



Casa Floria

San Juan, Manila

Designed by Gerard Lico for ARC LICO

Text by Patrick Canteros

The restoration of Casa Floria exemplifies the potential of preserving heritage buildings in the Philippines. Heritage buildings in Manila face numerous threats, especially the contemporary pressure of demolition in a city that favors the construction of new developments. Structures like Casa Floria are especially susceptible in which complicated land inheritance issues present a challenge to the structure's continued viability. Built in the 1920s as a residence for an affluent Manila family, Casa Floria typifies the hybridity of structures built during the Commonwealth-era, which saw the confluence of American, Spanish, and native influences in housing design. As such, the demolition of Casa Floria would have figured as a significant loss in the already dwindling archive of heritage buildings. Through the "hybrid conservation" method used by project leads ARC LICO, however, the project models the possible interplays between designer and client in approaching building conservation and transforming older spaces to accommodate a client's current lifestyle. ARC LICO's approach in reusing the structure's original materials and innovative layout that preserves the structure's exterior facade allows for the preservation of the home's original aesthetic, while upgrading the structure to modern standards. To this end, Casa Floria reveals a mode of small-scale preservation that private clients can participate in, modeling an alternative to the common tear down approach.

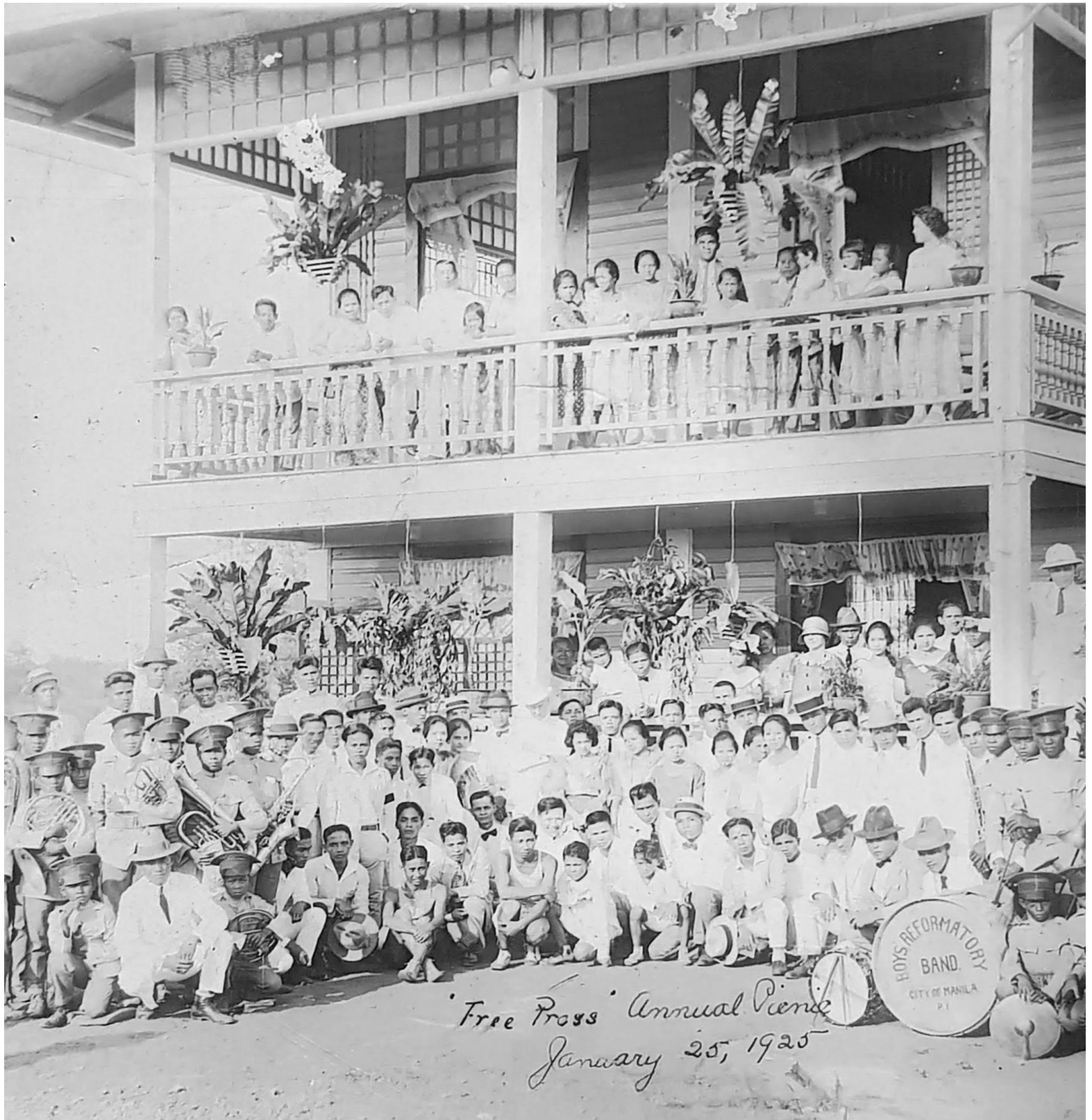
Built during the 1920s as the family home of publishing executive Floro Santos, Casa Floria sat in a genteel San Juan neighborhood for decades (ANCX Staff, 2022). Having survived the travails of Manila's history, from the disastrous bombings of World War II to the rapid development and sprawl of the post-war era, the structure carried the many scars of time. If it were like its contemporaries, the structure would have been torn down and replaced with a modernist concrete-and-glass structure common to the single-family housing stock in Manila (Santos, 2022). For the current owners to instead initiate a restoration with ARC LICO proved a significant departure and revelation in the interventions possible for structures and housing of this type.



