

The project started out as a simple volunteer design project for our organization, UP Task Force Arki (TFA is a service-oriented student organization based in the University of the Philippines College of Architecture –Ed.). The Kitanglad Integrated NGOs, an organization based in Mt. Kitanglad, Bukidnon (in Central Mindanao), asked TFA through its partner NGO, TAO-Pilipinas, to suggest designs for the Mt. Kitanglad Cultural Heritage Center.

The Mt. Kitanglad Cultural Heritage Center is envisioned to serve as a venue for cultural understanding among the various indigenous peoples, mainland settlers, and the local government units around the area. It will house spaces for cultural activities and also serve as a support facility for the tourism activities in the Mount Kitanglad Range National Park.

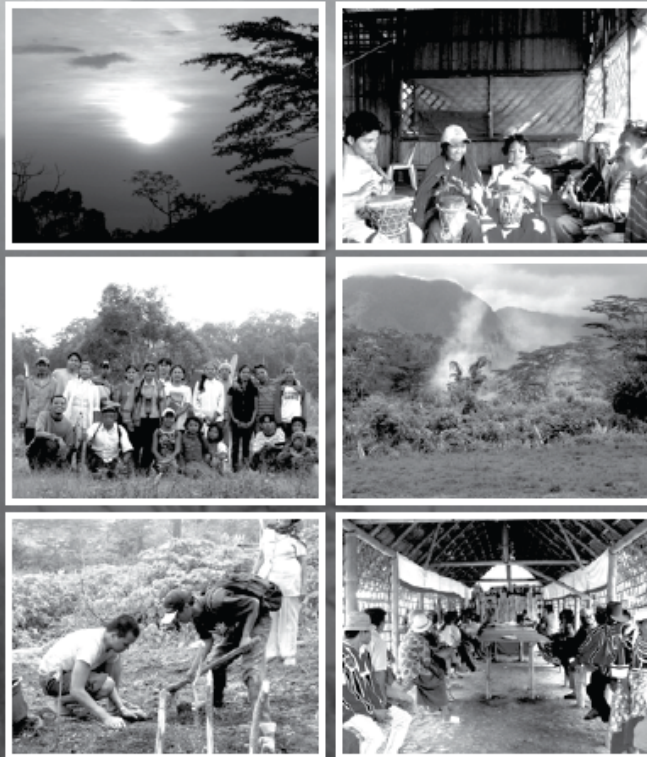
We started drafting design schemes after getting the requirements. It turned out to be really difficult, since it was impossible to design for people we haven't met, for a site we haven't seen, and for a culture that's almost entirely different from ours. We didn't think the project would be successful if the huge gap in the middle of the design process couldn't be filled. So three of us, Architect Anna Gonzales, Jhun Fabrero (another TFA member), and I, packed our bags and flew all the way to Mindanao for the much needed architect-user interaction. Little did we know it was going to be a lot more than that.

We decided to hold a two-day workshop on architectural design and space making, which aimed to allow the indigenous peoples of Kitanglad to provide inputs in the design of the Mt. Kitanglad Cultural Heritage Center. Encouraging their participation in the design process, could in a way, contribute to their empowerment as the true protectors and cultivators of the land. It was pretty ambitious, but not impossible, as we soon found out.

### Language barrier

At first, I realized how paralyzing it was when I couldn't speak the language of the Bukidnons, the tribe who composed majority of the participants of the workshop. I felt depressed because I felt I wasn't giving enough of what I could share. But after a few activities and exercises, I realized it really wasn't that difficult.

When I was assigned to facilitate the discussion among the "elders group" on the formulation of the design criteria, all I had to do was listen hard, listen well and listen more, especially when I sensed that the elders were also doing their part in trying their best to communicate their thoughts. Somehow, I felt that we were able to strike a middle ground: Our conversations were composed of 30 percent Binukid, 20 percent Bisaya, 50 percent Tagalog, served with patience and loaded with sincerity!



