

II Fabled Opulence Manila, the Philippines and *The Manila Hotel*

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Fig. 1 – Apparition of a jeepney through the heavy rain. View from my taxi along Roxas Boulevard.

“It is a useless life that is not consecrated to a great ideal. It is like a stone wasted on the field without becoming a part of any edifice.”

Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*

Of Martyrdom and Making-Do

It was raining heavily when I got into Manila. Gallon after gallon of relentless tropical rain, cascading like an epic waterfall from the sky. Through the windows of my airport taxi, racing along a semi-flooded Roxas Boulevard to my hotel, I peered out into a dream-like, technicolour world, populated with skyscrapers in shades of shocking pink, blue and green; and by monstrous psychedelic rides that had been pimped out of control. Jeepneys, the Filipinos called them – these hybrid vehicles, originating as military jeeps the Americans left behind after World War II; a cross

between mobile discotheque and Optimus Prime; the outcome of fevered and flamboyant imaginings of post-war Filipinos, making-do with the ruins of a fledgeling identity.

This was my first trip to the Philippines. Before this, my impression of the entire country – and particularly of Manila – had been shaped by a succession of Filipino maids who had quite literally raised me to young adulthood while both my parents focused on their careers. This *impression*, captured in a few sentences, goes as follows: Manila is a very chaotic, poor and dangerous city; Filipinos speak very loudly in a distinct accent that replaces “v”s with “b”s and “f”s with “p”s; Filipinos are also very religious, sometimes ridiculously so, but that didn’t stop them from having a *very* good time. Not really the most politically correct impression of an *entire* country. But then, when I was growing up, with my succession of Filipina surrogate moms, most news about the Philippines tended to be bad news - Imelda Marcos anyone? And most news nowadays about the Philippines doesn’t seem to stray too far either from presenting the country as a... well... basket case.



Fig. 2 – Evading the heat in the VIP Area of the Quirino Grandstand, Rizal Park.

I thought Manila a much-misunderstood city. And my trip to the city confirmed my suspicions. To wit: Manila is a gloriously complex, colourful and chameleonic

place, if one managed to look past its obvious failings. Therein lies the catch. The failings are almost too obvious to look past. For starters, Manila is indeed riddled with crime, and very dangerous. Before I left, I was advised by friends who had visited the city not to travel on my own, and if I insisted on doing so, not to wander around on my own with a DSLR camera in full view. I defied their warnings on both counts, except for the part about the DSLR camera (I brought a discreet point and shoot camera for this trip). But I was glad to have been warned beforehand. On the first afternoon of my trip, I almost fell victim to a scam that would have seen me drugged and abandoned, without my clothes and valuables, in some unknown hotel somewhere in the city. At least that was what I found out (through online forums) *could* have happened to me if I had agreed to throw in my lot with a friendly and harmless-looking “family” of middle-aged “tourists” from Cebu, who tailed me for fifteen minutes from Rizal Park to my hotel, insisting that I take a jeepney ride with them to Chinatown. Not.

