Patriotism and Hyperreality: Reflecting Baudrillard’s Theory in the General Emilio Aguinaldo Museum, Kawit, Cavite, Philippines

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Abstract

The unique mansion of General Emilio Aguinaldo, first Philippine president is one of the most visited historical sites in the Philippines, the house, an evolutionary product of several periods from the Spanish up to the independence period serves as a living legacy of the president. The façade, unique structure and features of this landmark has remained to be the most iconic, fascinating and mysterious among the residences of famous Filipino leaders. Using the lenses of Umberto Eco's theory of hyper-reality and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, this exploratory project will attempt via descriptive method to analyze the said unique historical landmark in time for the 150th birth anniversary of General Emilio Aguinaldo in 2019.

Keywords: hyperreality, fantasy, museum space, bahay na bato

Introduction

The year 2019 is a big year for the celebration of the 150th birth anniversary of General Emilio F. Aguinaldo, the first president of the Philippines. As a Philippine leader, General Aguinaldo made a lot of contributions and legacy to the Philippine society. The first Philippine republic was created in his time which is hailed as the first of its kind in Asia, the Philippine national anthem and flag were both commissioned by General Aguinaldo in anticipation of the proclamation of the country’s short-lived independence in 1898. The first constitution and congress were both created during his term as well. Among his many legacies, and one of his most prominent tangible heritage is the frequently visited by students and tourists, the sprawling Aguinaldo mansion which he built through the different periods. A public museum, donated to the Philippine government by the general himself a couple of years before his demise in 1964, the imposing structure located in Kawit, Cavite was built in 1849, the popular museum, with a floor area of 1,300 sq. m. and a lot area of 5,000 sq. m. (Manalo, 1998) represents a very unique architecture, perhaps the only one of its kind in the country. The said landmark, being maintained by the National Historical Commission of the Philippines was a subject of a book written by Ino Manalo and published in 1998 by the then National Historical Institute in time for the centennial celebration of Philippine Independence. The book featured the significance of the house as a bahay na bato type of architecture as the residence of the first Philippine president, the general manifested through his creative imagination his patriotic sense via the decorations and motifs and the visual narrative of its sense and purpose in the history of the Philippine revolution.

Beyond the symbols and decorations of the structure lies an empowering idea of the subject, setting aside the idea of it as being an entity of magnificence and grandeur. Unlike any
ordinary *bahay na bato* structure of its contemporary, the said type of architecture which is a product of the indigenous and Hispanic building traditions, conceived in order to prevent the dangers posed by fires, earthquakes, and cyclones (Lico, 2008, p. 158). The birth of the Philippine *bahay na bato* architecture is a product of a long period of development which has interwoven foreign features (Alarcon, 1991). The Aguinaldo mansion on the other hand, as an ingenious product of the general’s creativity is a simulation of the patriarch’s personality and vision for the Philippines employing the said type of architecture as a takeoff point.

**Employing Exploratory and Descriptive Methodology**

The author of this project once served as the curator of the said edifice during the 1998 centennial celebration of Philippine Independence. The central attention of this national event was geared towards the historical structure being the residence of the first Philippine president. The structure for all its architectural, cultural and historical merits became the center of national attention in 1998. Thousands upon thousands of people from all over the country would visit the house everyday during the centennial year. Visitors, people from all walks of life, would express their delight, surprise, amazement upon seeing the exteriors and interiors of the structure. Thus, the experience of the author working at the said significant structure is reinforced by the idea of its uniqueness and reflections of eccentricities by the master of the house. This project will attempt to employ an exploratory direction using the descriptive method and the framework of Jean Baudrillard’s Theory of Hyperreality. The author’s personal insights and experiences while working at the said structure shall be the core content of this project.
The structure as an exploration