Gerard Lico

Gerard Lico is a Professor at the College of Architecture, University of the Philippines Diliman. He practices architecture as a heritage conservation professional and designer of institutional buildings. He is a prolific author of publications on Filipino architecture and cultural studies, curator of architectural exhibitions, and director of documentaries on Philippine architecture.

Apart from his academic work, he heads a multi-disciplinary, research-oriented design consultancy practice, ARC LICO. He has been involved in the conservation of landmarks such as the Manila Metropolitan Theater, the Rizal Memorial Coliseum, and the core buildings of the University of the Philippines campus in Diliman. He also served as a consultant for conservation planning initiatives for various local and national heritage sites across the country.



'Free Press' Annual Picnic
January 25, 1925



The original construction of Casa Floria exemplified the influence of American design on pre-existing Spanish-colonial conventions as the US colonial project matured in the Commonwealth era. Seen primarily with the Western-style two-level balcony fronting a traditional 'bahay-na-bato' structure, the building exemplified a modern Filipino lifestyle fit for a family like the Santos (Medina, 2022). Social events played out in living rooms adorned with sliding capiz-shell windows and coconut wood panels. Air flowed through intricately carved ceiling fretworks to provide crucial breathability before the adoption of air conditioning on the islands. On the two-story balcony (a feature popular in the American South), capiz-shell ventanillas diffused light during lazy afternoons (Abanes, 2022).

Casa Floria continued to serve as a residence for the Santos family over the decades resulting in significant changes to the building's layout. The upper balcony was closed off and sections of the living and dining room were converted to additional rooms. Time had also brought wear on the home's adornment. Many of the capiz-shell windows were missing pieces and had their sliding mechanisms jammed. Moisture damage had also visited some of the home's wooden features (Medina, 2022). By 2018, with the property now also subdivided among inheritors, the future of Casa Floria was put into question.





1 — Research and Design

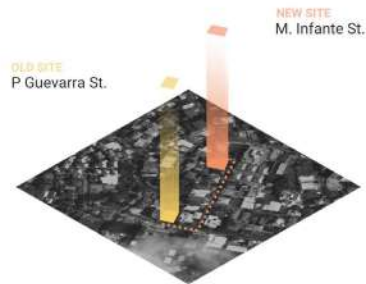
The approach to conserving Villa Floro was guided by meticulous archival research to show its significance to the community. A solution was made to save the property, to give it a better life, and to serve the current needs of its users.



The house of Floro Santos, built in 1924 along Foch Street (P. Guevarra), was a pioneering residence in Little Baguio, San Juan, Philippines. Stylistically, the house combined the aesthetics of Franco-American colonial buildings with its large, two-level balcony, but fused with *bahay-na-bato* (traditional Filipino wood-and-stone house) elements: capiz shell sliding windows, *ventanillas* (literally, 'little windows'), metal openwork fascia, and lyre-shaped fretwork.



