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Pacita Abad's Boston and Batanes

The Ivatan stone houses prove that heritage conservation can be done—with the right governance
By: Winston A. Marbella
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FUNDACION Pacita Nature's Lodge



INSIDE Fundacion Pacita

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS—Pacita Abad, the international artist from Batanes, was in Boston with husband Jack Garrity when we came visiting for the summer. But first, Pacita and my wife Noreen, schoolmates at the University of the Philippines, had a lot of catching up to do.

Pacita insisted that no less than a weekend would suffice. So when in Boston, we did what proper Bostonians do: a walking tour of Boston Common, a side trip to the museums, and, of course, an obligatory visit to the Kennedy Library, which was a delightful surprise for a bookworm like me. By this time, Pacita had earned a name in the art world with themes influenced by wherever her economist-husband's bank employer assigned him in Asia and Africa. And she was right; we had a lot of catching up to do. But wherever in the world Pacita might be, her thoughts always turned to her favorite topic: her home province of Batanes.

I had been to Batanes once, and had delighted in taking pictures of the Ivatan stone houses. They were also Pacita's favorite spots, especially their restoration and preservation as historical sites. She would have been glad to know that it is happening now; the Ivatan stone houses have been designated cultural heritage sites.

Rising from the rubble



WEAVER'S Museum

As if typhoons and wind-tossed seas were not enough torment, a massive 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck the province of Batanes, north of Luzon near the southern Chinese border, on July 16, 2000.

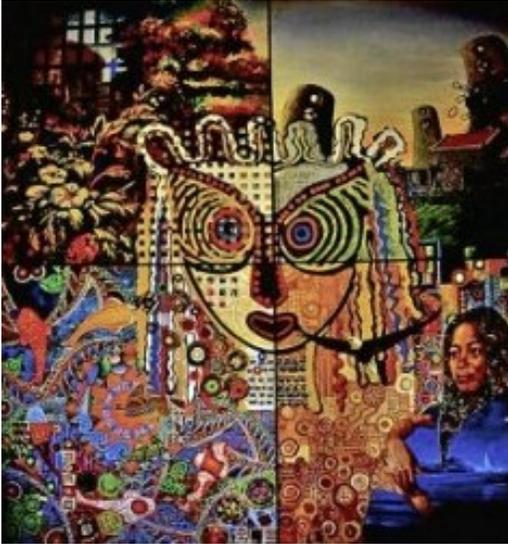
Many of its centuries-old Ivatan stone houses fell in rubble heaps to the ground.

In a demonstration of how the human spirit can literally rise from the rubble, former Rep. Florencio "Butch" Abad, Pacita's brother, took the opportunity to commission the University of the Philippines School of Architecture to rebuild the massive stone houses that were strong enough to withstand typhoons, but not earthquakes.

Thus began a labor of love by a group of enterprising architects who saw in the effort a chance to also study Ivatan architecture up close and personal. Many houses were rebuilt from the ground up, literally stone by stone.

But the initiative took more than architectural derring-do. The architects soon found that rebuilding the houses was the easy part. Mobilizing the local government, political will and sustaining resident enthusiasm would take much more than architects are used to doing.

Governance lessons



EXAMPLES of native Ivatan art that Pacita loved so dearly, she encouraged her provincemates to preserve. She put them on display at her studio, now open to the public.

Thus was born an experiment in local governance management that was presented recently as a case study at the University of Makati's joint Green Urban Design Workshop with the UP Graduate School of Architecture for graduate students and local barangay officials.

The two-month workshop was conceived as a living example of how local government initiative can be harnessed to mobilize political will for urban renewal and conservation.

The workshop was a joint project of the U/Mak's School of Public Policy and Governance, the Pimentel Institute of Local Governance, and UP. If fund-raising efforts were successful, the barangay officials and graduate students were to visit Singapore to look at urban development projects considered state of the art. The joint project was headed by architect Raymond Chin of UP and Raymund Rosuelo of U/Mak.

Indigenous resources

The Ivatan conservation project became a model for mobilizing indigenous resources in projects of this kind. The conservation team was headed by architects Joven Ignacio and included UP's Cristina V. Turalba.

The Ivatan experience was chronicled in a book available at the UP School of Architecture. It details the architectural challenges of the project, but, more importantly, catalogued the local governance implications.

The work has been presented to five countries, which includes Taiwan, which has an Ivatan community that speaks a similar dialect.

Rare heritage

To withstand typhoons, the Ivatan stone houses sported six-ft-wide walls on the side facing the wind. Thatched roofing was built up to three-feet thick to resist rain.



Secretary Abad is now head of the Department of Budget and Management, but the people of his home province will remember him more for preserving a rare cultural heritage for posterity. A renowned sibling, the late Pacita Abad, not only sought but celebrated indigenous cultures of Africa and Asia in her Matisse-like paintings. She will be well-pleased with this effort to preserve the Ivatan heritage she loved so dearly.

Fundacion Pacita, a vacation lodge that was formerly Pacita Abad's home studio, was lovingly refurbished by Butch Abad in honor of her memory.

Hemingway at JFK

During the visit to the Kennedy Library, Pacita took us to where the Kennedys had made room for Ernest Hemingway's memorabilia. The late President Kennedy was a Hemingway fan and loved to quote the writer's definition of courage in his speeches: "Grace under pressure." Our whirlwind weekend was capped by a Sunday brunch at Boston Harbor for the mandatory clam chowder. You have not tasted clam chowder until you have tasted the original in Boston. To make room for heaping servings of the chowder, we opted for a light salad and soft shell crab, which was in season. Our Bostonian friends said there is only a 48-hour window when these crabs molt (shed their shell to grow bigger) and the new one hardens. We were lucky to have a taste of this seasonal New England delicacy.

Recreating memories

As we are wont to do, we try to preserve these warm memories with friends by recreating the dishes back home in our kitchen. Then we share the memories with friends who come over for intimate dinners.



COOP Art Gallery

We call this Pacita's Bostonian Brunch: Ivatan salad, Boston Clam Chowder and Steamed Crabs a la Batanes.

When crabs are hard to find, prawns capture the flavors of the sea just as well. As with fresh green salad, we make a dressing of corn oil and the juice from a whole lemon to perk up the palate.

For side dishes, we sauté potato wedges that have been seasoned with salt, pepper and dried basil. We fry till golden brown in corn oil, which gives the potatoes more flavor. Sautéed carrots, whole corn kernels and beans add color, crunchiness and texture.

Whenever we have Boston clam chowder, our thoughts turn to Pacita. We never forget that weekend in Boston, her immense talent and her enduring friendship. We will never forget Pacita's Boston and Batanes.

The author is an itinerant gourmand and inveterate wine taster.