity of scholarly literature on twentieth-century religious architecture—both Christian and non-Christian—in the Philippines. By “religious architecture,” the author includes not only Catholic and other Christian churches but also mosques. The book’s value lies in offering a richly documented first exploration of this subject, featuring an extensive collection of photographs and 21 pages of bibliography. It provides a foundational study of contemporary church buildings in the Philippines, the country with the third-largest Catholic population in the world.

Fernández-Cobián’s work addresses a significant gap in the scholarly literature—one that is particularly striking given the large number of religious buildings constructed in the Philippines since its separation from Spain, its former colonial power, in 1898, and the influential work of architects such as Leandro Valencia Locsin (1928–1994) and José María Vélez Zaragoza (1912–1994). The author convincingly demonstrates that exploring this often-overlooked, and at times “impure” or “alternative,” strand of sacred architecture—distinct from the canonical narratives of modernism—was both timely and necessary. As he notes, Filipino religious buildings, characterized as “compact, massive, and permanently ventilated” (p. 236), are steadily gaining recognition on the international stage (p. 9).

The book’s methodology is another of its distinguishing features. Drawing on the work of Andrea Longhi, professor at the Politecnico di Torino (2017. *Storie di chiese, storie di comunità. Progetti, cantieri, architetture*. Roma: Gangemi), Fernández-Cobián adopts the study of the interplay between society, religion, and architecture as his central analytical framework. This relational approach serves as the unifying thread throughout the volume. Given the deep historical connection between Filipino identity and the Catholic Church, this hermeneutical lens proves particularly effective for interpreting a nation whose cultural fabric is profoundly shaped by “Catholicism, festivity, and family” (p. 17).

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first two serve as introductory sections, offering a general overview of the Philippines and its architectural landscape (pp. 3–35). The remaining six chapters trace the evolution of contemporary religious architecture in the country from its independence to the present day.

Following Spanish colonization, the American Period (1902–1946) (chapter 3, pp. 37–52) marked the beginning of a new architectural phase, as the nation searched for a renewed identity. The era of Independence and Post-War Reconstruction (1946–1950) (chapter 4, pp. 53–74) saw the rise of notable structures such as the Baclaran National Shrine (1953–1958) and the striking “Angry Christ” Chapel (1946–1949) by Antonin Raymond, which became a site of artistic pilgrimage (p. 67).

The period of Modernity and Democracy (1951–1972) (chapter 5, pp. 75–108) introduced iconic buildings like the Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice (1955) by Leandro Locsin—an architectural precursor to the liturgical reforms of Vatican II (pp. 101, 144). The subsequent era of Brutalism and

the Dictatorship (1973–1979) (chapter 6, pp. 109–148) was marked by the use of exposed concrete and bold geometric forms (p. 110), with Locsin striving to define a distinctly Filipino architectural language (p. 119).

Regionalism and Inculturation (1980–1999) (chapter 7, pp. 149–184) emphasized vernacular design elements, exemplified by the Chapel of Cartwheels (1960) and the Greenbelt Chapel (1977–1983)—the first chapel constructed within a shopping mall (p. 157). The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (pp. 160–162) played a crucial role in promoting a “truly Filipino” ecclesial architecture (p. 177), inspired in part by theologian Anscar J. Chupungco, OSB (pp. 170–171), whose influence is seen in the Church of the Transfiguration Monastery (1994–1996).

In the twenty-first century (2000–2023) (chapter 8, pp. 185–234), Filipino religious architecture has grown increasingly diverse, ranging from the “radical modernity” (p. 185) of Jesuit chapels (pp. 192–195), to the “return to historicism” (p. 185) observed in mall chapels and Mormon temples (pp. 209–214), and the “inclusive modernity” (pp. 223–231) seen in projects such as the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Antipolo (2004–2012) by Dominic Galicia.

The book concludes with a section of final reflections (pp. 235–241) assessing the historical and contemporary importance of Filipino sacred architecture in its ongoing search for a distinctive identity. These are followed by ten appendices (pp. 243–316) that provide supplementary material and historical background, along with a comprehensive bibliography and indexes (pp. 319–359).

The result is a carefully crafted volume, both in content and presentation. Straddling the line between an architectural guide and a historical monograph, it places particular emphasis on the socio-cultural context of worship spaces. At times, it reads like a compelling narrative of recent Filipino history told through its sacred architecture—arguably the book’s most remarkable strength.

The main limitation of the book lies in the relatively limited fieldwork and archival research conducted on the buildings analyzed—an aspect the author acknowledges and reserves for future investigation (p. 4). Much of the information is drawn from existing publications or digital sources. As a result, the volume includes few architectural plans, elevations, or sections, and lacks large-format photographs or close-up images of key elements—particularly iconography or essential liturgical loci such as the altar, ambo, chair, or tabernacle. While this limitation is understandable—given the immense and scattered nature of the country’s architectural heritage (the archipelago includes 7,641 islands, around 2,000 of which are inhabited, according to Wikipedia)—it must be noted that architectural studies without direct documentation or firsthand experience of the buildings run the risk of reaching overly tentative or incomplete conclusions.

The great merit of this work lies in its comprehensive overview of the most significant examples of contemporary religious architecture in the Philippines—one of the few majority-Christian nations in Asia. As Fernández-Cobián himself notes (p. 4), this study offers a valuable foundation for future research, whether by the author or other scholars, focusing on specific themes or individual buildings within this vast architectural landscape. In this light, an English translation of the volume would be especially welcome, expanding its reach and impact within the international academic community.