The house served many functions through the decades from hosting social and civic events to providing a safe refuge during the war. Miraculously, the house survived the Second World War but not the rapid developments of our time—the lot was subdivided, and demolition was impending.



Relocation Finding the old home a new home

In 2018, despite the dilapidated state and obsolete spatial program of the house, the owner initiated the relocation and conservation of the structure to a new site just 400 meters away, because the property on which it stood was to be subdivided among co-heirs.

2 — Dismantling

In anticipation of the relocation, a methodical process was undertaken which involved taking complete documentation of the structure, tagging each part and piece, and carefully taking them apart with proper handling and individual restoration.



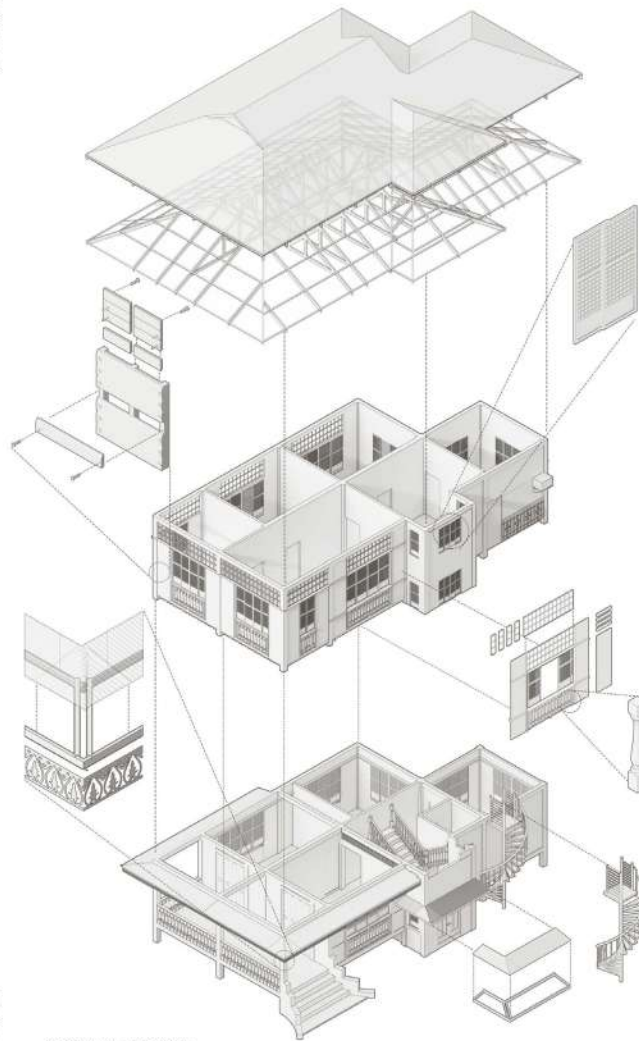
3 — Reconstruction

To complete the process, the building was put back together with the added context of the present; this meant bringing back previous social spaces and the integration of new spaces for the owner's needs.

