

Drive and vision: the Museo Pambata in Manila

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A children's museum with an impressive urban outreach programme, the Philippines' Museo Pambata is above all a model of civic consciousness and pride. The author is one of its founders and is now the museum's executive director and concept developer. She holds a doctorate in Early Childhood Education from the University of the Philippines.

A father reads to children as part of the storytelling programme in the poor urban communities.

The Museo Pambata was a dream of three unlikely people – a city mayor and a mother-and-daughter team, each with a distinct vision to give children the best there is. The result was a magical 'hands on' museum.

The Mayor of Manila, Alfredo S. Lim, had just returned from a global UNICEF Summit for Mayors in 1993 where they had assessed and familiarized themselves with the status of children in their urban centres. The meeting had reaffirmed his political commitment to uplifting the lives of children. The mother, Estefania Aldaba-Lim was a former Minister of Social Welfare and United Nations Special Representative for the International Year of the Child in 1979 (with rank of Assistant Secretary General). In that capacity she had the awesome responsibility of raising the consciousness of the world regarding the unacceptable and miserable conditions of children: poverty, hunger, illiteracy, unnecessary deaths and gross violations of their human rights. I was the daughter, whose deep interest in the

early education of children led me to set up several pre-schools and a nationwide teacher-training facility. The three of us answered the call to establish a children's museum to provide opportunities for Filipino children to develop their talents and curiosity for learning.

It began with a building

The Elks Club Building was part of architect Daniel Burnham's urban plan for Manila in the early days of American colonization and was designed by the American architect William Parsons in 1908–10. The City Council of Manila in December 1994 passed a resolution to lease this building for free to the Museo Pambata Foundation for at least ten years.

It took several architects and creative designers to work on the museum plan. A tandem of architects, Joselito Tecson, a talented creative designer, and the building architect, Mario Nabor, worked closely with the concept plans. The result, according to cultural heritage expert Augusto F. Villalon, 'is one of the city's few first-rate examples of architectural re-use which completely respects the architecture of Parsons'. This historic building remained the same on the outside but the interior underwent a complete change.

Room partitions were torn down, ceiling beams exposed and verandas enclosed to maximize use of space. This allowed for seven theme areas:

Old Manila explores the diverse cultural and technological heritage of the city, including a replica of a Spanish galleon and a scaled-down historic Binondo church. One section showcases Chinese influences in Philippine culture and features a typical ancestral stone house



Photo by courtesy of the author

where children can try on costumes of their grandmothers' time. Huge photographs of Filipino revolutionary heroes are accompanied with listening phones in English or Pilipino which recount their lives. Alongside are photos of young heroes, boys and girls aged 10 to 14, who were outstanding for their courageous acts of bravery.

The Environment theme room focuses on a major concern with rapidly deteriorating land use. A rain forest with a real waterfall contrasts with the barren, denuded forest shown opposite. Occasional storytelling and drama presentations on the environment are held here.

A very popular area is *Children in the Global Village*. Inspired by UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child, it dramatically introduces visitors to the neglect, abuse and victimization of children around the world. United Nations Agencies use the area for global events such as campaigns to eradicate child labour, book launches, performances of

puppet shows and workshops. The only museum collection contains children's dolls, costumes and indigenous musical instruments donated by embassies and private collectors. Child-related activities are often organized here.

Science Discovery on the second floor covers a wide range of topics and seems to be one of the most popular spots in the museum. From simple magnet experiments to bubble fun to tinkering with parts of a jeep engine, activities are designed to encourage the children's participation. The moon rock from the collection of the astronauts Aldwin and Armstrong is on loan from NASA.

Career Options, like the Science area, has changing exhibits. Youngsters are busiest here as they play-act careers as mail carrier, fire-fighter, architect, television broadcast journalist, editor and backstage artist.

Down the veranda corridor are a series of mini-neighbourhood stores where chil-

Photo by courtesy of the author



Mini-neighbourhood stores are installed in the veranda corridor.

dren's socio-dramas take place. These are the corner grocery store, news-stand, small town restaurant, shoe repair shop, drug store, bakery, fish and meat stall, rice store and flower shop.

The *Arts and Crafts Centre* allows the children to create 'things from scrap' and workshops for street children are held in this area.

The 'Where did I come from?' exhibit in the *Bodyworks* theme room dominates the health section and also addresses issues such as smoking, STD/AIDS, dental care, the physically handicapped and how very young children learn.

Reaching out

In the room devoted to the rights of the child, a descendant of one of the Philippines' revolutionary heroes narrates a story about her famous grandparent.

After four years of existence and nearing its one millionth visitor, the museum has gained recognition for its broad array of activities and was cited by the inter-

nationally known firm of Lord Cultural and Museum Planners of Canada as a museum with outstanding education programmes. One of these consists of Mobile Libraries which reach out to street children in the poor urban areas with twice-weekly story-telling sessions. Some fifteen areas have tapped parents to tell stories to their children who sell flowers or cigarettes in the streets. One outcome of these sessions was the establishment of Day Care Centres and an awareness of the rights of children to education and play. The youngsters themselves undergo value change and are motivated to read. A small library collection of an initial 200 children's books is turned over to the centres after six to twelve months of story-telling.

Children from the public schools and street centres audition to join the Mentor's Programme in the field of drama, dance, visual arts, maths, science and music. A three-year activity supported by a private non-governmental group, it matches these talented youngsters with senior mentors patient enough to hone the children's hidden talents. The 1998 Philippine Centennial Celebration inspired the drama group to perform playlets based on heroes. Skits on STD/AIDS were performed under the hot noonday sun in the poor urban communities and in ceremonial halls of international conferences. The child performers, aged 10 to 13, developed a love for theatre and a glowing self-confidence.

The series of twelve children's books on 'Career Options', a first attempt at publication, was cited by the Manila Book Critics Circle, (1998) as an innovative publication using real-life role models. Mail Carrier, Journalist, Architect, Firefighter, Teacher, Scientist, Rural Doctor, Entrepreneur, Police Officer, Artist, Farmer and Priest are among the careers selected.

Photo by courtesy of the author



Two-thirds of the books are pre-sold to sponsors, who in turn distribute them to poor and deserving children. The rest are sold in bookstores.

The museum also operates a travelling exhibit that goes to shopping malls around the country. The first one celebrated the Philippines Centennial with heroes of yesterday and today, entitled, 'I am Proud to be Filipino'. It included computers that talked about the heroes, costumes of a bygone era to try on, arts and crafts to do and dioramas on Philippine history. In an Asian country much exposed to Western culture, where young children ape Michael Jackson's style and hang around the shopping malls, the Museo Pambata brings this alternative model, in the hope of capturing their attention and curiosity for learning.

Funding all these initiatives took perseverance coupled with a supportive press and a hard-working office staff. From the outset, the idea to persuade at least twenty 'godparents' to give a once-in-a-lifetime gift of 1 million pesos (\$250,000) each seemed impossible. As the museum grew from concept to reality, the attraction grew and to date there are twenty-five godparents called *Ninongs* (Godfather) and *Ninangs* (Godmother), whose endowment fund makes the Museo Pambata a financially viable project. This



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fund has been useful to bring in poor and deserving children free of charge and allow them to participate in all the activities and programmes.

The Museo Pambata has a lean and young staff with hardly any museum experience, but a drive and vision to make learning for young children as exciting and wonderful as it can be. The Board of Trustees continues to weave new ideas and is fully supported by the First Lady of the land and the city of Manila. ■

A replica of a Spanish galleon features in the Old Manila exhibit.