

# PRESERVING A LEGACY

THE BINONDO HERITAGE RESTORATION  
AND MUSEUM PROJECT











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## The Binondo Heritage Restoration Project

In the early 20th century, Manila was the center of trade and commerce in the Philippines. Its major districts like Escolta, Quiapo, Divisoria, and Binondo were teeming with commercial and retail establishments and financial institutions. The streets were lined with beautiful public and private buildings reflecting Manila's architectural styles of American, Spanish, and Chinese influences. Binondo was the prime business address where major banks established themselves before branching out nationwide.

While the capital city continues to be a bustling melting pot of all kinds of commercial endeavors, Manila, like many cities in the world, is faced with the typical urban problems of pollution, overpopulation, traffic congestion, and aging buildings and monuments. The city government undertook a program of revitalizing Manila into the beautiful city that it was. As it prepared to celebrate its 100th anniversary, China Bank embarked on a genuine restoration of its original headquarters located in Binondo, Manila — the world's oldest "Chinatown."

The restored China Bank Binondo Center is the Bank's contribution to the city's revitalization program and stands as an architectural reminder of Binondo's heyday as the "Wall Street of the Philippines."

## The China Bank Building: A Beaux Arts Beauty

China Bank's first home was a modest structure on No. 90 Calle Rosario, which is now Quintin Paredes St., in Binondo. By its second year in 1922, the Bank had grown so much that it would soon need a bigger building. By 1924, China Bank was operating from its newly-built five-story head office on Calle Juan Luna corner Calle Dasmariñas. Binondo, then, was developing into a beautiful central business district, shaped by dominant European and American architecture of the 19th and early 20th centuries. A range of architectural styles was seen on its structures—from Neoclassical and Beaux-Arts to Mannerist Revival, Art Nouveau, and Mission. Many of the buildings were designed by European and American architects in the Philippines and later, by Filipino architects who studied in American schools as pensionados.

The designer of the China Bank Building was Arthur Julius Niclaus Gabler Gumbert, a German architect who worked for the Chinese government on the Tientsin-Pukou Railway System and who helped design the Tianfu-Shandong Train Station (1908–1914), considered the biggest and most modern train station in China at the time. Gabler Gumbert relocated to the Philippines from China, possibly because of the Chinese Revolution in 1911, and started his architectural practice in the country in 1912. By the 1920s, architects in the Philippines were veering away from the Neo-Baroque style preferred by the Spanish colonizers and were adopting the new styles rooted in the Neoclassical tradition.

Designed and built on a 737.84-square meter property in 1923–1924, the China Bank Building was initially a five-story structure which was later extended to seven levels. Gabler Gumbert designed the building in the Neoclassical fashion, utilizing a variation of the Beaux-Arts style.

“Arthur Gabler-Gumbert . . . was well aware of identity in architecture, as identity defines what the building is. Banks are important commercial institutions, and their architectural interpretation elucidates who they are. As can be seen in the architecture of other banks in the area, the Neoclassic-Beaux Arts style, firmly rooted in the classical traditions of the past, exudes confidence and trust—a must-have . . . if one is to invest one's hard-earned money within its perceived solid walls,” writes Architect Manuel D. C. Noche, former secretary of the Heritage Conservation Society, who was commissioned by China Bank for the restoration project.

Architect Manuel Noche describes the original China Bank Building:

Gabler Gumbert followed the classic tripartite formula in this project—a solid lower base, a repetitive middle level supported by classical columns, and a crown capped with, in this case, the classic cornice. The base is pierced with arched openings, above which rest tall Corinthian columns.

The original uppermost level is crowned by corresponding moldings, making the building a fine example of classical proportion and elegance. The ground level is articulated with tall stately arches, four on both sides—though along Calle Dasmariñas, an arcade for shelter is provided. The inner arches mimic those found along the periphery. The ends or edges of the façade thrust slightly from the main face and veer from the repetition of this formula—instead, a square-headed opening with a rectangular clerestory above it is utilized.

The walls, which appear to be of plastered concrete, are divided into two segments—the simple pedestal, which approximately stands one-fifth of the whole height of the ground floor, and the deeply grooved upper wall, which is layered and rendered in the Mannerist tradition. The external

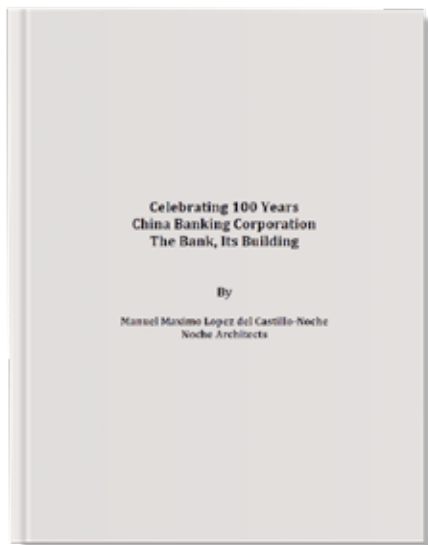


Arthur Julius Niclaus Gabler Gumbert (1882-1940) was one of the most notable foreign architects in the Philippines. Aside from the China Bank Building, his other important commissions include the Yutivo Hardware Building, the Plaridel Masonic Temple, and the Manila Gas Corporation Building.





