

Restoring Iloilo City's Calle Real

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of Iloilo City is a place called Calle Real, where elegant vintage buildings (circa 1920–1930) have withstood the ravages of time. It was and still is the center of economic activity in the city, which has earned the moniker central business district.

This paper presents a brief history of Iloilo City and the story of how Calle Real was developed and transformed into a vibrant district beaming with tourism and economic potential. The task of restoring the buildings back to their stately appearance is an inspiring story of hard work and determination that gave Calle Real the distinction of being declared a heritage zone.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Oscar M. Lopez describes Iloilo City in its heyday in the book *Iloilo: A Rich and Noble Land*:

When I was born in 1930, Iloilo was the undisputed Queen City of the South. My siblings Geny, Presy, and I were raised in a city then at the peak of its grandeur. It was a genteel, gracious city of elegant mansions, and fabulously wealthy sugar barons.

There is much to be proud of. Since the 1850s, Iloilo has been a national leader in many fields—in nationalism, economics, politics, music, culture, education, and food.

During the first wave of globalization that swept the world between 1815 and 1914, and the resulting rapid growth of the sugar industry in the Visayan region, it was Iloilo province that led the way for the country. By the last decade of the 19th century, Iloilo ranked second only to Manila in volume of both export and import trade. Sugar accounted for the greater part of Iloilo's exports. A telephone network linking the provincial capital with Jaro, Molo and Mandurriao was established in 1894. Direct cable between Manila and Iloilo began operation in 1897.

It was but natural that educational development should follow economic prosperity. Thus, by the last few decades of the 19th century most of the towns in Iloilo had elementary schools for boys and girls.

By the way, Iloilo City today is a flourishing university city with seven universities and five other major academic institutions.

We are honored to be invited to share the experience of our Iloilo Cultural Heritage Foundation, Inc. (ICHFI) in the restoration of eleven buildings so far on Calle Real, the Iloilo central business district. We will try to cover in this paper a brief history of Iloilo City and our rationale, objectives, approaches, successes, failures, and partners in reviving and restoring Calle Real.

“ILOILO, THE GRANDEUR AND THE GLORY”

Allow us to share with you a list of “100 Firsts of Iloilo.” Appropriately titled, it starts with the statement that no other province in the Philippines has chalked up a list of so many “firsts.” These proud Ilonggos are tempted to enumerate all one hundred, but we will restrain ourselves and mention only a few.

“ILOILO’S FIRSTS”

- The first school for boys in the country was founded in Tigbauan in 1652 by the famous Jesuit priest-historian Father Pedro Chirino.
- The province that produced the biggest quantity of textile (jusi, sinamay, cotton) during the Spanish era.
- The first province to export sugar directly to Australia—starting in 1859. (It also exported sugar to Britain, China, and the United States.)

- The oldest existing college in Western Visayas: Colegio de San Jose, founded in 1872.
- The first bank outside Manila: the Iloilo branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, established on 2 April 1883.
- The first province to have a cosmopolitan or international business community. By the 1880s, Iloilo already had vice consulates or consular agencies for Great Britain, United States, Switzerland, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, France, Netherlands, and Germany. Aside from the citizens of these countries, there were also Lebanese, Chinese, Indians, Armenians, and other nationalities in Iloilo.
- The first city outside Manila to have a telephone system—starting 1 June 1894, covering Iloilo, La Paz, Jaro, Mandurriao, and Molo.
- The first city after Manila to be connected to the major cities of the world by cable—beginning 6 November 1897.
- The first provincial branch of the Banco Español Filipino de Isabel II (now Bank of the Philippine Islands), which opened in 1897.
- The first public elementary school during the American regime: Baluarte Elementary

School in Molo, founded by Rosendo Mejica in 1901.

- The first provincial public high school in the country: Iloilo High School, organized in 1902.
- The first car assembly plant in the Philippines—owned by Taller Bisayas de Strachan and MacMurray, which assembled the German car Daimler in the 1920s.
- The first golf club in Asia: Iloilo Golf and Country Club in Santa Barbara town.
- The first commercial airline in the country: the Iloilo-Negros Air Express Co. (INAEC); its inaugural flight from Iloilo to Manila was on 3 February 1933, with a Stitson 3 motor plane.
- The first luxury ship in the interisland service: the *SS Don Esteban* of the De La Rama Lines, built in 1935 at Kiel, Germany, at the cost of more than PHP 1 million.
- The first Filipino to launch the Propaganda Movement in Spain: Graciano Lopez Jaena, founder of *La Solidaridad*.

