Destructive Creation
The U.S.–Philippine Relationship in American Art

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Forged in war and framed by empire, the relationship between the United States and the Philippines has been as tumultuous as any of America’s encounters with other Asian nations. And yet, as recent analysts have emphasized, one of the most marked aspects of that long-running connection is the extent to which it has become hidden from the U.S. historical imagination through neglect, willful forgetting, and “miseducation.” The result has been the shrouding of the U.S.–Philippine relationship—and its violent foundation in the Philippine-American War—in what the poet and critic Luis H. Francia has called a “mantle of invisibility.” “Here is a war that lasted for a decade, cost so much more money and lives than the 1898 Spanish-American War,” Francia writes, “reduced in scale and intensity to a nonevent.”

Francia’s critique also carries profound weight for the American art-historical imagination. To be fair, a small number of scholars have noted that the creation of works of art and architecture played a part in the U.S. imperial administration of the Philippines. Most recently, David Brody explored how the colonization of the Philippines “permitted the acting out of American Orientalist fantasies” that had permeated U.S. visual and material culture in the late nineteenth century. And, as early as 1972 Thomas S. Hines noted that “[Daniel] Burnham’s mission to the Philippines as an architectural consultant in 1904 and 1905 and his subsequent planning proposals for the cities of Manila and Baguio constituted indeed an architectural corollary to the earlier more salient programs of the United States for the islands’ political and economic development.” But in American art scholarship at large there has been little exploration of the extent to which the turn-of-the-century Americans who forged empire shared the era’s
particularly intense attraction to art-making as a vehicle and venue for political, social, cultural, and economic transformation. This is surprising, for two reasons. The first is that architecture was only one of the wide range of aesthetic media in which Americans worked in this context, from photographs, picture postcards, and illustrated books, to buildings and landscapes. The second is that evidence for this ferment is not only to be found in the Philippines; a significant quantity of relevant material is also available in the United States, hidden in plain sight in repositories including the Smithsonian Institution.  

With this in mind, the first aim of this essay is to remove Hines’s qualification that “political and economic” programs pursued by the United States in the Philippines were “more salient” than merely “corollary” art and architectural measures. In fact, the U.S. political and economic programs that the historian Glenn May has insightfully called an “experiment in self-duplication” nearly always contained within them a constitutive element of aesthetic transformation that directly intersected with more familiar practices of “social engineering.” U.S. attempts to create and reformulate Philippine civic institutions along American lines entailed not only the reconfiguration of abstract principles and relations between people but also the physical and aesthetic reconstruction of “the political landscape” in the sense that the term is employed by the archaeologist Adam T. Smith—as a built environment comprising buildings, monuments, architectural decoration, and other works of visual art, which in turn became the physical context for the performance of aesthetically charged civic rituals and the subject of further representation.  

The American reconstruction of the Philippine political landscape was, as this suggests, a complex and multifaceted process. On the most basic level, it involved the deployment—in the design and construction of U.S.-controlled institutions in the Philippines such as schools, hospitals, and prisons—of forms and styles that directly referenced the American metropole. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of large new neoclassical buildings such as the Manila building that was recently refurbished as the National Art Gallery. The structure was designed originally as the city’s public library by the American architect Ralph Harrington Doane and built, according to revised plans designed by the Filipino architect Juan Arellano, as the Legislative Building in 1926. Beyond “self-duplication,” however, the U.S. employment of neoclassicism also referenced the more general process of architectural reiteration that attended the imperial building projects of Britain and other European empires—including Spain, which in the Philippines employed neoclassicism in both civil and ecclesiastical buildings such as the monumental Taal church in Batangas Province.  

In other instances, American structures referred to regional, vernacular, and domestic forms that were adapted to use in the Philippines. This is not to say
that such quotidian forms did not also have imperial associations. For instance, an American hospital built in the form of a bungalow referred both to U.S. domestic architecture (and perhaps especially to the domestic architecture of California, the home state of many Americans in the Philippines and the point of embarkation for the vast majority of U.S. soldiers and civilians alike) and to colonial Anglo-Indian architecture. What is striking in this case of an institution built in a vernacular, regional mode is that it was (like grander structures in more imposing styles) also understood by some American observers as a “monument” whose success as a work of institutional architecture correlated specifically to the success of American geopolitical aims. This is made clear by a typed annotation affixed to a photograph of the building found in an album made by the American teachers Maud and Luther Parker. It describes the hospital as “entirely free from the usual odors of such institutions” and the “main operating room” as “made of crystal,” and declares, “All of this is the great Monument of the American flag in the Philippine Islands.”