# Designing with the Lumad on Mt. Kitanglad

A volunteer learns more about architecture and life in a design workshop with an indigenous community in Bukidnon

BY PAOLO B. AGUILA



Bae Inatawan explains that they like the image of a Thai palace, because its roof structure reflects the seven peaks of Mt. Kitanglad.

### Mapping daily activities

The first day was really enlightening, for both us and the Bukidnons. The tribe was asked to dramatize their daily activities so we could get an idea on how these will affect the design of the center. After the very enjoyable presentation, the members of the tribe expressed their delight in having gone through the activity. More than being able to have fun in performing, there was something in the activity that made them realize that their life, however ordinary, is worth staging. It was a simple yet self-esteem strengthening exercise. We also learned a lot about their culture, sensibilities, and identity as a people.

### Choosing a form

Another enlightening exercise was the architectural forms preference exercise. We showed them different indigenous architectural forms from different "lumads" (indigenous peoples) from all over South East Asia, in order to trigger their aesthetic sensibilities and extract from them their preferred "built" forms. We also hoped to understand what spaces they felt most comfortable with.

The Bukidnons picked a Thai palace as their most preferred form, but not for the same reason I naively thought they would. When asked why they chose the image of the Thai palace, they said it was because the roof structure reflected the seven peaks of Mt. Kitanglad! I was floored to hear such a simple yet sensitive explanation of aesthetic preference from people who haven't gone to an architectural school, or even finish secondary school. I, assuming myself to be in a position to say what kinds of reasons are valid in the choice of forms for built structures, underestimated the very people I could learn so much from; or rather, overestimated my capacity to think. Either way, we realized that were there to learn, as much as we were there to share.

### Getting dirty

After formulating the design criteria for the center, and mapping the activities of the tribe, we decided to literally get our hands dirty, and create a clay (mud and water) model of the site, representing the approximate scale, proportions and orientation of the site, complete with existing foliage and topography.

Author Paolo Aguila creates a sketch model together with Onil, a participant from the Bukidnon tribe.



After familiarizing ourselves with the site, we then integrated the site with the forms and the spaces agreed upon the day before. We, together with the tribe, made sketch models of the structures and assembled them on the scaled map of the site, to form the most concrete image we could come up with of the basic design of the future cultural heritage center.

That night was indeed one that will forever remain in my heart. I felt a different kind of fulfillment; one that will never be replaced by any form of reward. I'm used to doing volunteer work for my organization, but this rare chance to work with these amazing people made me realize that architecture can be a lot more than fabricating forms. It can be a tool to empower individuals, reinforce identity, and facilitate communication. Architecture can undeniably, build worlds; given the right avenues, it can also build people.

### Lessons from Kitanglad

The workshop in Kitanglad taught me these basic yet important lessons: One is that learning is a continuous process. No matter how old you are, how powerful you are, how smart you are, you're never too good for additional learning. I'll never forget these people who've thanked us for sharing our knowledge and skills when in fact, I'm not so sure if it was them or us who learned and grew more with the experience.

**“We were there to learn as much as we were there to share”**



The workshop involved creating a clay model of the site, complete with foliage and topography.

Perhaps the most important lesson for me is that life acquires more meaning when it is shared. I have never felt so proud in my whole life of what we were able to accomplish during our brief stay. I felt that I was able to share the gift of architecture and give it back to whom it truly belongs, to the people. I have often questioned the purpose of this profession that I chose to pursue, contemplating whether it will bring me happiness in the future. But in seeing how it can possibly help other people find comfort and happiness, I did find happiness and fulfillment for myself. The experience may not have completely laid out the path that I am to take, but it did expand my options, as much as it did make the world a bigger place. Somehow, it gives me a firmer resolve to keep doing what I do, hoping that tomorrow the world will see a day when more people will start sharing. I can only imagine the beautiful changes that will make! ■

### About the Author

Paolo Aguila was the chairperson of the University of the Philippines-Task Force Arki for the school year 2004 to 2005. The design workshop was held in May 2005.