China Bank's original head office in Binondo, Manila, completed in 1924. Called Downtown Center, and later Binondo Business Center, it was the Bank's headquarters for over six decades.



Arch. Noche describes the building's original architecture, the renovations through the years, and the massive undertaking to restore it to its former glory. The manuscript is available for free download at [www.chinabank.ph](http://www.chinabank.ph)

arches are designed with layered moldings and capped by a classical cyma reversa keystone. The inner wall and arches of the arcade, compared to the external façade, appear to be plainly treated. The tall and stately arches are adorned and protected with heavy Rococo grille work with the monogram of China Banking Corporation rendered in a cartouche of metal plate and located at the center of each upper arch. Above the arch, in what comprises architecturally the frieze, is the etched name of China Banking Corporation, written both in English and in Mandarin *shūfǎ* characters.

The building's upper floor, which rises from the second level to the fifth, is treated in classical style. Resting above the base or the ground floor are ten fluted Corinthian columns, five on each side. These rise from the second level to the top of the fourth floor. Rounded attached columns align the central massing while flat square pilasters add support along the protruding edges. The edges of corners protrude from the main face of the central massing. This is treated plain and articulated solely by the square-headed fenestrations that line the corners. The sole exception is on the second floor, which is designed with fully operating French windows supported by a corbelled balcony.

Along the strapwork, or the separating surface between levels, two distinct yet classical treatments are rendered. Between the second and third floor levels, the design utilizes raking cornices, above each of the four central double-hung windows. While between the third and fourth levels, a series of festoon reliefs provide a festive look. Along the protruding edges, festoons are again utilized between levels, though here, two variants are utilized. Along the upper level, the festoons are designed with female heads, while wreaths decorate the lower level. The windows are articulated with separating transom and mullion



As China Bank braced for World War II, it blocked its arches with plywood sheets.



The China Bank Building was partially burned during the war. When the Bank reopened after Manila's liberation, the building was rehabilitated and two more levels were added.

molds, while the original flat iron windows utilize double-hung mechanisms. All windows except for the second-floor French doors are square-headed and divided accordingly into glazed panels.

Separating the fourth level from the fifth, above the Corinthian capital, is a layered fasciae frieze designed with a series of flat strip moldings. This terminates into a ledge where the fifth floor rests. This level repeats the articulation of the fenestrations below with the exception of the absence of separating columns. In its place are rendered decorative corbels. An articulated Corinthian cornice—utilizing dentils, modillions, and lion-encrusted cymatium—crowns the building, which originally terminated in the fifth floor. This is topped by acroterions lining the cornice.

Based on archival photographs, Architect Noche says that Binondo in the 1920s was in a state of redevelopment, and while there were modern buildings in the tradition of the Neoclassical style and variations of it, the buildings along Calle Dasmariñas were built in the old style, with masonry and wood. Calle Dasmariñas was a narrow eight-meter wide street and would be widened only in the 1930s. Photographs show that the China Bank Building was partially burned during World War II and was rehabilitated after the liberation of Manila. A sixth and a seventh floor were added, with the top floor crowned by classic Greek ornamentation on the cornice parapet.

## Pragmatic Renovations

By doing a forensic study of the building and studying archival photographs, Architect Noche and his team found that more renovations were made on the building in later years. In the 1960s, marble cladding was added on the whole ground floor façade, covering the arches along Juan Luna Street and the internal arches along Dasmariñas Street. The marble cladding also hid the rustication design of the façade on both sides, and the molded surround of the arches.

The other visible change was seen in the 6th-floor trellised deck, which was removed or integrated to an extended 6th-floor façade. This expansion aligned the 6th level to the main building façade, leaving just the 7th floor recessed. In this expansion, the coupled columns that lined the façade remained in place although clad in the new concrete wall. A new overhanging roof covered the new 6th floor.

Four major changes were made in the building's interior, according to Architect Noche. First, an Otis elevator was installed in place of stairs. Traces of the old stairway could be seen inside the elevator shaft. Second, the ground floor was partially elevated by 1.10 meters. This was undertaken in the 1960s to address the perennial flooding in Binondo and to align the floor to the street after its elevation by the Department of Public Works.

The third major change was the expansion of the Bank through its connection to an adjacent building

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—WILLIAM WHANG

acquired in the late 1960s. This was done by piercing the party wall dividing the two structures, which resulted in the removal of the rightmost elevator shaft of the old building. In the process, the ceiling was also lowered, hiding the decorative cornice that lined the original high ceiling.

The fourth significant change was done in the original banking hall, which had a very high 7-meter ceiling. The clear open space in the banking hall was closed to provide for a mezzanine, which would house the Bank’s accounting and clearing departments. With the cladding of both the exterior and interior walls with marble panels, the peripheral arches were concealed.

The other interior changes were the installation of drop ceilings on all the floors, which hid the original ceiling cornice mold; the cladding of the columns with wood or marble tile panels; and the replacement of tiles on all the floors. In the banking hall, a thick layer of concrete fill covers the original flooring, which was of red granolithic mix.

