

A Semiotic Investigation of the Porta Mariae as a Religious Monumental Architecture

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Abstract

The Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country, holds religious monumental architecture (RMA) as a vital part of its cultural and spiritual heritage. This notwithstanding, little academic focus has been given to the meanings conveyed through such structures. This study examines the Porta Mariae in Naga City using Greimassian semiotics, a framework built upon structuralist semiotics for decoding architectural communication. This neoclassical arch, built a little over a decade ago to commemorate 300 years of Bicolano devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia and inspired by Roman triumphal arches and Catholic holy doors, has become a prominent city landmark and integral to Catholic rituals in Naga. This paper interprets the structure as a symbolic communication system, uncovering layers of meaning conveyed to pilgrims, devotees, and visitors that extend beyond its visual and architectural appeal. The investigation ultimately reveals the Porta Mariae as a dynamically communicative artifact embodying profound religious, cultural, and historical meanings, serving as a living symbol of Bicolano faith, heritage, and enduring identity.

Keywords: *Bicol; Peñafrancia; Porta Mariae; religious monumental architecture; semiotics*

Introduction

Religious architecture has always been part of the configuration of public space in the Philippines. Most of its towns and cities trace their origins to the Spanish colonial period during which the *poblacion* or settlement was centered on the plaza, usually with a church nearby. This colonial legacy established a template for urban planning that persists today, embedding religious structures into the nation's sociocultural fabric.

Academic interest in religious architecture in the country is primarily on sustainable religious tourism development (Chua et al., 2023), the preservation of historic churches (Ibañez et al., 2020), their diachronic resilience—the ability of structures, particularly historic churches, to withstand challenges, changes, or natural calamities over an extended period and maintain structural stability—and structural integrity (Soliman, 2019) as well as architecture (Girard, 2021). This is probably because, for a practitioner of faith, scholarly interest in religious architecture is slightly beside the point. Both Christians and non-Christians would argue that the true essence of religion is not with the buildings, even if these are treated as sacred spaces, but in how people lead their lives based

on tradition, ritual, and doctrine. The soul of the church is its people, not the physical structure, and in the Philippines, that is virtually everyone, because only less than half of one percent of its population indicated no religion. In the wider scholarship, however, interest of religious structures come from various perspectives. Academic literature covers a wide range, such as the impact of religious architecture on the development of the city structure and urban layout (Gil-Mastalerczyk, 2016), how religious architecture can lead to fresh reflection and offer new theological insight (Rae, 2023), the political and cultural significance of color motif in religious architecture (Jordan, 2023), how religious architecture influences worship and spirituality (Thomas, 1994), and these are far from being representative of the scholarship landscape.

Buildings are imbued with meaning. Buildings are part of a communication system and thus impart knowledge of the symbolic and cognitive disposition of a culture (Joseph, 1981). With a rich heritage of religious architecture, and with religion woven in its social fabric despite the official separation of Church and State, a study of RMA in the Philippines presents opportunities for new insights and better understanding of its culture, which is currently underrepresented in academic literature. This paper aims to contribute to filling that gap through the exploration of religious architecture as a communication system.

The study of architecture as a communication system is an application of semiotics to the built environment. Semiotics is an account of signification, representation, reference, and meaning, pioneered by Charles Peirce in his Theory of Sign (Atkin, 2023). A sign is something perceptible to our senses, where the signifier is the perceptible form or expression of the sign, and it conveys information about that which it signifies. The discovery of the meaning, or of the relationship between the signifier and that which it signifies, is semiotics. Thus, semiotics is essentially the study of anything that stands for, represents, references, or means something else beyond what it is (Riera, 2020).

The object of this semiotic analysis is the Porta Mariae, a commemorative gate built in 2010 at the suggestion of the Catholic Archbishop of Caceres, in Naga City, Philippines (see *Figure 1*). Its design was inspired by neoclassical architecture, which blends with the rest of the parish complex, the focal point of which is the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral, a Romanesque church with a cruciform layout. It is, however, not a simple gate but is more of a prominent architectural feature, both in size and appearance. To locals, it gives a European vibe, reminiscent of the post-Roman triumphant arches such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. It is however also inspired by the long tradition in the Catholic church of dedicating holy doors to commemorate important events. The Porta Mariae was built to commemorate the 300th year since the likeness of Our Lady of Peñafrancia was brought to Bikol, welcomed, and venerated by the Catholic faithful. The Marian gate has already become part of the cityscape of Naga, a landmark in the Bikol Region, and one of the places that pilgrims, devotees, and tourists visit.

The Porta Mariae was built by the Peñafrancia Devotees of Metro Manila Foundation (PDMMF), a not-for-profit non-stock corporation registered as a foundation with the Securities and Exchange Commission on 6 October 2009. It was organized solely for the purpose of building the Porta Mariae and supporting the parish in its upkeep and maintenance.

Despite its architectural and communal significance, the Porta Mariae has not been academically analyzed, particularly through a semiotic lens, a gap this study addresses by interrogating how its form, materials, and spatial organization communicate meaning to diverse audiences.

The Porta Mariae, a monumental triumphal arch constructed in 2010, commemorates the 300th anniversary of the Bicolanos' devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia. Strategically located at the entrance to the Naga Metropolitan Cathedral Complex and topped by a striking brass statue of Our Lady flanked by angels, it symbolizes both spiritual protection and regional pride.

Like many Marian monuments worldwide, the Porta Mariae serves as a beacon of communal faith, pilgrimage, and cultural identity. Globally, it shares architectural grandeur and spiritual significance with structures such as the Gate of Dawn in Vilnius, the Our Lady of Fatima Sanctuary in Portugal, and the Cathedral of Mary Queen of the World in Montreal. Within the Philippines, the Porta Mariae joins a constellation of Marian landmarks, including the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in Parañaque and the La Naval de Manila Shrine in Quezon City, functioning not only as places of prayer and reflection but also as hosts for religious festivals and processions, thus integrating sacred tradition into everyday civic life.

However, what distinctly sets the Porta Mariae apart among Marian monuments, both locally and globally, is its profound and intimate connection to the Peñafrancia Festival. The Peñafrancia Festival is described as one of the largest and most emotionally resonant Marian pilgrimages in Asia, deeply rooted in a regionally focused, grassroots devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia, who is the region's most venerated Marian image and known to most Bicolanos as "Ina" (mother). Each year, during this festival, millions of pilgrims physically pass beneath the Porta Mariae's arch during the Fluvial Procession and Traslacion, transforming it into a living monument that is dynamically activated through ritual, movement, and community participation. The Traslacion specifically refers to an annual tradition where the image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia is transferred in a procession from the Basilica Minore to the Naga Cathedral.

During this event, the main gate of the Porta Mariae admits throngs of people and devotees into the patio for the Eucharistic celebration that follows. The Porta Mariae's strategic location, specifically between the Naga Cathedral and the Peñafrancia Basilica, further reinforces its crucial role as a threshold between sacred spaces, serving as a physical and symbolic passage between the civic world and the divine.

Architecturally, the Porta Mariae is also unique among Philippine Marian monuments due to its neoclassical design and triumphal arch form, a style reminiscent of Roman imperial architecture yet deeply infused with local Marian symbolism. Unlike most Marian sites, which are typically churches or free-standing statues, the Porta Mariae's gateway structure explicitly echoes Mary's traditional title as the "Gate of Heaven". While the elevated placement of the Marian image atop the arch is a visual and theological cue shared with other towering Marian figures such as the Mother of All Asia statue in Batangas or the image of Our Lady of Guidance in Manila, the Porta Mariae's imagery and context are intimately tied to Bicolano identity, reflecting a profoundly localized form of Marian devotion rather than a national or pan-regional significance.

Beyond its religious function, the Porta Mariae also operates as a significant cultural and historical landmark within Naga City, seamlessly connecting faith with civic pride and intertwining history with modern devotion. It serves to anchor the city's Catholic heritage within the broader narrative of Filipino identity and spirituality. In essence, the Porta Mariae transcends its commemorative function, becoming a living testament to the enduring bond between the Bicolano people and their patroness, illustrating how Marian devotion continuously evolves and is expressed through architecture, ritual, and regional identity.

The Porta Mariae's neo-classical triumphal arch design was a deliberate architectural choice, carrying deep theological, historical, and cultural resonance for its commemoration of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Peñafrancia. This design decision reflects a fusion of sacred symbolism, colonial heritage, and civic identity, offering a rich visual and spatial tribute to the beloved patroness of the Bicol region.

