

## The Manila Times

# MIT students lend a hand in Tondo

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) postgraduate students were joined by students from the University of Santo Tomas in revisiting three projects in Manila from the mid-1970s, which became famous the world over for their lessons for housing the urban poor after these projects were presented at the "United Nations Conference on Human Settlements" in 1976 in Vancouver. The three projects, the Dagat-Dagatan development, the Tondo-Foreshore upgrading project and the Habitat Demonstration project "Kapitbahayan" were the focus of the two-week survey and documentation by the visiting group of students from the United States and their Filipino counterparts in late January. The MIT/UST project was labeled "The Road from Manila" workshop, reflecting the long way that housing policies have come since Vancouver 30 years ago.

The 14 MIT students—led by MIT Professor Dr. Reinhard Goethert—were mostly from the architecture and planning departments and from eight countries representing the diversity of the school. The UST students were mostly from the architecture department.

This is the 15th annual workshop abroad organized by SIGUS (Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement) at MIT, an education/research group that champions new approaches to practice and service targeting the poor and underserved.

The three projects surveyed represented a momentous milestone in a global "paradigm shift" toward celebration of the informal sector—known as "squatters" by many. These events formalized international recognition of the energy and opportunity that the informal sectors offered and highlighted the need to work with them instead of against them. The conference led to the establishment of UN Habitat, dedicated to human settlement development, and new approaches to housing were initiated.

The Tondo-Foreshore project was a first attempt to tackle some of the major problems facing metropolitan Manila, and was envisioned to "demonstrate the practicality of this approach for upgrading the standards of living of those living below the subsistence level" in fast-growing urban areas. The project became a model for the world, and Manila became the focus for intense development study.

Also presented at the Vancouver conference in 1976 was the parallel "Manila-Tondo Foreshore International Architectural Competition," which challenged the world to brainstorm new ways of approaching community, house and income issues of low-income families. Over 3000 architects registered from approximately 68 countries, and about 500 formal entries were received. A New Zealand entry was the first place winner, and a model house was built at the Vancouver Conference.

Now 30 years later, the MIT/UST team revisited the original projects to explore whether the lessons of 1976 are still valid and that the approach still provides a viable housing strategy for the world's urban poor. Extensive support throughout the two weeks was provided by the NGO Gawad Kalinga, guided by Tito Cajulis, and by staff of the National Housing Authority.



Rising young Fil-Italian entrepreneur Ilac Diaz (2006 TOYM awardee and son of art gallery owner Silvana and renowned painter Ramon Diaz), who is an MIT student for focused advanced studies, was the key liaison between MIT and Manila.

The projects targeted two areas: the family and house, and the key participants in 1976 who formulated policy and made the projects a success.

For the family and house, teams of students undertook surveys focused on the physical, social and economic changes since the start in the late 1970s. Teams were asked to interview families that had been successful, as indicated by the quality of the house and the expansion. And conversely, teams were asked to interview families that are still evolving. The interest was in understanding what factors contributed to the success, or non-success. Unique was the focus on a long-term perspective of change in the past 30 years using both the physical form of the house and the parallel family circumstance, as opposed to the common "snap-shot" usually undertaken in surveys.

For the interviews of the key participants, three questions were posed: What were the key concerns in 1976? Now 30 years after, how would you modify your approach in today's context? What do you suggest would be appropriated to teach in schools in preparing emerging professionals to deal with the increasingly difficult housing problems of today?

The interviews took place over the two weeks, and included prominent community organizers from the 1976 projects, architects who designed the projects, and even the Former First Lady Imelda Marcos, in her role as head of Human Settlements Agency in the 1970s. The interviews were filmed, and it is being considered to make a short film for distribution to schools and interested parties at home and abroad.

The second week was dedicated to working with the NGO Gawad Kalinga, in building houses for the poor in Baseco. This gave an opportunity for the graduate teams to understand the effort and difficulties that community members were faced in building their houses in the Tondo Foreshore and in Dagat-Dagatan. Several other Gawad Kalinga projects were also visited to better understand the full range of housing offered.

The survey and documentation will be used as a resource in an open-panel presentation and an exhibit at the UN World Urban Forum III, which will be in Vancouver again from June 19 to 23. The World Forum will be hosted by the Canadian government, and celebrates the 30 years of the new housing approaches. This is a big international event and gives the opportunity for Filipinos to present their housing ideas to an international audience.

The survey team is hopeful that there will be good representation from the Philippines at the World Forum, and funding is being sought from local foundations to support their attendance. The representatives from the Philippines would be drawn from within the settlements themselves, the University of Santo Tomas, the National Housing Authority, and from the NGO Gawad Kalinga.

MIT students are continuing to explore and understand Filipino culture after the surveys. Many are traveling throughout the country to sample the range of what the Philippines offers. The project has been more than just a workshop, and gave insights and understanding of Filipino culture to the many who participated. It is hoped that the links established would continue.

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