



THE SYQUIA MANSION AS A LIVING MUSEUM: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE TRANSITION FROM FAMILY HOME TO MUSEUM

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Abstract: I am a sixth generation member of a family that still owns a Spanish colonial house, the bahay na bato, in the heritage city of Vigan, Ilocos Sur. It was declared a heritage house by the National Historical Institute or NHI in 2002. My grandmother Petronila was the last of her generation to live in the mansion. For her daughter Millie, my mother and myself, it was still a house. I have many fond memories of spending summers in the house with my extended family when all the rooms were occupied, the dining table groaning with Ilocano food favorites, and the house ringing with the sound of laughter, conversation, and footsteps.

But over time the house was hardly lived in and deteriorated badly. The family could not afford the amount it would take to restore it structurally. Government funds were granted on the condition that it would be open to the public. This triggered the transition from house to museum.

A museum, according to the ICOM Code of Professional Ethics is defined as "a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."

This is a fact all family members have accepted even if slowly. We realize that this is the only way the mansion will continue to exist to perpetuity. This paper hopes to share this personal experience as well as reiterate the need to restore, conserve and preserve our heritage structures that are not just stone or wood but artifacts that preserve memories of an era, a lifestyle, and a family. The goal of the heirs of the Syquia Mansion is to create a living museum that allows for the mansion to be important, relevant, and contributing to the community in which it exists.

Key Words: Historic house museum, relevance to community, cultural heritage, visual and material culture.



1. INTRODUCTION

I am a sixth generation member of a family that is fortunate to still own a Spanish colonial house, the bahay na bato, in the heritage city of Vigan, Ilocos Sur. It was built in 1830 by Justo Angco, a wealthy businessman of Chinese descent. When his daughter Estefania married Gregorio Syquia in 1875, he and his wife Filomena gave the house to them as part of Estefania's dowry that also included a horse and carriage. As Gregorio's fortune began to grow thanks to a very active merchant economy brought about by the Acapulco - Manila Galleon Trade, so did the house. Gregorio and Estefania added more rooms and living spaces for their two sons, Vicente and Tomas. Vicente died in childhood while Tomas lived long enough to marry Concepcion Jimenez and sire eight children. The mansion was again extended to accommodate Tomas' growing family sometime in the early 1900's. A large bedroom for Tomas and Concepcion and a nursery room was added effectively dividing the mansion into two wings -- Gregorio's and Tomas'. When Tomas and Concepcion's oldest child and daughter Alicia married Elipidio who was later to become President of the Philippines, the mansion was again renovated to accommodate President Quirino's desire to sometimes hold office in Vigan. A long dining room was added along with a large kitchen on the second floor to cater to large groups of people.

My grandmother Petronila, Tomas and Concepcion's second oldest child and daughter was the last of her generation to live in the mansion. But for her daughter Millie, my mother, and my generation it was still a house. I have many fond memories spending summers in the house with my extended family when all the rooms were occupied, the dining table groaning with Ilocano food favorites, and the house ringing with the sound of laughter, music, and conversation. My grandmother loved her house and would "go home" as often as she could. She would make sure the house was clean and in good condition. At some point, she became the Administratrix after her father and grandfather, managing the tenanted lands and distributing the family's share of produce. But by this time, it had already begun to show its age. Still, my grandmother would proudly show off the house to eager visitors. By tagging along on these personalized tours, I learned even more about my family and could now connect the family stories to the artifacts and architectural elements. For example, the carroza or carriage was used by Estefania who like her husband Gregorio appreciated the finer things in life particularly if they were European.

When my grandmother passed away in 1992, the mansion was no longer lived in, neglected, and deteriorating even more. The dining room, for example, had tilted to a very precarious angle and could fall anytime. The family could not afford the amount it would take to restore it structurally. At that time, there were no architects or engineers who had the knowledge or experience to preserve, restore or conserve the mansion. Without the proper supervision, the family did what they could, possibly putting the mansion in a more precarious situation.



Thankfully, help finally arrived. In 1999 my aunt Vicky Quirino Gonzalez took over as Administratrix and under her watch the family managed to source government funds for the mansion. Under the auspices of the National Historical Institute (NHI) now the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) we were granted funds to restore and preserve the mansion but on the condition that it would be open to the public. This was not only due to the mansion's importance to the heritage city of Vigan but also because it had been the home of President Quirino and his wife Alicia for a time. This donation triggered the transition from house to museum. In 2002, the Syquia Mansion was officially declared a historic heritage home.

A museum, according to the ICOM Code of Professional Ethics, is defined as " a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment. " This is a fact all family members have accepted with much difficulty and very slowly. The push to finally turn it into a living museum only began in 2016 -- 14 years after its declaration as a heritage home, and has come from my generation that numbers about 105 and all owners of the mansion. This is not including the generation before us and those after. For many family members, the mansion has very little sentimental value but all agree that the only way the mansion will continue to exist to perpetuity is that it become a historic house museum. Some families in Vigan who own such houses have converted their homes to bed and breakfasts, sold them, or simply abandoned them.