RATIONALE FOR THE RESTORATION OF ILOILO CITY'S CALLE REAL

Iloilo was a cosmopolitan city of stately mansions and booming bustling economy. Much of the economic activity

was centered on Calle Real, the central business district. About forty vintage buildings are on J. M. Basa Street and its environs, most of which had fallen to sad disrepair.

Calle Real was the heart of Iloilo City, a symbol of its past glory. It is part of our heritage. Calle Real is to us, and quoting Dr. Maria Serena Diokno in her speech at the inauguration of the ICHFI office, “a living thing from the past. If we destroy our heritage or allow it to rot, we will lose a chunk of our past and, with it, ourselves.”

Dr. Diokno writes that heritage in practice pits two values against each other: material profit and spiritual or psychic fulfillment.

ILOILO CITY'S TOURISM POTENTIAL

The overarching goal of the Iloilo Cultural Heritage Foundation, Inc. is to restore Iloilo City's Calle Real to its old glory, reviving and preserving it as part of our heritage and transforming it into the focal point for developing Iloilo City as a major tourist destination. This restoration is one important key to Iloilo City's future as well as its past. Seen from the point of view of tourism potential, this constitutes cultural capital, which is also a unique economic resource for the city and the province.

The foremost architect Augusto Villalon wrote, as reported in *The Manila Daily Bulletin* in September 1907, that Iloilo was the Metropolis of the Visayan Islands, the second city of importance in the archipelago, and the greatest market for sugar in this part of the world.

Talking about possible new tourism “products,” Albert Lim, while he was tourism secretary, said on TV that Iloilo City has the largest collection of vintage 1920–1930 commercial buildings, along what was the former Queen City’s “Golden Mile,” its antique and beautiful churches and once stately homes. Incidentally, the so-called Golden Mile is one of only two heritage shopping streets in the Philippines; the other, Escolta in Manila, remains unrestored.

Despite all these, sad to admit, the city, the regional center of Region 6 and sometimes the venue of national conventions, is often only a side destination to Boracay. It is only now that prestigious “international brand” hotels are opening in the city, confirming investors’ perception of its undeveloped tourism potential. Incredibly, Iloilo City is not included in the Department of Tourism (DOT) list of possible heritage cities to develop under its Heritage Villages Pilipinas Program. Hopefully, this anomalous oversight will be remedied soon. UNESCO, however, has included the city as one of the possible heritage sites; Vigan, Taal town, and Cebu being the foremost candidates.

COMPONENTS OF THE PROPOSED CALLE REAL RESTORATION PROJECT

To revive Calle Real and with it develop Iloilo City into the envisioned vibrant and attractive tourist destination, we believe that the proposed restoration should consist of the following concrete interventions:

1. Restoration of the facades of twenty-six elegant vintage (circa 1920–1930) buildings. These buildings though run-down, dirty, grimy, and in many cases defaced were tenanted, and are in active use, by retail and food outlets.

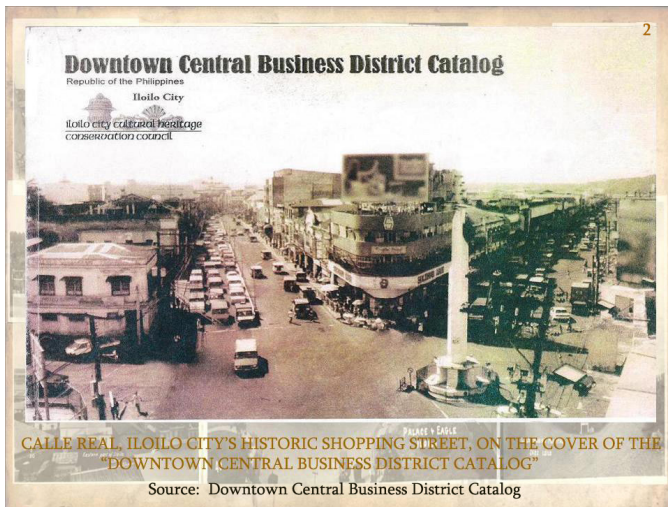
2. Covering the sidewalks with pavers and installation of “antique” Spanish-style lamps.
3. Relocation of sidewalk vendors out of Calle Real’s sidewalks but also to commercially viable locations. This includes building and subsidizing uniformly built kiosks. Paving the sidewalks and relocating the sidewalk vendors have to go hand in hand. The sidewalks of the vintage buildings have already been colonized by vendors, blocking foot traffic and bringing with them all possible eyesores (tarps, cooking utensils, cots), not to mention hygiene and sanitation issues. As in most relocation efforts, the voting power of the groups to be relocated is a big factor as far as support of the city government is concerned.
4. Relocating overhanging electric and telephone cables festooning the streets. Decades of electric wires and cables, live and dead, crisscross the airspace of Calle Real. It would take political will and millions of pesos to remove dead ones and bundle or bury live ones. The problem is far from being solved although the city government has promised to undertake “bundling.”