Another quotidian form derived from an Asian original that Americans built into the Philippine landscape—and then represented in other media—was the gazebo. As is suggested by the thirteenth-century Southern Song dynasty painting collected by Charles Lang Freer, Strolling to a Lakeside Gazebo, gazebos historically were associated with elite social rituals. Wealthy Americans constructed them for private use in the nineteenth century, as may be seen in Thomas Hill’s painting Irrigating at Strawberry Farm (ca. 1865), depicting a California landowner with Chinese laborers before a gazebo and a distant Mission-revival mansion. But generally speaking it may be said that in the context of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States the gazebo acquired quite a different set of associations. Particularly when configured as a bandstand, the American gazebo came to be situated precisely at the confluence of landscape architecture and civic ritual and thus was perhaps quintessentially associated with the performance of Americanness. As such, gazebos were built not only on public greens but in institutions with an avowedly assimilationist purpose, such as Pennsylvania’s Carlisle Indian School.

In the Philippines, Americans created, preserved, and reiterated gazebo landscapes, both in symbolically important locations such as the large Manila park known as the Luneta and within new landscapes, including those specifically associated with American institutions. Both the Luneta and an open-air pavilion there preceded U.S. occupation. Nonetheless, from the beginning Americans worked to claim the site through use, alteration, and representation. During the Philippine-American War, the U.S. military used the park as an encampment ground for troops and for the procession of fallen officers, as well as the grounds for Fourth of July rituals and the performance of celebrations for other newly introduced holidays.
These and other uses were then photographed and sent back to the United States as commercial images. U.S. alterations included the extension of the park and creation of a “New Luneta,” on a large site reclaimed from the sea, on which a large flagpole was raised and two gazebos symmetrically placed on either side of the flagpole. This transformed landscape was the subject of American images intended for circulation to the United States and/or among Americans in the Philippines. One example, a postcard published by the Philippine Curio Agency, cast the gazebo-laden bayside stretch of the Luneta as a place where Americans could indulge in nostalgic yearning. As the poem printed below the image lugubriously intoned, “The slow undulating blue waters/Bejeweled with sparkling white foam/Lazily waver in front of my vision,—Lazily whisper a message of home!”

Americans also produced and reproduced gazebo landscapes mirroring the United States in explicitly institutional contexts. One striking example of this is a postcard by the prolific Manila-based American publishers Leon J. Lambert and Milton Springer, depicting a white-clad band in and around a gazebo (Figure 1). Nearly every detail of this landscape—the waving American flag, the manicured grass, the immaculate pathways, the slatted benches—evokes the United States. In some cases, these details evoke the landscape of California, notably the lush, yet controlled plantings of palms, the imposing mountains, and the pink-to-blue sky. Indeed, while there is no direct evidence that the landscape in the postcard was designed after a particular U.S. original, it is striking that the somewhat idiosyncratic palm-thatch roof of the gazebo, the Pacific vegetation, and the mountains do have counterparts in a specific

U.S. landscape that was reproduced tens of thousands of times in the same period. This was the gazebo’d park on Redlands, California’s Smiley Drive, drawn by Louise M. Keeler and printed in *Southern California*, a guidebook published by the Santa Fe railroad that was in its eightieth edition in 1901.8

