

# Pinay stands tall on US architecture landscape

Lira Luis is putting a distinctly Filipino stamp on some of America's landmarks, writes **Laura G Perez**

Architect Lira Luis is a towering landmark on the Filipino-American landscape. Her work has been featured in leading American publications and exhibited in state museums. She is in the registry of *Who's Who Among Executive and Professional Women in America* (Honors Edition) by Cambridge Who's Who Registry of New York, 2007.

The only Filipino to have graduated from Taliesin West – Frank Lloyd Wright's School of Architecture – since its establishment in 1937, she started a Lira Luis Brand, with offices in New York, Phoenix and Manila. She also heads Progressive Habitats Foundation, an organization that offers design services to the homeless and helps in rebuilding the flood-devastated Mississippi.

She first got our attention last year when she designed a US\$4 million mall in Arizona patterned after the Philippine nipa hut in collaboration with American Architect George Sheller.

"It is not a literal interpretation of the indigenous house in our country, more of utilizing the bahay kubo's stilts. The stilts for the mall were angled in such a way that they give the impression of movement and activity which are important elements in any restaurant or retail environment."

Aside from this project, Lira became famous for her Portable Transient Shelter Pods, a runner-up in *Metropolis Magazine's* NEXT Generation design competition. "It's a housing solution that was originally designed for homeless seafarers in the Philippines.

"I want to be known as a socially responsible architect," says Lira who is currently based in Chicago, the same city where Frank Lloyd Wright first built his Oakpark Home and Studio as a young architect, and where Ernest Hemingway lived.

She admits that she has a soft spot for the homeless which could be the result of having studied in the School of the Holy Spirit in Quezon City (elementary and high school) and the University of Santo Tomas (BS Architecture). "Oh yes," she chuckles, "those five years of Theology at UST."

Graduating cum laude from UST in 1995, she was offered a scholarship by prestigious schools in England and Scotland but she chose the Taliesin West scholarship.

Only a maximum of 35 students are accepted in Taliesin West's bachelor and MA programs every year, out of the thousands who apply from different countries. She took its masteral program for three years, staying in a studio at daytime and sleeping each night



US-based Filipino architect Lira Luis (above) is not shy to innovate. She lived in one of these Arizona tents (below) while taking a master's program.

“I want to be known as a socially responsible architect”

**LIRA LUIS**  
Architect and green activist

in a tent without electricity, phone and water, in its 600-acre property. It is part of the school's experiential training that connects students to

their environment in the Arizona desert. "We were trained to co-exist with nature." The great Frank Lloyd Wright was a proponent of organic architecture. He believed that the structure should blend with, not impose, on nature. He also believed that humanity should be central to all design.

"I have always admired Frank Lloyd Wright. It was such a joy to study and live in a building that he designed. My other favorite structures are Fallingwater in Pennsylvania (with a stream and waterfall running under the building) and the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York which is like a seashell."

In 2006, she went back to Manila for the first time after seven years, and launched an audio book about FLW's architecture titled "Frankly Speaking: It's the Wright Way."

The book-launching was held at Oakwood Premier, by Ayala Land, Inc, a company she worked for 10 years ago.

Lira is exceptionally articulate, hardly pausing during the interview, as if she does not run out of ideas. She also sounds very enthusiastic about any topic that is brought up. No wonder she is often invited to speak at architects' conventions.

ANGBANSA

## Albay

Health authorities have warned residents of 11 villages against possible contamination of their drinking water due to the collapse of a portion of a reservoir wall in Barangay Balinad.

The Albay Provincial Health Office advised residents to filter and boil their drinking water.

The water was subjected to analysis and it was found that its chemical contents had "turbidity" or muddy sediments.

Despite the turbidity findings, the test showed that the water had no bacteria content, the result of recent efforts to encourage filtration to ensure safe and potable drinking water.

Other findings from the analysis indicated that the water from the spring source meets the drinking water standard on the levels of iron, chlorine, nitrate, alkalinity and copper.

## Palawan

The repair and rehabilitation of the city's airport terminal building is now in full swing.

This, after Palawan representative Abraham Khalil Mitra, together with representatives of Department of Transportation and Communication and Air Transportation Office, held a ground-breaking ceremony at the city's airport.



"It's a slow season for tourists. I think it's a good time to start the construction", said Mitra, referring to repair and rehabilitation of the airport terminal under Phase 1 worth P28 million.

He said they are expecting another P100 million this September for Phase 2 of the terminal building.

Phase 1 and Phase 2 are scheduled for completion in June 2008.

## Isabela

The Department of Agriculture has pledged P11 million in counterpart funding for the construction of one more small water impounding project to ensure the supply of irrigation water to the town's arable lands.

The amount will increase the P4.8 million share from the provincial and municipal governments of Isabela to complete the needed infrastructure that will boost agricultural production.

Agriculture regional executive director Gumersindo Lasam said the support fund had received approval from Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap.

At least P16 million will go into the construction of the water impounding projects in barangay Dingaling and irrigation canals from an existing pump irrigation system built 15 years ago.

## Makati, HSBC building and a few of her favorite things

**Laura G Perez** in Sacramento

What does Lira Luis think of the high-rise buildings in Hong Kong? She says they have their own charm and character.

"I like the design of the HSBC building. It's innovative."

But she says she does not care for the Cathedral of Sagrada Familia in Spain, designed by Antonio Gaudi. "It reminds me of melting candles." This cathedral has been under construction for over a century.

Lira says that after 9/11, some American architects have

designed buildings with a hole in the middle, perhaps a subliminal defense against another Twin Towers-style plane attack. They are also into green buildings.

She does not think the Philippines buys the principles of organic architecture very much. On her website, she freely expresses what she thinks of the Makati skyscrapers:

"Makati is flanked by cookie-cutter buildings designed by foreigners who have displayed a total lack of understanding of a tropical country in a lower latitude close to the equator.

"Why did we allow this to happen?"

"Partly due to the Filipino mindset of colonialism and branding, anything imported, in this case designed by a foreigner, must be good.

"This is contrary to the organic architecture I've learned. A building needs to be site-specific.

"One can't just pluck the floor plan of a building from out of an industrialised nation like America then build it in a country in different latitude.

"It's like buying a fur coat in New York because it's hip and

trendy then wearing it in Manila where it's 30 + degrees C."

Lira thinks President Arroyo needs to support initiatives that create environmental awareness and responsibility.

She says the government needs to establish a national benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of high-performance buildings.

Architects need to help solve the environmental problem through design. "I'm currently pursuing accreditation to become a professional Sustainable Design Expert.