IMPLEMENTING RULES AND REGULATIONS FOR THE RESTORATION OF VINTAGE BUILDINGS

Fortunately, then mayor and now congressman Jerry P. Treñas laid the groundwork for the restoration of Calle Real. He organized the Iloilo City Cultural Heritage Conservation Council (ICCHCC) during his term through Ordinance No. 054, Series 2008, which formulated the “Implementing Rules and Regulations for the Downtown Central Business District

(CBD) Heritage Zone.” Supporting it is Executive Order 46, directing the implementation of the above, issued October 2009. This was done with the support of the Canadian Urban Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in urban areas in Canada and other parts of the world.

Pictured here is the *Downtown Central Business District Catalog* cover. The catalog presents photos of the buildings, including notes on the main features of their facades.



Source: Iloilo City Cultural Heritage Conservation Council (ICCHCC), *Downtown Central Business District Catalog* (Iloilo City: ICCHCC, 2002).

Serious comprehensive work had indeed been done on the regulatory framework for the restoration as well as cataloguing of the heritage buildings on Calle Real by the ICCHCC, with Arch. Antonio Sangrador as chairman.

Unfortunately no move has been made since 2009. It is about time the actual restoration begins.

THE ILOILO CULTURAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION, INC.

The Iloilo Cultural Heritage Foundation, Inc. was organized in November 2011 by concerned Ilonggos, including Manuel E. Villa Jr. and Antonio C. Sangrador, prominent architect and restoration advocate. Other prominent Ilonggo business persons like Susan C. Florete, Yolanda Pajaro, Jose Mari Chan (businessman and celebrity), and Marilou Lacson Arcelo joined the Board of Trustees, endowing prestige and credibility to the foundation.

ICHFI's mission is to restore and transform Calle Real into a "Heritage Street" and develop it into a must-see tourist attraction aimed at the traveler-market segment interested in historical/cultural sites.

The task for the foundation is, simply put, to raise funds for the restoration of the facades (only) of the buildings. After four years, ICHFI has already restored eleven buildings on Calle Real. But at the onset, possible sources of funds were difficult to identify.

We had naively thought that the best source of restoration funds would be corporate foundations of the conglomerates of super-rich Ilonggo families who had made great fortunes in Philippine business. From experience we learned that since the buildings were privately owned, there was no interest whatsoever to restore them. In this country, blood ties and tight connections are very important. Had we had these, efforts to solicit funds from said foundations would have been more fruitful. Government funds could not be legally used for private property development.

The enviable story of the blighted old colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, USA, restored by the passion of one man, William Goodwin, and the incredible generosity of John D. Rockefeller Jr., would not be repeated in Iloilo City. Not yet anyway. Williamsburg, restored to its pre-civil war days, has become one of the USA's biggest tourist attractions.

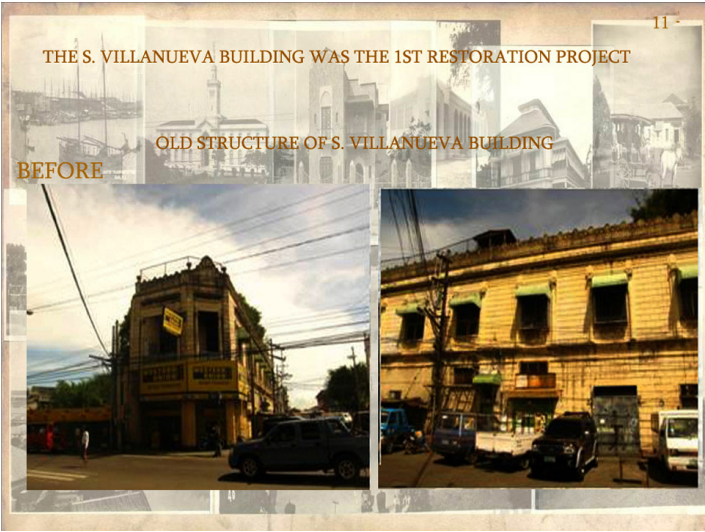
DEMONSTRATING SERIOUSNESS OF PURPOSE

Calle Real had been left to slowly deteriorate, its once proud structures covered with sprouting grass or saplings from crevices on the walls; its sidewalks overflowing with vendors who had already become informal settlers.