While Lambert and Springer’s image might be taken at first glance for a picture of preparations for a Fourth of July celebration in California, the caption indicates that this was not at all what the postcard represented. In fact, the figures in the bandstand were colonists in the Iwahig Penal Colony on Palawan Island—a U.S. facility built in 1904 in the face of overcrowding and rioting in Manila’s Bilibid Prison. As such, the image might be taken at second glance as merely an example—admittedly, a somewhat bizarre example—of U.S. social engineering through the apparently benevolent use of pleasing landscape architecture and uplifting civic ritual. But, as Michael Salman argues, the colony did not just hold criminals in need of reform. Rather by 1908 as many as a third of Iwahig’s inmates were political prisoners, incarcerated for crimes such as sedition, insurrection, or “brigandage.” This latter offense, as Jim Zwick argues, was introduced by the Philippine Commission in 1902 precisely to criminalize armed resistance to U.S. rule—just as the United States had earlier defined the conflict itself as an “insurrection” rather than a war. In other words, the “Brigandage Act” or “Bandolerismo Statute” that brought many Filipinos to Iwahig represented the continuation of a deliberate U.S. effort to limit its obligations towards Filipino revolutionaries, who would have enjoyed specific rights and privileges under U.S. and international law if they had been defined as legitimate combatants and as prisoners of war. As such, the image is something of a sorcerer’s mirror, reflecting the U.S. promulgation of the “soft power” of social engineering through aesthetic reform, while occluding its exercise of harder forms of coercion rooted in war.9

Lambert and Springer’s *Park and Colonist Band, Iwahig Penal Colony, Island of Palawan, Philippines* thus brings us back to Francia’s assertion that the Philippine-American War lurks in the blindest spot of the U.S.–Philippine relationship—and to some of the ways in which the American art-historical imagination has been blinded to coercion and violence as contexts for aesthetic practice within that relationship. For, if it may be argued that American art scholarship generally ignores images, objects, buildings, and landscapes produced within the context of the U.S.–Philippine encounter, then it may also be argued that even the limited body of scholarship that does address the role of American art and architecture in that context tends to bracket this aspect of the subject. Hines’s account, for example, focuses entirely on Burnham’s plan and the “architecture of quality and of startlingly prophetic import” of William E. Parsons, the consulting architect appointed to carry out the plan, essentially skipping over the war and its legacies. And, while Brody does interleave an analysis of Burnham and
Parsons with material from the Spanish-American War—notably in an interesting account of how a “naval [and] land parade, fireworks, street decorations, swarms of visitors, the construction of the monumental Dewey Arch, and a range of other cultural productions” contributed to the “canonization” of Admiral George Dewey in the United States—his account is less attentive to the specific ways in which aesthetic, military, and political practices intersected in the (deadlier, costlier, larger-scale, and more intense) Philippine-American War. Moreover, in their accounts both authors emphasize positive aesthetic practices such as creation, reproduction, circulation, and the preservation by Burnham and Parsons of “pre-existing Spanish design.”

While once again acknowledging its debts to these earlier authors, this essay proposes, as a second line of argument, that a greater emphasis should be placed upon aesthetic practices that had dislocating, disfiguring, or destructive results. Such a reorientation, I argue elsewhere, must include an analysis of how the American spoliation and destruction of art and architecture directly intersected with military practice during the officially recognized period of conflict between 1899 and 1902. But it also ought to entail a recognition of the subtler ways in which a dynamic interplay between creation and destruction persisted much later—throughout the decade of simultaneous conflict and reconstruction that followed Theodore Roosevelt’s official declaration of the end of the war in 1902, and even into the somewhat less tumultuous decades that followed.

