

## Religious Tropical Architecture: the churches of Leandro V. Locsin in the Philippines

BY JEAN-CLAUDE GIRARD

The focus of this contribution is on the importance of tropical architecture in the work of Leandro V. Locsin, in the context of post-wwii in Asia. Based in the Philippines, Locsin is immersed in the Christian tradition – the main religion of a country that was dominated by the Spanish crown from the mid 16<sup>th</sup>-century to 1898, and where the Catholic Church remains powerful across much of the archipelago today. Attention is focused on Locsin's religious buildings and projects, where he succeeded in giving a new treatment to the tropical architecture of faith-based structures, through the integration of climate considerations and the reinterpretation of vernacular architecture of the Philippines.

Leandro V. Locsin is a Philippine architect who has produced a rich catalog of more than 240 projects located mainly in his country, of which half were completed. He started his career in 1953, in a post-colonial context that had left the country faced with fundamental questions of identity in all fields, and in particular, in architecture. If his entire production is associated with the attempt to define a new Philippine architecture,<sup>1</sup> we propose in this article to focus more specifically on the question of religious buildings because they demonstrate Locsin's formidable capacity to adapt a model, by definition established according to rigorous and inflexible rules, to the local cultural and climatic conditions of his country.

### The Philippines: climate, history and religion

The Republic of the Philippines, located north of the equator and south of the Tropic of Cancer, is subject to a tropical climate of two main seasons, the dry season from December to May and the rainy season from June to November. Comprising more than 7,000 islands, the archipelago is part of Southeast Asia, the history of which is characterized by a series of colonizations and commercial exchanges that have left their mark on local cultures.

The Philippines underwent two major periods of colonization, the first by the Spanish who governed the Philippines for more than 350 years (1565-1898), to make way for the Americans who settled in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1898-1942).<sup>2</sup> While the Americans focused on questions of political, infrastructural and educational organization, the Spaniards, for

their part, introduced and imposed Catholicism in a lasting way,<sup>3</sup> making the country an exception in the region.

Thus, it is interesting regarding the question of religious architecture and, more particularly, of the churches in the post-colonial context, when the Filipinos maintained their adherence to the rule of the Vatican, and to what extent these sacred spaces were reinterpreted and redesigned to meet local conditions.

### The arrival of Locsin on the architectural scene

In 1964, an edition of the "Exchange" journal sought to take stock of the question of Philippine identity in all art forms, by giving voice to various actors in the archipelago's cultural scene. Philippine architect Locsin, then 36, was asked to write the chapter on the built environment. Establishing a historical panorama of the country, he introduced, from the outset, the question of cultural mixing that took place in his country. The chapter then returned to the environmental question to refute the merits of importing structures unsuitable for local climatic conditions, as the Americans had done by trying to impose a neoclassical model based on a formal historicism.<sup>4</sup> Despite his age, Locsin had already constructed numerous buildings whose central question was the search for a new Philippine identity.<sup>5</sup> For him,

*(...) the first consideration of the Filipino builder and certainly the most evident in his architecture, which is after all an outgrowth of man's desire to protect himself from the elements, is the climate and resulting flora. (...) The fact that the Philippines is in the tropical belt and therefore*

*subject to humidity, have not only moulded the development of architecture, but also have limited our knowledge of its history by leaving little if no vestiges of the past.<sup>6</sup>*

He thus put forward an approach, for him fundamental, which had previously tended to be ignored.

### Church renewal in the aftermath of wwii

At the beginning of the Spanish period, existing buildings were repurposed and enlarged, in order to provide sufficient space for the gathering of the faithful. However, the successive destruction caused by typhoons and earthquakes leads to the re-evaluation of the construction method. Church structures, still arranged on a basilica plan, were built of stone and stabilized by lateral buttresses. If the plan reflected a form of organization imposed by the Eucharist, the profile was stockier, and the bell tower separated, in order to resist telluric movements.<sup>7</sup>