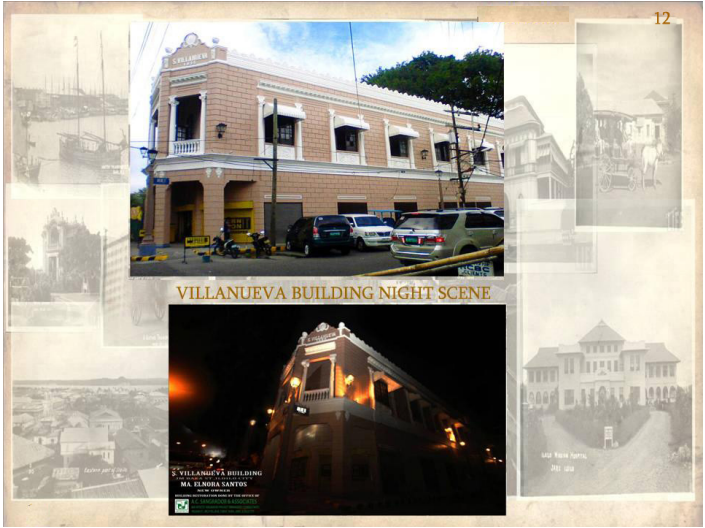
The foundation's seriousness of purpose had to be demonstrated. Mrs. Nora Santos, present owner of the 1927 Serafin Villanueva Building on Arsenal corner J. M. Basa St., fortunately decided to gamble on the preposterous offer of ICHFI to restore the building at her own cost.

Restored, her Villanueva Building standing there in its renewed glory was enough to convince former prime minister Cesar E. A. Virata, now vice chair of RCBC Board, to respond enthusiastically to the foundation's request to restore RCBC's Villanueva Building across the street, at the bank's cost. It was mid-December and right after Christmas day, an RCBC vice president was in Iloilo for an assessment visit. Soon after, RCBC's building was restored too.

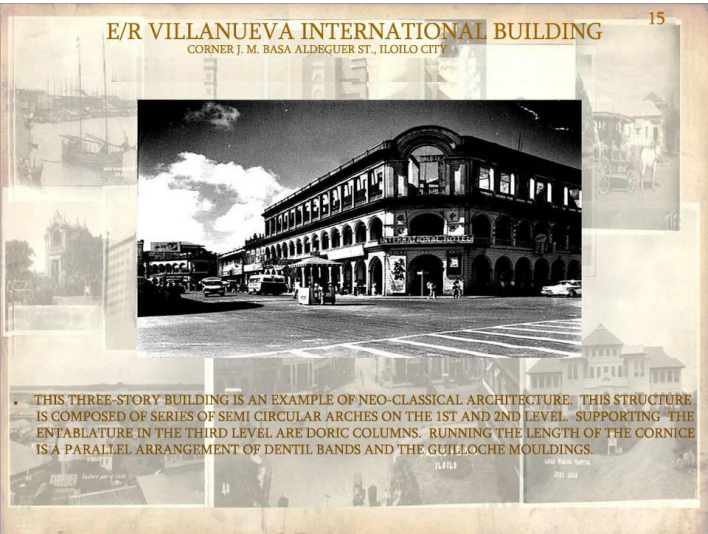
ICHFI's announced intention to restore Calle Real seems now more like a vision, not the daydreams of a few sentimental Ilonggos stuck in the time warp of Iloilo's heyday.



