Appraising the Historical Significance of the Postwar Site of the Philippine Congress on Lepanto Street, Sampaloc, Manila

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Abstract

Discussions of the 1945 postwar restoration of the Philippine Congress often mention an American-sequestered Japanese school on Lepanto Street (now Sergio H. Loyola Street), Sampaloc, Manila. This building witnessed the country's transition from a commonwealth to a republic in 1946 and the passage of significant laws before the Congress returned to the rehabilitated war-devastated Legislative Building in 1949. Despite its importance, the edifice is neither marked as a historic site nor featured in Manila's local tourism materials. The historic structure was demolished around 2006. This paper argues that the site and structure's post-Congressional utilization and its representation in various primary and secondary accounts contributed to its obscurity. However, reconstructing its history reveals details that might help illuminate Japan's prewar dynamics with the Philippines and explain why the U.S. sequestered it.

Keywords: *Manila School of Japanese Language, Battle for Manila, House of Representatives, Polytechnic University of the Philippines*

Introduction

Leafing through various works on the history of the Philippine Congress reveals that this institution once held office in a Japanese schoolhouse on what is now Sergio H. Loyola Street (formerly Calle Lepanto) in Sampaloc, Manila (hereinafter referred to as "Lepanto"). This was the Manila School of Japanese Language, one of the Japanese properties sequestered by the Americans. It was later turned over to the Philippine Government to serve as the temporary house of the Philippine Congress after the destruction of the Legislative Building along Padre Burgos Drive during the Battle for Manila in 1945. Despite the historic laws debated within it and the nationally significant events it witnessed, the Lepanto property is not among the celebrated historic sites that enshrine the country's proud legislative history.

This paper argues that the temporary and unfavorable conditions of the Lepanto property during its tenure as the home of the Philippine Congress from 1945 to 1949 contributed to its obscurity and lack of proper recognition beyond brief historical mentions. Its institutional history and memory reflect this, affecting what could have been a shared sense of the nation's heritage and pride. For instance, had the nation or the immediate community been more aware of its significance, the schoolhouse could have been saved from demolition and recognized for conservation purposes. Instead, what remains today is the lingering memory of the Philippine Congress on Lepanto. The fact that it was once located here forms part of the "remnants of experience" that "still lived in the warmth of tradition," transforming them into an "organized past," which Pierre Nora (1989, pp. 7-8) called history.

Indira Chowdhury (2015-2016) viewed institutional memories as "commemorative events that institutions organise to mark the milestones of their existence" (p. 245). These are "internal to the institutions," often "unrelated" to the "broader socio-economic, political and cultural histories of the time," making them subjective to a particular institution's remembrance. She also noted that these are channeled by the "present" through "commemorative events and publications" (p. 245). Choosing what to remember is another aspect of institutional memory, which, she further noted, is prone to selectivity. This is "often characterised by the unacknowledged forgetting of events and values that had once been a part of [the] institution". Evidently, the Lepanto site is mentioned in the history of the Philippine Congress and occasionally in the histories of successor institutions, such as PUP.

Congress on Lepanto

A significant portion of Manila's historical and political complex was destroyed during the urban warfare between the Allied Forces

and the Imperial Japanese Navy. This is known as the Battle for Manila, which lasted from February 3 to March 3, 1945. Since it was relatively outside the war zone, Malacañang, the Office of the President in San Miguel, Manila, was spared. However, the Legislative Building along Padre Burgos Drive, where the Philippine Legislature held sessions since July 16, 1926, was not (Pareja, 1967, p. 406).

In the effort to restore the authority of the Commonwealth of the Philippines, the incumbent members of the Philippine Legislature, who had been elected on 11 November 1941, reconvened at the American-sequestered three-story Japanese school at No. 841 Calle Lepanto (Daroy, 1997, p. 116; Philippine Judiciary Foundation, 1998, p. 415; Duldulao, Ed., 2007, Vol. 1, p. 374; Quezon III, 2007, p. 160). By then, the World War II-damaged Legislative Building was still undergoing reconstruction. Although the rebuilding had begun in 1946, Congress returned only in 1949, initially occupying the central chamber while the left and right wings were completed the following year (Pareja, 1967, p. 407).

The Lepanto site of the postwar Philippine Congress is not widely known to the public, especially when compared with the former sites of the Philippine legislative body, such as the commanding Barasoain Church in the City of Malolos, Bulacan; the majestic Marble Hall of the Ayuntamiento and the lofty Intendencia in Intramuros; the imposing Old Legislative Building; and at present, the Batasang Pambansa in Quezon City and the GSIS Complex in Pasay City. As of writing, no known textbook mentions this site as a former location of the Philippine Congress, except for Gregorio Zaide's (1970, pp. 62, 66) work.

History will show that the Lepanto Congress site witnessed critical moments in our nation's life. It was at this site that the recovering postwar Philippine Commonwealth transformed into the Third Philippine Republic; that bills, both the notable and the infamous, were passed to strengthen the new nation-state; that the nation mourned two Philippine presidents who died in office; and that political struggles shaped the course of the new republic's history.

It was also here that the reckoning of the current Philippine Congress began. On July 4, 1946, the Philippine government honored the members of the First Congress of the Republic of the Philippines with a bronze tablet installed at the base of the Independence Flagpole in Rizal Park, Luneta (Office of Public Information, 1947, p. 405). However, despite convening at Lepanto from 1946 to 1949, the tablet failed to reference the site, thus missing another opportunity to educate the public about its significance. In 2010, the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) replaced the existing marker

with a duplicate containing the same content, which still makes no reference to the Congress' Lepanto site (NHCP, 2024, pp. 210—213).

