Filipino Craftsman Creates a History Lesson in Wood

The ceiling truss between the dining area and kitchen in Benji Reyes's house is Philippine hardwood salvaged from an old bridge. Mr. Reyes built his home almost entirely from such recycled woods. More Photos »

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ANTIPOLO, PHILIPPINES — The house that Benji Reyes built is one of a kind, partly because of the way he built it, and partly because of the wood he used.

Mr. Reyes says the only nails he used in building the house were to hold down the roof tiles. More Photos »

The house is constructed entirely of rare Philippine hardwoods, species so endangered that it is now against the law to cut them.
So Mr. Reyes, 54, found the wood in other places: in century-old houses scheduled for demolition, in an abandoned mine shaft and a shuttered factory. A furniture maker and sculptor by profession, he has been utilizing salvaged wood in his projects for 30 years.

Using his stockpile of reclaimed boards and beams, he remilled the timber and built his 500-square-meter, or 5,382-square-foot, house by hand. Then he assembled every wall, door, floor and staircase without using a single nail, although nails were used to hold the roof tiles.

It took him five years, starting in 1998. But Mr. Reyes patiently follows the same code in every work he creates: “Build it once; build it right.”

Mr. Reyes’s house stands on 7,000 square meters, or 1.7 acres, in Antipolo, an hour’s drive from central Manila. Completed in 2003, it consists of three two-story sections built down a forested hillside to the creek below.

The first is a receiving area, a high-ceilinged, glass-walled pavilion filled with breeze and the babble of a small waterfall at the front gate.

The second section, which has a deck, a kitchen and a dining room, is reached by a short bridge. It spans an indoor brook that runs in a stone channel from an indoor koi pond to a larger pond outside.

A sculptural stairway fashioned of salvaged ebony leads to the second section’s lower floor. A koi pond set against the house’s outer wall can be seen through a window on the stair landing. When it’s time to feed the koi, Mr. Reyes simply opens the window.

In the third, and final, section of the house are bedrooms, an audiovisual room and Mr. Reyes’s office.

The many water features around the house — including three large koi ponds (one of which used to be a backyard swimming pool) and seven smaller ponds — temper the heat of summer. The ponds are fed by filtered rainwater, with overflow channeled to the garden and then to the creek.

Throughout the house are distinctive doors and pieces of furniture made by Mr. Reyes from salvaged wood. A kitchen counter was made from old railroad ties. Floorboards are held in place with hundreds of handmade ebony dowels. Surfaces glow with a dark patina, the product of rigorous sanding, an oil finish and age.

While the result reflects Mr. Reyes’s skills and single-minded focus, there is evidence of a stubborn streak, too.

The ceiling trusses were salvaged from an old bridge, something city inspectors refused to approve in the blueprint stage. “They claimed it wasn’t strong enough,” Mr. Reyes said. “But they’re computing loads for concrete and steel. That’s their training.”
Mr. Reyes, who studied architecture and designed the house himself, calculated that the trusses would work because the beams — of a stout local mahogany called yakal — came from a bridge that had held up under far heavier loads than his roof. So he did the trusses his way. And when the inspectors returned, they approved the finished construction.

Mr. Reyes built much of the house this way, by feel. In his years of collecting and working with reclaimed hardwoods, he has learned well the strengths of different species.

“There are specific species of wood to use for window rails, for stairs, for doors,” he said. “If it’s going to be a post, it’s going to be molave. If the post is going to be subjected to the elements, it’s going to be dungon, which is iron wood.”

Mr. Reyes says he does not know of any other house like his. One reason is likely the scarcity of the wood. The rate of deforestation in the Philippines has been among the worst in the world, and two years ago the government banned all logging.

Another would be the amount of patience required. When the right piece of wood was not available, Mr. Reyes waited until it was.

When he decided that the perfect material to line the ceiling of the entry pavilion was runo reeds, traditionally used as arrow shafts by Ifugao tribesmen, Mr. Reyes waited five months for his Ifugao supplier to gather a sufficient number. The supplier refuses, on principle, to cut any reed before it reaches the proper age and thickness.

Mr. Reyes began building with a budget of 800,000 pesos, or about $19,500. His friends were skeptical, and they were right. His original budget covered the cost of laying the stone and concrete foundation; he now estimates the final cost was around 8 million pesos.

When Mr. Reyes started on the house, reclaimed wood was not a popular building material and could be acquired cheaply. The first three posts he bought cost two bottles of local gin. Today, the same posts probably would cost 8,000 pesos each, partly because of Mr. Reyes’s success and growing influence in the field. He often welcomes to the house architects and designers who want to use salvaged wood. He says he hopes his home also teaches them something about traditional building methods, sustainability and respect for the Philippines’ endangered native forests.

Mr. Reyes built his house for his family, a place for his two daughters to grow up. When they reached college age, he added the swimming pool, a cabana, a Jacuzzi and a sauna so they could entertain friends at home.

But now that his daughters have moved to Australia to pursue their careers, he has refocused his energy and imagination on his furniture, which he and a team of craftsmen he has trained make in a workshop on the property and is sold around the world.
Mr. Reyes's furniture is both fanciful and utilitarian. He calls his custom chairs, doors and tables “functional sculptures,” and thinks of his house the same way.

“It’s testament to Filipino design and ingenuity — and the beauty of Philippine hardwoods,” he said.

Ref.: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/19/greathomesanddestinations/19iht-rephil19.html?_r=1&

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