



# ECO VERSUS EGO

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





Image courtesy of Daintree Ecolodge & Spa

**E**cological ethos took time to find its way into Western architectural

**expression.** The Grecian notion of the built environment as separate from the natural, validated by the Romans' conception of man lording over nature, has pervaded the intellectual and ethical consciousness of many designers in the early years of civilization. It was only in the 19th century that the concept of ecological design would spread across Europe and mainland United States with the writings of modern thinkers like John Ruskin and Aldo Leopold who first saw the environmental impacts brought by the unprecedented rise of factories and skyscrapers in Western cities and colonies. Bothered by its implications, architects began to acknowledge the significance of designing buildings in harmony with nature. This awakening, so to speak, challenged succeeding generations of designers across the world to break away from egocentric ideals and start putting design in the service of man and the environment.

Such was the challenge that confronted Hitesh Mehta, a landscape architect and planner from Kenya. Inspired by the Indian philosophy of Jainism and *ahimsa*, both teaching non-violence and respect for all living things, Mehta had an epiphany as a child living among leopards in the African wildlife. Standing at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro along the borders of Kenya and Tanzania, Mehta marveled at the landscape architecture of the Amboseli National Park, which promotes natural conservation while empowering the *Maasai* communities who lived there for centuries. So inspired was

he at the idea of reconciling the built and natural environments, that he took it upon himself to travel the world and expose himself to foreign cultures and places that would shape his ecological conscience and design sensibilities.

In 2002, Hitesh Mehta co-edited the definitive *International Ecolodge Guidelines*, a book that argues for authentic ecolodges. In the book, Mehta distinguishes ecolodges from traditional hotels and resorts as low-impact facilities that conserve the environment, benefit local communities, and offer tourists interpretative experiences. Since then, he has become one of the world's leading experts on ecotourism physical planning.

It's not surprising that when the Philippines, a country with a diverse well of natural tourism assets threatened by corruption and *carte blanche* development, updated its National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan, Mehta was the first in mind of former tourism secretary Mina Gabor, founder of the International School of Sustainable Tourism (ISST), to launch an awareness campaign on ecotourism planning in the country. "The whole trend around the world is towards visitation to natural areas and we have a tremendous number of sites that we can be proud of," says Gabor.

Gabor partnered with architect Emmanuel Miñana to bring Mehta to Manila for a weeklong Ecolodge Planning Workshop and Design Charette from March 2-6, 2015. Mehta showed up in a *barong tagalog* on the first day to kick off the series of lectures. By the third day, he was walking barefoot in the vast organic gardens of bank executive Flor Tarriela in Antipolo, leading the

participants in a walkthrough to experience the place with their six senses—the sixth being the spiritual—before drafting a site analysis and translating it into a plan. "Our common mistake is that we go to a site and immediately act as designers. We need to analyze first the things around us," says Mehta.

The event became doubly significant with the participation of major influencers like architects Jorge Yulo, Conrad Onglao and dean Joey Yupangco, along with representatives from leading architecture firms like Leandro Locsin Partners, Rchitects, Inc., Casas+Architects, and C|S Design Consultancy. Representatives from developers such as Rockwell Land, Greenfield Corporation, and NuvoLand among others were in attendance as well as land owners, tourism facility operators, and architects in civil service.

If at the start of the workshop there were reservations, misgivings or misconceptions about designing for the health of our ecology, these were replaced midway through by excitement and a strong sense of commitment to tread lightly on our land and seas, and to spread the message of the eminent benefits of ecoarchitecture, ecodevelopment and ecotourism.

Through this series of articles, we hope to share the transformative knowledge and experience that the workshop participants journeyed through. Through these pages, we hope to give ecological design ideas fertile soil in which to flourish; and to inspire in architects, owners, developers and public servants a desire to make informed decisions, commit to sustainable practices, and ultimately, to forego the ego in order to build for the eco. ■