



## **RATIONALE FOR THE PHILIPPINE NATIONALITY ROOM**

### **Design Specifications**

When the PNR Committee was formed, it was given a manual listing the rules and guidelines for the building of a Nationality Room. Four notable specifications stood out and became imprinted in the committee's collective mind:

1. The room's architectural design must pre-date 1787, the date of University of Pittsburgh's founding.
2. The room must be a fully functioning classroom.
3. The room must be of museum quality – authentic, world-class and, once turned over to the University, maintained for life by them.
4. The room's authenticity will be subject to verification by the University.

The Committee agreed that, in addition to the above specs, there should be 2 more:

5. The room should be immediately recognizable as a Filipino room.
6. The visitor should be moved to say “wow-w-w” upon entering it.

### **Design Concept**

This phase took the longest because everyone on the committee felt the weight of getting the right concept for the room. Contacts were established with the College of Architecture at the University of the Philippines. A lab class was challenged to come up with possible concepts for the Philippine Nationality Room. Three kinds were proposed: a “bahay kubo”, a mixed tableau and a “bahay na bato”.

The “bahay kubo” was appealing because the structure is ubiquitous in the Philippines and many Filipinos easily identify with it. However, the bamboo and thatched material used to make it would not meet the museum, long-lasting qualities demanded of the room. The University of Pittsburgh would never approve something that would need to be replaced every so often due to the natural deterioration of bamboo and thatched material. More importantly, after due research, it was found that the nipa hut is not found just in the Philippines, but all over Asia – Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, etc. In other words, it wasn't unique to our country. We reluctantly set that aside.

The proposed mixed tableau incorporated characteristics from different regions in the Philippines, making it seem like a hodge-podge, lacking in unity, a “halo-halo” (mix-mix) design, so to speak, and not easily recognizable as being singularly Filipino. “Halo-halo” might be good as a snack but not for the PNR.

It finally became obvious that the “bahay na bato” was the best choice, unique to the Philippines and found all over the country. Research has found that, over the centuries, the “bahay na bato” actually evolved from the “bahay kubo”. With the typhoons, floods and inclement weather regularly affecting the islands, the nipa hut never lasted that long so wise and inventive carpenters elevated it by putting the structure on top of

a stone foundation with 4 haligi (tree trunks) used for structural support. Instead of bamboo and thatch, wood was used on the second floor for walls, ceilings, floors and roofs. Capiz windows perched above or between “ventanillas” were used for decorative and practical reasons – protecting from the sun when closed and letting in cool breezes when open. Over the years, the “bahay na bato” assimilated design influences from other cultures and countries such as Spain, Mexico, France and Japan.

Today, one will find representations and variations of the “bahay na bato” in just about every major city or town in the Philippines. Outstanding examples abound in Vigan, Ilocos, Malabon, Rizal, Bulacan, and Taal. So many Filipinos now design homes that recall the “bahay na bato” or, if they are lucky enough to have ancestral houses in that design, restore and maintain them with great pride.

### **The Search for a Prototype and Actual Design Phase**

The search for the design involved several steps:

- (1) Extensive tours by PNR members of museums, Intramuros (Walled City in Manila) and “bahay a bato” sites in Manila, Laguna, Batangas, Cavite, Ilocos and Bohol;
- (2) Intensive search for and commissioning of a Filipino architect who would work closely with the PNR architect of record, Warren Bulseco; and
- (3) Consultations with Dr. Zialcita, anthropologist, sociologist, university professor, and author of the definitive book on the “bahay na bato” “Philippine Ancestral Homes”.

As part of the design process, Filipino Architect Melinda “Popi” Laudico herself embarked on an extensive tour of “bahay na bato” houses in the Visayas (Bacolod) and Ilocos (Vigan), keeping in mind the criteria required for our Philippine Nationality Room, especially the 1787 date. After consultations between Architect Laudico and Dr. Zialcita, it was recommended that the ancestral Quema House in Vigan be used as the point of reference for the design. Built in 1820, it was seen as the best representation of the oldest vintage “bahay na bato” available for our long-sought design.

The Quema House dates to the 1820’s, is maintained by family relatives and while over a hundred years old, is still elegant in design, much like a grande dame from yesteryears. It portrays the design characteristics that are familiar to us – the capiz shell windows, the ventanillas, and the wide plank hardwood floors. Unfamiliar to us but part of the design of that era are painted walls and ceilings.

Let’s review for a moment the specs that we had to adhere to.

