

Ideology of Justice and Dynamics of Power Relations: A Semiotic Investigation of Philippine Courtroom Architecture

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Abstract

The physical arrangement of a courtroom plays a critical role in the questioning process engaged in by the courtroom players, and impacts on the discourse of each of the interactants. As is often the case, power is wielded by the interrogators, or the “powerful,” who control the public discourse, thus putting the interrogated, or the “powerless,” at a disadvantage. The question of power in the courtroom remains to be controversial especially since it beleaguers the lay people. It is not only the language used by the courtroom players where the exercise of power and control can be manifested. Even physical space which describes how the judges, lawyers, suspects and witnesses sit themselves in the courtroom reflect power asymmetry. Hence, the way courtroom interrogators are positioned viz-a-viz those who are interrogated may prove that power and dominance is indeed enacted and legitimated. Using Branco’s (2010) framework on courthouse architecture, this paper seeks to analyze how power asymmetry extends to the non-verbal aspects of the ways of the advantaged lawyers/judges and the disadvantaged lay by examining the courtroom layout of select Philippine courts occupied by judges, lawyers, suspects and witnesses during courtroom interactions. The study is qualitative in nature as it provides a descriptive analysis of the arrangement of the physical structure of select courts in the Philippines that reflect power and control of those involved in the litigation process. At least seven types of courtroom physical plans were analyzed in this study – four regional trial courts in the City of Manila, another regional trial court in Malolos, Bulacan and two other courtrooms in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya. Two moot courts were likewise examined to validate the findings in the actual courtrooms.

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