One place to begin such a reorientation is with the Burnham plan itself, and Parsons’s work to implement it through the design and construction of certain structures. Here the emphasis placed by scholars on the preservation of the Spanish imperial past is appropriate. But so too are contrary aspects, beginning with the American reconfiguration of Manila. Since the sixteenth century, the walled city of Intramuros had been the center of political, economic, military, and religious authority. It was Manila’s and the Philippines’ central “political landscape,” embodied by structures such as the Ayuntamiento, the seat of the city government; the Aduana, or customs house; Fort Santiago; and the churches and houses of the Catholic religious orders—and by spaces such as the Plaza Aduana (renamed the Plaza de los Martires de la Integridad de la Patria in 1897 to honor loyalist troops in the Philippine Revolution). The Burnham plan did “preserve” this landscape’s “picturesque” structures and spaces. It did so, however, by converting the walled city into “a recreation park possessing expansive promenades where the people gather during open air band concerts” (indeed, “one corner of the bastille has been made over into an underground aquarium”) while relocating the new core of buildings, spaces, and avenues in extramural districts. Thus, while not destroying the individual buildings of Intramuros (as would happen on an almost incalculable scale during the Second
Individual buildings also embodied the dynamic interplay between creative and destructive practices. Hines convincingly presents Parsons’s method as a distillation from “the corpus of Spanish-Philippine building,” analogous and parallel to “Irving Gill and his California contemporaries’ increasingly purified abstractions of the earlier Spanish Colonial styles.” In both cases ecclesiastical architecture was a primary referent, seen for example in the overlapping employment by Gill, in the 1913 Women’s Club of La Jolla, and by Parsons, in the 1910 Philippine General Hospital, of arcades of round arches, a staple feature of both the California missions and Spanish churches in the Philippines. Such arches can be seen in Adam Clark Vroman’s late-nineteenth-century postcard of Mission San Luis Rey de Francia (Figure 2) in California. Indeed, while Parsons himself was not apparently directly influenced by the California missions, other Americans engaged in the reconstruction of Philippine institutions certainly imagined a link between them and the Philippine landscape, Maud and Luther Parker (who became industrial inspector in the Bureau of Education), for example, affixed 18 postcards of the California missions into their album, along with the many architectural and ethnographic views of the Philippines that constituted the bulk of its images.13

Gill’s distillation of architectural elements from California’s picturesquely ruined missions into modernist clubs and laboratories did parallel aesthetic processes that took place in the Philippines to some degree. There was a key difference, however. In California, by the time of Gill, Vroman, and even the U.S.-Mexican War, the missions
were already secularized, in poor repair, and anachronistic. When the United States went to war with the Philippines, in contrast, the church landscape there was still very much in use. Thus it could not just be reimagined by the makers of nostalgic postcards or the cool renderers of architectural parts, but had to be wrested from the control of the Catholic church and the religious orders through legal wrangling, negotiated or coerced occupation, or force. These processes were inscribed upon the buildings themselves and upon American representations of them—and, it is arguable that they were embedded within the new structures Americans built. Consider, for example, the inclusion in the Parker album of a commercial photograph of the Jesuit Observatory. This was no mere recording of a tourist visit, for the 1901 annotations to the image mark out the “Exposition Building where we are stationed,” the “Baggage room, Assembly Hall, Observatory, Ladies’ Quarters, and Carriage Rooms”—in other words, the appropriation of the complex for U.S. civilian occupation. Or consider the Augustinian church and convent at Guadalupe (Figure 3), outside Manila, whose iconic tiered arcades and popularity as an American tourist site—one 1906 guide called it “Guadalupe Queen of the Ruins”—made it a likely model for Parsons’s cloister-like arrangement of tiered arches in the Philippine General Hospital (Figure 4). Along with several other church buildings in the province of Manila, Guadalupe was a ruin, not because of the ravages of time or earthquakes, but because it had been burned by U.S. forces in 1899.14

An undercurrent of destruction also informed U.S. revisions to another, final institution: schools. Here it is necessary to comment briefly on the importance of schools as a site for U.S. social engineering in the Philippines, and on the intersection between so-called social engineering and aesthetic transformation in that context. Like the revolutionary Filipino government, whose 1899 constitution called for a separation
of church and state and the establishment of “free and obligatory” public education, the American administration originally set out to secularize the schools and to extend their reach to wider segments of the population—although the goal of universal primary education was quickly abandoned. Within this framework, U.S. administrators and educators pursued a range of other political, social, economic, and cultural goals, through instruments as varied as the use of English as the medium of instruction, the introduction of physical education and other curricular changes, and the institutionalization in the school calendar of new holidays including not only Independence Day (which fell during the Philippine school year) but also Thanksgiving Day, Washington’s Birthday, and even Occupation Day.15

Even more than in other institutions, social engineering in the U.S.-administered Philippine schools intersected with reformist aesthetic practices. Perhaps the most obvious of these was the Bureau of Education’s wholesale redesign and reconstruction of the educational infrastructure—including in some cases the construction of dormitories as well as schools. This was a highly centralized project, exemplified by the adoption under Parsons in 1912 of a Philippine-wide “unit system of construction” for the building of schools of all sizes. Thus even before Filipino school children experienced a single day of the American curriculum, or heard an American teacher speak a word of English, schools built in this architectural mode themselves imparted some first modernist lessons in modular design, scale efficiency, and centralized administration.16