The neo-classical style, characterized by its symmetry, clean lines, and Greco-Roman influence, was specifically chosen to evoke a sense of timeless dignity and sacred grandeur. This architectural vocabulary conveys ideals of harmony, virtue, and permanence, qualities long associated with the Virgin Mary in Catholic theology, particularly reinforcing her celestial status as Regina Caeli (Queen of Heaven).

In addition, this stylistic choice subtly acknowledges the Philippines' Spanish colonial legacy, during which neoclassical elements were integrated into significant religious structures like the San Agustin Church in Manila. By drawing on this historical architectural vocabulary, the Porta Mariae simultaneously recalls the past and reclaims it in the service of local devotion, transforming a colonial language into a distinctly Filipino expression of faith. Globally, the use of neoclassical design for Marian monuments, such as the Basilica of the Virgin of the Rosary in Mexico and Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, is not uncommon, thus situating the Porta Mariae within this broader tradition while maintaining its unique regional character.

The neoclassical features, including its grand scale, simple geometric forms, and symmetry, are coded to transmit the message of the perfection of God. The structure's block design and concrete material also manifest stability and permanence, signaling that it is expected to withstand time and weather, just as the 300-year devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia has endured. This conveys to the faithful that in times of uncertainty, there is stability in their "Ina" (mother).

The decision to adopt the triumphal arch form further deepens the monument's symbolic weight. While ancient Roman triumphal arches commemorated military victories and civic achievements, the Porta Mariae reinterprets this form to celebrate the spiritual triumph of Mary, her role as the victorious intercessor who conquers sin, protects the faithful, and leads the way to Christ. It serves as a visual metaphor for Mary's triumph over evil, aligning with titles such as Our Lady of Victory.

Crucially, the arch functions as a pilgrimage threshold, strategically situated between the Naga Cathedral and the Peñafrancia Basilica. During the annual Peñafrancia Festival, millions of pilgrims physically pass beneath its arch during the Fluvial Procession and Traslacion. This annual procession involves the transfer of Our Lady of Peñafrancia's image from the Basilica Minore to the Naga Cathedral, with the Porta Mariae's main gate facilitating the entry of devotees for the subsequent Eucharistic celebration. The arch reinforces Mary's traditional title as the "Gate of Heaven" (Porta Caeli) and her central role in the spiritual journey of the faithful, symbolizing the path "to Jesus through Mary".

The scale and prominence of the Porta Mariae are statements of both civic pride and spiritual commitment. Unlike smaller shrines, this public monument declares that Marian devotion is central to the identity of Naga City and the Bicol region. Its imposing height, neoclassical clarity, and symbolic imagery make it a civic landmark, while its construction in 2010, resisting contemporary trends, aligns with the timeless values of Catholicism, asserting that faith, heritage, and identity are living forces in the Philippines.

Other architectural styles like Gothic or Baroque were considered but not chosen. While Gothic architecture emphasizes divine transcendence and Baroque features dynamic ornamentation for emotional impact, the neo-classical style, with its clarity, balance, and restraint, was deemed more appropriate. This choice was made because the Porta Mariae needed to be a universally legible, dignified, and stable public shrine, qualities fitting for a maternal figure revered for her constancy, purity, and protective presence.

The semiotic approach was pioneered by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), an American philosopher, logician, and scientist who laid the foundations for the modern study of signs and meaning. Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992), a Lithuanian-French semiotician, came later and built upon structuralist semiotics, whose approach was later adapted by Lukken and Searle in 1993 to provide a robust framework for decoding architectural communication (Guirguis et al, 2016). Lukken and Searle's methodology, which examines both the "form of expression" (topological and plastic categories) and the "form of content" (discursive and symbolic layers), is particularly suited to structures like the Porta Mariae. By analyzing its verticality, chromatic contrasts, and symbolic ornamentation, this study reveals how the arch mediates between devotional narratives, regional identity, and collective memory. The analysis further demonstrates how the arch's design, from its 11-meter height to its gold-leafed Marian statue, orients pilgrims spatially and spiritually, reinforcing its role as a threshold between the secular and sacred.

It challenges perceptions of religious monuments as static historical artifacts, instead positioning them as active participants in cultural communication. The Porta Mariae's commemorative function, architectural hybridity, and role as a site of pilgrimage and civic pride demonstrate how such structures communicate ontological historical, and sociopolitical content, accommodating communal rituals and fostering collective memory. The findings underscore the urgency of semiotic analyses in contexts where architecture intersects with lived faith, communal identity, and postcolonial heritage, as these approaches reveal the complex ways in which buildings serve as conduits for profound cultural and identity-related messages. By interpreting the Porta Mariae through Lukken and Searle's semiotic framework, the study illuminates not only the symbolic and communicative strategies embedded in its design, but also how such monuments can promote public reflection, critical engagement with history, and the ongoing negotiation of meaning within evolving socio-cultural landscapes.

Literature Review

The built environment serves as a powerful medium of cultural expression, where architecture transcends mere functionality to communicate meaning, identity, and belief systems. This literature review examines how semiotics provides a critical lens for decoding architectural meaning across diverse contexts, from rural vernacular structures to sacred urban landmarks. Recent scholarship demonstrates that architectural semiotics not only reveals the cultural, spiritual, and historical narratives embedded in design but also informs contemporary debates on sustainability, heritage conservation, and adaptive reuse.

The review is structured thematically, beginning with rural and vernacular architecture (Xu et al., 2024; Girard, 2021), where symbolic elements encode regional identity, before exploring sacred spaces (Şenocak, 2024; Raza & Sehgal, 2022) as semiotic systems that bridge tradition and modernity. Further, it investigates the urban and historical role of religious buildings (Gil-Mastalerczyk, 2016; Soliman, 2019), their resilience, and their socio-cultural impact. Theoretical critiques (Khan, 2023; Jordan, 2023) and functional adaptations for tourism and sustainability (Chujap et al., 2023) round out the discussion, highlighting how semiotics intersects with practical challenges in architectural practice. Collectively, these studies underscore architecture's dual role as both a physical construct and a communicative text, offering methodologies to interpret its layered meanings in an increasingly globalized world.



Figure 1. The façade of the Porta Mariae, a neoclassical building which serves as gate and entrance to the grounds of the parish complex of the Catholic Parish of Saint John the Evangelist, in Naga City, Philippines (CC BY-SA 4.0). Source: Wikipedia / Neil Angelo Marcellano, 22 September 2018 / edited by the Author

Rural and Vernacular Architecture

Xu et al (2024) combined theoretical research and practical case studies to explore effective methods for renovating rural architecture in China within the context of the new rural construction initiative. They analyzed the characteristics and shortcomings of existing rural architectures and proposed an innovative model for renovation by applying the theory of architectural semiotics. This approach posits that Chinese rural elements function as a symbol system carrying profound cultural connotations. The study demonstrated how architectural semiotics could be applied through the deliberate use of geometric symbols, material symbols, color symbols, and space symbols in design to reflect regional characteristics and cultural heritage. They concluded that architectural semiotics held a significant position in the transformation of rural areas, providing new perspectives and methodologies to enhance the quality and value of rural architectures and contribute to sustainable development and cultural preservation.

Similarly, Girard (2021) studied the significance of tropical architecture in the work of Leandro V. Locsin, specifically examining his religious buildings and projects in the Philippines during the post-WWII era. They noted that Locsin was deeply rooted in the Christian tradition of the Philippines, a country with a strong Catholic history. The research highlighted how Locsin successfully provided a new approach to the tropical architecture of faith-based structures by integrating climate considerations and reinterpreting the vernacular architecture of the Philippines.

Sacred Spaces and Semiotic Systems

Şenocak (2024) combined theoretical analysis with a practical case study to explore the semantic relationships within modern mosque typologies. They analyzed traditional mosque forms and discussed the application of architectural semiotics to understand architecture as a communication channel carrying clues about social life, economy, and cultural accumulation. The study focused on the TBMM Mosque, a significant modern adaptation that won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1995 and applied Charles Morris's three dimensions of semiotics, namely: syntactic (formal relationships), semantic (relationship with meaning), and pragmatic (relationship with users and function), to examine the mosque's structure, interior space, and equipment. Their findings demonstrated that the TBMM Mosque, through elements like layered ceilings substituting for the traditional dome and the visual integration of the garden of paradise via a glass qibla wall, successfully conveyed the semantic and religious underpinnings found in traditional mosque typology, symbolizing a link between two worlds. The analysis concluded that architectural semiotics is a valuable tool for reading and understanding architectural meaning, showing that modern designs can effectively carry the same deep meanings as traditional forms while integrating functionality and practicality.