#### **1. The room must pre-date 1787: Note: It is important to remember that the University of Pittsburgh has approved our appeal for variance from the 1787 spec.**

The Quema house, after long exploration, fulfilled the date closest to 1787. We must remember that during 1787, there was a rising class, led by people involved in commerce. Having achieved prosperity, these businessmen and landowners had the wherewithal to travel to foreign lands and/or send their children abroad for their own travel experiences or to get properly educated. From these travels and exposure to

other cultures, the rich local families incorporated what they had absorbed or been impressed by into their surroundings at home. Thus, the Quema house today reminds us of life in pre-1787. It, like many Vigan houses, tended to be opulent, obviously influenced by worlds outside Philippine shores. Just as the owners of such richly furnished homes took pride in welcoming visitors to their homes, so too can we when we bring parts of the Philippines over by way of the PNR. It is a room we can be proud of – something that represents the best of our homeland. A room like this recalls the grandness of an era that once existed even in an area fairly remote from Manila. Think of what might have existed and survived in Manila and surrounding areas had the city not been ravaged by World War II.

**2. The room must be a fully functioning classroom:** While no bahay na bato will have 27 student chairs, there was no way of getting around this guideline. There has to be chairs for a class and the Univ. of Pitt. said this room accommodates close to 30 so that's what we had to provide, along with the teacher's desk, a blackboard and the projector. The solhiya chairs with their woven cane backs will provide instant recognition as a Filipino feature. The capiz windows capture the tropical ambiance, providing natural sunlight with their transparent quality.

**3. The room must be of museum quality:** This is the educational part of the Quema house. Most of us have not seen nor might ever see the Quema house in Vigan just as many of us might not have seen the Batanes houses or a particular castle in Europe. By building and re-creating the Quema house, we allow the visitor to the PNR to experience a room, a house, and family life in the 1820 period (remember, we were given a variance). Here was a prosperous family who probably belonged to a business class, able to travel and bring back or copy things they had seen on their travels to Spain, Mexico, Japan or France.

The room was most probably decorated just like upscale houses in Manila, Iloilo, Bacolod, Batangas or Laguna. The basic construction or outside structure, however, adhered to architectural conceits and construction techniques of the time. The fact that the house still stands, replete with furnishings, shows the timeless, enduring quality of our proposed PNR. The furniture we will copy will be made by the finest woodcarver /designer we can find, able to produce furniture of that era.. The decorations – paintings, antiquities, mirrors, etc. – will reflect décor dating back to that period. The “Letras Y Figuras” a focal point of the room, is a unique form of painting involving a visual play of images and words which must be looked at carefully for full appreciation. Firstly, the alphabet goes right along with the idea of a classroom. Secondly, the Letras Y Figuras concept was developed in the Philippines, refined by Jose Honorato Lozano who was considered a master visual chronicler of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Philippines. Thirdly, the background of the painting and each letter depicts life in the Philippines from that era, everyday scenes as well as notable sights. Do take the time to scrutinize each letter and you will be amazed at the minute and exquisite detail involved. For an art that developed in the 19th century, the Letras and Figuras is modern and sophisticated in its renditions.

**4. The room’s authenticity must be verified by Pitt.:** The fact that the Quema house still exists makes it very easy for us to bring the Pitt team, headed by Maxine Bruhns, to Vigan and show them the veracity of our planned design for Rm. 313 at the Cathedral. There will be no question of the room’s authenticity.

**5. The room should be immediately recognizable as Filipino.**

Many will ask why there are no “haligi” (tree trunks for support) which are, for many, a feature of the “bahay na bato” that lingers in our memories of places we visited or even lived in a long time ago. The “haligi” are probably there but they were not designed to be exposed in accordance with the preferred architecture of the times. If they were incorporated into our design, they would be sorely out of place and totally inappropriate with the rest of the design, simple as that. Think of the Batanes house having Venetian blinds or lace curtains. They would have been impractical, expensive and completely out of place.

We would also have loved to incorporate the Rice Terraces, the colorful Moro vintas, the majestic Mayon Volcano, or the San Agustin Church but again, they wouldn’t go with the design. No house could capture all that and be considered authentic.

It would have been so easy to cling to the comforting idea of the nipa hut or even the run of the mill bahay na bato we remember from our childhood, but this is our one chance to take our place alongside all the ethnic groups who chose to erect a nationality room just like us. Yes- and wow – Filipinos back in 1820 and before already had culture, taste, wealth and education to have lived in this grand manner and style. What a message to impart to the viewer! What an important, lasting lesson in history, language and art!

Thus, the features we are focusing on are: Capiz windows, ventanillas, wide floor planks, solhiya chairs, a huge multi-faceted mirror, paintings representing folks, costumes and lifestyles of Filipino life at that time, with special emphasis on the Letras y Figuras, artifacts from various regions on the cabinet shelves, and a general ambiance of the tropics.

**6. The visitor will be moved to say “wow-w-w”.**

Any of the Nationality Rooms, and this, of course, includes ours, represents just one chance to capture a look, a moment, an impression. That is what we have striven to do with the Philippine Nationality Room – to embrace this unique opportunity to portray the Filipino way of life in the best possible light. This room allows, nay demands, that we hold our heads high because we know we come from good, solid stock, from ancestors who gave us the achievements and the very DNA we proudly pass on to the next generation. This room does us proud. It will stand so long as the Cathedral stands and we will be proud we built it.

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