The institutionalization of new holidays in Philippine school calendars also employed aesthetic practices in the service of ideological change. American holidays provided obvious occasions for “Our young Filipinos” to perform American civil religion, to exhibit the U.S. flag, and to become the subject of images to be circulated in the
United States (Figure 5). Holidays also provided the opportunity for additional ways of enlisting Filipino youth in the reiteration of American iconography. School drawing manuals developed by Americans for use in the Philippines recommended holidays including Flag Day, Independence Day, and Lincoln’s and Washington’s birthdays as suitable occasions for the assignment of “special projects” to be undertaken by students.17

And then there is art and craft education itself. As they developed new schools, U.S. educators developed a complex system of art and craft education that turned Philippine schoolchildren into producers of highly specific kinds of works such as hats, mats, and works of embroidery. In turn, art and craft education became the subject of further representations in such images as the colorful Lambert-Springer Co. postcard *Embroidery Class, Manila, Philippines* (ca. 1909–20)—also reproduced in black and white in the Bureau of Education’s Bulletin No. 34, *Lace Making and Embroidery*.18

Such instruction bore some similarity to industrial design education in the United States, which matched economic to human development. But in this case, as in others, it may be seen that reforms in the Philippines were not just examples of a generalized reform program “appropriate for cities everywhere,” but that they entailed degrees of control and coercion that distinguished them from many domestic counterparts. The U.S. Department of Public Instruction micromanaged aesthetic details as minute as the color schemes employed in the making of mats, whose brilliant colors American educators worked to “tone down.” This aversion to brilliant color undoubtedly owed its origin in part to prevailing American models of color theory, notably A. H. Munsell’s *A Color Notation*, which American teacher Clara Carter recommended for use in the Philippine schools in her manual. But this inculcation of a particular aesthetic preference was also tied directly to a concern that did not inform art pedagogy in the metropole: the creation of saleable works by schoolchildren for domestic and export

markets. Indeed, the Bureau of Education instituted its own in-house General Sales Department explicitly for this purpose.19

Sometimes, coercion shaded into force, as may be seen in the approach U.S. administrators took to the aesthetic side of school secularization, particularly during the initial period when the schools run by the United States were not newly constructed but appropriated from the old Catholic regime. The approach taken by the superintendent of schools in Manila, David Prescott Barrows, an anthropologist and later president of the University of California, was quite severe. He “ordered the removal of all crucifixes, statues, pictures, and religious symbols from walls, doorways, and roof tops of all classroom buildings.”20

Although Barrows’s purge is an extreme instance of U.S. officials’ attempts at aesthetic (and hence, ideological) control through the schools, it is indicative of the more pervasive way in which the creation of an imperial American aesthetic and ideological order depended upon the suppression of alternatives. Consider the reconfiguration of the school calendar, which as has been noted affected the production and reproduction of American iconography and ritual. This process had another, negative aspect: the supplanting of the old calendar—including not only the excision of old political holidays but the radical diminution of Catholic holy days—and the intensely visual and material celebrations that accompanied them. This ritual and iconographic displacement of the old regime took place alongside corollary policies also aimed at suppressing revolutionary icons and practices, notably the notorious Flag Law of 1907 forbidding “Filipinos to use or display the Philippine flag anywhere, even inside Filipino homes.”21

In light of the many works and practices associated with the U.S.-Philippine relationship that have never been analyzed, it would be too soon to make a final conclusion regarding the place of that relationship in American art. Future scholars might address a number of important subjects that this essay has not been able to consider: for example, the responses of ordinary people to the visual and material transformations they experienced, and the roles played by Filipino architects and artists like Juan Arellano who directly shaped the creation of a new political landscape in the U.S. era. What may be argued safely for the moment is that that relationship, and the tumultuous dynamic within it between creation and destruction, ought to be a subject of sustained inquiry in the years to come.

Notes


4. Little has been published on the Legislative building, but informative text panels outlining its history were installed in the building after its renovation. For a comment on Spain’s employment of neoclassicism, see A. N. Rebori, “The Work of William E. Parsons in the Philippine Islands,” Part I, *Architectural Record* 41 (April 1917): 305.

