

Town & Country

PHILIPPINE EDITION

CEBU UP CLOSE

**MARY ANNE
ARCULLI**
SOUTHERN
FAMILY VALUES

**CHARY
ABOITIZ**
SEASIDE
SANCTUARY

**PLUS: IRENE
ARANETA**
AT HOME
WITH NATURE

GINGER HILL
GARDEN
GETAWAY

MAY 2008

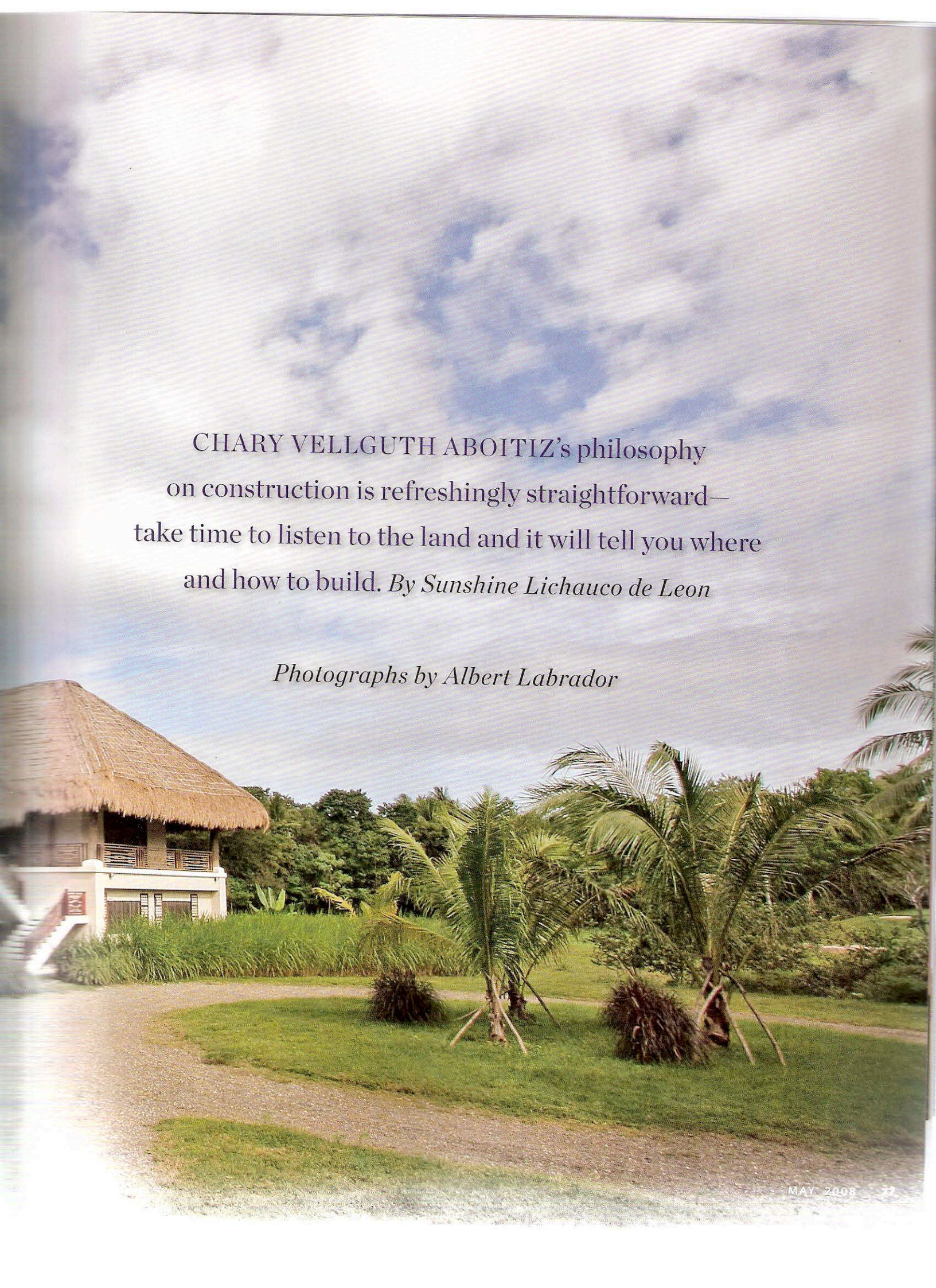
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Mary Anne Arculli
in Escada

