

Where to Live?

by Nadia Kondratiev

Decisions, decisions... Life is full of those. I felt nostalgic for the informed decisions of my previous life, in a place where things made sense, where a house was functional and, somehow, logical, though that might not be the right word. Maybe the houses I visited all day, every day for three and a half months are sensible, but that aspect remains hidden to the newcomer especially. The heat, the dirt, the humidity, the BUGS, the traffic, the inexplicable lack of logical explanations for certain recurring behavior patterns, all contributed to my perception of being in the southern hemisphere and walking on my head even though I was not far enough south yet.

My first day out I saw 16 houses. Some were big, some huge, some small, all kinds of shapes, clean, dirty, new, ruins... They were all strange to me, somehow wonderful but probably so because of a lack of reference point on my side as to their overall essence. There seemed to be more bathrooms than rooms. Why two kitchens? Though I was told that one is clean and the other dirty, I couldn't see why one would keep a kitchen dirty. I was told that it's reserved for fish cleaning; I guess Philipinos must eat a lot of fish to have a big room built just for their fish-cleaning... Someone told me that actually, the dirty kitchen is the maids' kitchen and maids are usually dirty. Why would one hire a dirty maid? Seems to defy the purpose... Still, two kitchens are the norm.

We had decided that we must have a pool. Indeed, the heat is so intense that I can't imagine spending time outside without water. So, we narrowed the options

by requiring a pool and a garden. The definition of pool and garden turned out to be very subjective. I visited a house in Corinthian Gardens. The house looked like a cement block with a fence around it. Once inside, though, the perception changed completely. A huge wooden staircase dominated the central hall, all made of this beautiful, warm, golden and copper wood, which, I was told, was narra. It was a truly magnificent and glorious staircase with very high steps, reaching to my knees and I wondered aloud why the highest steps I've ever encountered were in a country whose population made my 5 feet 2 inches feel tall. The explanation I was given is that it is a mathematical compromise between the space utilized (kept to a minimum) and the lucky number of steps. But I have seen staircases occupying an enormous amount of space and still possessing very tall steps. Is that due to an architect who doesn't excel in mathematics? The rest of this house, inside, associated very well with the magnificence of the stairs and the tour was a pleasure. Then I became curious about the garden and the pool.

"Very sorry, Ma'am. There is no pool. Must be a typo error... But there is a garden!"

"May I see it, please?"

"You haven't seen it? On your way in?"

"Sorry, no."

I was taken back out the front door and very proudly shown one row of small, fragile-looking, colored flowers, tightly hugging one side of the front of the house.

Apparently, I was not successful in hiding my surprise. In reply to my very round eyes, the lady of the house informed me, “No one cares about gardens here. We spend all our time inside. It’s much too hot outside or else it’s raining.” It explains the esthetic disparity often witnessed between the inside and the outside of a house, as if totally different people were in charge of designing each one.

Another adventure in relativity involves a house in Makati. Once again, I arrived with the firm hope of seeing a garden and a pool. By this time, my expectations of a garden had changed deeply. I knew now that a garden is just something growing outside. A garden does not necessarily mean something planted in the earth either, that is, the earth can be confined to a pot. A few potted plants on a cement square constitute a garden too. But in this Makati house, I had some trouble spotting the pool. I found the garden and I searched its five square meters of wilting greens but could not find the pool. I turned to the agent and asked if there wasn’t supposed to be a pool. She checked her pad. Yes, “pool” was listed; must be a mistake again. Let’s double check with the caretaker. We found this raggedy young man asleep by the side of the house.

“Is there a pool?”

Very proudly, “Oh, yes! Come Ma’am!”

He took us to a nook in the garden that bordered the “garage” – the cement square where the car sits. There sat a pile of rocks with two drops of water that I had taken to be a small fishpond, a very small fishpond. I think one might manage to just squeeze one’s posterior into this glorious pool, if one’s posterior isn’t too large, of course. Even the agent, trained in the art of stoicism, burst out laughing.

Someone informed me that there are no set standards for house construction in the Philippines. You decide what you want and no one can tell you that you *may not* build it.

If this is true, it would account for some of the fantastical designs that I have come across. It might be coincidence but my experience has shown that the strangest houses (and strange is not necessarily bad) are in the Greenhills area. There are two that top my list of unique.