Raza & Sehgal (2022), used semiotics as a modern critical tool to analyze the symbolic connotations and spiritual content embedded in the architecture of Shia religious buildings, specifically focusing on *Imambadas*.

Recognizing a gap in understanding the deep internal perception beyond aesthetics and formal aspects in previous studies, they interpreted the meaning of various architectural elements through analytical and implicit readings. The study highlighted how elements like domes, arches, courtyards, ornamentation, flags, banners, and calligraphy function as a symbol system conveying profound cultural, historical, and spiritual meanings, such as the concept of monotheism, connection to the divine, the tragedy of Karbala, and Shia identity. Their analysis demonstrated that Shia Islamic architecture utilizes principles like abstraction and an open visual approach to express theological concepts, contrasting with some traditional Western architectural focus purely on form or utility. The authors concluded that semiotics provides a valuable methodology for understanding the complex symbolic language and cultural significance of Shia Islamic architecture.

Guirguis et al (2016) used semiotic analysis to investigate whether Coptic Orthodox church architecture conveys an intended message that could be interpreted through its visual discourse. Focusing on a case study of the historically and architecturally significant Church of Saint Mercurius or the Abu Sayfayn in Old Cairo, the researchers applied an analytical framework based on the European branch of semiotics, drawing on the work of Gerard Lukken and Mark Searle. The analysis examined the form of expression (signifiers) through topological categories like position and orientation, and plastic categories of color and shape, as well as the form of content (signified meanings) at discursive, surface, and deep levels. They found that architectural elements like verticality, the use of numbers three and seven, specific door configurations, colors (red, white, black), materials (wood, marble, brick), and spatial organization functioned as signifiers. These elements collectively conveyed profound spiritual and theological meanings, such as ascension to God, the Holy Trinity, salvation, eternal life, the eye of God, the tomb of Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the second coming, while also asserting the building's identity as a traditional ancient Coptic Orthodox church. The study concluded that this architectural style indeed possessed meaning and communicated an intended message through a complex semi-symbolic sign system of relationships and oppositions, proving the value of semiotic analysis for deciphering the meaning in architecture.

Krech (2025) combined theoretical research drawing on Peirce's semiotics and systems theory with a case study on the Buddhist Sīmā to explore how religious space is socio-culturally constituted. He argued that religious space emerges through semiotization, where physically qualified space serves as a known source domain mapped metaphorically onto the unknown target domain of religious space to make it comprehensible. The study highlighted the crucial role of the oscillation between metonymy (literal understanding within a single domain) and metaphor (bridging different domains) in the constitution of religious space, a process mediated by symbols. The act of determining a Buddhist Sīmā was reconstructed as a ritual system of religious communication based on sign processes, involving the proclamation of physical landmarks (like a forest) that function first iconically by resemblance to its object, then indexically by direct connection or physical relationship to its object, and finally symbolically by convention, habit, or rule, rather than resemblance or direct connection, serving as material anchors for religious meaning. This process involves a semiotic system where a sign, object, and interpretant (an element of the sign process, not a human interpreter) interact, regulated by the religious code transcendent/immanent. The research also touched upon the historical context of Buddhism's emergence alongside the urban revolution, contrasting village/urban life with wilderness, a distinction semantically relevant to the constitution of monastic space. Ultimately, the author concluded that when religion spatializes and "folds in" physical places through symbolic endowment, these places become polysemic and ambiguous, literally regarded as sacred sites while simultaneously acknowledging that absolute transcendence is not fully contained within them.

Perhaps the first with a Philippine focus, Delos Reyes et al (2025) conducted a study utilizing a semiotic analysis to investigate the socio-cultural influence of the architectural facade of San Sebastian Church in Lumban, Laguna, Philippines. They observed that the Philippines' architectural styles showed a strong Western influence, which they linked to active economic and cultural interchange with the Western Hemisphere dating back to Roman times, paving the way for the rapid construction of churches after Spanish rule was established. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research involved a comprehensive site visit, analysis of historical documents, in-depth interviews with local experts and residents, and a survey of 334 respondents from the Laguna area to systematically examine the semiotic significance of the church's architectural and artistic elements. The study drew upon the theoretical frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes. The findings indicated that the meanings conveyed by the symbols and designs within San Sebastian Church played a role in the formation of the values and norms of the people, underscoring that spirituality and religion are significant facets of the human persona. The analysis and survey results revealed that the architectural elements evoked a range of emotions and interpretations that extended beyond purely religious connotations, triggering personal memories and associations and contributing to a space that resonated on emotional, cognitive, and personal levels. The authors concluded that the Christian articles of faith, as transmitted through the church's design and symbols, resonated through generations, fostering aspects of the Filipino psyche such as the importance of connection and love, the pursuit of knowledge, adaptation to change, finding strength, living with purpose, and recognizing inherent goodness.

Urban and Historical Contexts

Gil-Mastalerczyk (2016) investigated the place and role of religious architecture in the formation of urban space. Their aim was to present the impact of historical sacred objects on their surroundings and changes in the modern urban environment, specifically determining their influence on the development of the city structure and urban layout. They noted that religious architecture holds a unique role as a widely available and important component of cultural heritage, remaining visible for a long time and witnessing and stimulating historical events. Using a case study methodology, including many cases at different levels of analysis and focusing on the sacred architecture of Kielce, Poland, they explored this relationship. The study found that sacred objects, along with their associated functional environment, had a significant impact on the composition of the urban city, created the image of public spaces, and constituted attractive and open functional structures. Furthermore, the architectural value of these objects significantly affected the activation of tourist and business districts and regions, increasing the competitiveness of the city and changing its meaning on a national or international level.

Ibañez et al (2020) identified the significant features and assessed the socio-cultural value of historical churches and ruins in Cagayan, Philippines, with the goal of formulating policy recommendations for their conservation. The study found that these structures shared common characteristics in architectural design, materials, and structure, often following rectangular or cruciform plans, featuring high, thick walls with buttresses, and constructed using vernacular materials like bricks, river stones, and lime in a prevalent Spanish Baroque-inspired style. Assessing the intangible dimension using the Getty Framework, the research determined that both the functional churches and the ruins possessed a very high socio-cultural value, encompassing spiritual/religious, historical, aesthetic, social, scientific, and symbolic aspects. The authors concluded that these sites indeed held very high socio-cultural value and that policy recommendations should be formulated to ensure their preservation and conservation through coordinated efforts from religious authorities, local government units, and national agencies.

Soliman (2019) investigated how heritage churches in the Philippines resisted natural calamities, acknowledging that while heritage structures are generally resilient, they face threats from disasters like typhoons, earthquakes, and floods which the country is prone to, and some led to undesirable fate. The primary goal was to uncover the reasons behind the structural stability and methodology of these century-old churches that remained standing, exploring differences between old and new construction methods. Findings indicated that the development of a unique "Earthquake Baroque" architectural style was a response to frequent disasters, improving construction methods after some churches were destroyed, leading to features like separated bell towers to prevent collapse onto the main structure, the widespread use of buttresses to support high walls, the implementation of raft-type and deep foundations, and a transition from vulnerable wood to more substantial materials like stone masonry utilizing natural stones (such as limestones, coral stones, granite, adobe, and bricks) and lime mortar, which offered flexibility, breathability, protection, and even self-healing properties, unlike modern concrete mortars. The study also noted the cultural significance of these churches, encompassing their historical value, being a symbol of pride, contributing to the country's identity, appreciation for art, and being considered treasures by the community who care for them. Ultimately, the research revealed that the resilience of these churches stemmed from a combination of intentional design choices, traditional construction methods and material selection adapted to the local environment and hazards, and the cultural value placed on them by the community.

Theoretical Frameworks and Critiques

Khan (2023) explored the realm of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, to explore linguistic levels within the language of architecture, aiming to establish a theoretical premise for a semiotic analysis of architectural text. The study posited that architecture functions as a visual language and social text that embeds, embodies, and reflects a society's culture, values, history, and statements. Drawing upon linguistic concepts and theories from figures like Saussure, Peirce, and Morris, the author transposed linguistic levels, i.e., pragmatics, semantics, and syntactics, onto architecture to analyze how meaning is produced and interpreted. The research explored how architectural pragmatics concerned the effects of buildings on users through various senses; how architectural syntax dealt with the formal and structural relationships between elements, analogous to grammatical rules; and how architectural semantics focused on the relationship of signs to meaning, discussing concepts such as signifier/signified, denotation/connotation, and Peirce's icons, indices, and symbols. The author highlighted the shift from a focus on functionalism, which had neglected this semantic dimension, to the recognition that buildings inevitably carry meaning. The study concluded that analyzing architecture through the lens of semiotics and these linguistic levels offered a valuable, multidimensional methodology for understanding architectural meaning and suggested the possibility of a super-linguistic analysis.