## Preserving China Bank’s Heritage

To restore the China Bank Binondo Building to its former glory—that was the dream of some members of the China Bank management. With the initial planning stages starting as early as 2016, the restoration of the building became the centerpiece of the Bank’s 2020 centennial celebration. Named the Binondo Heritage Restoration Project, it aimed to preserve the Bank’s original headquarters and its place in the history of the Chinese Filipino community for future generations. The building was not only to be restored to its original design as faithfully as possible, but also to make it stronger and more sustainable.

China Bank engaged Manuel Noche and his firm Noche + Architects for the project. Architect Noche is the former secretary of the Heritage Conservation Society which advocates for the restoration and renewal



Prior to the restoration, marble cladding installed in the 1960s covered the arches along Juan Luna Street and the internal arches along Dasmarinas Street.



Contract signing with Heritage architect — China Bank President William Whang (2nd from left) shakes hands with Architect Manuel Noche. Looking on are Binondo Heritage Restoration Committee Chairman Alexander Escucha and Retail Banking Business Segment Head Rosemarie Gan.



of the Binondo area. A massive undertaking, the China Bank restoration project required extensive structural, architectural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and insulation work.

“This restoration project is aimed at preserving not only China Bank’s culture and legacy, but more importantly, the bygone character of Binondo for generations to come,” said China Bank President William Whang.

Beyond the restoration of the beautiful moldings, cornices, stately window arches with ornate grilles, and other architectural details, the bulk of the construction work involved retrofitting the building to improve energy efficiency. The building is designed to use energy efficient LED lights and inverter air-conditioners. The ground floor fixed windows use Low-E Double glazed panels. The Low-E glass provides a higher level of heat reduction while the double glazing provides better sound insulation than ordinary single glazed windows. There was also a plan to install solar panels, but tests showed that because of the three tall condominium buildings around the China Bank Building, the solar panels would not be able to catch enough sunlight to



Steel scaffoldings surround the building for the painstaking work of restoring the ornate moldings, iron grills, and other exterior architectural details.

make it viable. Nevertheless, the restored building will be energy-efficient.

“We’re not only restoring an important heritage building to its original architectural design, but we’re making it stronger, resilient, and sustainable for the next century,” China Bank SVP and project team head Alex Escucha said as the project began. “It is also part of China Bank’s Disaster Preparedness and Resilience initiatives and is likewise aligned to the goals of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) and ARISE Philippines,” he added.

“We commissioned a seismic study, but the result of the stress test was not conclusive that the building can withstand ‘the big one’ (a 7.2 magnitude earthquake) as



The restoration uncovered the stately arches of the original architecture, which were covered up as the building was repaired and remodelled through the decades.



Worker meticulously cleaning, repairing, and restoring the building’s exterior moldings and ornaments.





Perforated pipes were installed to collect water and prevent seepage during high tides.



To ensure that the restored building can withstand the “big” 7.2 earthquake as required by the Building Code, a steel retrofit was installed in all the seven floors topped with an advanced shock-absorbing rubber damper by Sumitomo. China Bank is the first building in the Philippines to use this technology.

required by the National Building Code (R.A. 6541). The structural engineers suggested a traditional retrofit but our chairman, Hans Sy, said ‘I know what you are trying to propose, but I want you to try something else which I know will be more expensive but will make me sleep better at night.’ The engineers recommended that all the floors be retrofitted with a Japanese technology of rubber dampers—the first of its kind in the country,” Alex said.

“China Bank is the first to use the Sumitomo Rubber Damper in the Philippines as an earthquake countermeasure system,” said VP Baldwin Aguilar, the project manager. Sumitomo Rubber’s vibration control technology reduces everything from wind-generated swinging to large-scale earthquakes. When the damper expands and contracts in response to seismic shocks, the special viscoelastic rubber installed in the damper drastically mitigates a building’s vibrations by converting seismic energy to thermal energy.

“We also commissioned a hydrological study which showed that the lobby was below the Pasig River’s level at high tide, so a modern pipe system and a cement barrier were installed in the ground floor. I’m proud to say that this project meets the standards of a true restoration and of structural sustainability and resilience,” Alex said.

The ground-breaking took place in April 2019, marking the start of construction and restoration, after a thorough forensic investigation that uncovered architectural details which were thought lost or damaged. Demolition work and site-clearing soon

started. The removal of the marble cladding on the ground façade fully uncovered the stately arches with Rococo grilles, a small part of which was discovered by the team of Architect Noche in their forensic investigation.

Both during the forensic investigation and restoration work, the project team led by Engr. Arthur P. Carlos executed a highly coordinated plan where occupants of one floor would be moved to the fifth floor — fully equipped with furniture and equipment for bank operations — while their floor was being investigated in detail and later partially demolished and restored. This was done for all the other floors. The operating units can then return to their assigned spaces in the restored building — which would then house units that used to hold office in the adjoining annex building.

