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THE VIGAN CITY HERITAGE CONSERVATION PROGRAM: A TOOL FOR DEVELOPMENT

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The historic City of Vigan, located in Northwestern Philippines, was already a significant trading post in 1572 when Spanish Conquistador Juan de Salcedo arrived and established a settlement called Villa Fernandina.

In 1758, the seat of the Catholic Diocese of Nueva Segovia was transferred to Vigan by virtue of a Spanish Royal Decree elevating her into a city named *Ciudad Fernandina de Bigan*. For more than a century, Vigan was the center of political, religious, social and cultural activities in the entire Northern Philippines. When the Manila-Acapulco Galleon Trade came to an end in the middle part of the 19th century, the importance of Vigan as center of trade and industry declined.

In the early 1950's, Virginia Tobacco was introduced as a new cash crop to spur the economy.

At that time, the political instability in the province and the resulting deterioration of peace and order triggered an out-migration of local businessmen and owners of ancestral houses. Most were left to caretakers, re-used as warehouses and for other inappropriate purposes, which caused their rapid degradation. The old historic district virtually became a ghost town. Traditional industries that fueled Vigan's economy during the colonial period were threatened with extinction. Although peace and order improved in the 1980's, the local economy did not. Worse, the public market was destroyed by fire in 1994, dealing the business sector an enormous setback.

Vigan was a 2nd class municipality with annual revenue of 27 million pesos or roughly 800,000 dollars at the exchange rate then, hardly enough to defray the salaries of government employees, let alone allow effective delivery of our most basic services.

This in a nutshell was what the situation in Vigan: a moribund municipality brought about by historical forces beyond her control. But unknown to the people then, a treasure of limitless potentials, our rich cultural heritage, lay unnoticed, unused and untapped.

In 1995, to improve on this seemingly hopeless situation, our administration collaborated with all stakeholders in the formulation of a vision and an action plan that would transform Vigan into a vibrant thriving community, using the conservation of our heritage as the major tool for development. This entailed a systematic 'housekeeping' within our bureaucracy. We re-engineered governance by

clearly defining policies, enhanced our capacity to deliver basic services, and practiced judicious spending of public funds.

Our endeavours are anchored on the four objectives of our cultural heritage conservation program.

The first objective is to fortify the sense of identity and pride of the community on their historic city. This is an essential ingredient to develop a high level of confidence and a sense of community.

A massive and creative information campaign was launched to inform our community about what we have and how to use them to achieve our vision. Our history, traditions, arts, culture including the ancestral buildings, traditional industries and other aspects of our heritage were thoroughly researched and disseminated through brochures, video films, electronic books, monthly newsletters and other media such as postal stamps and coloring workbooks for school children.

To provide ready access of information on Vigan for the local and international community, a website was developed.

We also revitalized existing people's organizations and encouraged the creation of new ones to become active partners in the transformation of our community.

After eliciting community involvement and putting in place local protective measures, Vigan was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage list on December 2, 1999.

At the same time, there was a popular movement among community members to have the ancient status of Vigan as a city restored. In the plebiscite of January 22, 2001, "An act validating and recognizing the creation of the City of Vigan by the Royal Decree of September 7, 1758 issued by King Fernando VI of Spain" was ratified by an overwhelming 93% affirmative votes.

The second objective is to institutionalize local protective measures and development plans to ensure continuity of programs and involvement of stakeholders.

Prior to 1997, conservation laws were enacted and implemented by national government agencies based in the capital city of Manila, a good eight-hour drive from our city. Aside from the lack of manpower and financial resources, these agencies entrusted with the responsibility to protect our built heritage did not have clear guidelines for homeowners to follow. Owners of historic properties were confused as to which government institution to approach to secure restoration permits. Because of these, several ancestral houses were inappropriately restored and demolished.

We then realized that safeguarding our heritage belong primarily to us, the people of Vigan. We therefore took the initiative to enact our own local legislation to protect our historic properties and encourage community involvement. These legislative measures include:

- 1) An ordinance defining the boundaries of the protected historic district specifying the core and buffer zones.
- 2) An ordinance providing the general conservation guidelines for Vigan ancestral houses and specifying the compatible uses of structures within the historic district.

- 3) An executive order creating a multi-sectoral Vigan conservation council to promote involvement of local stakeholders. This council serves as a clearing house for all applications for building permits within the historic district.

Clear-cut and specific steps in securing permits for house restorations were designed.

- 4) An ordinance enacting the Vigan conservation code prescribing detailed guidelines for conservation of Vigan ancestral houses.

Here are some of the ancestral houses that were restored in accordance with the guidelines provided for by our local conservation ordinances.

- 5) An ordinance providing a yearly allocation of one percent of Vigan's internal revenue allotment for arts, culture and tourism.