Jordan (2023) explored the place and significance of whiteness in contemporary church architecture, noting a prevalent "vogue" for this aesthetic across various denominations. They contrasted this with historical uses, such as during the Protestant Reformation where whiteness was a theological statement against Catholic opulence, or in the

Liturgical Movement which favored simplicity for liturgical focus. The study discussed examples like Richard Meier's Jubilee Church, known for its radical white form, and numerous other modern churches. The author suggested that the contemporary use of whiteness appeared less tied to specific theologies than in the past and potentially reflected a shift towards prioritizing spirituality over traditional liturgy. They posited that this aesthetic could serve as a kind of neutral "lingua franca" or "white cube gallery" allowing individuals to curate their own spiritual experiences, particularly for those who "believe without belonging". The paper raised critical questions about whether this whiteness was truly neutral or if it might erase difference, reflecting broader secular landscapes, globalization, capitalism, or post-colonial contexts, and suggested further research was needed to fully understand its complex implications, including potential connections to racial discourse.

Tourism and Functional Adaptations

Chua et al (2023) conducted a qualitative case study utilizing Focus Group Discussions, observation, and document analysis to assess the implementation of sustainable tourism management at two selected Philippine Marian Shrines managed by a religious congregation: the Minor Basilica of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary of Manaoag in Pangasinan and the National Shrine of the Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary de La Naval de Manila in Quezon City. Using the Repertory Grid methodology for analysis, they developed a sustainable religious tourism development framework, and concluded that their framework provides valuable guidance for the governing authorities of the shrines in their efforts to establish and maintain them as sustainable tourist destinations and promote collaborative growth.

Methodology

This study employs a semiotic approach to analyze the Porta Mariae, specifically drawing on the framework developed by Lukken and Searle, which is rooted in Greimassian structural semiotics, commonly associated with the Paris School. The choice of this methodology is both intentional and strategic, as it offers a robust and nuanced lens for decoding architectural communication.

The suitability of this framework for architectural analysis stems from its capacity to treat structures like the Porta Mariae as intentional communicative forms. While earlier semioticians like Charles Sanders Peirce laid the groundwork for the study of signs, it is Greimas's structural framework, further developed for liturgical and architectural settings by Lukken and Searle, that enables a systematic exploration of how physical spaces convey meaning. This makes the method particularly effective for analyzing religious monuments and ceremonial architecture.

A distinctive strength of Greimassian semiotics lies in its clear separation between the "form of expression" and the "form of content." The form of expression refers to how a structure communicates through its perceptible, material aspects. These are analyzed using topological categories (such as spatial positioning, orientation, verticality, and horizontality) and plastic categories (including chromatic features like color and lighting, and eidetic features such as shape and configuration). In the case of the Porta Mariae, this allows for an interpretation of how its 11-meter height, neoclassical style, and restrained monochrome palette project grandeur, stability, and solemnity.

Meanwhile, the form of content involves an analysis of the deeper meanings conveyed by these perceptual features. This includes the syntactic dimension (how spaces relate to their users and functions) and the semantic dimension (symbolic references and cultural resonances). It distinguishes between surface-level meanings, such as movement cues and behavioral expectations, and deeper meanings, such as figurative values, cultural memory, and theological symbols. For the Porta Mariae, this includes interpreting its role as a gateway, its Marian dedication, and its commemorative inscription as expressions of Catholic devotion and Bicolano identity.

Moreover, this analytical framework reveals the complexity of architectural communication. By closely examining features like verticality, symbolic ornamentation, and chromatic design, the study demonstrates how the Porta Mariae mediates devotional narratives, reinforces regional identity, and anchors collective memory. The arch does not merely mark a transition from one space to another; it orients pilgrims spatially and spiritually, operating as a threshold between the secular world and sacred tradition. In doing so, it challenges the notion of religious monuments as static relics of the past, instead presenting them as dynamic communicative agents imbued with ontological, historical, and sociopolitical significance.

Finally, this approach addresses a significant gap in academic literature. Despite the Philippines' rich heritage of religious architecture and the pivotal role such structures play in shaping national identity and social life, there remains a lack of scholarly attention to the meanings embedded in these buildings. The Greimassian semiotic

framework offers a rigorous methodology for analyzing religious architecture as a semiotic system. It opens new pathways for understanding how architecture contributes to the expression and preservation of Philippine culture.

The Greimassian semiotic method, particularly as adapted for architectural analysis by Lukken and Searle, was selected for its strength in decoding the complex, layered communication embedded within the Porta Mariae (see Figure 2). It provides a coherent and systematic means of interpreting how this structure functions not just as a physical gateway, but as a rich communicative artifact. Through this approach, the study reveals how architectural design can serve as a powerful medium for expressing religious devotion, historical memory, and cultural identity within the unique context of Philippine heritage.

Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative case study design, selecting the Porta Mariae as a singular, information-rich example that highlights the intersection of religious symbolism, cultural identity, and architectural communication in the Philippine setting. This case is especially well-suited to semiotic analysis because of its explicit commemorative function and its rich symbolic features. The study analyzes the structure through a systematic framework that distinguishes between the "form of expression" (how the structure communicates) and the "form of content" (what is communicated).

Analytical Framework

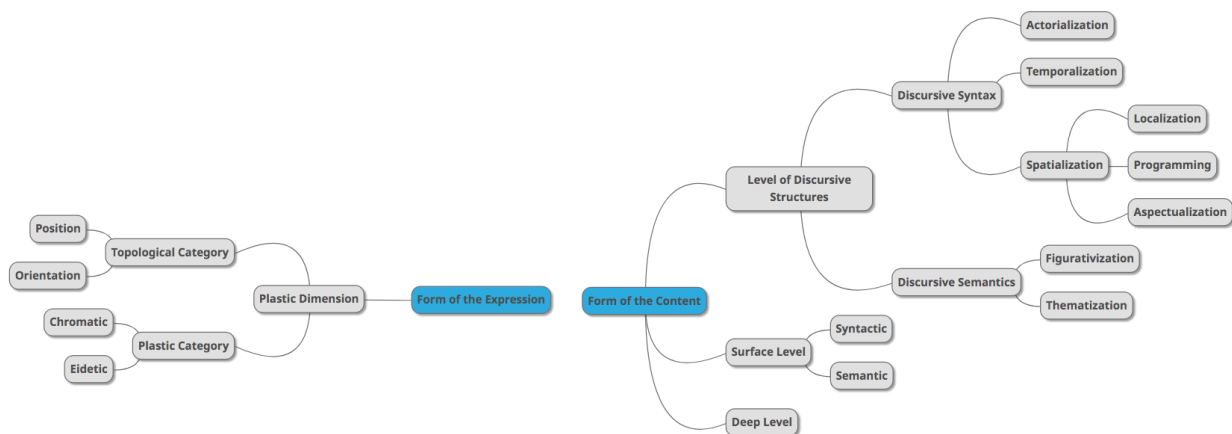


Figure 2. The analytical framework pioneered by Lukken and Searle in 1993, hereunder adapted from Guirguis et al (2016). It provides an overview of the aspects of semiotic investigation used in architectural structures.

The analytical framework used in this study is divided into several categories. Under the form of expression, topological categories such as position and orientation are considered. Position refers to vertical and horizontal relationships, spatial volumes, and the location of elements in relation to each other. Orientation involves how users move through the space and how their visual experience is guided by the design. The plastic categories include chromatic and eidetic aspects. Chromatic analysis focuses on color schemes and lighting effects, while eidetic analysis examines shapes, forms, and configurations that contribute to the overall aesthetic and symbolic impact of the structure.

The form of content is examined through discursive structures that include both surface and deep levels of meaning. Syntax is used to understand spatial organization—how spaces relate to users, moments, and functions—while semantics interprets symbolic references and cultural associations embedded in the design. On the surface level, the analysis considers behavioral cues and the transitions experienced by users as they move through the space. At the deep level, it investigates figurative values and the more abstract, projected meanings communicated by the structure.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study includes multiple sources. Primary data were obtained through architectural documentation such as photographs, design plans, and elevations. On-site observations provided insights into spatial

relationships and patterns of user interaction. The study also examined inscriptions, iconographic details, and material finishes to understand their symbolic roles. In addition, relevant historical documents and commemorative plaques were reviewed to contextualize the structure's significance.