By the last quarter of 2019, work on the arches and other architectural details was in full swing. The exterior was cleaned of decades of urban grime and restored by sandblasting and repainting the concrete façade. The interior was renovated to add modern touches that would complement its original appearance and enhance the beauty of the intricate details on the arch windows, entablature, and ceiling cornices.

The interior design and renovation work was executed by Sonia Santiago Olivares and Associates, Inc (SSOA), a leading interior design and consulting firm in the country established more than 45 years ago. It has undertaken many residential and commercial projects, including the interior design of upscale retail stores, corporate offices, and hotels. SSOA counts China Bank



Marker from the National Museum designating the restored building as an *Important Cultural Property*.



The National Historical Commission recognizes the significance of the China Bank Building in Philippine history.





among its long-standing clients, and has designed many of its offices and branches for the past 35 years.

SSOA designed the interior of the main banking floor, its lobby, and all other lobby floors in the building. “Our main goal was to restore and respect everything that was part of the original building. Anything new was to be modern and of today. Taking this approach kept the authenticity of the original heritage intact, which was a means of embracing the past. The creation of the new acknowledges the present and looks towards the future,” said Maja Olivares-Co, SSOA executive vice president and creative director.

“The beautiful grillework, stonework, and plasterwork were carefully brought to its former glory. The interiors had the benefit of the commanding presence of the grillework on the perimeter walls which was a very strong element in the main banking floor. The rest of the interior spaces, when discovered, was quite simple and devoid of any major details. The objective was not to compete with the grillework and plasterwork or recreate something similar but instead complement it with modern clean lines for contrast, further reinforcing the old and new,” she added.

Along with the restoration of the architectural details and sculptural decorations, structural retrofitting proceeded, as well as mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and insulation work. With two-to three-shift work days, much progress was accomplished in 2019. Underneath the scaffold and safety net, the transformation on the building’s exterior was already apparent. But as the Covid-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, Metro Manila and some provinces were placed on lockdown and construction was not allowed. The lockdown lasted longer than expected, slowing construction work on the building a great deal. The work disruptions from the pandemic-related lockdowns proved to be challenging, coupled with the fact that work in certain areas could be done only after banking hours.

On August 16, 2020, amid the pandemic, China Bank celebrated its centennial in a quiet and meaningful way with online Thanksgiving Masses. On the same day, despite the constraints, the fully restored building façade and ground floor were unveiled, revealing the refurbished Corinthian columns, cornices, and moldings; the stately arches with ornate grilles; and other Neoclassical architectural and sculptural details. Inside, with new granite floor and a very high ceiling, the main banking area on the ground floor looks grand, especially when it is bathed in natural light streaming in through the tall arches.







Dasmariñas Street facade at dusk.

**“Our main goal was to restore and respect everything that was part of the original building. Anything new was to be modern and of today. This approach kept the authenticity of the original heritage intact ... the creation of the new acknowledges the present and looks towards the future.” —MAJA OLIVARES-CO**



The actual branch interior on the right is an exact match to this architect's perspective of the modern contemporary branch design.

The full restoration of the whole building will make a historical landmark in the revitalization of Binondo, the world's oldest Chinatown. Alex said, "We expect to be part of the walking tour of Binondo, especially at night, that starts at the Jones Bridge with its restored dramatic lighting." Instead of settling for conventional flood lights, the project team decided on a dramatic lighting scheme by PL Light, the same lighting specialist that designed the lighting effects for the Manila Cathedral.

The restoration of the China Bank Building in Binondo can be considered the most faithful restoration that has been done on any building in the country. "The level of sophistication of this restoration effort is extremely high. This is not a restoration that is careless, that only pretends to be a restoration but is not actually a restoration. This is a very serious restoration, and I'd like to be able to connect that to the Bank's commitment to quality. More than two years of

research and forensics took place. Forensics means a careful—if I may use the term—archaeological digging into the building and what it tells us today," said Marian Pastor, curator of the China Bank Museum. "We're hoping that it becomes part of a renewal of inner Manila, of Binondo, because it's an important story, not for nostalgia reasons, but because we have to be able to understand what happened, how this country was supported by particular initiatives by people of integrity," she added.

"It's a real restoration, more than anything else, and we are very sincere and true to the historical findings of the building. And although there are compromises because of its current use and its current function – the lifestyle and the mentality of people now are totally different from the people of the 1920s – overall, it is a true undertaking of what a real restoration should be," Architect Noche said.







On January 28, 2021, The Binondo Main branch, called the China Bank Binondo Business Center, started serving clients at the beautifully restored building.

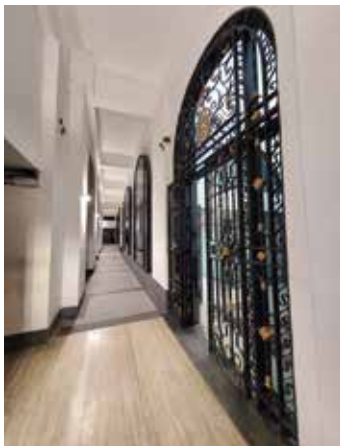
It is remarkable that this 100-year-old building is not only still standing and fully functional but is being used the way it has always been used since it was built—as a bank office. Once restoration work was completed on most floors, Bank officers and their staff moved back in.