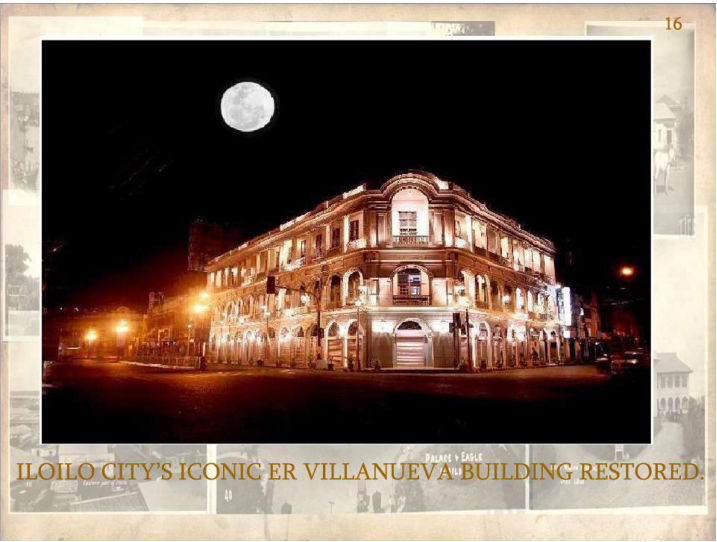
Source: ICCHCC, Downtown Central Business District Catalog.



Source: IICCHCC, Downtown Central Business District Catalog.



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INVOLVING THE BUILDING OWNERS

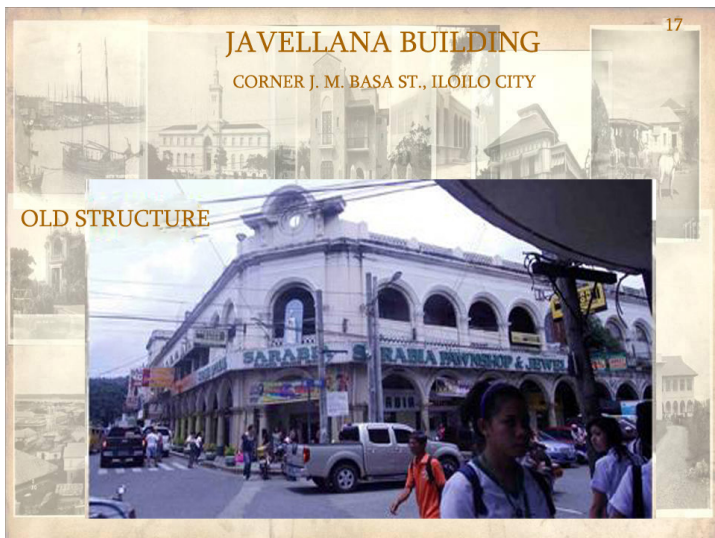
The spirit of Calle Real had vanished into the run-down buildings and filthy sidewalks and with it the pride of the building owners in their properties.

In addition to taking to the buildings with chisels and paints, a major task of ICHFI was to reawaken this pride of ownership and love for their native city in the now third-generation owners.

After two requests for funding to major Ilonggo-owned corporate foundations had been refused, we approached Atty. Mario Jalandoni. His grandfather, Eusebio R. Villanueva, had built several other edifices on Calle Real, but the ER Villanueva Building, popularly known as the International Hotel, even in its state of benign neglect, was the icon of Iloilo City. Attorney Jalandoni consented to ICHFI's proposal to share the costs of restoring his building. The tax incentives offered by the city were also useful.

In four months, the building, arguably one of the most beautiful in the Philippines, had been restored and took its original pride of place at the center of Calle Real. It immediately became the setting of many photo sessions.

The cost-sharing formula was not embraced enthusiastically by the building owners. Its impact would not immediately bring the satisfying ring of cash registers. However, the tax incentives, possible and justifiable rent increases from their decades-old lessees, the prospect of paving their sidewalks thereby banishing their unwanted "settlers," and the cost-sharing of restoration expenses made a convincing proposition. So was the information that cost of restoration could be "expensed," thus tax deductible. Five more buildings were restored under this arrangement, among them the beautiful, once burned, once mutilated Javellana Building owned by the heirs of the late senator Oscar Ledesma.



Source: ICCHCC, Downtown Central Business District Catalog.



Source: ICCHCC, Downtown Central Business District Catalog.

Inspired by the “new look” on Calle Real, several building owners have restored or are planning to restore their buildings at

their own expense. Sandra Sarabia Gorriceta and the Ledesma sisters restored their respective buildings. Henry Chusuey, the Ilonggo hotel tycoon, restored the beloved Palace Theatre. The Jarantillas, Ruth and Boy, have pledged to restore their Botica Socorro building on one of the corners of Calle Real. So has the Dulalia family.