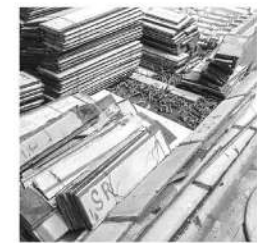


Rebuilding, part by part

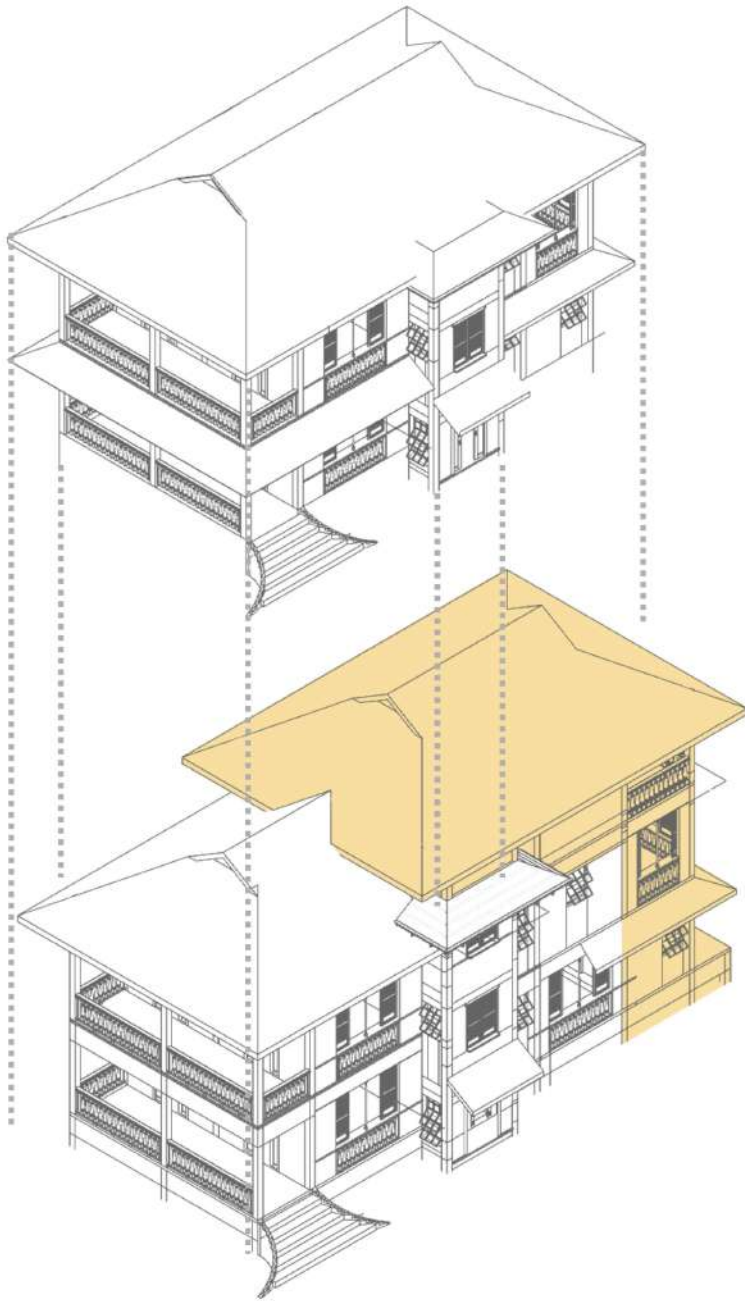
Maintaining its morphology and material integrity, the house was meticulously documented and rebuilt piece-by-piece on a modern reinforced concrete body and steel skeleton. Congregational and circulation spaces were returned to their original configurations.



Axonometric diagram showing the different parts of the old house



Textures from the original house, including (clockwise, from upper left) josts, fretworks, wood planks, terracotta tiles, siding, and oyster shell (capiz) windows.



As with many of Manila's aging generational family homes, a demolition job was the likely outcome. Casa Floria's inheritor, however, took a rare interest in preserving the structure. Tapping ARC LICO to spearhead the project, the client planned to preserve the house's original elements while accommodating her and her family's modern lifestyle. The project, dramatically, also required a reconstruction of the structure on a new lot two blocks away. To accomplish this, ARC LICO took to a "hybrid conservation" method in melding the past with the present (Yuvallos, 2022).

Approaching the front, an initial impression of the restoration seems to suggest that one may just be looking at the same building with a fresh coat of yellow paint. Upon further inspection, however, one begins to see the numerous changes that through skillful planning cohere into an effective ode to the home's historical essence. Gone are the walls sectioning of the upper balcony restoring the home's original lightness. To the right of the home, tucked behind the driveway, a new two-story structure housing a six-car garage, gym, and lanai rises in the same aesthetic style, seamlessly intuiting a continuity with the main structure (Medina, 2022). Finally, the rear and side facades also maintain their original look. To this effect, ARC Lico acts as a deft plastic surgeon, concealing dramatic transformations within a natural exterior.