2. METHODOLOGY

The first step the family took was to ask a family member living in the mansion for the last 17 years to leave the mansion. This was without its difficulties. But this does not mean family members cannot stay in the mansion. An apartment for family members has been set-up just off the kitchen for short visits. A foundation has been set up to manage the museum with one or two interested members from each branch (Alicia, Petronila, Cesar, Juan and Hector) assigned particular functions that include assuring that the mansion is self-sufficient and the other that the it is a living museum that continues to be important, relevant, and contributing to the community in which it exists. The foundation will also allow us to source funds from grant giving bodies for exhibits, events and most importantly, major structural repairs. Security measures have been put in place to assure that the contents of the museum remain intact. Family members have been returning "borrowed" artifacts although some are still missing. All the contents in the mansion have been photographed and inventoried. Because of our limited budget, we have not been able to hire and train proper museum guides. In times past, the family member living in the mansion would take tourists around but not on a regular basis and would many times pass on this duty to a long-time servant who took great liberties with the family stories to the delight of the visitors. To remedy this problem, numbered stands with short descriptions of each area of the bahay na bato and their relevance to the



family have been strategically placed around the house so tourists can walk through on their own. What was originally the library has been converted into a family picture room. This already existed during my grandmother's time. More pictures have been added and more importantly, all have been labeled properly. This is especially critical while there are still family members around who can still identify the long-dead people in the photographs. I am fortunate to have been introduced to these ancestors by my grandmother many times and so can proudly identify them. I have also been the willing audience of family stories and over the years have become the repository of these stories.

From his essay "The Museum of the Present" James Panero quotes theorist Stephen E. Weil as saying that "the museum of tomorrow must come to see itself not as a steward of a collection of objects but as "an instrument of social change." (Panero, 19). The vision of the Syquia Mansion is to be a well-preserved, educationally oriented, priceless legacy for future family members, the Vigan community, the rest of the Ilocos region, and the entire country. Our mission is to (1) preserve and promote the heritage, culture, and arts of Vigan City, and the rest of the Ilocos region, (2) educating the children, youth, and general public on the history, culture and traditions of Vigan City and the Ilocos region, and (3) assist in the community endeavors that will help improve the lives of Bigueños and of Ilocanos in general.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Syquia Mansion has housed four generations of Syquias and witnessed several periods in history – the Spanish and American colonial periods, the Commonwealth and the Republic. Family members were active members of society -- Gregorio Syquia was awarded the Order of Isabela La Catolica for his loyalty to the Spanish crown at the same time that Diego and Gabriela Silang had begun to stir anti-Spanish sentiments. Gregorio's only child Tomas, had a short-lived political career although his son-in-law Elpidio Quirino would later become President of the Philippines and held office in the Syquia Mansion whenever possible. In 1948, it was dubbed the Malacañang of the North.

In a Third World country such as ours, the preservation of the wealthy and educated ilustrado lifestyle might seem out of place. However, cultural heritage education is important as it creates a bridge between time and place that encourages an interest in place and history especially among children. This allows them to create worldviews, and see themselves as part of a broader temporal continuum. At its best, cultural heritage education creates alternative ways of looking at the world, promotes intercultural dialogue, and is a commitment to a community (Aerila, 1).

With its thick, two-story walls and inner courtyards, the bahay na bato was designed to allow a pseudo-European lifestyle inside and keep the ordinary world outside. In keeping with our mission, it is therefore important that visits are meaningful. To achieve this, the family will transform the

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spacious stable area in the ground floor into an exhibit hall and the camarin or storehouse into an events area for educational purposes to serve the visitors to the mansion, the majority of who are students. Here we will hold workshops and activities especially for children, and have lectures and performances. We hope to partner with schools and universities in Vigan and nearby towns to make the mansion an alternative and inter-active learning site.

However, capital costs for maintaining a historic house museum are always high. Therefore, the family has to find ways that will allow the Syquia Mansion Museum to be self-sustaining. A museum shop and delicatessen will also be set up in the stables area where the products available will be strictly family or Ilocano recipes in celebration and preservation of the Ilocano food culture. We would also like to be able to assist and provide livelihood and marketing opportunities for those who continue to practice traditional crafts like the weaving of the abel, or the production of cotton and salt which are ways of creating interest in the visual and material culture of the Ilocanos.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There is a lot of work that needs to be done, and this is only the beginning. I, as the newly designated Director of the Syquia Mansion Museum am looking forward to interesting times for the mansion. As long as the entire Syquia family commits to this new endeavor, then we can achieve the vision of perpetuity for the Syquia Mansion while fulfilling our noble mission. Our ancestors would be proud.

5. REFERENCES

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