5. The album made by Maud and Luther Parker is Album—Filipiana Division, 2 vols., National Library of the Philippines, Special Collections, n.d. Many other images in the album are also of institutional architecture or the performance of rituals associated with U.S. political culture (often within a specific architectural setting). Examples include a photograph of a parade on the Fourth of July, 1903, taken outside the old Manila Post Office; a postcard of the Philippine General Hospital; a photo of “Maud N. Parker presiding at the First Woman’s Club Convention ever held in the Phil. Islands,” dated 1917, and numerous images of schools. The Parkers’ correlation of architectural and geopolitical aims paralleled Rebori’s interpretation of Parsons’s work as “a lasting tribute to the period of our Government’s constructive interest in the Philippines.” Rebori, “Work of William E. Parsons,” I, 309.

6. See, for example, John N. Choate, *Carlisle Girls and Boys in School Uniform with Two Women School Teachers (?)*, Under Gazebo, 1879, a black-and-white gelatin glass negative in the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (NAA Inv. 06804900).


11. See J. M. Mancini, “Sovereignty Trouble: The United States, the Catholic Political Landscape, and Regime Change in the Philippines,” forthcoming and presented in versions at the State University of New York, Brockport, 2009; Yale University; Institute for Advanced Study; College Art Association, Chicago; Princeton University; and European Association for American Studies, Dublin, 2010.
12. Rebori, “The Work of William E. Parsons,” I, 319. U.S. military governors briefly used the Ayuntamiento, often misidentified in photographs as “the Palace,” as a headquarters until 1903; see H.C. White Co., The palace, headquarters of Maj. Gen. MacArthur, Manila, P. I., 1901, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Stereograph LOT 12605. Under U.S. rule, the Plaza of the Martyrs was given the vague name Plaza Españ. Burnham’s remit did not include military structures, and Fort Santiago continued to be used as it had been during the war. For useful notes on sites in Intramuros, see www.intramurosadministration.com/home.htm.


14. The destruction of Guadalupe is discussed in the early guidebook that used the phrase “Queen of the Ruins,” Miller’s Interesting Manila, 142, but that book does not mention the more widespread destruction of churches. See Archdiocese of Manila, Catálogo de las reclamaciones que por daños y perjuicios inferidos a la Iglesia Católica de Filipinas presenta al gobierno de los Estados Unidos de América el Arzobispado de Manila y los obispados sufraganeos (Manila : Imp. de ‘El Mercantil,’ 1903), 11–15, 171–73, and Mancini, “Sovereignty Trouble.” In 1920 the Guadalupe ruins still “featured in all the guide books”; Facts and Figures about the Philippines (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1920), 53.


16. Images of a dormitory, the Women’s Dormitory of the Normal School in Manila, may be seen in Rebori, “Work of William E. Parsons,” 318–19. As Kenton J. Clymer notes, dormitories became an important institutional space for American Protestant missionaries in light of the official policy of secularization: “if religion could not be taught in the schools . . . then the mission had to reach the students through dormitories”; Clymer, “Religion and American Imperialism: Methodist Missionaries in the Philippine Islands, 1899–1913,” Pacific Historical Review 49, no. 1 (February 1980): 29–50, see 49.

17. [Clara O. Carter], Course of Study in Drawing for Normal Schools (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1929), 14.

18. The postcards are in the collection of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1911.

19. Glenn May convincingly argues that the emphasis on vocational and manual education of American administrators derived from the approach of Booker T. Washington; May, Social Engineering in the Philippines, 89–93. Hines, “Imperial Façade,” 44. See the Department of Public Instruction of the Bureau of Education’s Philippine Craftsman Reprint Series No. 1, Philippine Mats (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1913), 12–13; [Carter], Course of Study in Drawing for Normal Schools, 8. Director of Education Luther B. Bewley wrote in his introduction to Catalog of Handwoven Products of the Philippine Public Schools (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1920), “The purpose of this catalog is to disseminate information on the standard handwoven articles made in Philippine public schools and, by so doing, to help the General Sales Department of the Bureau of Education to find buyers, both here and abroad, for these articles.”