The gathered data, serving as the core instruments of this semiotic investigation, were systematically analyzed through the specific lenses of Lukken and Searle's framework, which is derived from Greimassian structural semiotics and is commonly associated with the Paris School. This methodological approach enabled a direct relationship between the collected empirical evidence and the theoretical categories of architectural communication.

Architectural documentation, including photographs, design plans, and elevations, directly informed the analysis of the form of expression. These visual and structural documents provided the basis for examining the Porta Mariae's topological categories. For instance, its measured dimensions (11 meters high, 18 meters wide, 4 meters deep), rectangular plan, and the emphasis on longitudinal and horizontal directions through elements like columns and entablatures, were documented to understand its position. Similarly, the visual guidance provided by the structure, directing the observer's field of vision towards the Cathedral, was analyzed for its orientation. Simultaneously, these documents were crucial for analyzing plastic categories, detailing eidetic features such as the neoclassical style, the shapes of its coupled columns, entablatures, and tunnel vaults, as well as the configuration of the prominent Marian statue. Chromatic aspects, like the original monochromatic concrete and later grey paint scheme with off-white columns, were also derived from these visual records.

On-site observations further served as a vital technique for understanding the Porta Mariae's lived reality. These observations were critical for assessing spatial relationships and user interaction patterns, which are integral to interpreting the monument's orientation and its discursive syntax within the form of content. For example, direct observation clarified how the gates manage pedestrian flow and how the passage through them creates a symbolic threshold between the secular bustle of the city and the peaceful church grounds.

The inscriptions, iconographic details, and material finishes were meticulously documented and became primary sources for decoding the deeper meanings within the form of content. The etched 'PORTA MARIAE' inscription and the tercentenary logo provided explicit semantic cues for thematization (e.g., the strong Marian theme) and figurativization (e.g., its commemorative function). The brass statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia and the flanking angels served as key iconographic details that reinforced the Catholic and Marian identity, conveying profound theological messages such as "to Jesus through Mary". The choice of concrete as a material finish was analyzed for its symbolic meaning of permanence and stability, linking the structure to the enduring devotion of the Bikolano people.

Lastly, relevant historical documents and commemorative plaques were essential instruments for contextualizing the monument's purpose and identity within the Lukken and Searle framework. These sources clarified actorialization by identifying the designers, builders, and the foundation responsible for its construction, as well as the religious authorities involved. They also provided precise information for temporalization, marking the 300th year of devotion and the inauguration date, embedding the structure within a specific historical timeline. The explicit rationale and significance stated on the plaques further contributed to understanding the deep symbolic layers of the Porta Mariae.

Thus, the research's techniques involved a systematic process of semiotic coding and interpretation, where each collected architectural element, spatial arrangement, inscription, and historical detail was meticulously mapped to the topological, plastic, syntactic, and semantic categories defined by Lukken and Searle's framework. This comprehensive approach allowed for the detailed decoding of the Porta Mariae as a dynamic communication system, revealing its embedded religious, cultural, and historical messages.

The analysis was conducted in three main phases. First, the architectural elements and spatial arrangements were descriptively documented. Second, the elements were coded semiotically using the predefined categories. Finally, these coded elements were synthesized into an interpretive narrative that reveals how the Porta Mariae communicates religious and cultural meanings to various audiences.

Theoretical Foundation

The methodology is grounded in several theoretical foundations. Peircean semiotics provides the basic triadic model of sign-object-interpretant relationships, describing how a sign (the representation itself) relates to its object (what the sign stands for), and how this relationship produces an interpretant (the meaning or effect generated in the mind). Greimassian structural semiotics, developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas, built upon structuralist semiotics to offer a distinction between the "form of expression" (how a structure communicates) and the "form of content" (what is communicated). This distinction is central to the analysis, providing a robust approach for decoding architectural communication by examining how architectural elements convey meaning. Lukken and Searle's

adaptation of these theories for architectural settings ensures that the analysis is appropriately tailored to the study of built environments.

Limitations of the Study

This methodological approach does have limitations. The analysis focuses primarily on the visual and spatial aspects of the Porta Mariae and is constrained by the availability of officially documented historical and cultural sources. Furthermore, it considers only observable patterns of use and interaction, without extensive ethnographic or survey data.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a rigorous and coherent framework for interpreting how the Porta Mariae operates as a communicative artifact, showcasing how architectural design serves as a potent medium for expressing religious devotion, historical memory, and cultural identity, making the structure not only a visual landmark but also a meaningful participant in the religious life of the community

Results and Discussion

The semiotic analysis of Porta Mariae reveals how its architectural elements function as a complex system of signs that communicate religious, cultural, and historical meanings. Organized through the dual lenses of form of expression (topological and plastic categories) and form of content (discursive structures and symbolic layers), the findings demonstrate how the structure mediates between devotional narratives, regional identity, and collective memory. The following sections present a systematic decoding of its design, beginning with its formal properties—spatial configuration, materiality, and visual language—before examining its deeper semantic dimensions as a threshold between secular and sacred space. This analysis not only elucidates the gate's communicative strategies but also positions it within broader discourses on religious architecture as a dynamic participant in cultural transmission.

This section systematically decodes the Porta Mariae's design by first documenting its formal properties—spatial configuration, materiality, and visual language—then applying semiotic coding through topological and plastic categories for the 'form of expression' and discursive structures and symbolic layers for the 'form of content.' This rigorous semiotic analysis ultimately synthesizes these coded elements into an interpretive narrative, elucidating the gate's communicative strategies and positioning it within broader discourses on religious architecture as a dynamic participant in cultural transmission. This structured approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how the Porta Mariae communicates its profound religious, cultural, and historical meanings, solidifying its role as a living symbol of Bicolano faith, heritage, and enduring identity, as systematically detailed in the following sections.

1. *Decoding the Messages of the Porta Mariae*

1.1 FORM OF THE EXPRESSION

1.1.1 Topological Category

A. *Position*

As a piece of neoclassical structure, the Porta Mariae can be described as belonging to the classical block type with a rectangular plan. It stands 11 meters high, 18 meters wide, and 4 meters deep. It has a plain facade, accentuated only by four coupled columns supporting an entablature that serves as base for a second tier of the same number but shorter column pairs, and in turn supporting an entablature upon which a 3-meter brass statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, painted in gold, stands flanked by two brass angels blowing their trumpets, also painted in gold. The columns emphasize longitudinal directions, reinforced by the cross-section of the tunnel vaults topping the passageways, which appear like elongated rectangles pointing up. The position of the trumpets of the brass angels, forming an angle of elevation, create an imaginary triangle that further emphasize longitudinality. Meanwhile, the structure itself is horizontal, with an 18-meter base, compared to its 11-meter height. Both the cornice and the architrave run parallel horizontal lines through the two tiers of entablature, giving prominence to horizontality and ground stability of the structure.

B. *Orientation*

The grounds of the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral are surrounded by a concrete fence that opens to both Elias Angeles and Barlin Streets. Coming from the Central Business District

of the City of Naga through Barlin Street, a major throughfare for both foot and vehicular traffic, the shortest route to the Naga Metropolitan Cathedral is through the Porta Mariae. Upon stepping out the 4-meter-long passage, the gates open up to the patio which has a distinct wide paving that leads to the main door of the Cathedral through the neoclassical-style concrete gazebo with stained-glass dome. Entry from Elias Angeles Street is through paths that run perpendicular to the church, while entry through the Porta Mariae directs one to the church. As one approaches the portals, the hugeness of the structure is both felt and seen. The field of vision, inevitably, will be occupied by the Porta Mariae, but subsequently directed forward through to the portal which opens out to the big patio, towards the Cathedral. The depth of the passageway is plain with nothing to catch the eye but the church that it leads to.

1.1.2 Plastic Category

A. Chromatic Category

Originally, the Porta Mariae was not painted. It had the monochromatic color of concrete, which shades darker from finishing, sometimes from moisture, and sometimes from shadows. It has since been painted grey, complementing the dark grey paint of the exterior of the Cathedral. Its columns, however, are painted off-white, shades lighter than the grey color of the building. Still simple and monochromatic, the astragal, the bottom of the capital from the echinus, as well as the torus are painted in darker shade than the column, making good contrast and detail. Linings in the entablature are also painted with contrasting shades. Overall, the simplicity of the building is only accentuated by small details that provide contrast and depth.