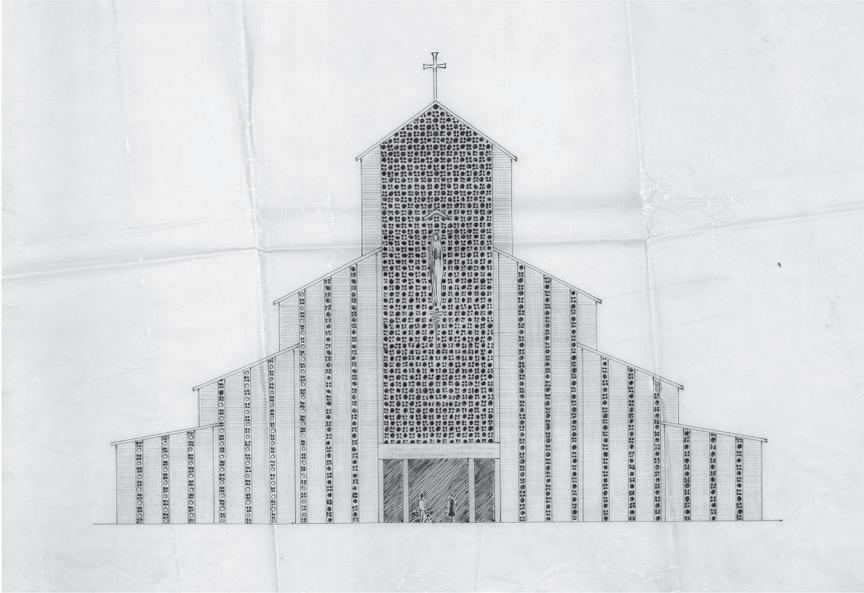
After independence in 1946 new religious construction proposals arose due, in particular, to the energy of Father Couturier (1897-1954)<sup>8</sup> whose desire to integrate modern art in religious construction was illustrated in the realization of the Saint-Ouvrier Chapel by American architect Antonin Raymond in 1950, in Victorias (Negros island).<sup>9</sup> This is considered to be the first modern church in the Philippines. Although the plan remains traditional, with the altar positioned at the end of the nave, light falls from the ceiling through an expressive structure of reinforced concrete beams covered with a mosaic by the artist Ade Béthune (1914-2002). The side walls are made of movable wooden panels which allow cross ventilation.

### Locsin and his vision of the Church

Locsin was a pious man who chose the theme of the church for his diploma work, obtained in 1953 at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila.<sup>10</sup> That same year, even before graduation, he began designing a chapel in Victorias, adjacent to that of Antonin Raymond, but which was eventually built in Manila. The theme inspired him so much that he went on to design some twenty religious buildings, ranging from churches to mausoleums, and memorial parks.<sup>11</sup> His first production was the Holy Sacrifice Chapel (1955) and his last, the Monastery of Transfiguration<sup>12</sup> (1994).

The typological choices are radically different in these projects, ranging from a basilica plan for the church of Cadiz (1963) to a central and radial organisation for the chapel located in Paranaque (1964). These different conceptions show how Locsin's interest in the liturgical question led him to seek

**01** Leandro V. Locsin, Prelatical Church of the Immaculate Conception, Ozamis, 1958, elevation.  
© Locsin and partners's archives, Neal Oshima Photograph.



**02** Leandro V. Locsin, Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Quezon, 1970, original plan. © Jean-Claude Girard Photograph.



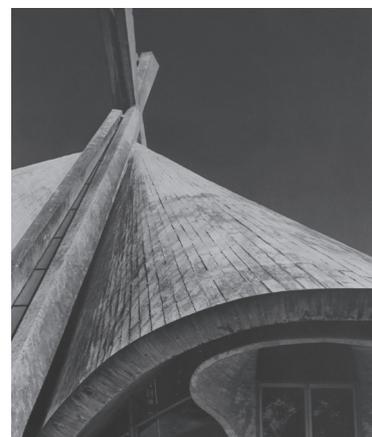
**03** Antonin Raymond, Saint-Joseph Ouvrier Chapel, Victoria, 1950, exterior view. © GoogleEarth.