To date, the only institutional history of the Philippine Congress that describes its Lepanto site in length was written on January 24, 1966, by Dr. Inocencio B. Pareja (1967), the then Secretary of the House of Representatives:

> To Former Japanese School
>
> Meanwhile, with the Legislative Building reduced to rubble, the holdover post-liberation Congress met at the old Japanese schoolhouse at the corner of P. Paredes Street and Lepanto Street near Azcarraga (now C. M. Recto Avenue). In this wooden three-story structure—now occupied by the Civil Service Commission and the Boards of Examiners—on the P. Paredes Street side and by the Philippine College of Commerce on the Lepanto Street side, the legislative functions continued until 1949, when part of the Legislative Building on P. Burgos-Taft Avenue was completed and readied for occupancy.
>
> The House of Representatives housed in the former Japanese school occupied the main floor close to the P. Paredes side. The main floor was not flush with the street level, having been elevated some four feet to escape the flood waters so common in the area during the rainy season.
>
> The Session Hall in this building cannot be recognized as such now, having been partitioned for the offices of the Civil Service. No photograph of it has ever been printed, probably because of lack of photographic materials at that time of post-Liberation and maybe because the newspapers were just starting to revive then. (p. 407)

It is worth noting how Pareja emphasized the physical structure of the site, referring to it as an "old Japanese schoolhouse" and a "wooden three-story structure," particularly in contrast to his description of the Legislative Building.

> The Legislative Building
>
> Originally intended for the National Library, the Legislative Building was part of the "Capitoline structure," an *impressive design* [emphasis added] in neo-classical architecture for a government center made by David H. Burnham, foremost American city planner of this day. Of Burnham's *grand plan* [emphasis added], only three buildings were finally constructed—the Finance Building, the Agriculture

> Building, and the Legislative Building (formerly National Library). The Burnham plan was doomed by the late Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon's plans for a new capital city, named Quezon City after the leader's death, outside Manila.
>
> The Legislative Building was easily the *finest public edifice during its day* [emphasis added]. Built along the lines of classical Roman structure, the massive four-story edifice was *richly ornamented* [emphasis added] with statuary and woodwork done by a great Filipino sculptor, Vidal Tampingco, and an Italian artist.
>
> The House section carried the influence of the old Roman architecture of dentils and columns with Corinthian capitals.
>
> *So breath-taking* [emphasis added] was the original Legislative Building that an Oriental king is said to have taken hundreds of photographs of it so that he could make an exact copy for his palace. The copy could be the Gia Long Palace in Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam, which resembles the Legislative Building very closely. (p. 406)

Though seemingly harmless, Pareja's critical descriptions contribute to the Lepanto site's obscurity, particularly when read alongside the postwar legislative branch's vehement desire to free itself from Lepanto as a "holdover post-liberation Congress" (p. 407). President Manuel Roxas himself echoed this in his address on June 3, 1946:

> I need not describe the sad state of public buildings. The very hall in which I've sat is a tragic testimonial to what has occurred here. *We are reduced to convening in a former Japanese schoolhouse* [emphasis added] while the proud Legislative Building we had built before the war lies in ghastly, ugly ruin. Most of our government functions are being carried on in crowded, temporary or bombed-out structures. Many government activities have been huddled together in congested quarters. Supply and equipment for government offices are at low level. Inefficiency, as a result, takes its toll. (p. 9)

Various iterations of this narrative of inadequacy persisted in later accounts of the Philippine Congress. President Roxas's sentiments were reiterated in a July 4, 1946 newspaper feature that described the Congress on Lepanto as "a sweltering former Japanese schoolhouse which replaced the demolished Legislative Building" ("Drastic reforms,"

1946, p. 14), as seen in Figure 1. Vicente Albano Pacis (1971), furthermore, described the predicament of the legislators on Lepanto as follows:

> the legislative session was held in a prewar Japanese schoolhouse, a three-story wooden building located on Lepanto street. The members sat in the Japanese students' chairs and the president officers were on low platforms… (p. 280)

Figure 1.
Interior of the main session hall of the Congress on Lepanto. Taken during Gen. Douglas MacArthur's speech before the Philippine Congress on June 9, 1945.

Source: US NARA (111-SCA-Album-2905197).

On the other hand, Elpidio I. Valencia (1977) had a different viewpoint on the utilization of the humble Lepanto site, writing, "Ironically, the legislative body was convened in a former Japanese school building on Lepanto Street" (p. 104). He continued, "There was such a dearth of edifices after the war that this seemed the only large one which could contain the huge body" (p. 104). His words were unique for his time, as he somehow appreciated the value of the Lepanto site despite its humble nature.