The building houses the Binondo Business Center, which, to this day, continues to be one of the biggest branches in the whole China Bank network serving its thriving Chinese-Filipino core market. This is unique

to China Bank because for the other banks, their first branch or head office either no longer exists or has become a small branch.

The Binondo Business Center or what used to be called the Downtown Center served the Chinese market by itself until 1960, when the Sto. Cristo Branch was opened. Even with the presence of over three dozen China Bank branches serving the entrepreneur and middle market in the Binondo area, the Binondo

**“This restoration and heritage project is China Bank’s contribution to the revitalization of Binondo.” —HANS SY**



Arcade along Dasmariñas St.



Better access to the safety deposit box (SDB) on the mezzanine floor with a PWD lift.



The main cash vault at the branch.



Restored elevators with original brass grills.





Before the restoration, the branch area was functional but unremarkable. The original high ceiling design was covered up with the addition of the mezzanine. The restoration revealed the grandeur of the high ceiling and exposed the original grills, providing the setting for a stylish update.

Business Center maintains its pre-eminent role as one of the biggest branches in the entire China Bank network.

“This restoration is the centerpiece of our centennial celebration and a major component of Binondo’s renewal. It is a true restoration, with as much emphasis on making the building sustainable and resilient for the next 100 years,” said William.

“The gravity of the pandemic necessitated a modification of plans, but it does not diminish the significance of the occasion. China Bank is 100 years strong and continues to be resilient and responsive. This restoration and heritage project is China Bank’s contribution to the revitalization of Binondo,” said China Bank Chairman Hans Sy.

## The China Bank Museum

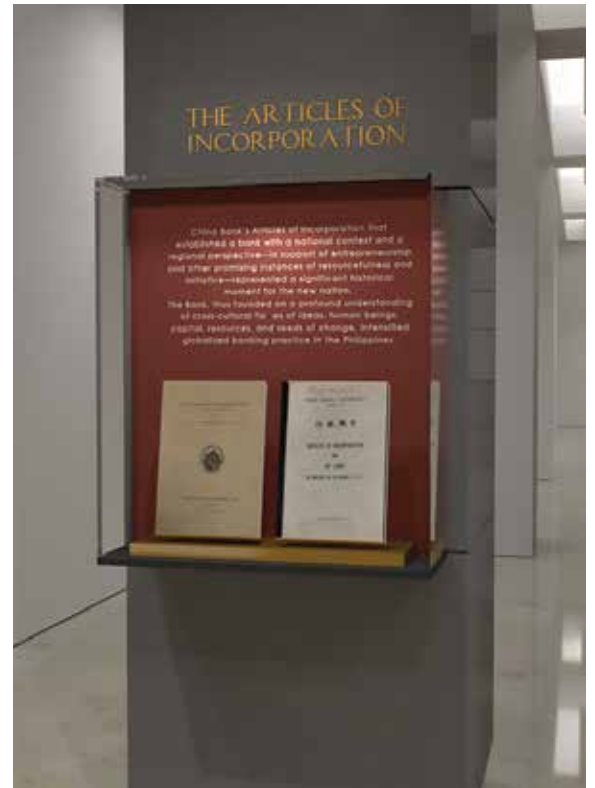
By Marian Pastor Roces, Curator

A guest, visitor, client, or staff who is seeking the elevators at street level, is first greeted by a tall, narrow wall of red stone, inscribed with the Core Values that have been upheld by the Bank for a century. The assertion in polished brass against the red stone signals to the future, as it were, about the Bank's institutional understanding of itself as a living embodiment of principles. The emblazoned words are:

RESOURCEFULNESS AND INITIATIVE  
CONCERN FOR PEOPLE  
HIGH PERFORMANCE STANDARDS  
EFFICIENCY  
CUSTOMER SERVICE FOCUS  
INTEGRITY  
COMMITMENT TO QUALITY

The laser-cut graphics in relief on stone also signals the existence of a museum within the building. The sense of a Bank with a strong institutional history is also conveyed by a short, looped video documentary catching the eye of the visitor transiting this space. The visitor is given to understand the age of the building, and its location in what was early 20th century Manila's business center. The building's survival through a tumultuous century, and its continued, high-performance use, are celebrated in its thorough restoration which, as the video shows, was a state-of-the-art effort the Bank made its pivotal centennial project.

Accessed by the two elevators used by Bank staff and guests, the China Bank Museum occupies most of the fourth floor of a building that is itself its own biggest museum artifact. The welcoming space evokes an elegant corporate setting, however with a twist: the fit-out looks like it will endure, with little diminishment,



over time; perhaps for another century. Glass paneling dividing foyer from museum marks off its front perimeter but also offers views of fragments of the interiors. The foyer quickly suggests a comprehensively curated museum, furthermore invested in appropriate design. The suggestion materializes as a full experience immediately upon clearing the entrance.