B. Eidetic Category

In the second tier of the building, above the arch of the main portal and in between the entablatures, the words 'PORTA MARIAE' are etched in concrete, rectangular embossed panel and below it says, "in commemoration of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia in the Bikol Region (1710-2010)." These too were in all capital letters but presented here as such for easier readability. As pointed out, however, the words are in capital letters, punctuating the words loudly, calling for attention. In addition, just above the main vault, where a keystone is usually located, the logo of the tercentenary is displayed in concrete and as part of the building being an ornament. It consists of a circular plate with embossed artwork, with a crucifix in the background.

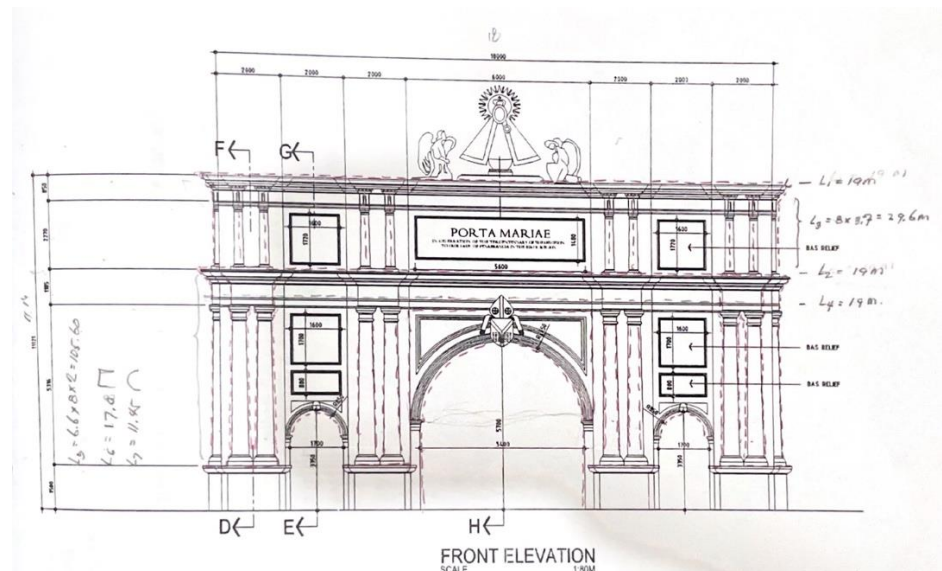


Figure 3. The original architectural drawing submitted by Gian Paolo Priela to the PDMMF and was approved by the Catholic Archbishop of Caceres, courtesy of Wenfredo Firme, Secretary of the Board of the PDMMF, and Mark Paul Bravo.

The smaller portals appear to have semicircular vaults, having arches on the doorway, but their ceilings are flat, rectangular, and plain. A few steps into the smaller portals lead to a doorway. The portal at right has a doorway at right, while the portal at left has a doorway at left. Both doorways lead to staircases that provide ingress and egress to and from the interior of the building, to its mezzanine floor intended to be a Marian museum and souvenir shop. The stairs further lead to the top of the building, right at the foot of the brass image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia and the angels that flank her.

The neoclassical design of the building, which is not common in the City of Naga or the Bikol Region for that matter, evokes images of similar edifices overseas, considered by locals as their own version, as it is often compared to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, France. Of course, in both dimension and detail, it doesn't really compare, except probably for the similarity in the architecture and the commemorative purpose for which the structures were built.

Shown in Figure 3 above is a facsimile of the front elevation architectural drawing originally submitted by the architect Gian Paolo Priela to the PDMMF. The design of the angels that flank the statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia was later changed by the sculptor.

1.2 FORM OF THE CONTENT

1.2.1 Discursive Structures

A. *Discursive Syntax*

- Actorialization

Actorialization is an analytical category that focuses on identifying and describing the actors, agents, or entities implicitly or explicitly represented or referenced by the architectural elements, such as designers, builders, or specific religious figures/institutions. The front panel of the structure identifies it as PORTA MARIAE, or 'Marian gate', and proceeded to explain in bold letters that it was built "in commemoration of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia in the Bikol Region (1710-2010)." In addition, the logo of the tercentenary of the Marian devotion on top of the main arch is also clear identification of its Christian (and Catholic) nature. The City of Naga is predominantly Catholic, and while other Christian denominations exist, it is usually the Christian denomination that provide clear distinction of their non-Catholic nature.

At the right wall of the main passageway, there are two marble plaques. The first plaque is a commemorative marker for the Porta Mariae, which bears the coat of arms of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Caceres, clearly identifying the edifice as a Catholic structure. It explains the rationale for building and the significance of the Porta Mariae, and names Gian Paolo Priela as the architect who designed the new landmark and Noriel Villar as the engineer who oversaw its construction. The second plaque lists the board members of the Peñafrancia Devotees of Metro Manila Foundation, Inc., the group that was formed and incorporated for the sole purpose of building the commemorative gate, led by retired Armed Forces of the Philippines Lt. Gen. Salvador Mison as chairman, the then Philippine National Police Chief Superintendent Tomas Rentoy III as president and chief executive officer, and businessman Antonio Hing as vice president. Bank manager Jose Villamor Mendoza was treasurer, engineer Wenfredo Firme was corporate secretary, and lawyer Manuel Diaz Jr. was corporate counsel. Other members of the board were civic leader and entrepreneur Ronald Rodriguez, banker Sigfredo Rivera, lawyer Antonio Medina, and businessman Henry Trillanes. The Archbishop of Caceres, Most Rev. Msgr. Leonardo Z. Legaspi, OP, DD, and the Rev. Msgr. Zosimo Sañado, HP, the parish priest of St. John the Evangelist, served as advisors to the board. It also mentions the Priscullano Vicaldo as the sculptor who built the brass statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia and the brass angels that flanked her, as well as E. A. Sancho Construction as the contractor that built the edifice.

- Temporalization

Temporalization is an analytical category that examines how architectural elements embed references to time, historical periods, or specific dates, indicating the structure's temporal context, commemoration, or endurance. The neoclassical

architecture of the building may be misleading, as it is mere inspired if not a revival of an architectural style of the past, but the concrete used in its construction is a giveaway of its modernity. The logo of the tercentenary of the Marian devotion on top of the main arch is the first clue of the period during which the structure was built. This is further reinforced by the marker bearing the coat of arms of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Caceres, which declared that the building was inaugurated and blessed by the Archbishop of Caceres on 10 September 2010.

- Spatialization

Spatialization is an analytical category that deals with how space is organized, localized, perceived, and programmed within and around the architectural structure, including its relationship to its surroundings and its functional uses for pedestrian access or large gatherings. In terms of spatial localization, an observer would find the Porta Mariae in the Catholic complex of Parish of St. John the Evangelist, a vast property that is home to the parish office complex, the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral, the Holy Rosary Minor Seminary, and the Naga Parochial School, adjacent to the Daughters of St. Paul, and just across the road from the Palace of the Archbishop of Caceres. In some ways, it blends with and complements the Romanesque appeal of the cathedral, as well as the two-storey brick seminary with Florentine Renaissance ornamentation and elements of classical Greek. As an imposing structure as part of the concrete fence around the complex, however, its hugeness is emphasized. It is also heterotopic to the buildings around it, which are at most two-storey business and residential buildings in a dense environment, dwarfed by the size of the structure and the image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia standing on it, as if watching over the city and her people.

In terms of spatial programming, the Porta Mariae provides pedestrian access to the patio in general. One of the smaller portals can be designated as ingress, while the other of the smaller portals can be designed as egress, to the church grounds, or to the museum and souvenir shop in its mezzanine floor. The smaller portals provide opportunity for controlled but smooth pedestrian flow. Meanwhile, the main entrance can allow bidirectional foot traffic, although if the bollards are removed, it can very well admit vehicles too, albeit in one direction only. During the *traslacion*, an annual tradition to transfer the image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia in a procession from the Basilica Minore to the Naga Cathedral, the main gate of the Porta Mariae admits throngs of people and devotees to the patio for the Eucharistic celebration that follows.

The hugeness of the edifice evokes grandeur as one approaches it. Stepping through the portals gives one the feeling of being enclosed by something bigger than one's self, which is but fleeting through just 4 meters of passageway. As one steps out of the arch on the other side of the gate, the huge patio presents itself, and the path down to the cathedral is well marked by a paved path amidst plain concrete grounds. Stepping through the portals is like leaving the hustle and bustle of a now very crowded and traffic congested central business district, for the peace and tranquility of the church complex. The short stroll from the portal to the main doors of the cathedral provides an opportunity to be calm as preparation for an experience of the divine through prayer and the sacraments.