During the centennial of Philippine independence in 1998, the Philippine Historical Association (PHA) attempted to bring the historicity of the Lepanto Congress to broader public awareness. Pacis and Valencia were cited in the PHA's centennial publications, *Philippine Presidents: 100 Years* (1999) and *Philippine Legislature: 100 Years* (2000). In both

books, Gloria M. Santos, the first Filipina president of the PHA, wrote the chapters that mention Lepanto. There, Santos (2000) paraphrased Pacis's description:

> Because the prewar Legislative Building—and most of Manila—was in ruins, the Congress of the Commonwealth held its sessions at, ironically, the former Japanese School, an old three-story wooden school building on Calle Lepanto. The congressmen had to sit in Japanese students' chairs and presiding officers on the low platforms. (p. 193)

Likewise, Santos (1999) adopted Valencia's justification of locating the postwar Congress on Lepanto, stating, "It was the only building large enough to accommodate the whole body" (p. 174). Moreover, Preciosa S. Soliven (1998) developed her own take on the symbolism of the Lepanto Congress as the postwar imagery of a downtrodden postwar Philippine society, writing:

> The squalor and congestion in which many of our people lived were seriously affecting the health of the younger generation. Even Congress and the Senate were convening in a former Japanese school house because the proud Legislative Building, built before the war, lay in ghastly, ugly ruins. (p. 66)

Manuel Duldulao (2007) then released the two-volume book *A Century of Philippine Legislature* to commemorate the centennial of the Philippine Assembly. No lengthy discussion was provided for the Lepanto Congress; instead, the site was briefly described as the "provisional quarters" of the Philippine Congress (Vol. 1, p. 374). In 2016, a government publication used the same term to describe the site, referring to it as the "provisional quarters in a converted school house at Lepanto Street in Manila" (Gatuslao, Arboleda, and Pasion, 2016, p. 355). Such phrasing revived the decades-old reduction of the significance of the Lepanto site.

While these sources referenced the Lepanto site of the Philippine Congress, none identified the exact location along what is now Sergio H. Loyola Street. A contributing factor in this is that none of the aforementioned works, including Zaide's textbook, directed readers to the successor agencies that later occupied the site. They did not cite–or may have overlooked–Pareja's (1967) account that, after the Congress returned to the Legislative Building in 1949, the Lepanto site was "occupied by the Civil Service Commission [CSC] and the Boards of Examiners—on the P. Paredes Street side and by the Philippine College of Commerce [PCC] on the Lepanto Street side" (p. 407). These are now the Civil Service Commission, currently located in Quezon

City; the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), formerly a branch of the CSC; and PUP.

Various secondary sources on these agencies' experience at Lepanto align with the Congress's narrative, as they themselves encountered difficulties operating at the site. For example, in its 1956 annual report, the Bureau of Civil Service (BCS) reported that this structure was "cramped for space... [and] not enough to accommodate its personnel" (BCS, 1957, p. 319). Moreover, in his biography of nationalist and former PCC President Nemesio "Doc" Prudente, Nelson A. Navarro (2011) described the PCC during Prudente's time as follows:

> Two blocks from FEU (i.e., Far Eastern University) was the Philippine College of Commerce, a little-known state college cramped into the two decrepit buildings... It occupied two wooden buildings in non-contiguous lots owned by the pre-war Japanese School and repossessed by the government. The main building on the corner of P. Paredes Street had briefly housed the restored Congress until its own building, which was destroyed in the war, was rebuilt. (p. 82)

The growing needs of both the CSC and the PUP led to the renovation of the Lepanto site in the 1960s, culminating in the demolition of the remaining structure around 2006 (NHCP 2017). As reported by Pareja (1967), the former Congress building on Lepanto had already become unrecognizable by the 1960s due to the partitioning done by the CSC. The physical integrity of the structure was neither preserved nor spared from demolition, as the Congress's brief tenure on Lepanto was not considered historically significant at the time.

Meanwhile, in a 2023 publication, the Senate of the Philippines invoked its connection to Lepanto, though somewhat ambiguously:

> Since the First Inaugural Session held in the Goldenberg Mansion in 1916, the Senate has changed situs a number of times, namely: The Intendencia (1916-1926); The Legislative Building (1926-1935); *a School Building along Lepanto Street, temporarily after the war* (1945-1947) [emphasis added]; a year at the Manila City Hall (1947-1948); back to the restored Legislative Building (1949-1972; 1987-1997) and the Senate at the GSIS Building (1997-present). (Senate of the Philippines, 2023, p. 3)

No known active efforts have been made by the House and the Senate to promote their connection to Lepanto or to help preserve the site, which is now significantly occupied by the PUP.

This apathy, so to speak, stems from the Congress itself, which

reduces its Lepanto past to a brief detail in its institutional history. In fact, even during his incumbency as the House Secretary, Pareja (1967) failed to secure any photographic documentation of the structure. He attributed this to the "lack of photographic materials at that time of post-Liberation" and to the fact that "newspapers were just starting to revive then" (p. 407). It is indeed difficult to find a photograph, even of the building's façade, today. However, one exterior image of the structure marred by trees survives (Quezon III, et al., 2007, p. 160).

Pareja (1967) also noted that during the 1960s, the main congressional hall on Lepanto could no longer be recognized, "having been partitioned for the offices of the Civil Service" (p. 407). If the site had been historically significant to Congress, efforts would have been made to conserve it, or, at the very least, the then-Philippine Historical Committee (PHC), now the NHCP, would have sought to install a historical marker on the site. Such a marker could have reminded the public of the site's significance. As Ricardo Trota Jose (2010) noted, "memorials and historical markers…, either by the government or by private groups," can "help perpetuate the memory of certain incidents, individuals or units" (p. 115).

The Japanese School

All sources on the restoration of the Philippine Congress on Lepanto mention a Japanese schoolhouse. This recurring detail prompted me to reconstruct the school's history, which could add further significance and context to the selection of Lepanto as the site of the postwar Congress.