Floor to ceiling, a gentle wall curvature cups, as it were, the visitor's eye to focus on a fairly large vitrine encapsulating a fairly small document. The altar-like placement calls for close attention: the paper is a faithful facsimile of the Articles of Incorporation that founded China Banking Corporation in 1920. With the original safely stored, the foundational document is set in its illuminated cubicle for what it is: the enduring magna carta of a Bank that had a vision particular to its time.

The Articles belong to the museum's first area, which is given to evoking the core value, Resourcefulness and Initiative. In this museum, these values are contextualized by the very birth of the Bank in the early 20th century. It was a Bank that—during that fin de





siècle— was an idea whose time had come. Indeed it was ahead of the curve: a Bank that activated financial networks between and among the Philippines, China’s Fujian Province and Hongkong, and the other nodes in this region, to help aspiring entrepreneurs newly migrated from China to the Philippines. A large-scale regional map to the right of the visitors upon entry “speaks” to the Articles of Incorporation across the entrance area. A museum App allows deepening of the understanding of that period, in which a Bank was founded with a strong sense of regional flows of capital, people, goods, and services.

Founding the Bank during that particular time and place—the thriving, cosmopolitan Manila promised liberty after American tutelage—is presented by the museum as an act of noteworthy resourcefulness and initiative. The situation was fecund: capitalizing on new entrepreneurs in Manila, using ease of capital movement brought about by exponentially increased traffic in the region, was to prove prescient. The initiative was immediately rewarded by the significant growth of commerce and industry in the Philippines and its capital Manila—as leadership positions assumed by the Bank’s clients began to feature significantly in economic growth. Significant numbers of the otherwise cash-challenged migrants became engines of growth for a new nation that was also starting to find its place in the community of nations. At the museum, Resourcefulness and Initiative is a succinct section exhibit of an event (the Bank’s establishment) and its layered contexts (southern China and Southeast Asia, and, specifically, Binondo), serving as threshold into a story structured by principles.

The museum theme of core values is reinforced by the next section drawing the visitor into a Banking culture characterized in large measure by its Concern for People. This core value is given a contemplative setting in a room-like space set off from visitor traffic. Cued by seating to consider tarrying for video









documentaries, the guest who can, indeed, stay, is enfolded in brief presentations fleshing out the core values. In the sequence as inscribed at the ground floor, the core values are communicated as institutional family wellsprings of best practice. The videos offer a view of the values as these are upheld by the employee corps, as much as by the Bank leaders since 1920; and as, furthermore, the esprit that in turn self-generates within the Bank's universe of influence.

Subtly-lit display cases lining a wall—still within the recess for audio-visual presentations—invite the visitor into moments in the Bank's life embodied in select documents. Concern for People pervades the handwritten account of Imperial Japan's liquidation of the Bank in the Second World War, during which PhP 13.2 million was taken from it—despite which, the Bank's employees reconstructed its records and honored its clients' savings. It is also Concern for People, in bold face, that emanates from the material traces of the Liberty Wells Foundation, initiated by Bank leader Albino Z. SyCip in 1953 to conflate the fight for liberty and potable water. The principle is simple and powerful. The Bank's institutional understanding of its place in Philippine and regional finance has been unchanging: people are its *raison d'être*.

The section on High Performance Standards follows on from the previous spaces that give macro perspectives, to in turn draw attention to the grain of Banking life in a century-long time line. The exhibition text stands by its assertion: longevity is a hallmark of a Bank performing at unusually high standards. And through time, an enduring ethos is cultivated that upholds only the most uncompromising levels of excellence. The visitor is drawn to the clear glass display case, tall, large, and narrow, that stages the history of the Bank in texts, images, and artifacts. The chronological dated data sequence that wraps around the horizontal interior of the case, are bright nodes in a long narrative strand. Node and strand—that is, event and history, or micro and macro—are together the Bank's autobiography. It makes for a compelling literature of accomplishment.

The ledgers and annual reports, Banking forms, product advertisements, anniversary commemorative materials—these are vestiges of business performed thoroughly, as the exhibition texts assert. Documents that bear the million acts of counting, recording, publication, and celebration of results: these archival materials embody institutional history with great precision. And while all Banks perform these tasks,





at China Bank such performance has been held sacrosanct, in effect, through a much longer time span than most other Banks. At the museum, the sacrosanct exhibitionary treatment of the documents of the quotidian life of the Bank suggests to visitors a long-held logic: that High Performance Standards have been set because of their direct impact on the institutional capacity to realize its concern for people.

Likewise, Efficiency—elevated in China Bank to be a core value instead of merely an after-effect of its elevated standards—is Bank DNA. As the museum text states in this next section, “Efficiency on many registers—the accurate value of time and effort, best practice in all Bank activities, and a connoisseurship of cost-effective methodologies — is Bank DNA. Efficiency is a measure of respect for its clientele.” The display of counting machines that were state-of-the-art when the Bank used them, including the Chinese abacus and the sequential array of American and European adding machines used over the last century, is collectively an embodiment of competence, productivity, efficacy. It is poignant, in fact, that this machine array begins with the abacus, ubiquitous in Chinese business and finance for centuries. It is a reminder of the old Chinese spirit of precision (indeed inherent in its writing system) that

has flowed into the China Bank’s methodologies and deployment of technology.