One was quite a nice house, large with spacious rooms, the master bedroom with its own balcony, a nice garden and a big pool. The oddity was in the living room. The very middle of this marble and stucco, formal, wonder was occupied by a firmly planted, enormous Greek column, almost as wide as it was tall. I could imagine a friendly tea or coffee get together around the column with anonymous, shouted conversations. My husband doesn’t like coffee tables. Well, no need for a coffee table here, it would only make things awkward. I was very tempted to take this house, just for the surrealist possibilities.

The second wonder was backing the golf course, which must be the reason for which the designers did not see the necessity of a garden. The lanai wrapped around the entire house. It was elevated and therefore more like a porch and went right over the pool, a very deep square occupying the only ground level outside area. There were no real poolsides to speak of either. One could have sidled around three sides, the fourth being completely flush with the house, but could not have put a chair, let alone a lounge chair, anywhere on the periphery. As I looked at this pool, I wondered how one accessed it. Looking over the lanai/porch railing, I could only see a door to the garage, which was under the house.

Inside the house, one wandered from half level to half level, sitting rooms everywhere. Only at the very back one encountered a real staircase, no beauteous wonder, but standard. This staircase led up to the bedroom level. The interesting part was the master bedroom. In the middle of the master bedroom was a small spiral stairway at the bottom of which was yet another sitting room. This one had



Diving into the Deep End - A foreigner insists on water sports at her Manila compound

round porthole windows and made one feel as much as possible as if one were on a ship. Each sitting room had its own bathroom, of course, and this one was no exception. Bathrooms must be checked; I stuck my head in; hmm, normal. I stepped in and the floor seemed to be slanted. It was slanting towards the sink, opposite the commode. As my eyes followed the slant, lo and behold, the floor disappeared. I cautiously bent down to take a look – water. A closer look – it was the pool. That was the answer to the question of access to the pool. I quite naturally imagined the floating body count the morning after a particularly enthusiastic wine and cheese party held in the maritime sitting room. But, as my son was only ten, I thought it more cautious to forego the extreme sports in domestic settings for another few years.

And so, we settled on a house with small, dark rooms, the better to air condition them, only to find that electricity is so expensive here that no one keeps their air con on all the time. So, the small, dark rooms only became suffocating and depressing. Live and learn! Fortunately, we were able to move to another house with big rooms and huge windows that can be opened to create breezes. These “medicinal” zephyrs have lifted our spirits remarkably.

I also discovered the reason for the glut of bathrooms in a house or apartment. Some have said that the climate requires frequent showers and/or bathing; a bathroom for each member of the household and their guests guarantees that no being ever need be uncomfortable. But no, we don't have time to take showers that many times a day. The light trickle that shyly and daintily spits forth from the nozzle does not manage to quickly chase soap away from one's skin. Soap is not intimidated at all by the poor trickle and one must energetically shoo it off with extra rubbing, leaving one in need of one extra trickle session at the end of the shower to rinse off the sweat engendered by the energetic rinse cycle. Exhausting and time consuming! No, showers are not the reason for so many bathrooms. Actually, the

more bathrooms there are, and often there are a few extra “powder rooms” for further insurance, the better the odds that at least one toilet will flush. Maybe it won't be possible to rinse one's hands in the same room where one has ... (sat?), but if one can flush, one shouldn't ask for too much more.

If you find a house or apartment where the taps and the toilets are both working in one same bathroom, you have struck gold; do not pass on this gift from God.

Some house owners go through a lot of trouble to make the plumbing work. The bathroom then becomes disproportionately important. There is one otherwise plain house in Corinthian Gardens who's master bedroom is something of a throne room. All marble with brass trimming and side by side his and hers thrones (toilet and bidet) facing a jacuzzi large enough to fit an audience of 20 guests, it is by far the largest room in that house.

One last tip – beware of pink plumbing. Do not settle on a house or apartment where the pipes are predominantly pink. The plumber's favorite tool is epoxy, which is pink, but which is not quite as resistant as metal. And even the metal used for plumbing here is not what most of us are used to elsewhere. There was a person who tried to fix a clogged drain by pouring Drano into it. She watched the pipe disintegrate to nothing before her very eyes. These products should not be sold here at all. They are just misleading.

This account is merely an amusing and superficial look at the housing situation here in Manila. I would urge all the experts to contribute articles, especially those well versed in the feng shui involved in door placement etc. and all the local rituals of house building. It is something your humble editor finds fascinating but is not nearly well enough informed in to propagate information on. Send all contributions to adbsanews@yahoo.com. Thank you!