B. Discursive Semantics

- Figurativization

Figurativization is an analytical category that explores how abstract concepts, values, or ideas are given concrete, figurative expression through the architectural design, style, materials, and features, conveying messages like permanence or welcoming openness. The neoclassical inspiration of the building architecture indicates that it is not of residential or commercial type. Its location at the fringe of the Naga Cathedral grounds and close proximity to the densely populated Barangay Santa Cruz could easily make it blend in were it not for its architectural style. Usually, buildings designed in the style of the late modern period and the industrial revolution, such as neoclassical architecture, are either in academic, governmental, or religious setting. Its location within the complex of the Catholic Parish of St. John the Evangelist is therefore cue to its religious and Catholic nature.

The building, constructed using concrete, shows permanence and indicates that it is expected to withstand time and weather. Just as the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia has lasted 300 years and remains strong among Bikolanos, the building is expected to last too. Naga City is ravaged by many strong typhoons almost year-round, and the sturdy construction of the Porta Mariae appears to have factored that in to ensure it can last many generations.

The main passageway, wide enough to admit a vehicle (although bollards prevent cars from actually driving through), and in general always open, is indication that anyone is welcome, Catholic or otherwise. The two smaller portals complement the main gate and allows passage for individuals and smaller groups, further reinforcing the notion of an invitation to enter. Being breaks in the wall as part of the concrete fence that segregates the grounds dedicated to worship away from the secular public space, the gates send the message that while anyone is invited to come in, one has to take the step in through to the gates.

On top of the arch of the main gate, the logo of the tercentenary celebrations of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia takes the place of where a keystone should be. It clearly marks the building as Catholic and as something that relates to Our Lady. One will never fail to notice the brass image of the virgin Mary and the brass angels flanking her, in the size and proportion of the building itself. This is clear indication of the Catholic and Marian nature of the Porta Mariae, if its name alone is not sufficient.

- *Thematization*

Thematization is an analytical category that identifies and explains the central subjects, motifs, or core messages communicated by the architectural structure, such as the "Marian theme" and its association with maternal love and protection. The Marian theme of the Porta Mariae is evident in many respects. The statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia that stands on top of the edifice is visible from afar. For locals, even those who are not Catholic, the Lady of Peñafrancia is a familiar image. The uninitiated will easily discover that of the multitude of devotional titles of the virgin Mary, it is almost universal in the City of Naga and the provinces of Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, Albay, Sorsogon, Catanduanes, and Masbate that she is Our Lady of Peñafrancia, and to many, their Ina, the mother who loves, protects, and provides.

The building itself is named Porta Mariae, or the gates of Mary, which is proclaimed in big bold letters etched in concrete in the main panel of the facade of the building. The same panel further explains that the structure was built "in commemoration of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia in the Bikol Region (1710-2010)." As a landmark erected to proclaim this devotional milestone, the building embodies the strength and fervor of the Bikolano love for their Ina, which is intended to be handed down to the many generations that will come, concretely, pun intended.

The logo of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia, unveiled and used in 2010 for that purpose, is included as permanent ornament of the building, on top of the main arch. In sum, the Marian nature of the edifice is unmistakable. And in a predominantly Christian country like the Philippines, the Marian theme is synonymous with its Catholic identity. Protestant denominations do not honor the virgin Mary as Catholics do, and thus the Marian theme is clear indication of its Catholic nature.

2. The Surface Level

The Porta Mariae spatially separates the busy public space of downtown Naga City from the relatively peaceful but still very public space of the patio. It distinguishes between the secular and the space where worship can happen, if not simply to provide solace to the weary and an opportunity to escape the hustle and bustle of the day.

It is a set of three gates, one wide main gate flanked by smaller ones on each side, but all of them of the same depth. These gates provide the public with access to the Cathedral grounds, but because they are primarily pedestrian passageways, anyone entering through them will have to be on foot, disengaged from their vehicles. The gates mark where travel ends, and the journey to church begins. While it is true that the patio and cathedral grounds serve many other public purposes, from early morning walks for exercise to any-time-of-day leisure visits and meet

ups, the primary purpose of the gates is to provide public access to the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral and its grounds, a place where the community can gather to worship the divine.

The depth of the building requires anyone using its gates for passage will have to take positive action to traverse 4 meters to emerge on the other side onto the patio and the Cathedral grounds. It is still some distance from the church, but the pavement offers a path through well-kept grass directing one towards the main doors of the Cathedral.

In addition to its portal function, the Porta Mariae could in itself be a destination. Both tourists and locals come for photos, and the museum in its mezzanine could attract visitors too. As one of the new landmarks in the City of Naga, it can serve as beacon that marks the exact or nearby location of a goal. Its size and height make it visible from several city blocks away, and thus could provide orientation cue that can be used to inform heading and direction.

3. The Deep Level

The dimensions of the Porta Mariae projects grandeur, but it is not huge enough for it to be mistaken as a place for community worship or assembly. Despite its architectural features, it is after all, simply a gate. But it is not an ordinary gate. It is a Marian gate. Its Marian character is asserted through its name, through the embossed panel in its facade, through the logo of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia, through the marble marker bearing the seal of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Caceres, and through the statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia on top of the structure, flanked by angels with their trumpets that are usually associated with praise and jubilation.

Beyond its segregating function, the Porta Mariae also extends a clear invitation to the public to enter the Cathedral grounds. Notably, it serves as the primary gateway to the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral from the bustling central business district and nearby residential and commercial areas via Barlin Street. This is rich in symbolism. For Catholics, a good way to Jesus Christ is through his mother Mary, which St. Louis Grignion de Montfort popularized in the phrase 'to Jesus through Mary.' Similarly, the only way to the church, where one can find Jesus Christ in the sacrament, is through Our Lady of Peñafrancia and the Marian gate upon which she stands.

Built in concrete, the Porta Mariae asserts permanence.

INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

"Porta Mariae", the name by which the building is called, is Latin which literally means "gate of Mary" or "Mary's gate". The Porta Mariae is really a gate, albeit architecturally different from the usual gate one would expect. In fact, it consists of three gates: one sufficiently wide, and two that are much narrower. In contrast to its surrounding religious buildings which are named in English, there is no apparent reason for using Latin except that the tradition of holy doors and triumphal arches date back to the very early beginnings of the Catholic Church when Latin was still the *lingua franca*. Use of Latin in modern times add a more serious tone, perhaps suggesting solemnity, and even a tinge of mystery (see Figure 4 for illustration).

The Marian nature of the edifice is apparent. The size of the statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia (and the two angels at her sides) makes it very prominent that utility of the building itself as a passageway can be conflated with its role as pedestal for the image of Ina. She is the highlight of the structure, not the gates. That the "Mariae" in the concrete panel engraving that announces the structure to be the "Porta Mariae" means "Mary" is almost intuitive, particularly to Catholics who, even if they do not speak Latin, know from tradition, such as for example prayers and inscriptions in sacred objects, who "Mariae" refers to. The prominent statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia further underscores the monument's Marian identity and its role as a focal point of regional devotion.

The building's neoclassical architectural style, with its characteristic symmetry, clean lines, and Greco-Roman influence, was a deliberate choice. This style was selected for its ability to evoke timeless dignity and sacred grandeur, conveying ideals of harmony, virtue, and permanence that are strongly associated with the Virgin Mary in Catholic theology. Furthermore, its clarity, balance, and restraint made it particularly appropriate for a public shrine that required universal legibility, dignity, and stability, qualities fitting for a maternal figure revered for her constancy, purity, and protective presence.

This deliberate choice of an enduring visual grammar also aligns with the timeless values of Catholicism and resists contemporary trends. This choice further supports the monument's purpose to communicate the perfection of God through its grand scale, simple geometric forms, and symmetry. While the architectural style speaks of simplicity, and features a plain facade accentuated only by four coupled columns, its simplicity is only accented by small details that provide contrast and depth, ensuring it is neither bland nor disinteresting. It is aesthetically pleasing and just sufficiently interesting to not distract.

The Catholic nature of the building is not difficult to infer from its location. It is, after all, part of the complex of a major Catholic parish in the heart of the Bikol region. Its being Christian is communicated by the crucifix which is part of the logo of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady, and its being Marian is clear distinction of Catholicism from protestant Christian denominations.

In addition, the choice of its robust block design and concrete material signals stability and permanence, as previously discussed, reflecting the enduring 300-year devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia and providing a symbol of unwavering support for the faithful in times of uncertainty.