As mentioned, the schoolhouse was sequestered and classified as enemy lands and properties by the U.S. Alien Property Administration in 1945 (McNutt, 1947, p. 151; "Official month in review, 1947, p. 3; "News and views," 1947, p. 301). In his 1942 report to U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.S. High Commissioner in the Philippines Francis B. Sayre (1943) noted that "a school" was among the "Japanese holdings of substantial size" in Manila and was considered as one of "the most important enemy-owned or enemy-operated properties in the Philippines" (p. 45). He listed it alongside "two banks, a large brewery, a club, a hospital, ... a considerable number of stores and small manufacturing establishments" in Manila, as well as "the abaca plantations in Davao, …and several lumber companies and a number of stores scattered in various parts of the archipelago" (p. 46). The "census" of enemy alien properties in the Philippines was already carried out by Sayre's office "several months preceding the outbreak of the war" (p. 5). Plans to take over these properties, however, were futile as "Manila fell into the hands of the Japanese" by January 1 to 2, 1942 (pp. 6, 8). Nonetheless, Sayre noted that "the information with

respect to Japanese properties so obtained was of great value in the work of supervision over enemy properties after the outbreak of war."

The sequestration of the Japanese school on Lepanto was justified since it played a crucial role in prewar Japanese propaganda in the Philippines. Before the war, the aforementioned Japanese school complex was known as the Manila School of Japanese Language, extending from No. 841 Lepanto Street, on the corner of P. Paredes Street, up to Nicanor Reyes Street in Sampaloc, Manila (Anon., 1939; Duldulao, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 374; Daroy, 1997, p. 116; Lichauco, 1952, p. 201; Romero, 1979, p. 180). It should be noted that the Japanese school had two buildings located along Lepanto. One was where the Congress held sessions on the Lepanto corner of Paredes, and the other, beside the Gota de Leche, just a few meters away, is still intact to this day and under PUP.

The school had previously been a Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist shrine known as the Hongwanji (or Hongan-ji) Temple. It was established on June 23, 1918 by Rev. Yamanouchi Hideo (born on 25 May 1900 in Hayatahara, now part of Higashihiroshima, Hiroshima, Japan), a member of the Hompa or Nishi Hongwanji Mission to Manila (Watanabe, 1938, pp. 186, 345; Weissblatt, 1940, p. 202; Quiason, 1970, p. 217; Goodman, 1983, p. 37; Motoe-Terami, 1989a, p. 77; Motoe-Terami, 1989b, Chan, 1991, p. 99; 72; Gonzales, 2007, p. 73). Based on the surviving images of the edifices, the buildings were constructed with wood, consistent with the construction conventions of the time. Although the street name Lepanto had existed since 1898–most likely in memory of the 1571 Battle of Lepanto–the area where the Buddhist shrine would later be established was still undeveloped at that time (Gamoneda, 1898). An 1899 American map of Manila confirms this (Millet, 1899, p. 460). Unless future research indicates otherwise, it is hereby hypothesized that the area was developed only in 1918.

Yamanouchi became a leading personality in establishing Japan's soft diplomacy in prewar Philippines. Around 1933, his temple served as the headquarters of *Sho-Ko-Shimpo*, a Japanese newspaper that circulated three times a week in Manila (Philippine Education Company, Inc., 1933-1934, p. 451; The Hongkong Daily Press, Ltd., 1938, p. 241). It is not yet clear whether he owned the newspaper, but its location in his temple suggests he supported it. On March 9, 1935, a newspaper reported that he led 60 teachers and 45 students to Japan for a "*viaje educacional*" (educational trip) ("Muchos maestros," 1935, p. 5; Providio, 1936, p. 128). Another newspaper report stated that there were only 63 members of this group ("Philippines Educational Party Tours," 1935, p. 354). Despite the conflicting details, Grant Goodman (1967) confirmed that Yamanouchi organized the tour (p. 118).

This initiative marked the beginning of educational tours sponsored by Kihara Jitaro, Japan's Vice Consul to Manila. It became known as the Filipino Educational Tour Party to Japan, which was supervised by the Hongwanji Mission (Simpson, 1936, p. 46; Weissblatt, 1940, p. 202; "Ex Consul," 1943, p. 8). Despite the Japanese invasion of the country's Asia-Pacific neighbors, the tour continued until 1940. A souvenir program was released after the educational tour, and Yamanouchi funded its printing. One of the programs, *Re-examining Japan: A Souvenir Book of the 5th Filipino Students' Educational Party to Japan in 1939*, was written by Paul R. Versoza, who is noted for coining the term *alibata* for the ancient Philippine system of writing (Versoza, 1940).

Wada Motoe-Terami (1989a) explained that three institutions emerged out of this "cultural exchange" (p. 84). The first was the Manila School of Japanese Language, established by Yamanouchi under the auspices of the Hongwanji Mission on November 1, 1935, which operated at the Hongwanji Temple (Provido, 1936, p. 128; Weissblatt, 1940, p. 202; Goodman, 1983, p. 37; Saniel, 1992, p. 12). In a 1937 advertisement, the school publicized the following objective: "To teach Filipinos and resident foreigners the Japanese Language, Literature, Religion, and other studies related to Japanese culture" (De Leon, 1937, p. 186). Betty Simpson (1936) also reported that "[a] Tagalog dialect course is offered to Japanese students" by this school and that "[t]he student who obtains the highest honors during the school year will be given the privilege of joining the aforesaid tour free of charge (i.e., educational tour)" (p. 46). From then on, the Hongwanji Mission's temple on Lepanto became widely recognized as a school. The three other school officials were Prof. Keiichi Kurosawa and instructors Jitsuo Oki and Shuko Harada (Philippine Education Company, Inc., 1937, p. 407).

