



ECO VERSUS EGO

Hitesh Mehta rallies major movers in a conference on ecotourism design and planning

WIDENING CIRCLES OF COMPASSION

To create harmony out of the tension between tourism development and environmental conservation, designers and planners must cultivate kinship with the site

Participants of the Ec lodge Planning and Design Charette workshop do a physical and metaphysical site analysis of Flor's Garden, the subject of their design charette.



One area within the property that people felt attracted to is a wide, green space shaded by several large mango trees. “It was peaceful and we felt it had good energy concentrated in the center,” said Sudarshan Khadka, spokesman of the Botones group. For this reason, the group said they were considering therapeutic activities in this area of the property.

On the third day of the workshop, Hitesh Mehta and Mina Gabor brought the participants to Flor’s Farm and Garden, a private five-hectare property for family outings. With a design charette as culminating activity of the workshop, participants would be asked to redesign Flor’s Garden into an ecolodge or event space using the principles of ecolodge planning and design. To prepare for the charette, participants spent the day there to get acquainted with the site, the owner and her philosophy, and to appreciate what the place has to offer as the knowledgeable staff served up tasty, organic Filipino *merienda* and meals (including *lechon*, which they insisted was healthy because the farm’s pigs eat only organically grown food).

The owner, banker Flor Gozon Tariela, welcomed the participants, explaining her advocacies of natural farming and educating people about edible and medicinal herbs. Over at her educational garden,

Jardin ng Buhay, she gave the participants examples of the nutritional and medicinal benefits of weeds such as *botones* and *katakataka*, which she calls “weedibles” and “weedicinals.”

As the group toured the grounds, Mehta asked the participants to be sensitive to the site and try to sense whether certain areas had strong or weak, positive or negative energy. “Where do you feel naturally drawn? Where does it feel peaceful?” he asked. “Those are important things to remember when designing.”

A lot was accomplished that day: measuring and establishing boundaries, drawing the base plan, carrying out physical and metaphysical site analyses, and finally, preparing site analysis plans for presentation the next day. Anthony Arbias of the Philippine Native Plant Conservation Society did a quick survey of the plant species in Flor’s Garden, and informed the workshop participants of particular plants in the property that were native and endemic,

and therefore to be encouraged; and which ones were exotic and invasive alien species, to be controlled, removed or destroyed.

Experiencing the site

The highlight of the day was the metaphysical site analysis using a six senses approach, an exercise that Mehta does at all the sites he works on, before he draws even a single line.

The design charette is a redesign of Flor’s Garden into an ecolodge or event space. It currently has one big rest house, a swimming pool, gazebo, cabana, nipa hut, two tents, educational gardens, fishponds, a hanging bridge, vermiculture and a grill area.



“My mission is to convert your soul to the natural world out there,” declared Mehta, adding: “My mission is to turn you into holistic designers and developers.” For Mehta, designing and developing holistically goes beyond working at the outset in multidisciplinary teams—although that in itself is vital to the successful planning of ecolodges. The cornerstone of ecotourism and building ecolodges, says Mehta, is an attitude of respect for all, which is very similar to the ethical principle of *ahimsa* or non-violence towards other living creatures. And because one cannot protect that which one does not understand, what designers, developers and property owners need to develop, Mehta asserts, is the ability to empathize with living and even non-living things. He quotes Albert Einstein:

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us ‘universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Sense of place

And so the architects, planners, developers and resort owners, including members of BluPrint’s team, each went off on their own to see, hear, touch, smell, taste and feel the site. We were told to pick a spot, and for about 10-15 minutes, focus only on seeing and looking at our surroundings, blocking out the other senses, and jot down our impressions, uncensored, on a notepad. We were encouraged to notice details that we normally might overlook. The same process would be done for each of the other senses (although understandably, people spent the shortest time on tasting), always writing down our stream of consciousness. The most revelatory and transcendent part of the exercise was the feeling part, when people spent time *being* one with the site. “Be a bird, be a tree, be the ground, an ant or a stone,” Mehta told us. “Feel the environment around you through the perspective of that being. How do you feel? If you want to write a poem or a song, please do so.”

One of the aspects of site analysis that the workshop did not do but is absolutely necessary before designing an ecolodge is an analysis of local cultural elements, both past and present, at the site and its vicinity. It is important to understand local traditions and folklore, clothing, dance, music, ceremonies, sacred grounds, etc., to actively avoid negative impacts on local culture.