**04** Leandro V. Locsin, Holy Sacrifice Chapel, Diliman, 1955, view of the interior.  
© Akio Kawasumi Photograph.



**05** Leandro V. Locsin, Saint-Andrew The Apostle Parish Church, Makati 1967, view from the street.  
© Akio Kawasumi Photograph.



**06** Leandro V. Locsin, Saint-Andrew The Apostle Parish Church, Makati 1967, view of the roof's structure.  
© Akio Kawasumi Photograph.

answers with either traditional or innovative solutions.

To the question of the floor plan is added that of enclosure of the space, meeting the need to house the assembly of the faithful. A further question is that of the climate, insofar as temperature, humidity and the weather must be accounted for so as to favor meditation under conditions different to those encountered by the European models hitherto imported by the Spanish.

In his text “Directions for the building of a church”, Locsin wrote about how the contemporary church had opened-up and must respond to appropriations defined by worshippers around the world:

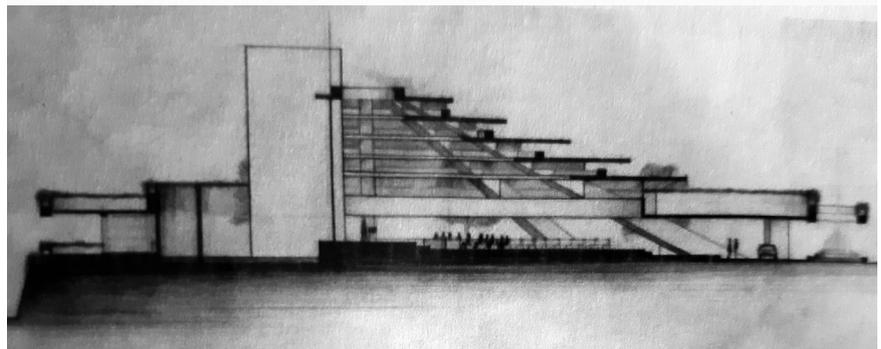
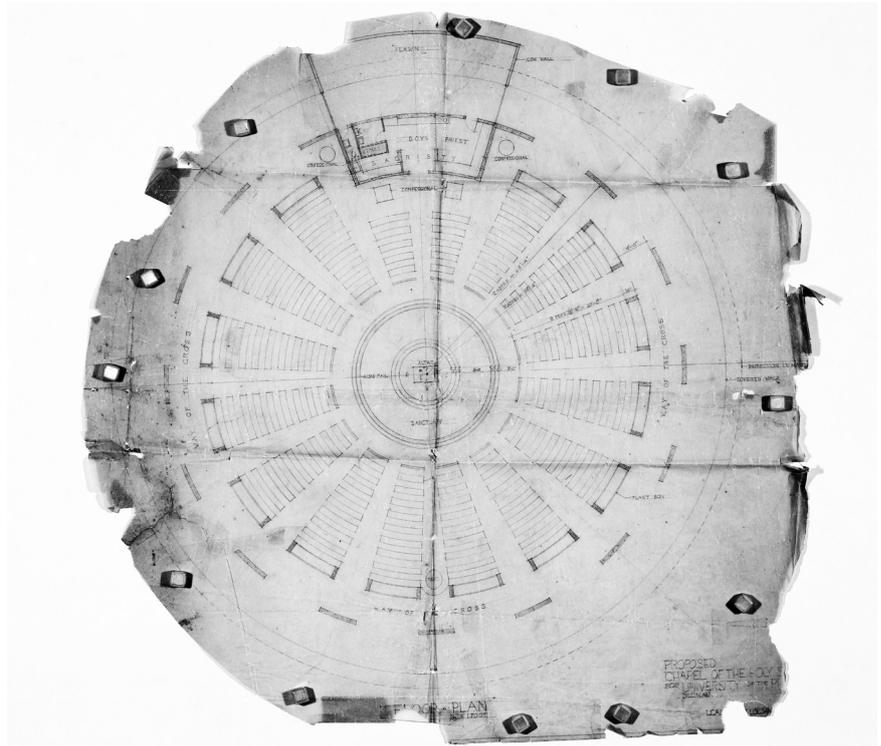
*The services of Christian worship, the Eucharistic sacrifice, the administration of the sacraments, the preaching of the word of God, the adoration of the Eucharist, these are not rendered in precisely the same way in all churches throughout the world. (...) The church of today is intended for the people of our times. Hence, it must be fashioned in such a way that the people of our times may recognize and feel that it is addressed to them. The most significant and the most worthy needs of modern mankind must here find their fulfillment: the urge toward community life, the desire for what is true and genuine, the wish to advance from what is peripheral to what is central and essential, (...).<sup>13</sup>*