The second institution, also founded by Yamanouchi in 1935, was the Philippine Student Travel Association. Its headquarters were also in the Lepanto temple. The third institution was the Japanese Information Bureau, established by Kihara and Yamanouchi in 1936, with its head office also located at the temple (Philippine Education Company, Inc., 1937, p. 309; Weissblatt, 1940, p. 202; Goodman, 1983, p. 37; De Viana, 2008, p. 44). Within the temple, the Bureau operated the Japan-Philippine Library, also under the auspices of the Hongwanji Mission. Established on September 15, 1936, the library served the Japanese cultural office's goal of disseminating "Japanese art and culture in the Philippines" (Simpson, 1936, p. 46; Weissblatt, 1940, p. 202; De Leon, 1937, pp. 187; Motoe-Terami, 1989b, p. 98). The Bureau also managed the *Japan Information Bulletin*, later renamed *The Eastern Recorder* in 1938, which served as Japan's propaganda medium (De Leon, 1937, p. 188; Weissblatt, 1940, p. 202; Goodman, 1983, p. 37).

Grant K. Goodman (1983) posited that this "non-political and non-economic Japanese-Filipino interaction" was part of what scholars termed a "cultural offensive" to galvanize "Japan's growing interest in the Philippines during the 1930s" (p. 31). He also noted that, for Japan, the "immediacy of Philippine independence" was tantamount to "the anticipated withdrawal of the American military presence in the area," which eventually benefited "the expansion of Japanese power in the Orient." True enough, the Manila School of Japanese Language became a propaganda instrument, attracting young Filipinos to appreciate Japan and later producing Japanese-educated Filipinos, all with the aim of serving their imperial purposes. Motoe-Terami (1986a) noted:

> While the members of the Japanese community could be regarded as victims of the Japanese military, the organizations they founded and nurtured assisted and served the Japanese military operations. They supplied the information necessary for the invasion and secured materials as well as manpower necessary for the operations while the Japanese military were in the country. (p. 87)

Lepanto Street was a notable Japanese area in prewar Manila (De Viana, 2008, p. 177). In addition to the shrine-cum-cultural and educational offices, the street had the Japanese General Hospital as well as several Japanese stores and residences. It is therefore unsurprising that the Japanese soldiers reportedly retreated to their "stronghold" on Lepanto when the American forces captured the University of Santo Tomas Internment Camp on February 3, 1945 ("In the Pacific," 1945, p. 17).

Sequestration and Repurposing

When the American forces landed in Manila in January 1945, retaking it was critical. Gen. Douglas MacArthur's marching orders included: "Take Malacañang and the Legislative Buildings" (Hunt, 1955, p. 11). However, Rear Admiral Iwabuchi Sanji, commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy, refused to surrender Manila. Instead, his soldiers entrenched themselves in various structures throughout the capital, including the Legislative Building. By February 10, 1945, reports were already claiming that the destruction of these "fine buildings" was imminent ("Japs making hopeless stand," 1945 p. 2).

The Battle for Manila was eventually limited to the Legislative, Agricultural (now the National Museum of Natural History), and Finance Buildings (now the National Museum of Anthropology), which were the remaining Japanese strongholds ("Freedom restored," 1945, p. 2; Aluit, 1994, p. 365). A newspaper report dated February 27, 1945, mentioned that the Legislative Building had already been "under direct artillery fire" for "two days" before "some Americans managed to enter

the building and, after stiff room-to-room fighting, reached the second floor". Alfonso Aluit, however, noted in his 1994 book that "each of the three building[s]… has been under the intense bombardment" as early as February 24, 1945. The newspaper report continued: "There they met concentrated fire from enemy corridor barricades and, after several hours of very stiff fighting they withdrew to Taft avenue to allow further neutralisation of the building by fire from artillery and tanks."

By 6:00 p.m. on February 27, 1945, American forces had cleared the Legislative Building of Japanese troops. On that day, "Daniel H. Burham's dream translated into masonry… as the bulk of the Legislative Building loomed, desolated and forsaken (since) the haze of dawn," Aluit (1994) remarked (p. 366).

As the fight for the Legislative Building unfolded, MacArthur led the restoration of the Commonwealth Government at Malacañang Palace at 11:00 a.m that same day. ("Manila battle," 1945, p. 2; Aluit, 1994, p. 367). On March 3, 1945, American forces declared Manila retaken, with the Finance Building marking the final stage of the battle (Aluit, 1994, p. 371). The core of the capital city was left in ruins.

As part of restoring the Commonwealth's authority over the Philippines, the First Philippine Congress of the Commonwealth reinstated itself. The members of this congress were elected in November 1941. It was the first time the Commonwealth's legislative body convened as two chambers, following the prewar constitutional amendment that transformed the unicameral Philippine Legislature of the Commonwealth into a bicameral Philippine Congress of the Commonwealth. Thus, it was referred to as the First Congress of the Commonwealth of the Philippines. The necessity to revive the legislative branch arose after raising the constitutionality of "the appropriations and public works bills which by constitutional limitations can originate only in the lower house," argued by Iloilo Representative Jose Zulueta, the temporary House Chairman ("Lower House will hold caucus," 1945, p. 4). The "immediate organization of the House of Representatives, to the mutual advantage of both the executive and legislative branches of the government," was imperative, according to the news citing Zulueta.

Since war-torn Manila had no government edifice in which Congress could hold its sessions, Zulueta announced from Malacañang on May 2, 1945 that "The House of Representatives," in particular, "will hold a caucus" on the morning of May 3, 1945 "at its building on Lepanto Street" (p. 4). This served as a precedent to occupy the Lepanto Japanese school temporarily.