Hitesh Mehta’s book, *International Ecolodge Guidelines* has exhaustive lists of what one must do to conduct a proper site inventory and physical analysis. The group had only a few hours to analyze the climate (sunlight, temperature, wind direction, etc.), land (physiography, soils, hydrology, etc.), vegetation (native and exotic species, vegetation types, precise locations), and wildlife (native and introduced fauna, transient fauna, etc.)

Compassion and empathy

The class was divided into four groups named Katakataka, Botones, Weedibles and Weedicinals. Although most participants seemed self-conscious or bashful at the start of the exercise, by the end, everyone embraced it wholeheartedly, and appeared to be refreshed and reflective. Perhaps because there were

some signs of degradation in certain areas of the property, particularly the creek, which we were told has been drying up through the years, the six senses impressions that the groups shared the following day were a mix of happy, serene, nostalgic and melancholic. Here are excerpts:

Sight: Creation, decay and struggle

- Railroad ties showing blotches of deterioration and scars from utility
- Banana plant in various stages of decay
- Ficus crawling up a tree, its roots grappling for a hold
- Water spiders skimming the surface
- Tiny guppies swimming upstream but getting nowhere
- Play of light and shadows as tree branches shift and clouds pass
- ‘Blackness’ from the overwhelming sound of blood rushing when ears are covered
- Textured striations carved out on the rock by the water

- White wisps of clouds like fine hairs on a child’s cheek

Sound: Nature, man and machine

- Gravel crunching under the wheels of a passing car
- Thrumming motorcycle engine that seems to go on forever
- Dog barking
- Birds call out, screeching
- Water is tranquil as it trickles down the stream
- Bubbles go plop, plop, plop like small bamboo chimes but softer, rolling as they sink into themselves
- An old man singing old ballads triggers a memory of old songs *yaya* used to sing
- Bamboo striking each other—a symphony, a gentle drumbeat of mother’s fingers playing across her pregnant belly
- Leaves rustling triggers memories of weekend lunches and oil sizzling, fried *maya-maya* with steaming white rice
- Rooster crows in the distance
- Shissing leaves as a snake slithers away
- The sound of infiniteness

MEHTA CHALLENGED PARTICIPANTS TO “MAKE THE PRACTICE OF ARCHITECTURE NOTHING LESS THAN A PATH TO HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS, A PATH TO GOD.”

Smell: Birth and death

- Leaves smell fresh, of life and summer
- The air smells transparent, like pristine light
- Fallen leaves smell like life and water
- Burning coal brings pleasant memories
- Earth smells of rust
- Muddy water smells like blood
- Rock smells like a thousand years
- Petrol smell near cistern
- Dust by the roadside
- Sun baking the earth
- Manure, unseen organisms toiling

Touch: Contrasts

- Cold, silky moss on a rough branch
- Grittiness of silt, smoothness of water flowing
- Hot and cold rocks
- Dimples, pimples and grooves
- Sharp thorns
- Hairy plants, waxy leaves
- Rough riprap

- Dried leaves feel old and tired
- Wet leaves feel like wet clothes
- A giant red ant walking like needles on the skin

Taste

- Air tastes clean
- Leaves are minty and wansuy-like
- Water is cool and soothing under the sun
- Brown water, metallic and menacing?
- Bitter but fresh tasting leaves
- Sweet leaves of tomato

Feeling

One of the participants, architect Charm Cabredo, chose to be one of the boulders in the middle of the creek. She lay down on it, face to the sky, unmoving for several minutes. Her poem is at the bottom of this page.

Higher Consciousness

“And we were just in Antipolo—imagine if we did this in a pristine site!” one of the participants told BluPrint.

Skeptics may scoff, but it stands to reason that owners, developers, designers and planners will tread more lightly on the land when they feel a kinship with the land and the creatures in it, which is why metaphysical site analysis, in addition to rigorous physical site analysis, is very effective in helping ensure that the ecolodge and the experiences one designs for it will be in harmony with the site.