To raise the profile of ICHFI's restoration efforts and to encourage participation, the Iloilo City Cultural Heritage Awards was established. It will annually celebrate and recognize excellence and dedication of architects, owners of heritage buildings, volunteers, tour operators, and other enterprises who innovate and lead in heritage preservation, and citizens active in heritage work and media. Two sets of the awards had been given, mainly to building owners who had restored their buildings.

One was given to Angelicum School for repurposing the long deserted “haunted” Lizares mansion into the centerpiece of their Jaro campus.

It must be noted here with gratitude that the sidewalk improvement and resettlement of the vendors was achieved with the donation of Smart kiosks for selected vendors. Vendors were persuaded by ICHFI and a supportive city government to ply their trade elsewhere.

*Source: ICCHCC,
Downtown Central Business
District Catalog.*



SOURCES OF FUNDS

How and from whom did ICHFI raise the money? SECRET. Actually we practiced a version of “crowdfunding,” except that the return on investment to the investors was psychic fulfillment, as Dr. Diokno calls it. Every peso counted. There were big donors, of course, who prefer to remain anonymous for reasons we do not need to detail here.

Six buildings were restored on a cost-sharing arrangement with ICHFI and the owners. For proposed major repairs and restoration of the once Ynchausti, then Elizalde, now COA 1913 Bahay na Bato, the only one on Calle Real, Congressman Jerry Treñas had allocated PHP 4 million. Sen. Loren Legarda had budgeted PHP 10 million, which was included in the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) budget.

SHARING ICHFI’S EXPERIENCE

ICHFI was new to restoration projects. These are some lessons learned:

1. A guide to the restoration effort is extremely useful. The catalogue published by the Iloilo Cultural Heritage Conservation Council identified and prioritized the buildings to be restored.
2. The implementing rules for restoration set guidelines and possibilities, and provide a useful formal framework for restoration efforts.
3. A legal document, such as Iloilo City’s Regulation No. 2001-07, “defining the Iloilo City heritage zone and

providing incentives to business thereat and for other purposes,” is also an effective tool for encouraging repair and restoration among the building owners.

4. Seriousness of purpose must be demonstrated. This was discussed in a previous section.
5. Seriousness of purpose must be further demonstrated through
 - a formal organization, preferably an NGO duly registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission
 - a set of officers, for goodwill and respectability, preferably individuals of known probity, irreproachable character and reputation; it would be useful if these officers possess high social capital and are well connected to possible sources of financing;
 - a known office address
 - accreditation with the Philippine Council for NGO Certification (PCNC). Accreditation is tedious but not difficult and will make donations to the planned foundation 100 percent tax-deductible and more attractive to donors. ICHFI has not yet gone through this process.

Unfortunately the need to preserve heritage buildings and “architectural legacies,” as Dr. Diokno calls them, is not strongly felt both among government officials and private citizens, even in cases where they own the heritage property. People who announce their interest in restoring old buildings that they do

not own are at best considered starry-eyed dreamers or suspected of a hidden agenda.

In the case of ICHFI, the Serafin Villanueva Building that was restored at ICHFI's cost convinced Cesar Virata to restore its sister building, RCBC's head office across the street in Iloilo, at the bank's cost. These restorations helped to affirm that ICHFI meant business.

6. The support of the LGU officials is critical to the project. While no funds were provided by the Iloilo City government, invaluable assistance was provided by
 - waiver of mayor's permits and one-day processing of other documents, a marvel as these processes go;
 - clearing of vendor colonies from sidewalks of restored buildings. Iloilo City Mayor Jed Patrick E. Mabilog has been most supportive.
7. Support from the Department of Tourism and the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA). The DOT cannot disburse funds for the restoration of privately owned structures. However, recognition and morale support articulated by DOT at every possible opportunity provided tremendous and valuable credibility to the project. DOT support could be in the actual realization of the benefits of the project such as organizing walking tours of Calle Real and creating awareness and demand for it as a cultural heritage destination.

TIEZA's mandate is to assist the tourism efforts in public areas where infrastructure is needed. Congressman Treñas has, according to him, tapped the agency to repave the sidewalks of the newer but also decrepit buildings of Calle Real.