The third objective is to forge local and international linkages

Our city continues to undertake collaborative projects with the private and government sectors. As well as with international agencies and other heritage sites to provide us the opportunity to imbibe best practices on local governance and heritage conservation.

The Spanish government provided technical and financial assistance in the formulation of a Vigan master plan which has served as our blueprint for development. After the completion of the Vigan masterplan, the Spanish government sustained the momentum with other joint undertakings, which included:

- o The restoration of an ancestral building that has been transformed into the Vigan culture and trade center;
- o The provision of potable water for all of our 30 rural villages under which each resident is entitled to a free daily supply of 5 liters of potable water for 25 years;
- o The establishment of an integrated water supply system
- o The introduction of scientific methods of aquaculture and fish processing;
- o The development of metal crafts;
- o The improvement of health and sanitation; and
- o The formulation of a solid waste management program.

At present, our city government is collaborating closely with UNESCO and the University of Northern Philippines in the preparation of the heritage homeowner's preservation manual. This will empower homeowners, architects, property developers students and other target users in the protection of our shared heritage.

In November 21, 2001, a sisterhood agreement was forged between Vigan and Barra de Navidad, Cihuatlan, the place where Spanish colonizers embarked on the first historic voyage to the Philippines from Mexico. This was followed by twinning agreements with Makati city; San Mariano, Isabela; Lal-lo, Cagayan; Taal, Batangas in the Philippines, and Honolulu and Maui in Hawaii. Pacts with Panaji City in Goa, India, Gniezno in Poland and the cities of Lipa, Mandaluyong, Taguig in the Philippines await formal signing.

We continue to send our experts to local and international training courses. Our city environment officer and city architect attended the international training on disaster risk management for cultural heritage sites in Kyoto, Japan.

We sent two delegates to an international forum conducted by UNESCO-ICCROM Asian Academy for heritage management for the formulation of a curriculum on Cultural Heritage Specialist Guide Programme.

A cooperative undertaking with the Technical Education Skills and Development Authority and the United Architects of the Philippines led to the establishment of the Escuela Talyer or School for Restorers to enable our craftsmen to become restoration workers not only for Vigan but for other protected sites and monuments as well.

Another project – the Instituto de Lenguajes (Institute of Languages) which will provide access to various language trainings necessary for employment is underway.

With the assistance of the department of education, traditional skills such as loomweaving and jar making have been integrated into the curriculum of our three national high schools.

In partnership with the oldest university in the Philippines, the University of Santo Tomas specifically its center for conservation of cultural property and the environment in the tropics, we conducted a cultural mapping project documenting our tangible and intangible cultural properties. Thus strengthening our capabilities to conserve them.

A significant result of this cultural mapping is “Buridek”, the Vigan children’s museum, the third of its kind to be established in the Philippines.

It also paved the way for the creation of the Vigan Heritage River Cruise that highlights the important role of the Mestizo River in the history of Vigan.

Six municipalities adjoining Vigan agreed to band together with our city to organize the Metropolitan Vigan Heritage Development Authority. This will accelerate advancement through an integrated cultural, social and economic approach anchored on heritage conservation.

The fourth objective is to develop Vigan as a tourist destination where tourism programs enrich and conserve the people’s core values and traditions, as well as sustain livelihood and employment for bigueños.

Cultural events such as the Vigan city fiesta and longganiza (local sausage) festival in January; the Semana Santa in April; Viva Vigan Binatbatan festival of the arts on the first week of may; the world heritage cities solidarity day featuring the Repazzo de Vigan (Vigan’s history on parade) on September 8 and the lantern and torch parade in December continue yearly to strengthen cultural awareness and appreciation.

On special occasions, a walk along Calle Crisologo is reminiscent of the past with the presence of horse mounted heritage guards and señoritas garbed in old Ilocano costumes.

The Vigan Culture and Trade Center, the Playa de Oro Resort, the Mira Hills Fil-Spanish friendship park, the streetside food court serving the famous Vigan Empanada (similar to the Mexican Taco), the Damili (terra cotta) Village, the weaving center, the native delicacies zone, the hidden garden and other destinations have drawn visitors out of the urban center, giving them a glimpse of the rural way of life.

“Kalesa” or horse-drawn carriage drivers have been trained on tour guiding and are accredited by the Department of Tourism.

Our sidewalks have been improved using interlocking Vigan terra cotta red-clay blocks, period lampposts and red clay street signs.

All these sustain the marked growth in Vigan's economy as manifested by increased hotel occupancy, invigorated traditional industries and the rise of trade and tourism-related businesses.

Through the Vigan heritage conservation program, our traditional industries continue to fuel the economy and provide employment opportunities to the residents.