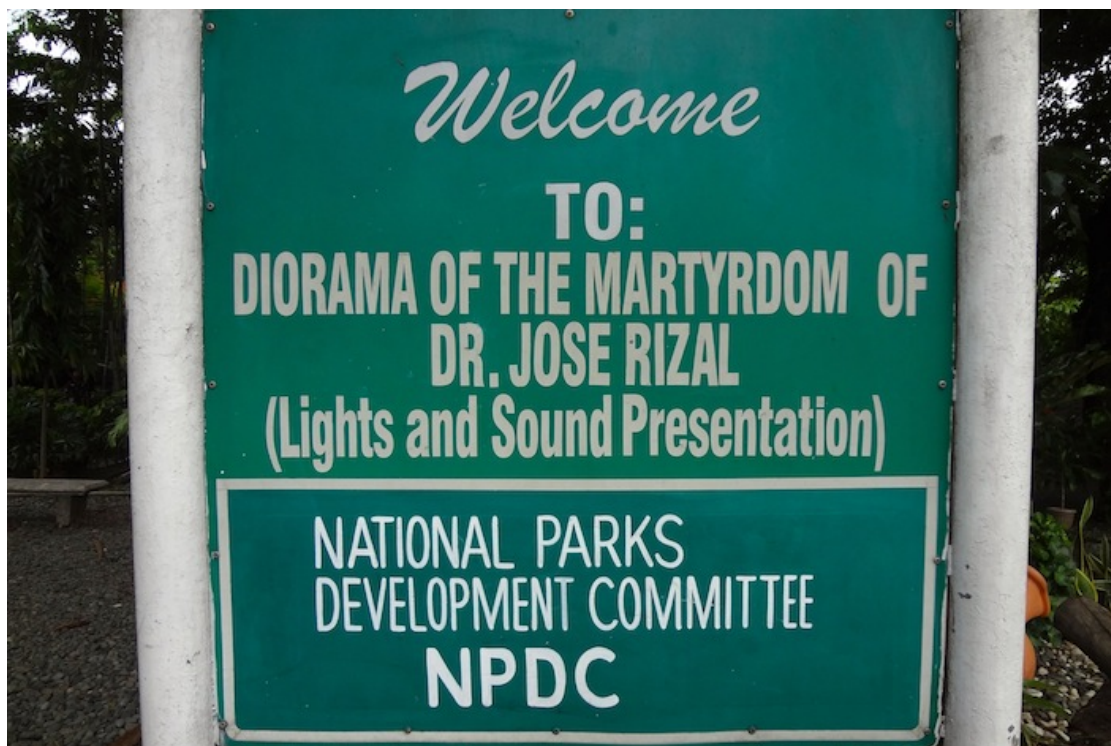


Fig. 3 – The Diorama of the Martyrdom of Rizal, in Rizal Park.

Manila is also somewhat caught up with its past. Ok, let's revise that. It is completely, irretrievably caught up with *the* past – particularly that of its National Hero, Dr Jose Rizal, who in 1898, led a failed revolution against the Philippines' Spanish colonisers (who had occupied the country for a staggering 330 years!). I say

“failed” because what followed the revolution was a second shorter period of colonisation by the Americans, who, with all their talk about democracy and liberty, turned the tables on their one-time Filipino allies, citing the country’s general “unreadiness for independence” as a convenient excuse to simply gobble it up.

But no matter. To the Filipinos, it was the spirit of the revolution that counted, not the outcome. And so Rizal is immortalised in a park that bears his name, within which sits a stupendous Monument that also bears his name along with his mortal remains, and is guarded 24/7 by two “Knights of Rizal.” The park also features a Diorama cum Light and Sound display presenting, in graphic detail, Rizal’s martyrdom, from his imprisonment in the colonial-era Fort Santiago, to his execution in the Park itself. The exact spot, just beyond the compounds of the Light and Sound Show, is commemorated with yet another immodest monument.



Fig. 4 – Fort Santiago – the heavily fortified entrance to Intramuros.

Everything makes for a rather unhealthy obsession with martyrdom. Which, I suppose, makes complete sense, when one considers just how much the city and its inhabitants have endured in their four hundred years of existence. The Spanish didn’t just colonise the city – they plundered and exploited it, locking themselves up each evening for three centuries in Intramuros (“Within the Walls”) - the impenetrable

fortress-city they built to protect themselves as much from invading foreign armies, as from rebellious natives. One small consolation of colonial rule was that Manila prospered and grew to become one of the most beautiful and opulent cities in the world, renowned across the oceans as the Pearl of the Orient. But all this beauty was laid waste in a few short weeks during World War II, and Manila attained the dubious honour of being the second most devastated city, after Krakow in Poland. Independence followed total devastation, like a phoenix rising from the flames. But *even then*, there was no respite from oppression and misrule. A few short decades of economic recovery would be followed by twenty years of martial rule by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda, during which the city and entire country would be systematically impoverished and a generation of its people forced into slums or out into the world as domestic workers.



Fig. 5 – Storm brewing behind the Philippine Flag.

