

Retracing Cultural Landscapes

2nd of a Series

The Royal Palm Boulevard

An architectural history class wandering around the National Taiwan University campus

Photos, Map & Text
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In the almost twenty years that I have been moving around the NTU main campus I have witnessed many changes, especially in the last decade, showing that this area is like an evolving organism adapting itself to modern times. Maybe the most significant landmarks established in recent years have been the new Library and the new Sports Center. But the unique part of NTU that still captures the essence of the whole campus, the place where graduating students go to have their pictures taken can not be other than the old area around the Royal Palm Boulevard. This is the main artery of the university, which follows an East-West orientation, and where you can receive a lesson on modern architecture if you walk along with your five senses on alert.

The Administration Building

The heart of that artery is the oldest building on campus—the Administration Building. If you enter there the first office you will find is the Visitor's Center, whose managing director, Mr. Sunghan Yang (楊松翰), provided me some relevant information for this article. The building is square-shaped, with a nice inner yard, but originally only the main façade was in existence. This was also the administration building of the earlier High Professional School for Agriculture and Forestry (高業農林學校) founded in 1926, two years before the establishment of Taihoku University (台北帝國大學) in 1928.



The Administration building facade has a Neo-Renaissance design.

The façade of the Administration Building though simple is quite unique in Taiwan, as nothing similar can be seen in other places. It follows the eclectic-historicist style common in Europe at the end of the 19th century, when different styles were combined. The most visible part are the two pairs of Corinthian columns escorted by Roman decorative items. That is why some people labeled the building as neo-Renaissance. But, in my opinion, it is closer to Mannerism, a kind of Renaissance whose forms are used in an extravagant way. For example,

the entrance forms a gallery, with windows that open out just to the Corinthian columns, blocking any possible view. Also the whole façade alternates vertical columns, red brick spaces and windows, going against the architectural principles of a Renaissance palace, which are divided into three clear horizontal floors. In any case, we are in front of a very serene façade that hosts in the center of its second floor the University President's office.

The neo-Romanesque buildings

The first buildings made for Taihoku University followed the historicist decorative pattern of the neo-Romanesque style, mainly characterized by Lombard decorative motives, recognizable in the continuous small “false arches” on top of the walls near the roof. These buildings were made under the aegis of the architect Ite Kaoru (井手薫). This architect graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1906, arrived in Taiwan four years later, and worked as assistant of Moriymama Matsu (森山松), the architect of the Presidential Palace.



Lombard “false arches” are the main features of the neo-Romanesque buildings.

The College of Liberal Arts

The first structure built was the College of Liberal Arts, which was formally inaugurated on 14 April 1929, although we can see early pictures showing its long façade already finished. This means that a few years before the Taihoku University formally opened its classes in 1928 the colonial government was working in the project. Probably in 1928 some sections of the building were accommodated for the first students, and finally in 1929 the building got inaugurated.

This building externally has the neo-Romanesque decorative pattern we mentioned, but the hall of the entrance still has an eclectic style. As we cross the threshold we find a neo-Egyptian hypostyle hall with small lotus leaves on the column capitals. The columns are distributed regularly, but some are absent at the entrance to facilitate the accessibility. At the back of this hall there is an inner patio, obviously neo-Renaissance on its second floor with nine Ionic columns supporting a dome. But, contrary to the usual emptiness of Renaissance patios, this one is occupied by Baroque stairs that unite both floors from two different accesses. One may wonder as to



The inner neo-Renaissance patio on the second floor of the College of Liberal Arts

where such ceremonial stairs lead, and the probable answer is to a former hall at the back of the stairs, where the dean's secretaries offices are located.

It is interesting to mention the presence of Modernism in the hand-crafted decorations all around; first, along the staircase: in the forge of the small balustrade, in the garland-like motifs of the wall, and in the color glasses of the windows, etc. Secondly it can be seen in the furniture scattered in the offices. Through time, some professors have preferred to use modern and functional furniture, and to hand over their “old stuff” to other professors that prefer old noble cabinets to host their books. These mahogany cabinets still have their old handles that match perfectly with other Modernist decorations in their offices like some glazed tiles or faucets and sinks. This is not only recognizable in the College of Liberal Arts, but in all the buildings constructed from 1927 to 1930 in the neo-Romanesque style.

The old Library

The next building constructed in the year 1929, but formally inaugurated on 19 January 1930, was the Library. Actually everybody refers to it as the Old library, and it hosts on its second floor the Gallery of University History (校史館). It was the second building on the northern side of Palm Boulevard. Its neo-Romanesque character was particularly stressed through the three gate arches in its entrance-pavilion. The wide arches rest on four capitals, on top of pairs of columns, and decorated with



Capitals in the portico of the old Library. They need urgent restoration.

garlands. This cannot be seen in Medieval Romanesque arches, but the resemblance is quite evocative. The problem with these capitals is that they were made with a very soft stone and year by year, they have been disappearing together with the columns without any efforts at restoration.

The science buildings

In 1930 construction moved to the southern part of the boulevard, following very rationalist urban planning principles. First, we have Building No.1 (一號館, 1930), which is a special construction because it accommodated two departments, that of Zoology and Botany, instead of one. This is why it does not have a central main door, but two different entrances on both sides. But, as we shall see, the progressive numbering of the buildings does not correspond exactly to their chronological inauguration. Walking towards the East comes Building No. 2 (二號館, 1931), originally destined for the Department of Physics. At its back we can see Building No. 3 (三號館, 1931), currently the Dept. of Agricultural Chemistry (農業化學系). This pair of buildings is not properly independent because they share the same gate and are united by a gallery.