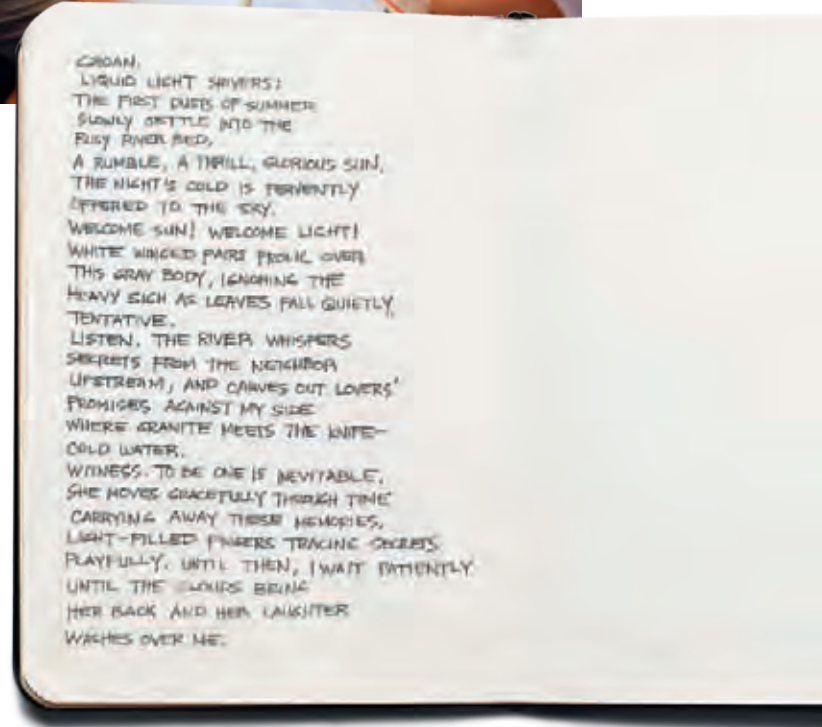
The designer’s challenge is to create this harmony despite the

conflicting interests of tourism development and environmental protection. In a book he co-edited, *International Ecolodge Guidelines*, Mehta sets an even higher standard. “A fundamental goal for any ‘eco’ project,” he says, “is that the development of the site must leave the site better off after development than before.”

After all the teams had presented their physical and metaphysical site analyses,

Mehta raised the bar yet again, quoting from Christopher Alexander’s book, *The Luminous Ground*, and challenging participants to “make the practice of architecture nothing less than a path to higher consciousness, a path to God.” With that appeal, Mehta charged the teams to work on their site plans and perspectives for presentation to a jury on the last day of the workshop. ■

With regard to physical structure siting, Mehta repeatedly reminded participants, “Buildings should not compete with the surrounding plant and landforms, which, after all, are the ecolodge’s main attractions.”



GODAN,
 LIQUID LIGHT SHIVERS:
 THE FIRST DUSTS OF SUMMER
 SLOWLY SETTLE INTO THE
 RUSY RIVER BED,
 A RUMBLE, A THRILL, GLORIOUS SUN,
 THE NIGHT'S COLD IS FERVENTLY
 OFFERED TO THE SKY,
 WELCOME SUN! WELCOME LIGHT!
 WHITE WINGED PAIRS PECK OVER
 THIS GRAY BODY, IGNORING THE
 HEAVY SIGH AS LEAVES FALL QUIETLY,
 TENTATIVE.
 LISTEN, THE RIVER WHISPERS
 SECRETS FROM THE NEIGHBOR
 UPSTREAM, AND CARVES OUT LOVERS'
 PROMISES AGAINST MY SIDE
 WHERE GRANITE MEETS THE KNIFE-
 COLD WATER.
 WITNESS. TO BE ONE IS NEVITABLE,
 SHE MOVES GRACEFULLY THROUGH TIME
 CARRYING AWAY THESE MEMORIES,
 LIGHT-FILLED PINNERS TRACING SECRETS
 PLAYFULLY. UNTIL THEN, I WAIT PATIENTLY
 UNTIL THE CLOUDS BRING
 HER BACK AND HER LAUGHTER
 WATCHES OVER ME.

“Site design,” says Hitesh Mehta, “as compared to master site planning, is specific to the property on which the ecolodge is to be developed. The main objective of the site design process is to balance human needs with the viability of natural systems.”



A CHARETTE THEY WON'T FORGET

Participants propose masterplans to transform a garden estate into an ecotourism destination



Originating from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in the 19th century, charette (derived from the French word “chariot” or “cart”) is a powerful problem-solving tool in site planning, where individual ideas are gathered to arrive at a consensus solution. Hitesh Mehta argues that “asking an architect to do site planning is like asking a dentist to do heart surgery,” that’s why architects have to consult with various stakeholders and allied professionals to produce a holistic and inclusive masterplan.