### Journey through the body of the churches

The Holy Sacrifice Chapel (1955) not only marks the start of Locsin’s architectural production, but also propels it to the forefront of the Philippine and international architectural scene thanks to its unexpected silhouette, its structural prowess and its typological invention.<sup>14</sup> The Philippines’ first reinforced concrete thin-shell roof with a span of 30 meters is the fruit of collaboration with the civil engineer Alfredo L. Juinio. The circular typology shows an interesting gradation of the entry sequence, the faithful having to cross several levels before being able to sit on the pews. Caryn Paredes-Santilan analyzes this concept of the intermediate zone and describes it as a threshold allowing one to connect the two spaces, while marking a pause in time to raise awareness of a change of place.<sup>15</sup>

The following achievements, such as the Church of Ozamis City (1958) and that of Cadiz City (1963), again based on the basilica-plan, showed again the reluctance to adopt a new typological configuration. However, their reinforced concrete construction highlights an expression close to Auguste Perret’s (1874-1954) architecture already present in the Antonin Raymond Chapel, and demon-

07 Leandro V. Locsin, Holy Sacrifice Chapel, Diliman, 1955, original plan. © Locsin and partners’s archives, Neal Oshima Photograph.



08 Leandro V. Locsin, Everest Hills Memorial Park Muntlupa, Church, 1990, section. © Locsin and partners’s archives, Jean-Claude Girard Photograph.

strates the new structural possibilities offered by this material.

From 1967 there was a stylistic evolution based on the expressive capacities of reinforced concrete, but also, the new typological possibilities that appeared after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The St-Andrew Church (1967), Magallanes’ Village Church (1970) and the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (1970), all located in urban areas, demonstrated, not only the creative freedom that Locsin acquired since he began in 1953, but also his adherence to certain principles of organic architecture.

In this collection, the Saint-Andrew Church is certainly the most radical in its formal break with the immediate environment, with its enclosure reminiscent of a shell and the importance given to its load-bearing structure comprising beams forming a cross.

Here Locsin pays tribute to Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) whom he met in the USA in 1959,<sup>16</sup> in designing a church that is “(...) organic and graceful, yet brutal, textured (...)”<sup>17</sup>

The Immaculate Heart of Mary Church, on the other hand, is a re-use of the geometric organism of the infinitely growing spiral that Locsin uses to create a gigantic canopy on the scale of the neighborhood.

Other projects exploited this notion of canopies on different scales, such as the Meditation Tower (1964), located in the Paranaque memorial park, which illustrated the ability to reinterpret the principles of the Nipa Hut, the traditional home of the Philippines, in a religious building.

*The principle of the Nipa Hut: Lightness of construction; Concern for ventilation; simple use of space and unity of ornament and structure (...).<sup>18</sup>*



In contrast, other projects had a much more demonstrative landscape dimension, such as the Everest Hills Memorial Park Church (1990) which sought to radicalise the question of canopy at a monumental level by giving it a form derived, again, from traditional roofing of the vernacular hut. As in traditional construction, the structure allowed the roof to be raised in order to promote cross ventilation; the air, passing over basins, is cooled by the freshness of the water.

Finally, his last building ever constructed, the Monastery of the Transfiguration in Bukidnon, Northern Mindanao (1994), is characterized by a pyramid roof, this time made by a metal structure whose large beams appear to emerge from the ground. The position of the structural supports frees the angles,<sup>19</sup> giving the roof the impression of being suspended above the ground.