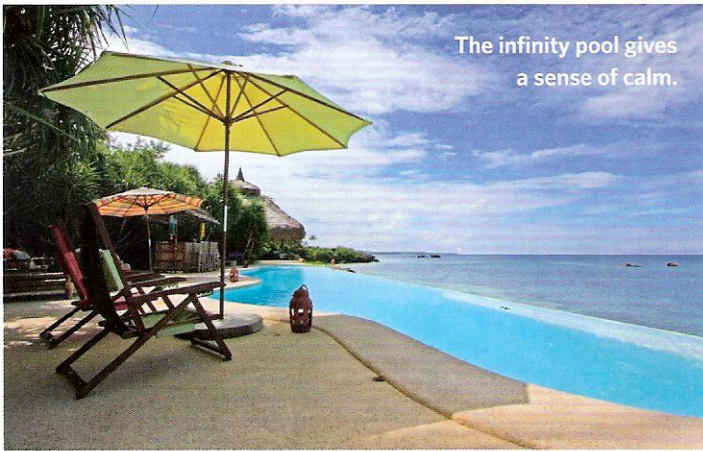
SEASIDE SANCTUARY



A photograph of a tropical landscape. On the left, a two-story building with a thatched roof and a balcony is partially visible. The foreground is a mix of green grass and gravel paths. Several palm trees and other tropical plants are scattered across the middle ground. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds.

CHARY VELLGUTH ABOITIZ's philosophy
on construction is refreshingly straightforward—
take time to listen to the land and it will tell you where
and how to build. *By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon*

Photographs by Albert Labrador



MANY PEOPLE CAN BUILD THEIR DREAM HOUSE but few can create a world where time stands still, only the wind and sea move, and each moment inspires you to just imagine. Chary Vellguth Aboitiz's "country home by the sea" in San Remigio, Cebu, is a masterpiece created by a woman who knew when to listen to the land, when to listen to herself, and how to truly infuse her spirit into her creation.

The world that Chary built through her country home is a direct reflection of this elegant woman's character—it is serene, stylish, comfortable, nurturing and sophisticated yet offers endless fun, independence, adventure and discovery. It is warm love in large doses within an oasis of rugged elegance. A place where you wake up inspired by the nature around you, where you can choose to spend a day lounging in the many corners designed to embrace deep reflection or explore the many secret hideaways the untouched land shelters. When you fall asleep at night, you remember how free you felt and your mind and heart rest together singing the same beautiful tune. The land was her inspiration but it is the manner in which this lovely woman's innate creativity enhanced the land that is inspiring, insightful and full of simple wisdom.

Visiting with Chary, I have learned that defining what you are looking for, knowing the purpose it will serve and being honest with your real needs is essential in your search for the right piece of property. "Tuktugaok" ("cock-a-doodle-doo" in Cebuano), was chosen because it was a perfect compromise. She says, "I wanted enough land to create a tranquil sanctuary and my husband was looking for beach. It had everything we were looking for." And sometimes, as she muses, beauty is relative: "Although it's not a perfect sandy beach all the time, I love it because it's sculptural at those times when the rocks are exposed. When the wind blows and tides change, the earth and sea have a way of renewing itself of seaweed and debris from the ocean."

The house was intended to be a place where family and friends could enjoy time together, and to be a refuge for her hard-working husband, Jon Aboitiz. She smiles, eyes sparkling and reveals, "We love to entertain. It's a bit of a paradox since we rarely go





The hexagonal gazebo opens out to the sea and the wild growth—making ingenious use of huge weathered doors.

The beach house pergola
generously draped with
"bridal bouquet" flowers.