Manila is a byword for epic tragedy – and Manilans? Well, in spite of what the city has endured, they continue to be a spirited and hopeful lot, always waiting for the next Rizal to come along to get them out of their present fix. For that alone – that boundless optimism and ability to make do in the face of overwhelming adversity – I admire and envy Manila and Manilans, particularly as those of us in far wealthier and better run cities fret and complain about problems that are trivial in the larger scheme

of things. I am reminded of the jeepneys – those ubiquitous symbols of the Philippine nation that I saw upon my arrival. It seems to me that therein lies a model, or an approach rather, to life – grab it by the balls before it turns around to bite you.

A Grand American Hotel



Fig. 6 – View of the Manila Hotel from within Intramuros, showing the original 5-storey building built in 1912, as well as the 18-storey tower block, built in the mid '70s.

Manila features on my Grand Tour because of the Manila Hotel, which, in its heyday in the early 19th century, was considered one of the three best hotels in the East, together with the Raffles in Singapore and the Imperial in Tokyo. The hotel was designed and built by the Americans in 1912 to cater to American tourists when the Philippines became American sovereign territory. The Spanish, it seemed, did not quite *do* grand hotels, unlike the other colonizing powers – the British, the French and the Dutch. Guests were sequestered in traditional inns within the confines of Intramuros. Which worked for the few hundred or so Spanish visitors who deigned to visit their furthest-flung colony; but was inadequate for the thousands of curious Americans who thronged to this territory once it became American.

The hotel, in its original form, was a five-storey, all-suite affair, designed in the California Mission style – clean lines, simple (to the point of austere) aesthetics, and a kind of understated elegance. The hotel I stayed at, however, was not in the least understated. Instead, a sort of brash Hollywood opulence with Filipino touches prevailed. Once past the glass doors (and security screening), it is hard not to be arrested by the vastness and theatricality of the lobby space, apparently the largest hotel lobby in the world – a cavernous expanse of Philippine hardwood ceiling, Philippine marble and other indigenous materials. The original five-storey building is also now dwarfed by an 18-storey tower with the name “Manila Hotel” emblazoned so boldly in gold over it, that no one driving along Roxas Boulevard, by the shores of Manila Bay, can possibly miss it. The perpetrator of the hotel’s overhaul and expansion in the ‘70s was the Philippine Butterfly, Imelda Marcos herself, and as is well known, her motivating philosophy was ever and always the bigger and louder, the better.



Fig. 7 – The vast, opulent lobby of the Manila Hotel.

To give Imelda some credit, the hotel accommodations were, indeed, splendidly opulent and luxurious, comparable to any other five-star hotel in the region. The rich mahogany tones of the lobby were extended into the room, where the overall effect achieved was an ambience of warmth, intimacy and self-conscious decadence.

Everything was superlative – the *biggest* in-room hotel TV in the Philippines, the *biggest* floor-to-ceiling windows in Manila, the *best* view in the city. An interesting design feature in the rooms was a latticed window used to soften the sunlight streaming into the room. An innovation of the Spanish Colonials, these lattices would have been in-filled with capiz shell in the colonial era – a kind of mother-of-pearl that served no other function than to further soften sunlight entering private domiciles in the daytime, so the light-fearing Spaniards could live their lives in an eternal, God-fearing twilight. Thankfully, there was no such predilection on the part of the hotel to fill these lattices in, or the overcast sky would have resulted in an even more depressing pall within the room.



Fig. 8 – Room interior, extending the warm Filipino mahogany tones of the lobby.

Instead of a suite in the original heritage wing, I opted for a Bay-view Superior Deluxe room on the 17th floor of the Tower Block (the highest floor, the 18th being its Presidential Suite). I admit it: I'm a sucker for a view and one of the few good things I had heard about Manila was the stunning sunsets to be had over Manila Bay. Unfortunately, the afternoon I arrived in Manila, it was raining heavily, and the forecast was stormy weather for the rest of the weekend. Checking in with the friendly Filipino receptionist, I was informed, rather dubiously, that I would love the view of the Manila sunsets from my room. I could only smile feebly at her infinite

optimism, while bitterly ruing my having neglected to check on the weather before booking my flight.