After a series of lectures and a day of channeling nature's energies in a metaphysical six senses site analysis, it was time to test the mettle of every participant in translating their impressions and abstract ideas into physical plans. On the afternoon of the fourth day of the Ecolodge Planning and Design Workshop, Hitesh Mehta took the role of task master as he led the four groups—the Weedibles, Katakataka, Weedicals and Botones—into a time critical and high pressure design exercise known as charette. Charette is an intensive collaborative session where a group tackles a design or planning problem within a given timeframe. To get feedback, the output of a charette is presented publicly before a jury or the community.

The brief was straightforward: Propose a masterplan for an ecolodge at Flor's Farm & Garden in Antipolo. The day before, participants toured the property and conducted site analyses both physical and metaphysical. The principles learned during the previous three and a half days must reflect on the plan, Mehta challenged the participants. To come up with a plan in 24 hours for a five-hectare property would be a feat in itself, since in practice that would require an environmental planning license separate from an architecture license. Parameters were laid out including space requirements and areas. The program should contain:

1. Parking
2. Entry pavilion – 9 sqm
3. Interpretation center
 - Ticket office/Information desk/Lobby – 25 sqm
 - Administration office – 9 sqm
 - Gift shop/Crafts shop – 15 sqm
 - Exhibition areas (History, Nature, Culture, Temporary) – 400 sqm

- Public toilets – 12 sqm
 - Internal theater – 40 sqm
 - Indoor & outdoor café – 20 sqm
 - Kitchen/Store – 20 sqm
4. Outdoor amphitheater – 40 sqm
 5. Guard house – 4 sqm
 6. Two garden pavilions – 18 sqm
 7. Hoya sanctuary, scented garden, *Jardin ng Buhay*, wet garden, kiddie garden, dry garden, butterfly garden, medicinal garden, water ponds and fountains, vermiculture farm.

What would normally take a couple of months in practice was condensed into a full working day exercise forcing participants to live or relive those agonizing years in design studio. Younger architects had to do without their computers, just pen and paper. The senior ones had no staff to rely on; they had to produce detailed drawings themselves. For business owners without prior experience in physical planning, it was baptism by fire. Even workshop organizer and seasoned architect Manny Miñana wasn't spared from the activity, and he jokingly tried to bribe a juror with canapés to get him to take it easy on his group.

By the eleventh hour, everyone was rushing last minute changes. One by one, members of the first group stood on in a firing line before a jury. Mehta himself played no part in the judging; he was merely there as an arbiter. Every group was now on their own. Landscape architect and former BluPrint editor-in-chief Paulo Alcazaren did not mince words as he led the rest of the jurors, Flor's Garden owner, Flor Gozon Tarriela, former tourism secretary Mina Gabor, glass sculptor and architect Ramon Orlina, Philippine Native Plant Conservation Society president Anthony Arbias, and socio-ecological entrepreneur and bamboo bike builder, Bryan McClelland. Wasting no time, Alcazaren asked questions in rapid-fire as soon as the group

took the microphone. "Where's the scale?" "Where is North?" "Where is the entourage?"

The Weedibles Group

The first group set the stage with a short presentation of a conceptual paper model made by Joey Yupangco that intrigued everyone. They explained that such abstraction represented the feelings they want visitors to experience at Flor's Garden. Based on their proposal, the site would be accessed via a drop-off area adjacent to the main road. Guests leave their cars in the parking area tucked away on the eastern corner of the site. From the Entry Pavilion, where guests register, the Interpretation Center with its iconic leaf-shaped roof will easily be noticed. The Interpretation Center serves as the site's

anchor, around which all other structures are oriented. The group proposed incorporating rainwater harvesting and gray water recycling systems in the building. Because cars would not be allowed beyond the drop-off and parking area, guests would have to walk their way through the property using the paved path walks. Whether such paths would be provided with cover was not immediately clear. The amphitheater sits on the southwest area. Beside it are a Wedding Pavilion and scented garden. The rest of the gardens, which the group envisioned to be places of meditation, are strategically located on the northwest where it is quietest, being furthest away from the road. All looked well, except that the group got their North orientation wrong.