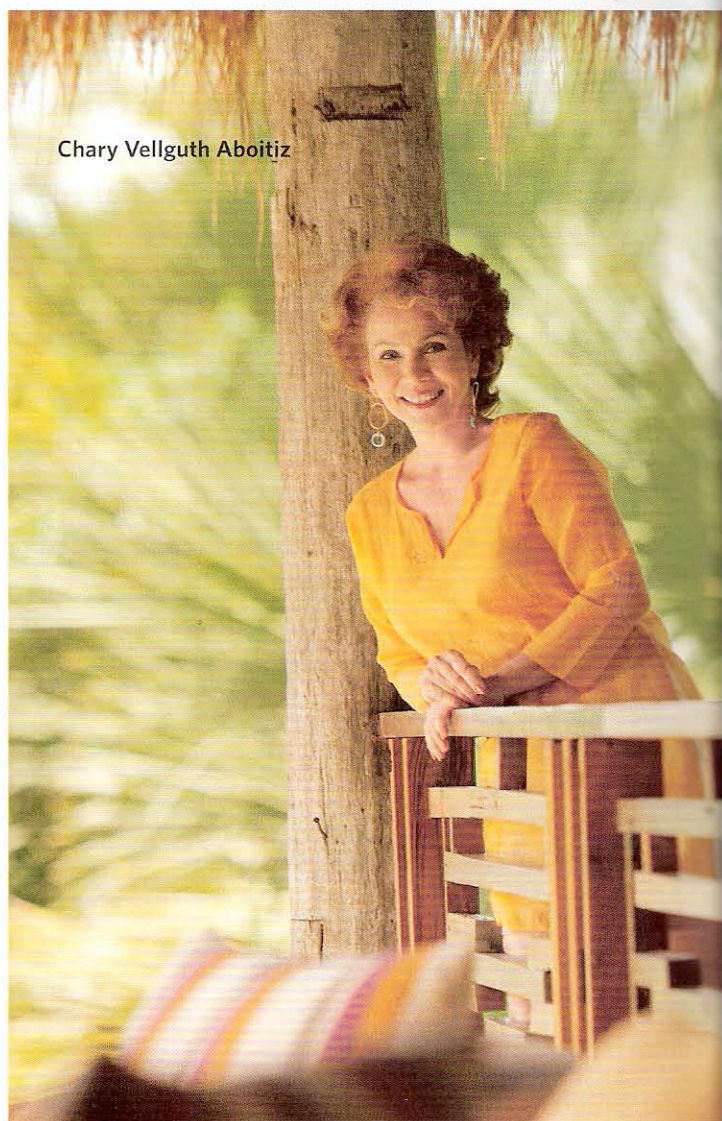
out socially, but our perfect evening is simply enjoying good food, lots of wine, sharing stories and endless laughter. We wanted to create a place that encouraged this." The flow of the land lends itself to an intriguing blend of solitude and togetherness. Daylight hours find guests scattered in the direction of their own form of pleasure and sunset draws everyone back together for an evening of *pica-pica* and cocktails, followed by a culinary feast to delight the senses.

Chary's core philosophy on building is refreshingly straightforward—if you take time to listen to the land, it will tell you where to build. As if to illustrate this, she discloses that for years, the first thing she built was a simple "*tagkaw*", an elevated structure with four posts and a *nipa* roof. Traditionally meant for laborers to take their midday rest from fieldwork, it was in this case built solely to provide her a shaded refuge from which to study the land during her frequent visits. The next step taken may seem surprising but not without good reason—instead of starting to build their own, the family rented the abandoned house next door! Chary explains, "Renting allowed us to still be together at the beach yet able to enjoy the whole creative process of designing the place and getting to know in detail what we needed and wanted. It's all in the organization as you have to know before you start building, what you need to keep running that house as maintenance free as possible."

Eventually, the land started to speak and she was there to listen. Chary possesses an admirable respect for nature. Both the style and decoration of her second structure, the hacienda-inspired guest house, demonstrates her desire to balance the elements in everything she creates as well as her very practical character. The fact that people living around their land had no sense of private property and would freely wander across it motivated her to find decorative elements that would be of no monetary value to anyone else. She recounts, "This is the idea of how a boat house came into being. The walls are adorned with old *banca* keels and an old wooden rudder. At night, a beautiful red glow emanates from the ship lanterns used on Jon's old family ships. The nautical theme was perfect because the structure of the house related to the land but the inside would then relate to the sea."

Nicknamed the "beach house" due to its proximity to the seafront, this pink concrete, two-bedroom house is located at the exact center of the property and was the work solely of Chary and her carpenter. Colored cement tiles, which were once popular in institutions such as schools and offices in the 1930s, have been resurrected as the house's main design theme and can be found everywhere—from the risers of the exterior staircase to the kitchen. With her uncanny ability to identify unusual applications for such discarded objects, Chary had purchased a stock

Chary Vellguth Aboitiz



The original *tagkaw*.



The central living spaces of the main house are clusters of cozy sitting and entertaining areas with a magnificent *nipa* hut-style roof.

of tiles years beforehand, knowing she would one day build something which would bring them into full focus.

An outdoor pergola, generously draped with “bridal bouquet” flowers, was constructed not only to extend entertainment space, but also to incorporate the one missing natural element—fire. Almost giggling, she reveals, “I wanted water, earth, wind and fire all represented. I had no excuse for doing a fireplace so instead I built a wood-fired oven, and now our homemade pizzas are the most anticipated meal.”