The idea of the paper is to use a different lens in looking at the phenomenon of the subject. The subject being the Aguinaldo mansion will not be seen in the historical lenses using its significance, cause or consequence for being, but rather its hyperreal perspective. From the *bahay kubo to bahay na bato*, the Filipino abode in its historical sense has seen a lot of transitions and evolutions. The influence of the economic social changes has dictated these developments (Alarcon, 1991). Going further, and beyond the narrative of Manalo’s earlier publication on the Aguinaldo mansion, the author using Jean Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality will attempt to look into the other dimension of the said structure, the author sees the connectedness and parallelisms of the subject to the idea of a fantasy land - a local version of a western castle built by an ambitious leader hoping to be remembered and etched in the collective memory of the public, his public, in this case in the succession of students and other visitors flocking to his sanctum annually. This paper will also revisit the numerous images and designs reflecting the general’s love for his country as showcased in the aesthetic features of the mansion.

![The façade of the Aguinaldo mansion](https://www.livingmarjorney.com/2013/01/the-aguinaldo-shrine-cradle-of.html)

The façade of the Aguinaldo mansion

Photo credit: https://www.livingmarjorney.com/2013/01/the-aguinaldo-shrine-cradle-of.html

The structure as text

Jean Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality, was used in this paper to look into the idea of the Aguinaldo mansion as a hyperreal entity. Baudrillard’s study posited that human experience is a simulation of reality (Smith, 2015). As a revolutionary hero, General Aguinaldo, made his own contribution of his worldview vis a vis his vision of a liberated Philippines free from the tyranny of foreign oppressors. In our culture, Baudrillard argues that: we take ‘maps’ of reality television
and film as more real than our actual lives (ibid.). These simulacra or hyperreal copies precede our lives, such that our television friends may seem more ‘alive’ to us than the real person playing that character (ibid.). He also began studying how media affected our perception of reality and the world (ibid.). Here he found that in a post-modern media-laden society we encounter “the death of the real”, where one lives in a hyperreal realm by connecting more and more deeply with things like television sitcoms, music videos, virtual reality games or Disneyland, things that have come to simulate reality (ibid.). He further argues that in a post-modern culture dominated by TV, films, the Internet and media all that exists are simulations of reality, which aren’t any more or less ‘real’ than the reality they simulate” (ibid.). And as such, Baudrillard points to the process of simulation in which representations of things come to replace the things being represented, and that the representations become more important than the ‘real thing’ (ibid.).

The mansion is a simulation, a hyperreal bahay na bato

The Aguinaldo mansion in this context has come to mean as the perfect symbol of the idealism of General Aguinaldo in terms of his vision and aspirations throughout his life for the country and for his countrymen. Navigating through the museum, one can experience a sense of awe and amazement as one discovers the uniqueness of the structure, for the seasoned tourist, the house is a far cry from a typical bahay na bato, it gives the visitor a sense of feeling that perhaps the owner of the house was attempting to project something ambitious and through the structural details the elements would be made tangible and the motives for the expression be made obvious. As one steps inside the house one would be transported back into the days of the not so distant past. The uniquely interesting features includes the following: a multi-leveled watch tower which offers a 360 degree view of the town of Kawit and nearby towns, the presence of an unusual balcony decorated with stars and equipped with a mini-canon; the underground air raid shelter; the dining table with a hollowed middle part which serves as the entrance to the underground air raid shelter; the mini swimming pool; the numerous secret passages; the ceiling of the house which served as an armory; the benches of the interior where documents and weapons maybe kept; the map of the Philippines on the main living room which indicates the province of Cavite in red color telling the visitor that it was in the said province where the revolutionary activities began; the president’s working chair with a horn of a carabao (water buffalo); the symbols and emblems of the Philippine tri-color on the wooden floor showcased on the wide wooden planks and many other curiosities. Discovering and seeing all these, one would be totally surprised to realize that such a bahay na bato can have all of these things, that such facilities and amenities actually exists but which were never a part of the typically traditional Philippine type of architecture.
Articulating fantasies, explaining patrimony, creating illusion