THE WEEDIBLES GROUP



Abstraction in paper of the feeling that the Weedibles group wants visitors to experience while at Flor's Garden



The Katakataka Group

This group started with a presentation of a bubble diagram showing their study of the interrelationships of the required spaces. They provided an access road along the northeast side of the lot and a service road on the southwest side.

The small entry pavilion is incorporated into the Interpretation Center where guests can register, walk around to view the exhibits, and exit to the amphitheater that showcases Flor’s Hoya flowers collection. In terms of aesthetics, their concept was similar to that of the Weedibles Group, where they proposed a sculptural roof inspired by the shape of a leaf. Employing vernacular aesthetic language, they specified bamboo as the main roofing and cladding material of the buildings. They also designed the roof to hold photovoltaic cells as a source of renewable energy. The group highlighted waste management in their presentation. Assuming that there are no connections to community sewage lines, they recommended a three-chamber septic vault in conjunction with a reed-bed sewage system. The reed-bed would handle liquid effluent pumped from the septic tank, and allow bacteria, fungi and algae to naturally remove contaminants from the wastewater.

The Weedicals Group

The Interpretation Center was an easily recognizable landmark of the group’s masterplan, the first building guests would see along the road. The decision to do it this way was a financial one, according to the group. They wanted to attract visitors to make money for Flor’s Garden. The Interpretation Center’s location would also allow the building to act as the garden’s buffer from the noise of tricycles and other vehicles plying the road. There is a separate entrance going to the

lodges, which are located at the back of the property. The amphitheater is on the west surrounded by thick greenery to hide the service yard, behind which is its own discrete service access. In essence, the structures are sited around the centrally located garden area that features a lagoon as an axis. This arrangement gives the green spaces an impression of importance. From the Interpretation Hall, guests can take the paved pathway to tour the garden areas. The site is perfectly legible and the meandering layout of the pathway allows people to notice the various focal points in the area, encouraging them to walk slower and experience the place.

The Botones Group

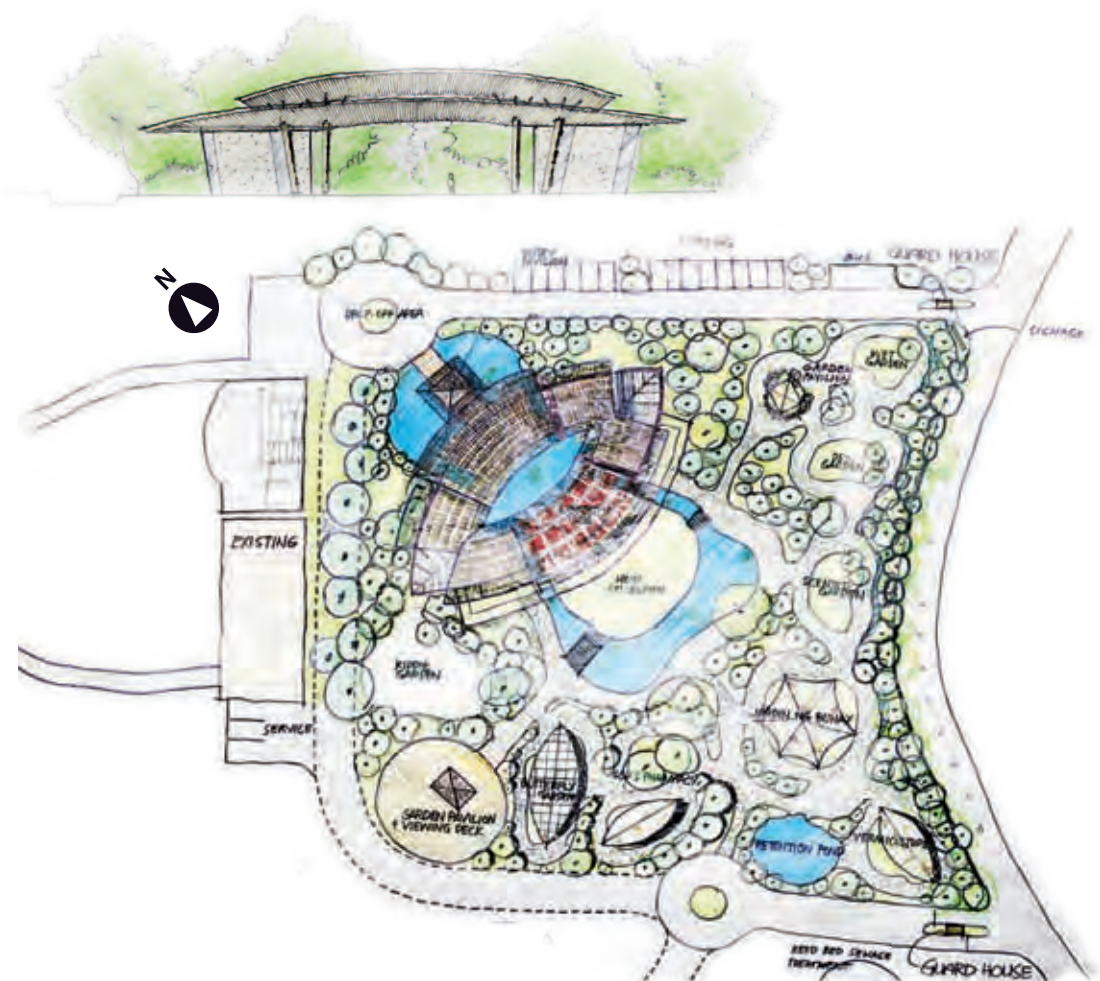
Their proposed masterplan is shrouded with greenery. The buildings are conservatively designed and do not command much attention, compared to the designs of the other three groups. After all, they reasoned, the setting, not the structure, is the highlight of the experience that Flor’s Garden is offering. There is an access road on the northeast portion of the site, marked by two roundabouts on opposite corners. The Interpretation Hall is made mainly of bamboo with a rainwater harvesting system. The site plan has no distinct focal point and the transition spaces are somewhat vague, but the vast manicured garden spaces at the center provides