The greater foresight of development though is sustainability, going beyond conservation issues and considering the totality of the community needs: population, tourist influx, strain on basic services, economic conditions, environmental problems and many more. Thus Vigan is currently addressing concerns of various sectors that will affect our heritage conservation program

From a second class municipality with an annual income of 800,000 dollars in 1995, it grew over the years reaching our current income of 4.2 million dollars. The added revenues enable us to deliver basic services such as:

- The Vigan Shelterville, a socialized housing project for 175 families of informal dwellers;
- The public market;
- The bus and jeepney terminal
- The refurbished Slaughterhouse
- Our Escuela de los Mataderos or school for butchers that trains internationally competitive butchers;
- The Vigan Stimulation and Therapeutic Activity Center provides free rehabilitation for children with disabilities.
- A skills training institute has been established to put together all skills enhancement courses of the city under one roof to ensure livelihood and employment opportunities;
- a 10-hectare solid waste management center that houses our bioreactor which converts biodegradable wastes into organic fertilizer; a styro plastic oven which recycles plastic and styrophor waste to tables for our day care centers; and a pulverizer to grind plastic bags and shampoo sachets to be used as paving blocks extenders and throw pillow fillers. Paper is also recycled by shredding, mixing with starch and pressing them to make paper briquets for cooking fuel.
- A comprehensive environment plan and the improvement of our meat processing industry was made possible with the assistance of the Canadian Executive Services Organization;
- We built the new Vigan police station with the indelible mark of the Vigan architecture. We have installed *tele-eye* or tv monitors in strategic places around the city, enabling law enforcers to monitor the peace and order situation even from the police central station.
- We implemented a massive rehabilitation of our rivers to address the problem of flooding and make our waters a source of livelihood and transport.
- To combat air pollution we have required all two stroke tricycles for hire to either be converted to LPG power, changed to 4 stroke or retrofitted. To date 3342 or 94.6% out of a total of 3532 tricycles have complied.

- We renovated and expanded the city hall, improving the workplace of our employees, whose hardwork, we made sure, were compensated with appropriate salary increases and improved benefits. We have also installed the fingerprint identification system for attendance. Our employees use uniforms that signify authority and make it difficult for them to gallivant.
- We acquired and developed a 4500 sq. Meter property in metro manila to serve as our satellite office, products display center and budget accomodation facility.
- We embarked on the computerization and networking of our financial transactions to safeguard revenue generation and disbursements. The programming and installation of the city's geographic information system has also been done.
- This year, we tied up with the Development Academy of the Philippines for the conduct of the Vigan Integrity Development Review wherein the City Government's corruption vulnerability and resistance were assessed followed by the formulation of an action plan for good governance. Vigan is the first local government in the Philippines to undertake this program.
- In the works is our effort to obtain an ISO 9001 2008 certification, again under the mentorship of the Development Academy of the Philippines.
- Although the Vigan Heritage Conservation program demonstrates that our rich cultural heritage can be an effective tool for development, we are aware that more need to be done. Our conservation guidelines have to be reviewed and reformatted to be user friendly and more specific; problems on traffic have to be addressed, a number of ancestral houses are still in varied state of disrepair.....and many more. However with the necessary elements of development such as:

- ❖ Community participation to create a sense of belonging;
- ❖ Institutionalized protective measures and development plans for unity of purpose;
- ❖ Infrastructure to provide business and employment opportunities;
- ❖ Linkages and interaction with national and international institutions;
- ❖ Restored investors confidence; and
- ❖ The renewed pride of the citizens in themselves and in their city. In place, we are confident that the Vigan conservation program anchored on our rich cultural heritage will sustain Vigan's growth and development.

It ensures that the richness of the legacy and the wealth of our culture that our forefathers left shall be enjoyed and valued by this generation and those yet to come.

These days Vigan has been recognized as a multi awarded city. We beam with pride on being a Galing Pook Awardee for Vigan's Heritage Conservation Program as Best Practice in Local Governance.

We take pride in Vigan's being the Cleanest and Greenest city in Northern Luzon from 2004 to the present.

Our City Agriculture and Fishery Council is the Most Outstanding in the Philippines for 2008.

Vigan is currently the Most Child Friendly Component City of the Philippines.

and to top it all Vigan is the Best Performing Local Government unit with the least number of constituents living below the poverty threshold in the Ilocos Region.

May I mention that as we pour efforts on the program we always consult history for we believe that by doing so, we get a clearer vista of where we want to go and how to get there.

Today, powerful images and sounds of modern living have established their marked presence: business and residential infrastructure, cars, tricycles, traffic and communication.

However, they are unable to drown the stillness and elegance of the past. But it is exactly the ability of coping with the needs of the present amidst the bounds set by a centuries-old legacy that makes Vigan a living city.

It has opened itself to change but has not sacrificed the bountiful wealth of its heritage.

Thank you and good day!