Once in the room, I found the view, taken in from the floor-to-ceiling windows, breathtaking indeed; though the Bay itself was rather less than inspiring – a sullen grey expanse punctuated with gaudy flashes of colour from the Port of Manila, the sluggish International Cruise Terminal, and Manila Ocean Park (the city's Aquarium). Standing by the window, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the same Manila Bay in the 16th or 17th century, when Manila was a great emporium for trade in the Far East, playing host to junks from China and Japan, fleets from Goa, Malacca, Borneo and Siam, and the magnificent Spanish Galleons that, for two hundred years, took precious silks, spices and tropical hardwoods from Asia to Acapulco in New Spain (present-day Mexico). *That* view of Manila Bay, bustling with peoples and wares from all over the world, would have been spectacular.

The General's Private Domicile



Fig. 9 – General Douglas MacArthur Suite

The Manila Hotel has seen its own share of the Rich and Famous in its 100-year existence. Among some of these celebrity guests were Ernest Hemingway, Charleston

Heston, Marlon Brando, Dame Margot Fonteyn, Richard Nixon and even The Beatles. But the most famous of all of them, the Big Kahuna himself, was General Douglas MacArthur – the man who famously accepted the surrender of the Japanese and thus ended World War II in the Pacific. Just *who* was this General MacArthur? Accounts portray him as a proud but taciturn man, totally devoted to the Philippines. The Filipinos certainly adored him: he was appointed Military Advisor to the Philippine Commonwealth (what the Americans called their colony) by the President of the Commonwealth at the time. But he was also brazenly colonial, demanding, in return for accepting the invitation from President Quezon, that he be housed in the Malacanang Palace (the Presidential Residence) or an equivalent. He got his wish. The President commissioned a special seven-bedroom “presidential” suite occupying an entire new floor in the Manila Hotel, especially for him.



Fig. 10 – The Champagne Room: European Dining in period American splendour.

The General only managed six years in his penthouse suite, however, before World War II broke out, and Pearl Harbour dragged America and the Philippines into battle. When the Japanese came, they turned the hotel into a military headquarters cum residence for their highest ranking officials – something that would happen to all of the grand colonial hotels in the region during the Japanese Occupation. Guests of the hotel were brusquely trucked off to internment camps, and their possessions

confiscated; while comfort women were brought in to entertain the Japanese troops, turning the hotel into nothing more than a brothel. By that time, the General and his family had retreated to an underground facility in the nearby island of Corregidor, and from there, he would orchestrate the programme of resistance that would finally result in the Fall of the Japanese in 1944.

Unfortunately, when the General finally returned to the Hotel, he would find his private domicile completely razed, a casualty of crossfire between Japanese and American troops. The present-day hotel offers a tour of a refurbished “General MacArthur Suite,” which in terms of size, is a mere fraction of the original. The collection of MacArthur memorabilia within the suite provided a sense of just how important a presence he was to the Hotel, to the City and to the Philippine people. But, from the rather nonchalant attitude of my Hotel Concierge cum Tour Guide – she continuously texted while rattling off general facts that I already knew – it was clear that the General was quite probably no longer relevant to the present generation of young Filipinos.



Fig. 11 – Channeling the past at the Tap Room Bar.

Later that evening, emerging from researching more about the hotel’s history and the General’s life, I sat at the very cosy Tap Room Bar for a glass of wine, and a

spot of nostalgia. The bar was part of the original building, and was exquisitely preserved and refurbished. Not surprisingly, the guests at the hotel that entire weekend consisted primarily of Americans and Koreans (staying guests) and Filipinos (visiting guests). At breakfast and dinners, I felt like I might as well have been visiting the Philippine Commonwealth, whatwith the surfeit of American families dining alongside their Filipino counterparts. The clientele at that very moment in the bar comprised an elderly Filipino couple dressed in their Sunday best, and a lone American tourist, whose booming (and rather irksome) voice continually distracted me as I attempted to make notes of my stay.