If the beach house reflects a perfect balance between nature’s elements, the main house, from structure to decorative detail, showcases the best of Philippine home design and crafts. Set back amidst cornfields 100 meters from the sea, the main house is really about the land, and in the spirit of its creator, epitomizes great symmetry and balance.

Chary explains that this particular spot was chosen because her objective was to create a plantation house that happens to be by the sea, rather than a beach house. Being surrounded by open space in every direction was of paramount importance in the design thought process. She mentions reflectively, “It took us seven years to figure out where to build our main house. The land tells you when it rains, if it floods, where the wind comes from, where the sun rises and sets. All these things contribute to the comfort of the house. You want the warmth of the sun but not on your face when going to sleep, and you want winds to be agreeable.”



Dining table centerpiece.

Filipino ethnic arts and crafts, notably, northern Luzon *bulul* or granary gods adorn this sitting area.



A cluster of natural elements—
bamboo, shells and plants. Below:
The Cebu guest suite opens up to
lush vegetation.





elements in a harmonious ensemble.
Bottom right: A centerpiece of vegetables. Bottom left: The TV room.





Dipping pool with a view.



The pool house sitting area was carved out of the lush pandan growth.

The two-floor structure has two distinct wings with central living spaces and fronted by two sets of staircases. In keeping with her mantra of representing all the natural elements in her home, the open plan living and dining room leads to a terrace that culminates with a plunge pool.

Because of its large scale, oversized furniture and proportions dominate the house, yet magically the house still embraces you with the cozy feeling of a home. Every detail has been carefully planned and every decision has a story behind it. Cogon was chosen for the sloping nipa style roof because it was more attractive and longer lasting. A true environmentalist, Chary had been collecting recycled wood and antique doors for years, and with the exception of the floors, these pieces are used throughout the house. She remarks rationally, "Although I like wood floors, I did not want them because it's so hot out there. I wanted cold on my feet and tiles cool your feet. My husband was against it but today he sees it works because *banig* [mats] are strategically placed as floor coverings, to avoid the tiles giving off a cold feeling."

Chary discloses that while searching for *banig*, she discovered that every region of the Philippines has its own style and pattern of *banig*. As a result, floors are decorated with designs from Minduque to Samar and Mindanao. Moreover, all textiles from window shades to bedspreads are hand-woven from different provinces.

In addition to wanting open space, it is clear that an abundance of natural light and fresh air were critical to all her architectural decisions, and Chary's ingenious problem-solving skills can be seen everywhere. The use of frosted glass instead of a solid wall for the ground floor rooms allowed light to come in from the entrance hallway yet maintained privacy. Installing an oversized mirror above the second floor staircase allowed light to be refracted into what otherwise would have been a dark stairwell.

When it came time to decorate the interiors, this furniture aficionado was more than ready. Chary speaks of the joy of putting her passion to practical use, "I have been buying furniture all my life and had a *bodega* that was getting very full. I believe that you can't put a house together by going to a store and buying things on the spot. If you love something, it will always find a place and that expression makes it yours."

A walk through the house is like a cultural tour from northern to southern Philippines. The rooms and terraces downstairs are all about Cebu, Leyte and Bohol, whose hand-turned wood tends to be more colonial and the décor more folksy. The upstairs main salons, though still low-key, are more elegant and sophisticated, with contemporary furniture made of natural raw materials. Primitive Filipino art from the north is the decorative arts theme.

Not surprisingly, this talented lady instinctively creates still life arrangements from materials found on the land. Centerpieces are often vessels in their natural forms filled with fruits, flow-