A section text describes China Bank’s day-to-day operations as expressive of “a culture of efficiency which draws from the Chinese heritage of its migrant founders.” Inscripting this Bank truth in a museum area that physically turns a corner of the overall space evokes its institutional career through a century of strategic technological innovation, turning the corner into high modernity from its precedent cultures. In China Bank, that arc of change has been underwritten by the core value of Efficiency, which allowed the Bank a steady focus as it navigates economic, cultural, and technological change. The display in this section indeed presses the idea that an abiding conservatism—vested in systematic recall of Chinese familial concepts of responsibility—pervades the deft choices of the best available technologies to advance banking efficiency in every period. Conservatism propelled modernization.

Modernization in China Bank therefore proceeded, and continues to proceed, with the institution’s solid foundation in traditional values. The next section, devoted to Customer Service Focus, is anchored by a large-scale artwork in laser-cut material: an assemblage of images of customers and employees

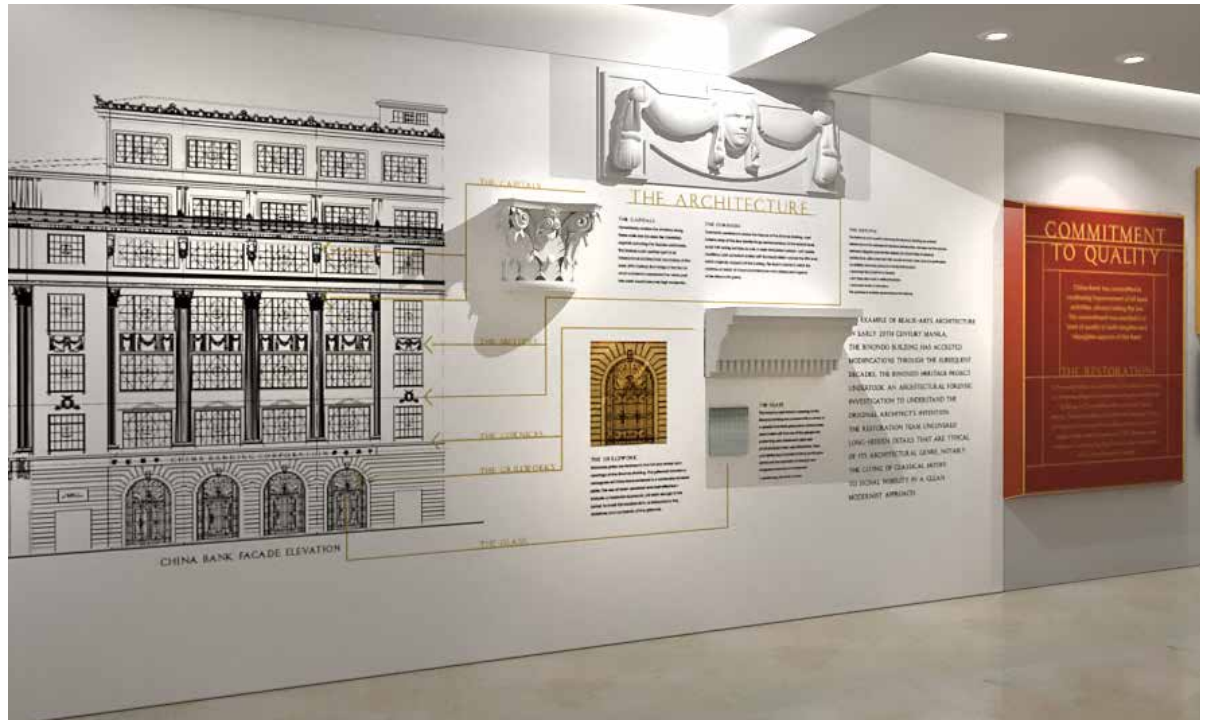
both engaged in forging relationships built on trust and mutual reinforcement of financial purpose. Central to the artwork is the image of Henry Sy Sr., the Bank's stunning embodiment of client success, who rose from migrant to multi-millionaire with the abiding trust, through nearly a century, of his earliest lender. In the assemblage, Mr. Sy is surrounded by Bank employees through time, and other beneficiaries of the Bank's customer service focus. The entirety of the image is the museum's way of providing a visual gist of a narrative of thousands of parts.

The artwork is emblazoned with the words Loyalty and Fairness. These are, to China Bank, more than a bank's responsibility to its clients and employees. The institutional commitment to the people it serves is underwritten by the human scale and humane spirit that the Bank leaders consistently renewed. The commitment is re-enacted in the daily minutiae of transactions and the will of the Bank officers to know and serve its clients. In the exhibit text: "A deposit slip filled by hand, a passbook handed by a teller to a client, a card used on reliable teller machines, visible signage—these are materials of customer service that to the Bank clientele are memory devices. These artefacts—where the Bank and its customers have converged and when service was provided—embody moments of trust building, safe transactions, and capital protection within an upright Bank culture."