Crossing the elliptically designed gardens and progressing towards the East we reach Building No. 4 (四號館, 1930), currently the Dept. of Horticultural Science (園藝系). This building—the last one with a neo-Romanesque style—also has a counterpart, Building No. 5 (五號館, currently hosting the Department of Bioenvironmental Systems Engineering (生物環境系統工程學系). Both buildings are also connected through a gallery and share the same main entrance. Building No. 5

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Modern Central Library

Architecture of NTU

By José Eugenio Borao



土木系館
Dept. of Civil Engineering, 1955



森林系館 Dept. of Forestry and Resource Conservation 1956



四號館（園藝系）
Building No.4 (Dept. of Horticultural Science), 1930



五號館（園藝系）
Building No.5 (Dept. of Horticultural Science) 1936



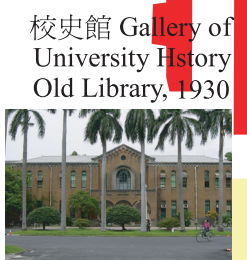
行政大樓
Administration Building, 1926



文學院 College of Liberal Arts, 1929

Bell of President Fu, 1951

二號館 Building No.2
Dep of Physics, 1931



校史館 Gallery of University History
Old Library, 1930



一號館 Building No.1
Building for Biology (Zoology and Botany), 1930

Garden of President Fu, 1951

大門口 Main Gate 1931



Hsin-sheng Rd

Roosevelt Rd



An old-times ambience is preserved in classroom number 9 of Building No. 5

was inaugurated in 1936 and no longer retains its neo-Romanesque features; but, on the other hand, its classroom number 9 on the second floor is unique preserving a strong taste of the old times.

The Main Gate

The historicist-eclectic period of NTU campus ended abruptly in 1931 with the construction of the main gate (大門口), made under the influence of the architectonical modern trends, being one of them the Bauhaus. This style of functional aesthetics started in Germany in 1919 after Gropius, and it was characterized by the absence of ornamentation and simplification of the façades. In 1930 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe became the new director of the Bauhaus, and he transferred the school to Berlin in 1932, but it was closed down by the Nazis one year later. Nevertheless, Bauhaus ideas had already spread to the whole world. That year, and after a famous exhibition in New York, all these modern trends maturing along the previous decade converged in the so-called “International Style”, whose principles were: to give importance to the expressiveness of what architects call the building volume, and to combine those volumes in a balanced way, not necessarily relying on the symmetry, and the most obvious, to eliminate the applied ornament or molding.

In some places the “International Style” produced buildings with nautical allusions, consisting of an



Like ships, students after graduation leave the university docks to enter society.

elongated and predominantly horizontal volume with a semi-circular end. This applies to the NTU Main Gate, whose ship shape had been always stressed; first, by the mast holding the flag of the university, and especially by the small two gardens at its front and back, the first manifesting the form of water in contact with the prow of a ship, and the second resembling the wake that that ship leaves behind. Finally, a third element showing the maritime connection is the series of lighthouses along the railings that clearly manifest that the small boat is leaving the port. This simple but important building for the history of architecture in Taiwan meets all the characteristic of modernity: no moldings, geometrical design, functionality and horizontality, especially in the windows that resemble the “commander's deck” of a ship.

We must end this part saying that all these representative buildings were made during the mandate of the first President of Taihoku University, Hiroshi Shidehara (幣原胡), who stayed in office since March 1928 to September 1937. On the other hand, in the last fifteen years of Japanese colonialism no main buildings were made in the Palm Boulevard.

The early Guomindang era

The most interesting, although strange, construction during the early years of the early Guomindang dominance was the Garden of President Fu Sinian (傅斯年, 1896-1950). He was the fourth president after the Nationalists took over Taiwan, and he only governed the institution in one year. Why did the school build a memorial garden in his honor, and also named the bell (the Fu zhong) after him? This bell still chimes to signal the start and end of classes and is located on top of the logo of the university. There must be several reasons behind this. First of all, he was a great scholar who belonged to the so-called May 4th Movement and had acted as deputy president of Beijing University. Second, he died while he was acting President of NTU, not during his retirement. Also he was a research scholar at the Institute of History and Language at Academia Sinica, an institution that named its

main Library of Humanities after Fu. And, finally he reformed the university's standards for hiring in order to find qualified teachers and established regulations for employment and promotion, greatly raising the quality of college teachers.

The Fu garden is a surprising combination of Western classical cultural emblems: a Greek tetrastyle exent temple, and Egyptian obelisk, and a Baroque fountain, in the center of four driveways pointing to the four cardinal points, as resembling the four rivers of Paradise; and everything in the middle of an almost equilateral triangle. What is the explanation for such displaced structure? I do not know if there is one, although I have tried with my students to look for it. If any, it should be found in the direction of the obelisk's shadow over the temple, pointing out—as it was customary in the Renaissance to some particular day in the life of president Fu.



The Fu Garden, that holds the ashes of former president Fu, instills a Romanticist atmosphere on campus.

Finally, I must say that the new buildings constructed one decade later also followed the evolution of those modern rationalist concepts. One of the directions that took the new architecture was the “majestic grandeur” style shown in 1937 during the International Expo of Paris by the Soviet architect Boris M. Iofan who competed with Nazi architect Albert Speer in the “magnificence” of their respective pavilions. They defined, for example, a scaled vertical façade that can be easily recognized on the new building of the College of Engineering (1955, 土木系館), now the Dept. of Civil Engineering, and on the building of the Dept. of Forestry and Resource Conservation (1957, 森林系館). Also, those buildings present a “curtain façade”, with horizontal continuing windows, very different from the neo-Romanesque vertical ones.

I hope that this “trip to the past” have served to offer some clues to better understand those Taiwan historical relics, and to encourage the readers to visit the Gallery of University History where hundreds of pictures are displayed evoking those precious times.