The house is an ambitious creation of a patriarch which was built and rebuilt through the different periods, a patriarch whose fantasies were translated into interesting symbols and house features. The patriarch of the said structure has envisioned a unique tapestry of these so-called simulations which has resulted in the condition of hyperreality, a situation where we only experience prepared realities (Smith, 2015). The house showcased elements that were never part of a traditional bahay na bato. A more intimate anecdote as one would peek into the house, and as the features identified earlier, one is led to discovering interesting backgrounder for all of these, such as the underground air raid shelter – it was built in anticipation of a possible bombing during the Japanese occupation which is said to be connected to a tunnel leading to the nearby parish church; a mini bowling lane (duckpin) - the first of its kind in the province - built during the early American period; a mini swimming pool, with a secret staircase located just under the master’s bedroom (which was exclusively used by the general every morning to engage in a cold bath especially after his retirement from his civic duties); and of course, a multilevel tower with several floors once occupied by his two male sons, and numerous passages (only imaginable in the western movies reminiscent of those complicated maze and tunnels), ceilings with romanticized images of the Philippines, an iconic balcony (which was erroneously thought by the public to be the site of the proclamation of Philippine independence in 1898) but was only added during the American colonial period, but has come to symbolize the proclamation of independence and vignettes of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, portraits of the family members who once lived in the house, photographs of the general with former Philippine presidents and a Japanese prince who visited the mansion and many others. The experience is not complete without seeing the tomb (renovated and remodeled several times) of the general which rests on an elevated platform with a
lovely view of lush mangrove trees and a fishpond as its backdrop. Clearly, after the hour-long adventure into the house, the distinction between the ‘real’ bahay na bato and the simulations of the mansion has collapsed. The mansion has become what the bahay na bato will never be: a bigger than life entity, the symbolic proportions created by structure is bigger than its predecessors physically and culturally.

The multi-leveled tower of the Aguinaldo mansion.

Photo credit: https://www.livingmarjorney.com/2013/01/the-aguinaldo-shrine-cradle-of.html

Realities versus myth

The visual spectacle created by the experience of visiting the mansion has translated into making the illusory images as truths and authentic. Despite the initial doubts during the process of experiencing and witnessing the unique characteristics and features of the mansion, one is led to believe that these things do actually exist in the cultural and historical realms, making them valid and acceptable, the suspension of disbelief soon follows, as the emergence of enlightenment clears any shadow of uncertainty. General Aguinaldo has victoriously translated his ideals through the careful workmanship of artisans employed in the process of embedding these thoughts in the entire structure. Aside from the hyperreal elements of the house, the presence of the Philippine tri-color
strewn all over the structure from the roof, ceiling, floor, benches, table top, the omniscient carabao, the three pergolas located at the lawn which represents the three major geographical divide: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, all created another perspective and point of interest and the visual narrative of the structure becomes an intersection of multi-dimensional proportion: the practical, romantic and ideal/illusory.

Interwoven contexts, quest for immortality, posterity and remembrances

The diverse trajectories navigated by the project gave a varied significance in terms of regarding the valuation and appreciation of the cultural edifice, first, it brought to light a perspective of ingenuity on the part of the general being the celebrated patriarch in this case; second, the symbols and visual narratives of the structure was revisited; third, an intersection of thoughts and ideas regarding the significance of the structure was given a cultural flesh, veering away from the tendency to employ a much more convenient historical-centric discourse. In the end, the very fiber of presenting the Aguinaldo mansion and the idea of it as a hyperreal entity, seem to have dovetailed into a convenient construction of a discourse leading to the issue of the patriarch’s quest for immortality- a sort of an attempt to locate the individual within the league of heroes and great men. And along this effort, a shot at being immortalized and etched in the collective cultural consciousness of the public.
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Photo credits:

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Angelo J. Aguinaldo