

# ESCOLTA: REVIVAL OF A FORGOTTEN ART DECO BOULEVARD

Ester van Steekelenburg (Urban Discovery)

In Manila a group of young creatives and heritage conservation groups are trying to bring back the glory of what was once dubbed the 'Queen of streets': Escolta. In pre- and early postwar Manila, Escolta was flamboyantly called 'The Wall Street of Asia'. This was the territory of bankers, lawyers and shipping magnates; it was where locals would come to burn their money in cinemas, luxury department stores and fancy restaurants. World War II dealt a cruel blow to Escolta and the row of elegant art-deco buildings designed by notable architects of the day were left to deteriorate. For a while, they remained under the threat of demolition, bereft of any consideration for restoration, retrofitting or adaptive reuse with dreary currency traders and import / export offices as tenants.

The situation changed in 2012 when Marika Constantino, executive director of the art collective 98B COLLABoratory, persuaded Robert and Lorraine Sylianteng, the Chinese-Filipino owners of a dilapidated art deco building, to rent them a room on their fifth floor. The rest is history. Robert, a heritage advocate at heart, embraced the arrival of the artistic crowd and before he knew it, his building had filled up with architects, filmmakers, fashion designers and other creative co-workers.

It led to an unlikely partnership between young activists and a nearly retired couple. Together they revived the creative spirit of the place and made Escolta once again a place to be in Manila. They joined hands to open up the basement of the building and turn it into a marketplace with independent boutiques, an artisan coffee shop, a 'period' barbershop and a craft beer café. Today, the First United Building openly defies its 90 years of age. The face lift resulted in a soul lift; you can now find its hallways filled with creative activity and youthful spirit.



## PARTNERS & TESTIMONIES

### HERITAGE ACTIVISTS

Heritage Conservation Society

“Escolta’s revitalisation can boost the morale of Filipinos because it will prove that it’s not yet too late to love, value, protect and maintain the treasures of our past. The next generation will continue to tell the story of what was once the true repository of economic greatness in the Philippines.” — Romel Santiago

### CREATIVE GROUPS

98B COLLABoratory, HUB: Make Lab (Hub),  
all-in-one studio, workshop, retail space

“With everyone’s help, we hope that Hub can be a makers’ locale, a place where creatives can work, play and dream. We want it to be a place that inspires collaboration, motivates people to respect heritage, stimulates reveries, encourages new experiences and promotes sustainability.” — Marika Constantino, artist / architect

“Escolta is a beautiful place and has a spectacular scene to offer. From food to photogenic buildings, it’s worth a thousand shots from different angles. It is better to preserve these heritage sites, so we have something to look back on and appreciate the old life, the buildings, the environment.” — Karlo Torio, fashion photographer

### BUILDING OWNERS

Robert and Lorraine Sylianteng, proprietors of First United Building (FUB) and Escolta Commercial Association Inc. (ECAI) a group of property owners which assures order & security in the district

“At first, United Building was a typical office building like many in the Binondo area, but when I saw that all these hip youngsters with their nice cameras were so interested in the building I decided to rent out a couple of vacant units to them... and it kind of took off from there.” — Robert Sylianteng







## INTERVENTIONS

1. **Finding new uses for old buildings** — renovate and maintain the old structures, and find new uses to engage a new generation to become stakeholders in revitalising the historic area.
2. **Creating a new public piazza** — opening a flea market in the basement of the building for creatives to sell their products, meet and collaborate. A deliberate alternative retail experience from the usual mall setup where buyers are not given the opportunity to get to know the people behind the goods they see.
3. **Calendar of street parties and cultural events** — Monthly events, such as Saturday markets and the regular Escolta Block Parties, created a buzz and brought young creatives from different disciplines to the district; musicians, filmmakers, cartoonists, etc. who helped jump-start a number of artistic efforts in the street.

## DO'S

- **Revive artistic and artisanal spirit, encourage experimentation and educate a new generation to give rise to fresh ideas.** This is important to create new values and meanings for historical buildings that can seem irrelevant to most youth.
- **Create interdisciplinary partnerships to push awareness of heritage preservation** through different angles and messaging when it is not a priority in the administration.
- **Cherish the value of heritage and find inspiration in original design details,** family photographs, vintage items and memories of place. Bring old stories to life in and around the building to articulate the uniqueness of place.
- **Organise events and campaigns to communicate that Escolta is a safe, happening place** where you'd want to spend a weekend.

## DON'TS

- **Don't wait for the government to take the initiative.** The National Historical Commission of the Philippines declared Escolta as a heritage zone, implying that the local government will be the major implementing body of all conservation works within Escolta, but the government is limited in both budget and manpower.