

LUXURY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

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A
PLATEAU
IN THE
SKY

This modern family compound in Cebu City incorporates Philippine indigenous materials while staying on par with global architectural standards.

Words: Alicia Corbett

The city of Cebu is known for its pristine white beaches, colonial architecture, as well as a burgeoning cultural and culinary scene that makes it easy to see why it is known as the Queen City of the South. It is also home to several scenic mountains and hills that offer a quick respite from the hustle and bustle of city life.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CS ARCHITECTURE.





Above: a two-storey family room overlooks the swimming pool.

Facing page: the property bears a closer resemblance to a luxury resort rather than a family residence.

PERCHED ATOP A prestigious residential development on one of the rolling hills overlooking the city is Hillside I, a modern family compound integrated with nature that incorporates Philippine indigenous materials. The project was created by CS Architecture, an award-winning full-service architecture, interior design and consulting firm established in 1992 with international headquarters in Connecticut and Manila.

The firm was founded by architects Anna Sy from the Philippines and Jason Chai from the US, who both studied at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. With a shared penchant for 19th-century beaux arts Western classicism and early 20th-century European modernism, the duo has honed a distinctive signature style over the years. This now spans a diverse range from sumptuous beachfront homes overlooking the South China Sea to a Scandinavian-influenced property overlooking Long Island Sound in Connecticut, using the finest traditional materials and workmanship in wood detailing that was brought in by European craftsmen from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

For Hillside I, the owners often entertained international guests, which Sy and Chai kept in mind during the conception stage. "We wanted to make sure that these visitors were inspired by a space that was both culturally Filipino as well as international in design," the duo said in a joint statement. "It's an introduction to both the natural beauty of the Philippines as well as its ability to be on par with global standards."

The duo faced challenges with the 4,800sqm property from the onset due to its location on a plateau that was 5m to 6m higher than the existing road, which required many elevation changes. This called for one year of designing and two further years of construction, which was a veritable feat in innovation on CS Architecture's part. The solution was to divide the many living requirements into distinct structures set at different heights, which helped to maintain an intimate scale of the entire complex.

The house was divided into several parts. The portico, main living area, dining pavilions and main kitchen wing flanked a central courtyard on the highest plateau. Then, the two-storey bedroom wing was situated to the east of the property, while the service wing was located to the west. On the lower plateau, a swimming pool fronts a two-storey family room. Secondary spaces such as guest rooms, office spaces and a gym are carved into the stone base and are accessible via an outdoor corridor. Covered walkways and bridges form a dynamic circulation network. The result is that, rather than a typical residence, the property is a resort-styled sanctuary that will make its residents feel as if they are on a perpetual vacation.



“Instead of creating one immense structure, we broke up the living spaces into clusters that were more accessible and attuned to the owner’s lifestyles and living patterns,” Sy and Chai explained. “We incorporated the elements of nature such as air, flora and fauna, water and respect for the natural terrain—all of which contribute to the feeling of calm, relaxation and a peaceful co-existence with the external environment.” Then, to complement the surrounding environment without compromising human comfort, the entire concept and design of the property was based on the idea of mutual habitation with nature. “Everything from the materials chosen, the respect for the intricacies of the natural terrain as well as the flow of the surrounding area were meant to complement the environment,” they said.

On top of having a resort’s vision in mind, both Philippine indigenous materials and traditional architectural features were incorporated into the design. An adobe stone base reminiscent of old Filipino ancestral houses wraps around the perimeter of the house. Natural materials such as abaca weaves that are native to the Philippines were incorporated into select interior surfaces, such as cabinetry, walls and panels, which contribute to the anachronistic feeling of being in two time periods once you step into the dwelling. Indigenous reed workmanship that adds texture to ceiling surfaces and bamboo elements are ubiquitous elements throughout the property.

Outdoors, lush gardens and water features meander between the buildings. These house the owner’s collections of driftwood equestrian sculptures made by James Doran-Webb, a UK artist based in Cebu whose works are also exhibited at Gardens by the Bay in Singapore. Separating the foyer from the circular drive court is a bamboo wall, which is a simultaneously unique and functional organic screen that is integrated into the entrance canopy. Both features are also reflective of the owner’s love for natural elements and contribute to setting the tone of the house. “These two features were intentionally done to highlight the contrast between a man-made linear design against a completely natural backdrop,” Sy and Chai stated. “This integration is both unique and functional.”



This and facing pages: nature is equally at home throughout the property.