Fig. 12 – The glamorous entryway to the hotel, at night.

Beyond the bar, I could hear the swells of a string ensemble in the hotel lobby, playing a medley of classic showtunes and '80s pop standards. A large crowd of Filipinos were gathered for a wedding, dressed in the sheer silk *barongs* for the men, and tailored cheongsams for many of the women. They looked a glamorous, sophisticated and elegant bunch – a huge contrast from the average Filipinos who lingered just beyond the high security perimeter of the hotel, and who could scarce afford shelter and three meals a day, never mind a grand wedding in the city's most opulent hotel. I had seen so many of these disenfranchised, sprawled out by the side of the street or in Rizal Park, as if waiting for a miracle to happen; or simply waiting, because there was nothing else they could do to pass the time.

And then it occurred to me just why Manilans continued to have an enduring love and reverence for this hotel that most average Filipinos could never dream of stepping into. The hotel – this grande dame of the city – provided the illusion of grandeur, cosmopolitanism and normalcy that the city previously had but may no longer lay claim to. Here people dreamed big of a Manila that once was – a prosperous and safe metropolis, where everyone may dream of one day stepping into wealth and privilege; a place of hope and opportunity where the young and ambitious may fulfill their aspirations. While the horrors of the last century unfurled beyond the hotel’s walls, inside there was always the same reassuring oasis of beauty, glamour and hope, however precarious, fleeting and ultimately fallacious. The key was to be able to *make it* inside these walls.

At this point, the string ensemble in the lobby struck up a spirited version of The Carpenters’ *Top of the World*, as if to suggest that I should not question too much, but simply accept and treasure the good fortune I had to be *intra-*, and not *extramuros*.

Mabuhay Manila



Fig. 13 – Filipino Breakfast: a simultaneously rich and subtle mix of flavours.

The morning of my departure, I partook of the Pinoy selection at the Hotel's excellent international breakfast buffet. I chose a mix of typical breakfast dishes: *tinapang bangus*, or a smoked milk fish, topped with vinegar, pickled chillis and onions; *pork longanisa*, which is a kind of sausage, imbued with a spicy, winey flavor; sun-dried salted *dangit*, or rabbit fish, deep-fried so crispy that one eats it whole; and garlic fried rice, local short grain rice fried in the tiniest slivers of garlic such that it had the faintest, most delicate fragrance and flavour I had ever tasted. The entire ensemble was a delicious combination of sweet, salty, sour and spicy; a feast for the palate as well as for the eyes. I marvelled at the mix of influences – Spanish, Chinese, American, Malay – that make up modern Pinoy cuisine and recognised this as yet another instance of the Filipinos making do splendidly with all that had been left to them. Unfortunately, I had heard only terrible things about Philippine cuisine – chiefly how there was *no such thing* as Philippine cuisine, but all I had had at the Hotel only served to reinforce just how misunderstood yet another facet of Philippine culture was. I was glad to have made this trip.



Fig. 14 – A dramatic break through the clouds.

After breakfast, I pottered around the hotel, reflecting on my experience that weekend. As expected, I never got to see the famed Manila sunsets. The best the weather would allow in my two evenings at the hotel was a momentary break in the

cloud cover when a tower of sunlight illuminated the waters in the distance. It was a dramatic moment, but hardly the spectacular event that I had been hoping to witness. When I mentioned it to the reception staff who had checked me in that first morning, she matter-of-factly suggested that I consider coming back to Manila later that year, perhaps for the Hotel's Centennial celebrations in October. I laughed and said, jokingly, that I would, as long as she could guarantee absolutely perfect weather and that I would be put in the same room again.

Back in my room, I decided to make use of the charmingly overwhelming array of stationery provided to write a letter to an old friend of mine in New York City. Pulling out a sheet of paper with the hotel's letterhead boldly emblazoned, I penned a few lines about my experience in Manila, and of the fabled opulence of this most dramatic of grand hotels, making sure to note how in writing this letter, I was doing exactly the same thing Hemingway must have done some eight decades ago when he stayed here – in the original wing rather than the tower block, but with a similar, unspoilt view of the Bay.