The columns, the arched gates, and the direction of the trumpets of the brass angels that flank Our Lady all indicate verticality, which is generally interpreted as symbolically reaching out to the heavens or an aspiration to connect with the divine. Not to be missed here is the role of the virgin Mary. She literally stands between the sky, which is metaphor for heaven, and the ground below. It should also be noted that the image of Our Lady is actually carrying the child Jesus. While there is emphasis on the role of Our Lady as the mother of Bikol, owing to the filial nature of the Bikolano and the great reverence mothers are given in a Bikolano household, her role as mother of Jesus, first and foremost, is what drew her close to the Bikolano. For the Bikolano faithful (and all Catholics for that matter), great love and respect to Mary the mother of Jesus Christ will be very pleasing to Jesus Christ himself. Catholics believe in the intercession of Mary, and in fact, one of her many titles is as the mediatrix.

The role of Mary as intercessor or mediatrix is

further reinforced symbolically by the physical and spiritual journey implied by passing through the Porta Mariae to reach the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral. As articulated by St. Louis Grignion de Montfort, the path 'to Jesus through Mary' is deeply embedded in Catholic tradition. This architectural arrangement thus concretizes the belief that Mary serves as the gateway to Christ, particularly for those seeking Him in the sacraments within the church. There are, of course, other access points to the church via the gates along Elias Angeles Street, and this too asserts that while there are other ways to follow Jesus Christ, the certainty that the Mary leads the faithful to her son is no less.

It is also noteworthy that the building is commemorative of the tercentenary of the devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia in the Bikol region. It plays a role in the collective memory of the Bikolanos and marks a milestone in their lived faith. It is designed to house a small museum where memorabilia and other objects will be kept so that many more generations of Bikolanos will find a connection to their shared heritage.

4. Architectural Semiotics of Hope

There is no doubt that the Porta Mariae has enhanced the socio-cultural life in the City of Naga. As an architectural piece, it has become one of the places to see and visit in Naga. It has contributed to the aesthetics of the parish complex and is now a landmark that defines the cityscape.

Its Marian and Catholic character is evident, yet it is not a church, or a building dedicated for worship. On the other hand, it complements the Metropolitan Naga Cathedral and does not duplicate its intended purpose, as a small chapel would, where the Eucharist or any of the sacraments, can be celebrated. It is therefore symbolic of the role of Mary in the Catholic Church which protestant denominations usually misinterpret. The devotion to Mary complements the faith journey of the Catholic. She is honored but is not worshipped.

A semiotic reading of the Porta Mariae reveals the following messages:

Coded into the neoclassical architecture features of grand scale, simple geometric forms, and symmetry is the message of the perfection of God. The longitudinal features of the building send a message of yearning and the aspiration to reach out to this perfection.

The message of peace is coded in the relative tranquility found within the cathedral grounds, a sanctuary distinctly separated from the bustling secular public space by the imposing Porta Mariae. As an integral part of the concrete fence, the arch provides controlled access for pedestrians. An intentional few steps are required to traverse its gates, facilitating a deliberate transition from the city's chaos to the peaceful spiritual environment within.

Coded into the brass statue of Our Lady of Peñafrancia, known to most Bikolanos as Ina, is the message of motherly love, a mother who guides, a mother who protects, and a mother who nourishes. Ina is the Bikolano's prompt succor. In times of need, when only a miracle can save, the Bikolano faithful seek help from their Ina. Stories of miracles have been handed down from generation to generation, and though there hasn't been a documented case of anything phenomenal like a blind person regaining sight or a disabled person being able to walk again, many devotees can attest to the many ways Ina made a difference in their lives, from passing examinations and life changing achievements to miraculous cures and deliverance.

The horizontal lines along both the cornice and the architrave through the two tiers of entablature indicate ground stability. It reminds the faithful that in times of need, there is their Ina, a mother with solid footing they can hold on to when the ground is shaky.

The overarching message of the Porta Mariae, however, is that of hope. Mary is a symbol of hope. Through her, Jesus Christ the Savior was born. The image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia is that of Mary carrying the child Jesus. It is not just as if she is standing over a grand pedestal watching over her people, it is as if she is presenting her child to the world too, announcing that she is carrying the Savior. The angels that flank her are blowing their trumpets not so much as to praise her, but to announce the jubilation that she is carrying Jesus Christ for everyone to see.

The message of hope is further reinforced by the gates that lead to the church. The gates are open invitation to the public to come and step through, to go where the pavement leads: the front door of the house of God.

This invitation is extended despite the Porta Mariae's monumental scale and solid mass, which might appear to have relatively small openings compared to other triumphal arches. Standing at 11 meters high, 18 meters wide, and 4 meters deep, its hugeness is both felt and seen, deliberately evoking grandeur as a statement of both civic pride and spiritual commitment. The choice of concrete and its block design manifest stability and permanence, signifying its fortitude to withstand time and the region's frequent typhoons, much like the enduring devotion to Our Lady of Peñafrancia. While the main passageway itself is just 4 meters deep, requiring pedestrians to "take positive action to traverse" it, this depth is intentional. The design functions not merely as a broad thoroughfare but as a physical and symbolic passage and a pilgrimage threshold, embodying Mary's traditional title as the "Gate of Heaven" (Porta Caeli). It serves to spatially separate the busy public space of downtown Naga City from the relatively peaceful church grounds, distinguishing between the secular and the sacred, and prompting a brief, reflective transition from the city's hustle and bustle to the tranquility of the divine. The multi-gate configuration—one wide main gate for bidirectional flow and two smaller portals for controlled individual passage—further reinforces this intentional, welcoming yet transitional function.

Conclusion

This study's semiotic analysis, utilizing the framework developed by Lukken and Searle, conclusively reveals the Porta Mariae not merely as a commemorative structure but as a dynamically communicative artifact, actively mediating between profound religious, cultural, and historical meanings. The strategic choice of a neoclassical triumphal arch design – characterized by symmetry, clean lines, and a deliberate, monumental poise – eschews fleeting trends for an enduring visual grammar, thereby conveying timeless values of sacred grandeur, permanence, and stability. Far from being bland or disinteresting, its aesthetic precision is just sufficiently interesting to not distract, focusing attention on its intended role in communicating the perfection of God and providing a concrete symbol of stability and fortitude amidst life's uncertainties and regional challenges. Furthermore, the Porta Mariae functions as a profound pilgrimage threshold. Its massive and solid form with seemingly small openings, compared to other triumphal arches, deliberately requires a positive, intentional step to traverse. This physical act symbolizes the spiritual journey from the secular city's chaos to the sacred tranquility of the Cathedral grounds, powerfully enacting the Catholic theological concept of 'ad Jesum per Mariam' (to Jesus through Mary). Thus, the monument's design, from its imposing height of 11 meters to its specific gate configuration, serves as a powerful materialization of Naga City's enduring faith, heritage, and identity, positioning it as a living testament and an active participant in cultural transmission and collective memory.

This research significantly contributes to filling a critical gap in the academic literature on religious monumental architecture within the Philippine context. By meticulously applying the rigorous Lukken and Searle semiotic framework, this study has not only demonstrated that structures like the Porta Mariae are far from inert physical forms but are, in fact, active, sophisticated agents of cultural communication, embodying deeply resonant ontological, historical, and sociopolitical meanings. Our detailed analysis, moving from the tangible architectural elements to their profound symbolic content, concretely illustrates how the Porta Mariae functions as a powerful conduit for messages of hope, maternal love, and divine guidance. It emerges not merely as a visual icon but as a deeply symbolic space, a tangible marker of sacred territory, a living vessel of collective memory, and an enduring testament to the Marian devotion of the Bikolano people, powerfully illustrating the ongoing negotiation of meaning within evolving socio-cultural landscapes. This approach underscores the urgency and necessity of semiotic analyses in understanding how architecture shapes and reflects lived faith, communal identity, and postcolonial heritage.

However, the study is not without limitations. It focused primarily on visual and spatial characteristics and relied on documented sources of historical and cultural data. The absence of ethnographic or survey-based research limited the analysis to observable behavior and symbolic interpretation, without incorporating user perspectives or experiential feedback.

Future research may expand on these findings by integrating qualitative data from pilgrims and visitors, thereby exploring how the structure's intended meanings are received, interpreted, or even contested by its users. Comparative studies of similar religious monuments across the Philippines or in other Marian pilgrimage sites could also shed light on broader architectural patterns and their role in shaping communal identities. Such directions would enhance our understanding of how architecture functions not only as a symbolic medium but also as a lived and contested space within the dynamics of faith and heritage.

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