various interesting spots for solitary reflection as well as social interaction.

Issues raised

Despite the stress and pressure, the exercise proved to be a fruitful, enjoyable and invigorating endeavor, especially as it allowed for a highly interactive exchange of ideas and opinions between the jury, the presenters, and their audience. For example, a landowner mentioned that the groups tucked most of the toilet facilities far away from the assembly areas, making it hard for elder guests to walk the long distances. She also pointed out the lack of provisions for the handicapped.

THE KATAKATAKA GROUP

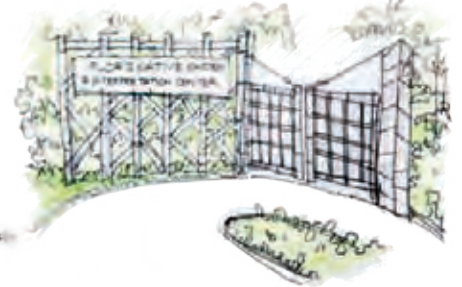


THE WEEDICINALS GROUP



- | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 UNLOADING BAY | 10 SCENTED GARDEN | 16 EXIT GATE |
| 2 MAIN ENTRY | 11 HOVA SANCTUARY | 17 PUBLIC RD. |
| 3 MAIN INTERPRETATION HALL | 12 GARDEN TERRACE | 18 ANTIPOLO TREE (EXISTING) |
| 4 CENTRAL GARDEN & LAGOON | 13 SWIMMING POOL | 19 WEDDING PAVILLION |
| 5 AMPHITHEATER | 14 MAIN LODGE | |
| 6 JARDIN NI BUNAY | 15 EXISTING KITCHEN | |
| 7 KIDDE GARDEN | 16 SERVICE BAY | |
| 8 BUTTERFLY GARDEN | 17 MAIN GATE TO LODGE | |
| 9 WET & DRY GARDEN | 18 DRIVEWAY | |

THE BOTONES GROUP



Another participant raised the issue of garbage disposal. She suggested that aside from providing a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), trash bins must be placed in the visitor areas. This prompted someone to ask whether they would not become eyesores and distraction from the scenery. If hidden, how would people find it? For his part, Ramon Orlina noticed that none of the groups incorporated public artwork as part of the landscape design. He argued that art contributes to the making of a place. Meanwhile, Bryan McClelland asked the groups in jest, “Why is there no parking for bamboo bicycles?”