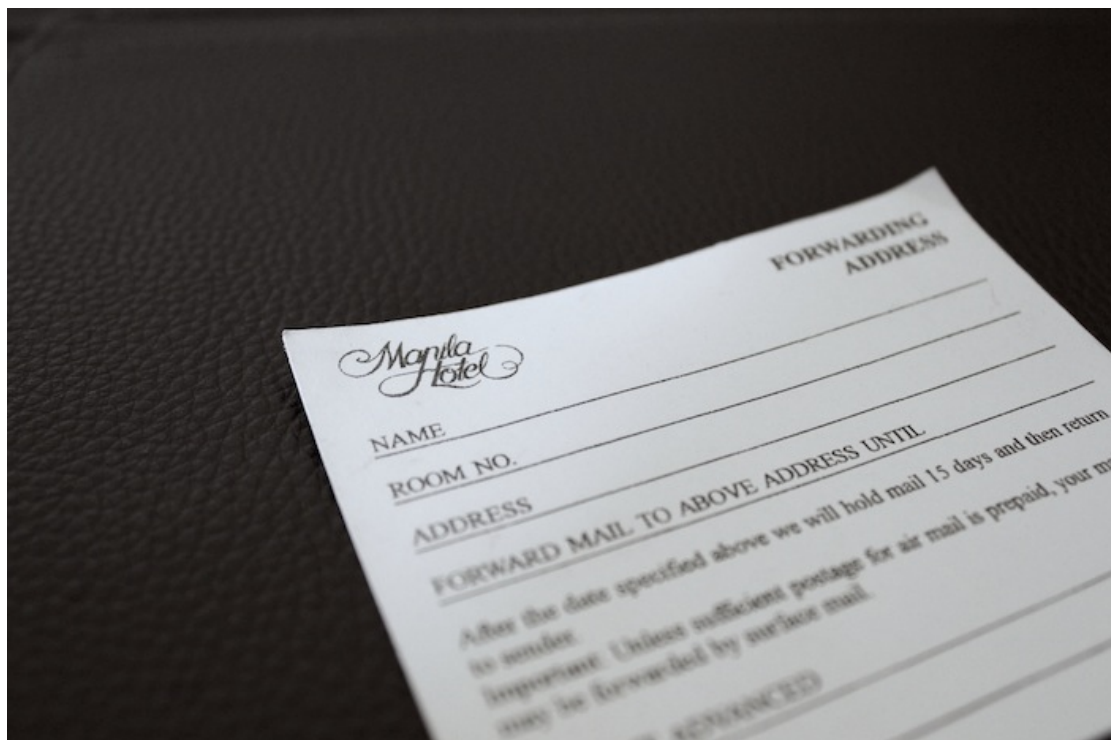


Fig. 15 – Forwarding address slip with the Manila Hotel's iconic logo.

As a quaint but completely out-dated touch of hospitality, the hotel still provided forwarding address slips for those long-staying guests who, finally

departing, required their mail to be redirected to their onward destination. On a whim, I decided I would fill in one of these forwarding slips, just in case, during my brief stay, a friend or relative had seen it necessary to send me an urgent note. Behind the slip, I left words of encouragement for whoever cared to read them:

“Mabuhay Manila and mabuhay Manila Hotel. May you thrive and prosper. I’ll be back for sure, when the clouds have finally cleared; and this time, I’m determined to see those stunning sunsets.”

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Essential Reading

Beth Day Romulo, 1976. *The Manila Hotel. Diamond Jubilee Edition*. Out-of-print.

Luis Francia, 2010. *History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos*. NY: Overlook Press.

Stanley Karnow, 1990. *In Our Image: America’s Empire in the Philippines*. NY: Ballantine Books.

Jose P. Rizal, 1887. *Noli Mi Tangere (Touch Me Not)*. NY: Penguin Classics.



Fig. 16 – View from my window of Manila Bay, the Cruise Terminal, the Manila Hotel pool, and a huge storm brewing.