Zulueta further noted that "[o]nce organized, the House can suspend session from day to day in accordance with the constitution, until such time as the President (Osmeña) can address it and enunciate his national policies" ("House elections slated," 1945, p. 3). The election of the House Speaker and other officers was initially scheduled for May 8, 1945, but remained contingent upon the availability of Osmeña, who was not in Manila at that time (p. 3). The election proceeded only on the afternoon of June 9, 1945, when Osmeña appeared before both chambers of Congress at Lepanto and delivered a message–considered a State of the Nation Address or SONA (Osmeña, 1945). Zulueta formally became House Speaker, with Roxas as Senate President. Contrary to what one might expect, "[m]ost of the members" of this Congress were "no better off materially than the rest of the population, and one of President Osmeña's first acts was to present each member with two pairs of pants, two shirts, and a pair of shoes" (Hartendorp, 1953, p. 181).

Some members of the restored Congress at Lepanto faced accusations of wartime collaboration. Excluding those who died during the war and those identified as collaborators with the Japanese, only 15 out of 24 senators and 75 out of 96 representatives comprised this congress (p. 181). However, Hartendorp (1953), citing an unnamed Congressman who had been detained by the Americans at Iwahig Penal Colony on charges of collaboration, wrote that despite clearance from serious collaboration by the U.S. Army's Counter-Intelligence Corps, "no less than 17 of the 22 surviving senators and 60 of the 88 surviving members of the House had been collaborators" (p. 181).

Lepanto continued to house Congress during the Second Congress of the Commonwealth, convened on May 25, 1946. It was also at this site that the legislative body became the First Congress of the Republic of the Philippines upon the latter's inauguration on July 4, 1946. The current numbering of the Philippine Congress began there, further underscoring the historicity of Lepanto. Senators convened there in the morning, while House members met in the afternoon (Romero, 1979, p. 180).

In late 1945, the Senate relocated to an Ortigas-owned building on Legarda Street, Sampaloc, which it had been renting since April 30, 1945 (Anon., 1953, p. 181; Senate of the Philippines, 1950, p. 682; Romero, 1979, p. 180). As a result, the Lepanto property was transferred to the House of Representatives. On June 14, 1946, Commonwealth President Manuel A. Roxas and U.S. High Commissioner Paul V. McNutt issued a joint press release announcing their agreement regarding the "transfer to the Philippine Government of title to former enemy lands and property now held by the Alien Property Custodian." This included

the Japanese school on Lepanto, "where the legislature is now meeting," thus, "needed… urgently… by the Philippine Government" (McNutt, 1957, pp. 150-151). For this agreement to take effect, a law had to be filed before the U.S. Congress. Thus, the Philippine Property Bill of 1946 was co-authored by Senator Millard Tydings, also the co-author of the Tydings-McDuffie Law of 1934, and Representative Jasper Bell, co-author of the infamous Bell Trade Act of 1946, with the support of President Harry S. Truman (p. 151). On June 10, 1947, James McInnes Henderson, Philippine Alien Property Administrator, facilitated the official turnover of the Lepanto lot and its buildings to President Manuel Roxas. The U.S. Government received a token of PHP 3.00 pesos as payment for the House of Representatives' use of the Lepanto buildings (Duldulao 2007, 2, p. 398).

Meanwhile, the cost of reconstructing the Legislative Building was not submitted to the U.S. Congress until 1948 (Delgado, 1948, p. 264). President Elpidio Quirino eventually received the completed reconstruction of the Legislative Building, along with the Finance and Agriculture Buildings, from the U.S. Philippine War Damage Corporation on October 21, 1950 ("The Business View," 1950, p. 413).

What the Philippine Congress's institutional memory recalls about Lepanto is the inadequacy of the space. Yet it was on this site that Congress was restored. It also hosted the necrological services for Presidents Manuel Quezon and Manuel Roxas, held on July 28, 1946 and April 25, 1948, respectively (QMC, 1952, p. 131; Quirino, 1953, p. 34).

Hundreds of bills were debated, deliberated, and enacted here, including those essential for the socioeconomic recovery of the Filipino people and the restoration of key institutions. These included the establishment of the People's Court that tried war crimes through Commonwealth Act No. 682 on 25 September 1945); the transition of the Philippine Commonwealth into a republic and the scheduling of the Commonwealth national election (Commonwealth Act No. 725 on 5 January 1946); the creation of the Department of Foreign Affairs (Commonwealth Act No. 732 on 3 July 1946); the adoption of the coat-of-arms and great seal of the Republic of the Philippines (Commonwealth Act No. 731 on 3 July 1946); the ratification of the Bell Trade Act of 1946, which was the last law of the Commonwealth (Commonwealth Act No. 733 on 3 July 1946); the creation of a law that protects journalists or the Sotto Law of 1946, named after noted journalist and nationalist Senator Vicente Sotto, Sr. (Republic Act No. 53 on 5 October 1946); the incorporation of the Philippine National Red Cross (Republic Act No. 95 on 22 March 1947); and the passing of intellectual property rights laws (Republic Act Nos. 165 and 166 on 20 June 1947).

It is through these landmark laws and events that Lepanto became a historically significant site.

With the approval of the Philippine Alien Property Administration, the Philippine School of Commerce (PSC) began sharing the same space with the Philippine Congress on August 4, 1947 (Luya, ed., 2004, p. 21). The PSC had been reactivated in 1941, following its 1933 merger with the Philippine Normal College, now the Philippine Normal University. The war interrupted the school's rebirth. The school's administrators subsequently requested that Roxas provide a space for their operations, to which he offered the Lepanto property. This left Congress with even less space.