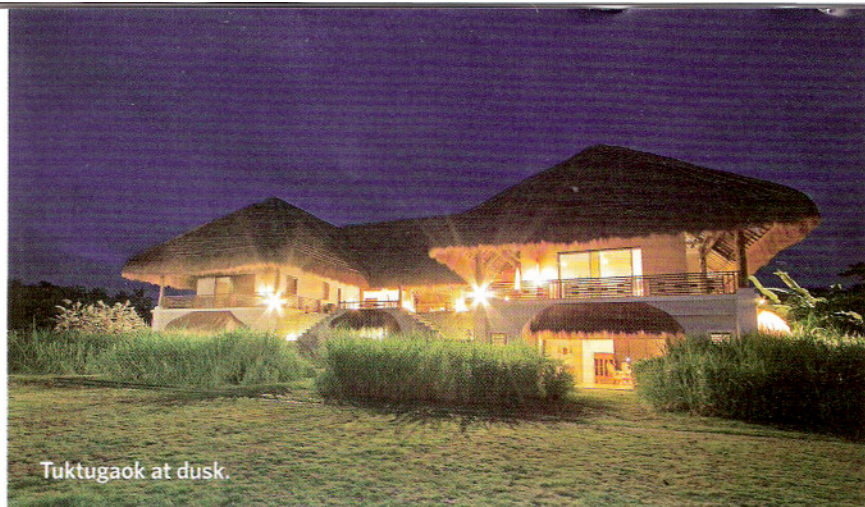


ers or plants. Her own words reflect her natural grace, "I love to find beauty in the most ordinary things. I like to mix my more quality pieces with inexpensive finds that I consider interesting, and not too serious. I look for the potential in smaller things."

Not only is there nothing superfluous about her house, but the ease with which Chary harmonizes different design concepts results in a truly "universal" house—it could actually be located anywhere, in almost any country. Chary states her design goal clearly, "I wanted the house to be Filipino, but in the modern vernacular. Although the use of indigenous materials is prevalent, it is not a native house I wanted to bring the whole equation to another level, by integrating lifestyle, design, taste and comfort."

Another creative principle which Chary lives by is that design is something that has to work for you and it can't be just for show. Each room has to have a function. She studied the habits and preferences of various types of guests when planning the bedrooms, and remarks, "I needed flexibility for all types of people—I was thinking of couples when I decided every room would have a combination of large beds and their own bathrooms for privacy. Dormitory-style rooms were designed for children." Being the dream hostess that she is, Chary wanted guests to feel they have all the comforts of home but still be independent. Each two bedrooms therefore share a small sala, providing for sitting space or time alone between meals. In an effort to allow guests to maintain, as she says, a "liberating connection to nature" while indoors, all the oversized bathrooms are "open style", with one wall exposed to the outdoors.

In contrast to the well-considered layout of the main house, the landscape surrounding it is deliciously wild. The intrinsic beauty of rolling sugarcane fields was the main influence for the tall grass surrounding the house. Chary says philosophically, "I always look at daily life around and my surroundings and try to draw inspiration which I can apply



Tuktugaok at dusk.

to what I create. I was determined to preserve the rural integrity of the area and didn't want to tame the landscape."

Always one to learn from life's experiences and incorporate them into her quest for perfection, Chary recounts a discussion with her husband Jon, whose objectivity has merited him the role as her "best critic". She says, "The entire property fronting the sea is covered by profuse *pandan* growth which he insisted I clear from the front of the house so we could see the water. I did not want to cut it. When we lived in the rental house on the water, the strong winds came and we were totally vulnerable. On our property, you don't sense the wind because of the *pandan*. This showed me that it was an ideal shield from storms, and it prevents us from being seen from the ocean. It is also nice to be able to spend the day at sea but retreat back to the tranquility of the land."

A stroll down the jungle path from the main house leads one to an infinity pool that blends into the sea, its free form shape echoing the growth pattern of the *pandan* forest that embraces it. Chary considers the pool a special gift, since her desire to build one had been long held in check because the area of her choice was covered by coral. Only the discovery of a natural cavity within it would make this possible. She recalls excitedly, "One day this natural hole presented itself. That's how special this place is. Once again, the land spoke to us and said this is where we should build the pool."

The land also asked for a day room from which to lounge and enjoy a view of the sea and the sunset, as a jutting natural outcrop poolside created the space for the now frequently used, hexagonal gazebo. Enter it from the jungle path, and it's clear that the designer not only has vision but a sense of humor. One would expect that the beautiful carved wooden door would lead you into an enclosed room, however this one leads you from one open space into another! Chary explains her whimsical decision with her characteristic disarming charm, "I wanted to use the doors but had nowhere else to put them!" A lighted "happy hour" sign greets guests at the bamboo poolside bar and a native-style pool house called "Chary's Sari-Sari Store"—these serve as other reminders of her playful nature.

Experience twilight at Tuktugaok and you feel as if you have been transported to another world. Listen to the orchestra of crickets and say hello to the families of frogs that cross your path as you wander from the freedom of the beach to the comfort of the main house. Follow the parade of firefly-like torches that lead you back to a home, which glows with the inviting light of candles and lanterns, contrasting perfectly with the fading sunset. Chary Aboitiz's vision has not only created a refuge hallmarked by, as she says, "love, laughter and conviviality", but her world here is very simply a place to catch your breath. ❖



A corner of the lanai at sunset.