### Conclusion

The corpus of Locsin's churches, although only part of a work comprising very different structures,<sup>20</sup> does not however, form a separate chapter. On the contrary, it demonstrates the architect's great ability to interpret local conditions and international references in order to integrate them into his architecture.

Locsin managed, by using the new means at his disposal, in particular, the new structural and expressive possibilities of reinforced concrete, to link his projects to archetypes of religious space while adapting them to the context, towards a built environment unique to the Philippines. His proposals for religious architecture are thus completely in line with the local conditions of the country, while

proposing his own language derived from previous international models.

### Notes

- 1 For a complete view of Leandro V. Locsin's work see Jean-Claude Girard, *L'œuvre de Leandro V. Locsin (1928-1994), architecte. A la recherche de l'identité évasive de l'architecture Philippine du second après-guerre*, thèse No. 8593, Lausanne, Laboratoire of history and theory 2, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, 2018.
- 2 During WW11, the Japanese occupied the country from 1942 until independence was proclaimed in 1946.
- 3 Although located in the center of Southeast Asia, the population of the Philippines comprises around ninety percent of Catholics, the rest being divided between Muslims and diverse religions.
- 4 If this is the case in the majority of state and institutional buildings or in the Manila Beaux-Arts plan drawn-up by Daniel Burnham (1846-1912) in 1905, certain actors, in particular the architect William E. Parsons (1872-1939), in charge of applying the Chicago architect's plan, tried to seek continuity with local conditions. Apropos of this see Andrew Nicolas Rebori, "The work of William E. Parsons in the Philippines Islands", *The Architectural Record*, No. 41, New York, January-June 1917, 305-324, 423-434.
- 5 Apropos of this see Girard, Jean-Claude, *Opus cit.*
- 6 Leandro Locsin, "The Elusive Filipino Soul in Architecture", *Exchange*, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, No. 33, Manila, The United States Educational Foundation in the Philippines, 18-25.
- 7 Lico Gerard, *Arkiteturang Filipino: a history of architecture and urbanism in the Philippines*, Diliman, Queszon City, Metro Manila, University Press of the Philippines, 2008, 130.
- 8 Marie-Alain Couturier, *La Vérité blessée*, Paris, Plon, 1984. Fr Couturier called upon Le Corbusier to design the La Tourette Monastery in 1950.
- 9 Christine Vendredi-Auzenneau, *Antonin Raymond. Un architecte occidental au Japon (1888-1976)*, Paris, Editions A. et J. Picard, 2012, 106.
- 10 Ramon Villegas, "Leandro Locsin: Renaissance builder", *Design & Architecture Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Makati, 1989, 30.
- 11 The number of projects known to date amounts to 21, based on examination of the Locsin design office archives and listed in the inventory of the

thesis that I've devoted to the subject. See Girard, Jean-Claude, *op. cit.*

- 12 This religious complex was completed by Locsin's associates after his death in 1994.
- 13 Leandro Locsin, "Directions for the building of a church", in Augusto Villalon, Rodrigo Perez III, *Leandro Locsin. The poet of Space*, Manila, Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1996, 16-17.
- 14 This project was actually an adaptation of his project, not carried out for Victorias, mentioned above.
- 15 Caryn Paredes-Santillan, *Approaching the Sacred: A study of the spatial manifestations of liminality in the architecture of Leandro V. Locsin*, Kyoto, Japan, 2<sup>nd</sup> Architecture and Phenomenology Symposium, 2018.
- 16 During this trip, Locsin went to Mexico to visit Barragan's work. It is possible that he saw Candela's churches, much published at that time, and that they were an inspiration to him, even if he never mentioned the Mexican architect in his texts or interviews.
- 17 Leandro Locsin in Ramon Villegas, "Leandro Locsin: Renaissance builder", in *Design & Architecture Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Makati, 1989, 30.
- 18 Leandro Locsin, "The Elusive Filipino Soul in Architecture", *Exchange*, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, No. 33, Manila, The United States Educational Foundation in the Philippines, 23.
- 19 Angles freed from supports had already been realized for the church of Magallanes in 1970.
- 20 There are 5 main categories: religious, residential, institutional, and administrative buildings, also hotels.

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