By August-September 1947, the Senate had relocated to Manila City Hall, leaving the House of Representatives on Lepanto (Cornejo, 1947, p. 79). By this time, the address of the Lepanto property had been adjusted to No. 949, indicating that the number of houses and establishments in the Sampaloc district had increased. As seen in Figure 2, presumably taken during MacArthur's visit as the guest of honor at the inauguration of the First Congress of the Commonwealth of the Philippines on July 9, 1945–the address No. 949 appears on the Congress's gate (Roxas, 1946, title page; Cornejo, 1947, p. 79; Valencia, 1977, p. 104). No. 841, on the other hand, was later designated to George E. Koster, Inc. as early as November 1945 and remained in use around 1949 (George E. Koster, Inc., 1945, p. 14; McMahon, 1949, p. 708).

Figure 2.

General Douglas MacArthur (center) with President Sergio Osmeña (left) and Manuel Roxas (right) at the gate of the Congress on Lepanto.

Note. The gate's post inscribes the new address of the Congress No. 949. Source: The Gary de la Rosa Collection.

Utilitarianism and Blurring

Since the Lepanto site was seen only as temporal and not historical enough at that time, even Congress was unable to prevent its repurpose, renovation, and eventual demolition. Pareja (1967) himself was aware that "[t]he Session Hall in the [Lepanto] building cannot be recognized as such now (i.e., the 1960s), having been partitioned for the offices of the Civil Service." When Congress returned to the Legislative Building in 1949, the BCS became the next occupant of the Lepanto site, as seen in Figure 3 (National Statistics Office, 1951, p. 114; Pareja, 1967, p. 407).

Figure 3.

A 2025 Google Map screenshot of the Lepanto Congress perimeter, divided between the Professional Regulations Commission (A) and the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (B).

In one report, the BCS (1957) acknowledged that the site was "the former Congress Building at P. Paredes St. (corner Nicanor Reyes Street), Sampaloc, Manila" (p. 319). In 1973, the Board of Examiners of the BCS, later renamed the PRC, was established. The BCS eventually vacated the Lepanto property and turned it over to the Board of Examiners. As a result, the PRC's address has been assigned to Paredes Street corner Nicanor Reyes Street in Sampaloc, Manila. Shortly before the PRC's establishment, the old BCS building, which was part of the prewar Hongwanji Temple, was gutted by fire. Surprisingly, in 1983, the National Historical Institute (NHI) issued a historical marker for the CSC at its new address at Constitution Hills, Batasang Pambansa Complex in Diliman, Quezon City (1993, p. 49). The marker acknowledges Sampaloc as the former CSC site, clearly referring to its former location on Lepanto.

Moreover, the Bureau of Public Libraries (BPL) also benefited from the restoration of the Congress to the Legislative Building in 1949 (Morallos, 1998, pp. 12-13). The BPL were once located in the basement of the Legislative Building as the Philippine Library and Museum (Pareja, 1967, p. 406). Unfortunately, as Chando Morallos (1998) remarked, the Congress "decided to use the building for itself" (p. 13) and ordered the BPL to move into what they had vacated on Lepanto. At that time, the Philippine Historical Committee (PHC) was attached to the BPL because the BPL director also served as the concurrent PHC Chairperson (BPL, 1950, p. 11). Directories from the early 1950s corroborated this by stating that the BPL and the PHC shared the same address at No. 949 Lepanto, the postwar address of the House of Representatives (Farolan, 1951-1952, p. 116; Office of Public Information, 1955, pp. 96, 97; De Jesus, 1955, p. 30). In 1961, both institutions moved to their permanent home in the present-day National Library Building on Kalaw Street, Ermita, Manila. The directories also recorded that No. 949 Lepanto was the address of the Board of Pensions for Veterans, the forerunner of the Philippine Veterans Affairs Office (PVAO), which was headed by President Emilio Aguinaldo (Farolan, 1951-1952, p. 117; OPI, 1955, p. 113; De Jesus, 1955, p. 30).

By virtue of Republic Act No. 5919, enacted on 21 June 1969, the Lepanto site was officially transferred to the PCC. This law excluded the portion of Paredes Street already occupied by the BSC (now under the PRC). In 1968, the PCC eventually moved its main campus from Lepanto to what is now PUP's Mabini Campus in Sta. Mesa, Manila (Luya, ed., 2004, p. 21). The former PCC Lepanto Campus was later rebranded as the Rizal Campus and the PUP Technopreneurial School. As mentioned, the remaining old structure of the Congress on Lepanto was demolished by PUP around 2006. It is now being repurposed as the future site of the College of Law and Institute of Technology of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) (Acedero, 2021).

Moving Forward

The Lepanto site is rich in history, from before it became the site of the Philippine Congress. However, this history has become fragmented and unclear due to the site's post-Congressional use. Despite Congress being occasionally mentioned in varied institutional histories and memories of its successor agencies, the perception that it was just a temporary site jeopardized the preservation of the structure. At that time, priority was given to addressing the growing needs of the units occupying it. As Pareja (1967) noted, BSC heavily modified a portion of the structure, rendering it unrecognizable. In 2006, PUP demolished the remaining portion, except the one beside Gota de Leche. Postwar societal needs were imperative, and the site was urgently needed for

essential government services. Lastly, the proximity of the people to the events at Lepanto may have influenced their appreciation of the site. This closeness may have prevented them from appreciating the crucial events that contributed to the site's historical value. This tendency to overlook contemporary events is common in the study of contemporary history.