8. Persuade building owners to share in the costs of restoring their buildings by
 - arousing long dormant civic and family pride and a competitive spirit relative to other families;
 - citing the tax incentives;
 - citing the possibility of tax deductions through charging restoration costs to business “expense”;
 - citing the possibility of increasing customer traffic in retail outlets through the clearing of sidewalk vendors and improved frontages (this was relevant in the case of Calle Real, which is a commercial area);
 - citing possibilities of increasing rent of tenants (again for commercial buildings).
9. Persuade heritage-minded building owners to restore their buildings at their own expense. The three Ledesma sisters, daughters of the late senator Oscar Ledesma, restored their building, which has fifty-meter frontage on Calle Real. Henry Chusuy, the Ilonggo hotel magnate, also restored the beloved Palace Theatre, now his property, at his own expense.

10. Tap corporate donors and big advertisers. ICHFI received a donation from Smart of PHP 11 million on a staggered basis for two hundred sidewalk kiosks bearing their logo. Construction supply companies in Iloilo, including Boysen Philippines, Inc., were also donors. Unfortunately, ICHFI has few connections among the top 500 corporations. Better-connected fundraisers could be more effective. Foundation members with high social capital would be most useful here.
11. Donations big and small should be actively solicited and gratefully accepted. Most of these donors—friends, family members, classmates, and Ilonggo Balikbayans prefer to be anonymous.
12. Give recognition to partners in the restoration efforts. ICHFI established the Iloilo Cultural Heritage Awards for this purpose, and these are jointly given away by the Mayor's Office, DOT 6, and ICHFI. Glass trophies modeled after each recipient's building were given away at the glamorous annual mayor's ball.
13. Tap government sources. The PDAF scandal has made this very difficult. In 2012, Congressman Jerry Treñas allocated PHP 4 million for the restoration of the 1913 Commission on Audit (COA) Balay na Bato. Senator Legarda had included a line item of PHP 10 million in the NCCA budget for major repairs of the COA Building.

“For the benefit of public institutions seeking donations from the private sector, the Tax Code provides that donations to the University of the Philippines and other state colleges and universities are deductible up to 150 percent of the value of the

donation for income tax purposes pursuant to Section 25 (b) of Republic Act No. 9500.”

MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE

Many important buildings on Calle Real have yet to be restored, among them the COA Building, the Masonic Temple, the Socorro Drug Building, and the Celso Ledesma Building.

Blocking the view to the imposing Customs House from the Calle Real side is the singularly ugly Freedom Grandstand. Seldom used except by vagrants and drunkards at night, it should be transferred elsewhere and the minipark it displaced reestablished.

The ICHFI has a grand vision of Calle Real, with the proposed Iloilo Calle Real Park, as a totally pedestrian zone following the model of Crisologo Street in Vigan, Koenigsallee, Düsseldorf’s “Golden Mile,” and the shopping street in the exquisitely beautiful university city of Heidelberg—the last two both in Germany. There are many examples all over the world. In the Philippines, only our Calle Real and Escolta, our (grand streets) “high streets,” as the British call them, offer these possibilities.

CALLE REAL COMING ALIVE

Parts of the vision are coming to life. The “Calle Real Pedestrianization Project” has been approved by the Iloilo City Council. The “Pedestrianization of Calle Real” will ban weekend vehicular traffic on J. M. Basa St., the main artery, and open it up to a series of concerts, fashion shows, dance contests, and a weekend market with the restored lighted buildings of Calle Real

as backdrop. Concerts by famous Ilonggo artists—Gil Lopez-Kabayao, Jose Mari Chan, etc.—are being planned. Successfully managed in terms of traffic, events, and merchandise mix, it should bring uniqueness, visitor traffic (local and foreign), fun, life, and revenue to the historic shopping district. It will afford the Ilonggos an open-air public place, an alternative shopping destination to the big box malls now sprouting in their city.

An elegant Santacruzán was held down Calle Real in May 2014. The event was unique and a “first” in that all gowns and other costumes were made of *hablon*, the Ilonggo local fabric. A mass wedding was also held in Calle Real in June 2014.

Walking tours of Calle Real are now being conducted by the Department of Tourism. Travel agencies have been trained to do these, and tourists may now walk on the newly cleaned and paved sidewalks of Calle Real.

Congressman Jerry Treñas worked for the passage of the bill, RA 10555, in 2013 declaring certain heritage sites in areas in Iloilo City as cultural heritage tourism zones. These, among others, include Calle Real.

Dr. Maria Serena Diokno, chair of the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP), has written ICHFI of the commission’s intent to declare Calle Real as a historic center/heritage zone. An NHCP marker would be installed in front of the iconic ER Villanueva Building.