The museum space is divided so that another turn brings the "discussions" of the above core values to bear upon the last two. The section on Integrity succeeds that of the relationship of loyalty and fairness, in order to then honor its leaders who built the Bank's foundations thus. The text on the Bank leadership through the century states that: "China Bank chose a relay of men of known integrity to lead it through its first century. Each Chairman of the Board and President had their own leadership style but had integrity as common quality." It is a truism in the finance and commerce field of the nation and the region that China Bank's leadership has consistently been composed of individuals of









Above, the portrait of China Bank founder Dee C. Chuan by National Artist Fernando Amorsolo, and below, the portraits of the succession of the Bank's presidents and chairmen by portrait artists Romeo Enriquez and Edgardo Lantin, are displayed in the museum's section on Integrity.





**“The China Bank Museum was curated to communicate through and with the building. The visitor picks up its actual features, old and new. Content is delivered via architectural elements: the capitals just outside the windows, the retrofitted steel beams ... The building, after all, is the principal artifact.”** —MARIAN PASTOR ROCES, Curator

extraordinary probity. The Bank’s ethical standards were modeled by its highest officialdom. And its reputation for honoring all commitments, bar none, is directly owed to the personal integrity of this leadership.

Aside from the photographs and memorabilia of the bank’s different Boards of Directors is a special memorial to D. C. Chuan, founder of China Bank. Featuring a portrait by the renowned painter (who would in due course become National Artist) Fernando Amorsolo, as well as other photographs during the foundational period of the bank, the museum text underscores what all bank employees know: “Already a lumber magnate as a young man, Dee C. Chuan founded China Bank in 1920 to serve fellow immigrants from China, and entrepreneurs neglected by the large commercial banks in American Colonial Manila. Mr. Dee built the bank on this foundation—abiding concern for the underserved, and the desire to allow them opportunities for success—which distinguishes China Bank from other banks.” The section then displays a chronological sequence of commissioned portraits in oil of the bank’s highest leadership: Albino Z. SyCip, Dee K. Chiong, George Dee Se Kiat, Robert Dee Se Wee, Marcelo L. Nubla, Edward S. Go, Gilbert U. Dee, Hans T. Sy, Henry Sy Sr., Ricardo C. Chua, and William C. Whang. It is an august lineage.

Hence, Commitment to Quality, occupying the last section fronting the gallery of leaders’ portraits, is a metaphoric conversation between leadership and its stewardship. Two key exhibits consist the visitor experience. The first is a wall-sized display in reliefs explaining the restoration project the Bank undertook as its flagship project for the celebration of its first century. As stated in the ground floor video, this has been a high water mark for restoration projects in the Philippines. The text offers that “The Bank called it the Binondo Heritage Restoration Project and set out to recreate the building to be as close to its original state when it opened in 1924. The two-year endeavor is among the

Bank’s most visible expressions of its Commitment to Quality.” And, having raised the bar in historical structure preservation, China Bank shows a straight, indeed unwavering, line of descent from the early 20th century growth of regional and national finance that fed on globally valued ideas, to the early 21st century shifts in the nature of finance.

Yet it is the second exhibit in this section that is the pièce de résistance: the building itself as connecting link between past and future. Exposing what would otherwise have been invisible—two of the A-shaped steel beams inserted into the old building, each beam set equipped with rubber vibration control to protect it from earthquake damage—the curatorial work on this museum literally and symbolically exhibits Commitment to Quality as security for the building, its employees and leaders, its clients, and all they collectively stand for. This technology is only used for the first time in the Philippines and should inspire other heritage projects to utilize technological innovation in support of institutional endurance. It is therefore apt that the museum experience ends with a display of Centennial memorabilia, that is, on a celebratory note.

China Bank celebrates its solidity as an institution: a reliably supportive agent of economic growth, a vehicle for traditional values that guide modernization, and an abiding instrument for core values that have served its constituency remarkably through a century.

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*Marian Pastor Roces is the Philippines’ senior independent curator and founder of TAOINC, the country’s pioneering and only corporation specializing in museum development, parks, art in public places, and publication. Her nearly 50-year career includes highlights such as the establishment of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, the Yuchengco Museum, Museo Marino, the UP Museum to a History of Ideas, and the Bangsamoro Museum. She curated Philippine Pavilions that were awarded grandes prix at the World Expos in Japan and Spain.*



**CHINABANK ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE  
RESTORATION AND MUSEUM PROJECT**

**Built**

1923-1924

**Architect**

JULIUS ARTHUR NICLAUS GABLER GUMBERT

**Project Patrons**

HANS T. SY, CHINA BANK Chairman  
WILLIAM C. WHANG, CHINA BANK President  
RICARDO R. CHUA, CHINA BANK President (2014-2017)

**Centennial Heritage Project Chairman**

ALEXANDER C. ESCUCHA

**Restoration Architect**

MANUEL MAXIMO LOPEZ DEL CASTILLO NOCHE  
(Noche Architects)

**Branch Interior Design**

MAJA OLIVARES-CO  
(Sonia Santiago Olivares and Associates/SSOA)

**Museum Curator**

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**Project Manager**

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**Project Management Consultant**

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