One of the controversial issues discussed was the proposal of one group to uproot the mature exotic trees in the property, particularly some old mango trees (Yes, mango trees are alien to the Philippines!), and replace them with native ones. Mehta and Arbias were all for it, although cautioning that such decisions must be made on a “tree-by-tree basis,” and must be carried out by experienced professionals. For them, exotic trees are still exotic, whether they are one or 100 years old. As discussed by Arbias in an earlier lecture, exotic species disrupt and fragment the existing ecosystem of an area. And with many of our plant and animal life endangered, Arbias says, we must all the more plant only trees native to each area, to help their ecosystems recover. Asked about his experience overseeing the physical redevelopment of districts in central Singapore in the early 2000s, Alcazaren recounted how they balled up hundreds of exotic trees and replaced them with natives, because the government was determined to revitalize the country’s ecosystems. The reason we don’t use native trees in our developments, Alcazaren said, is that local suppliers do not have enough native trees of

the size and quantity required by developers, leaving them with “no choice but to get exotic trees from suppliers in countries like Malaysia.”

Takeaways

It was a long and nerve-racking day but no one could imagine a better way to cap the five-day learning experience. Architects were able to reassess their knowledge in site planning as an activity distinct from architectural design, while landowners and businessmen were able to appreciate the complexities of property development and the various forces at play aside from profit. Miñana took the opportunity to thank the groups including Hitesh Mehta and Mina Gabor, and wished that everyone would be bringing something home aside from a certificate. He encouraged all participants to share what they had learned to their colleagues and superiors at work, in the hope that as teams they could influence decisions and help steer their companies towards best practices in ecological design.

Gone—or at least, nowhere in sight—were the nagging doubts that many participants had shared earlier in the week about the feasibility of designing authentic ecologies and developments that don’t harm the environment. Bar none, the mood was confident and positively ebullient.

For Cyrene Reyes, a permaculture farmer in La Union, the workshop affirmed her conviction that the way she wants to develop her farm “is on the right track.” She expressed her surprise at finding out how detached many architects are from the projects they design. “They’re the last to be brought into a project,” she said, to which a landscape architect piped in, “No, we’re the last to be brought in!”

For agriculturist and real estate developer Billy Gualberto, the workshop was one among many steps he has been taking in a long journey of conversion, and one could even say, atonement. Gualberto was a big game hunter who had been involved in transporting wild animals from Africa, and creating the game preserve that is Calauit Safari Park in Palawan, which displaced thousands of locals from their homes. “My concern for nature began in the late 1980s at the height of dynamite fishing near our beach property in Occidental Mindoro.” From advocating the conservation of corals and aquatic life, Gualberto became active in the protection of the Philippine tamaraw and eagle raptors. He later also became active in protecting the rights of indigenous tribes. “Before, my passion was more of preserving our fauna, and now I’ve realized that to do that we need to take care of our flora to save our fauna who are losing their habitat. The most important thing I learned in this workshop that I will take home is that monoculture (planting only one species of plants) is unnatural and dangerous to the ecosystem.”

“The most significant thing I learned from the workshop,” Architect Sudarshan Khadka said, “was about unlocking the expressive potential of a site through a deliberate attempt at connecting to the spirit of a place. This process helps expand the role of architecture in the production of cultural affect.”

Architect Charm Cabredo voiced the sentiments of many: “I felt fortunate to experience the Six Senses exercise. I shed my architect’s thinking cap and opened myself to what the land was telling me. Dropping the ‘self’ allowed the consciousness to expand and bring back that sensitivity that had been dulled.



We designers tend to get ahead of ourselves in the planning process, letting our experience and knowledge ‘lead’ the design direction in a nearly one-size-fits-all solution, losing sensitivity to the other things that matter, things that provide substance, things that add to the story—the land, the people who live off the land—Eco versus Ego.” ■



The Lake Sebu Watershed Forest Reserve, a major water source of South Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat and home to the endangered Philippine deer, is one of the banner sites of the National Ecotourism Plan II seeking to establish ecotourism businesses in key priority areas in the Philippines. Training programs for boat tour guides are conducted and a central retail outlet for T'boli handicrafts was established to promote indigenous culture and arts. (Image courtesy of Mark Christian P. Marcelino)

GONE—OR AT LEAST, NOWHERE IN SIGHT—WERE THE NAGGING DOUBTS THAT MANY PARTICIPANTS HAD SHARED EARLIER IN THE WEEK ABOUT THE FEASIBILITY OF DESIGNING DEVELOPMENTS THAT DON'T HARM THE ENVIRONMENT.