Nonetheless, the successor agencies of the Lepanto site are by default the co-caretakers of the spirit of the place. Based on the frequency with which the legislative connection to the Lepanto site is acknowledged, the PUP cites it most often (Luya, ed., 2004, p. 21; PUP, 2025). At the very corner of Loyola and Paredes Streets, where the postwar Congress once held its sessions, now stands the PUP College of Law building, constructed in January 2024. One way to enshrine the site's memory would be for the university to dedicate a space in the building as a gallery.

The NHCP may also revive its 2017 initiative to install a historical marker for the Congress on Lepanto. The plan had to be shelved due to concerns that the marker would be neglected, as the site was then an unpresentable and unkempt vacant lot (NHCP, 2017). This recognition, however, will complete the network of historic sites associated with the legislative history of the Philippines that have been commemorated through national historical markers. This begins with the 1898-1899 Revolutionary Congress in Barasoain Church, which was marked by the PHC in 1940 (Sison, ed., 1981, p. 83; NHI, 1993, p. 37), and was later declared a National Historical Landmark by virtue of Presidential Decree No. 260 on August 1, 1973. The list also includes the Philippine Assembly in Ayuntamiento, one of the country's first historic sites to receive a historical marker from the Philippine Historical Markers and Research Committee (PHRMC), the origin of the NHCP, (PHC, 1957, p. 53). Although both the marker and the structure were destroyed during the Battle for Manila, the PHRMC's successors, the NHI and the NHCP, installed new markers in 1989 and 2021, respectively (NHI, 1993, p. 168; NHCP 2021). The first Philippine Senate in Intendencia is also in the list. However, the PHRMC installed a historical marker in 1935 but failed to mention its role as an upper house. The marker is currently missing and has not yet been replaced by the NHCP. The building, on the other hand, is currently owned by the National Archives of the Philippines and is under restoration. Finally, the list also includes the Philippine Legislature and Congress in the Old Legislative Building in Manila, which received a historical marker from the NHI in 1996 as the site of the Senate, in addition to a 2010 marker commemorating the structure's declaration as a National Historical Landmark (NHI, 2008, p. 4; NHCP, 2024, p. 223).

While the last marker narrates the structure's function as a legislative building, it fails to mention the interregnum in its use between 1945 and 1949, or what can be called the Lepanto years. Now home to the National Museum of Fine Arts, the Legislative Building is aptly referred to as the Old Legislative Building, since both houses of Congress have long since moved out. The House of Representatives has been located at the Batasang Pambansa Complex in Quezon City since the opening of the Eighth Congress in July 1987, although the complex had earlier housed the Interim and Regular Batasang Pambansa from 1978 to 1986 during the Marcos era. The Senate, meanwhile, has held its sessions at the GSIS Complex in Pasay City since 1998 and is expected to transfer to the Bagong Senado at the Bonifacio Global City, Taguig City. A historical marker acknowledging the Lepanto years would then help clarify for the public will no longer be puzzled about where Congress held its office from 1945 to 1949. Most importantly, it will serve as a reminder of the site's hallowedness in history, despite its limitations, inadequacy, and simplicity.

The appreciation of what is historic is relative to a particular generation. What might be historically significant to today's generation may not be to older generations. Here, Teodoro Agoncillo's view that "[h]istory is re-written by every generation" because "every generation writes its own history" makes sense (Ocampo, 1992, p. 108; Ocampo, 1995, p. 45).

This is evident in a number of social media posts about the Congress on Lepanto that began to appear around 2018, although these still described the site as temporary. In these posts, the public identified the site as the present-day PUP Lepanto Campus, also known as the Rizal Campus. On November 25, 2019, the Facebook page of the Legislative Library, Archives, and Museum of the House of Representatives paid homage to its former home on Lepanto. More recently, during the State of the Nation Address on July 28, 2025, various social media pages featured the Congress on Lepanto as the site of previous presidential addresses before the reconstruction of the Legislative Building in 1949. Most of their sources were culled from the democratization of information made possible by the now-defunct Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning Office, particularly through the Flickr account "Presidential Museum and Library, Malacañang Palace" on July 16, 2015 and Rappler (Rappler 2016).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its unfavorable conditions and unimpressive appearance, the reduction of Lepanto to a mere memory of Congress's temporary location, without any effort to preserve the physical structure,

contributed to its insignificance as a historic site. This was further complicated by the successive repurpose of the site by other government agencies. Part of the site was renovated beyond recognition by the BSC in the 1960s, while the rest was demolished around 2006 (except the wooden building beside the Gota de Leche along Lepanto).

Because various institutions wrote their own independent histories of Lepanto, the general public was left with little understanding of what became of the actual site of the postwar Philippine Congress. This is evident in the institutional history of the Philippine Congress, which, at least as of 2008, tends to cite only the Japanese school on Lepanto. The institutional histories of PUP, NLP, and CSC mention only in passing that their Lepanto site had once housed the Philippine Congress. The NHCP, PRC, and PVAO, on the other hand, do not acknowledge this. Convoluted as this history may seem, the layers of memory that the Lepanto site accumulated through time can still be recovered. This narrative must be told cohesively to avoid obscurity and confusion. No layer should be silenced nor disowned, especially the site's association with the Japanese. This scholarly attempt to reconstruct Lepanto's past awaits the verdict of present and future generations as to whether it is worthy of remembrance.

Bionote

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