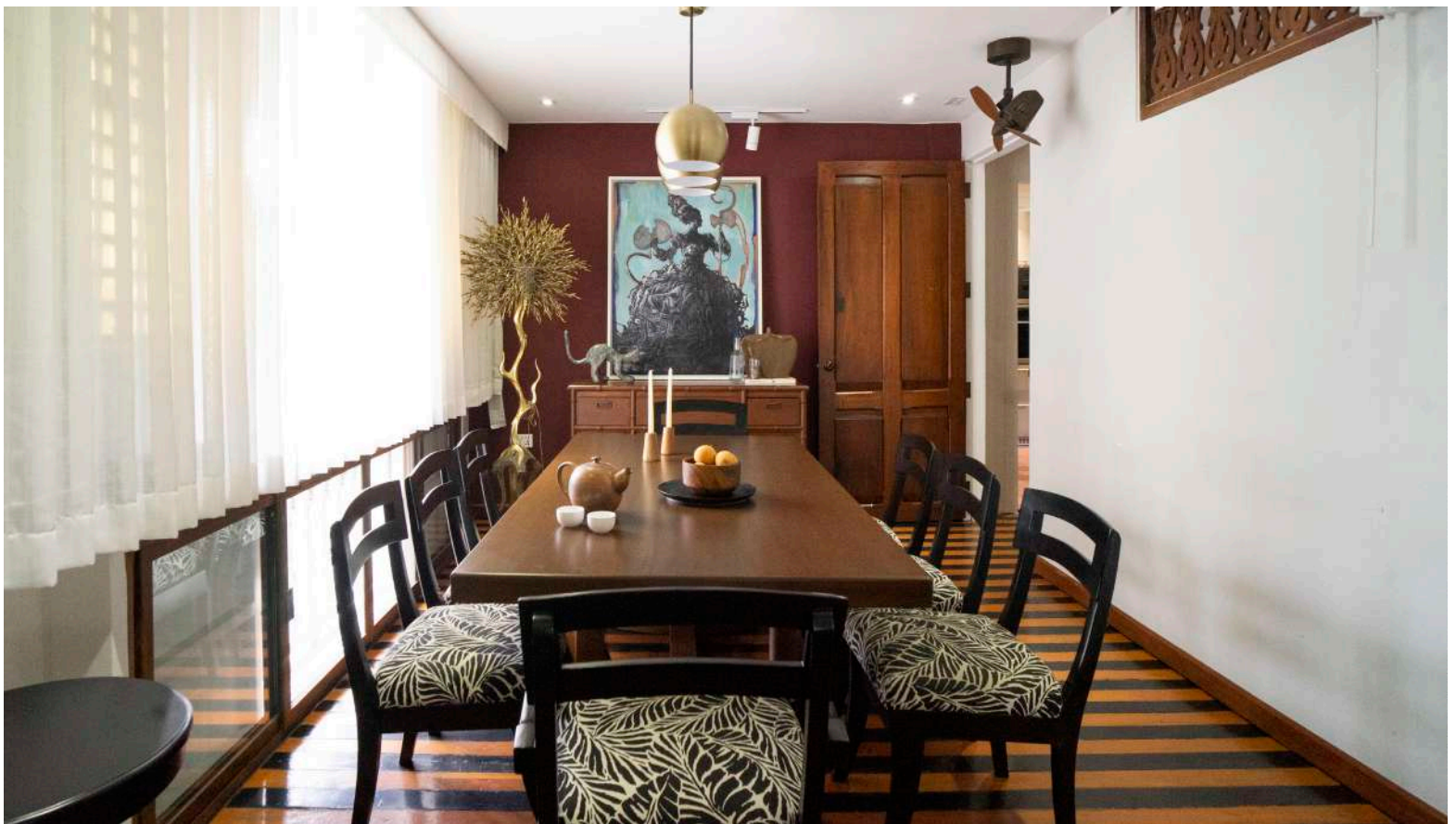
Stepping inside, one begins to understand the enormity of these changes. As with the exterior, the interior initially conceals, then reveals as one moves from front to back. Walking through the living and dining rooms, both seem to breathe easier with walls removed to return them to their original footprint. At the rear, one arrives at a kitchen thoroughly expanded to accommodate the utilities of modern cooking. The larger kitchen fittingly also marks the boundary between the home's original size and the new space added through a surreptitious expansion of the middle. This intervention allowed for the preservation of the home's exterior facade while entertaining new spaces for the client's family (Arch Lico, n.d.)

Originally, a two-story structure, the home has gone through a considerable growth spurt almost a century after its construction. Additional rooms now sit in the rear of both the first and second floors. Beyond this horizontal elongation comes two additional levels. At the rear, a third floor adds additional height while below rests a basement courtesy of a new concrete and steel foundation. To avoid disjunction, the original wooden staircase was rebuilt to connect these new additions, snaking uninterrupted from the listening room in the basement to the new art gallery at the top (Arch Lico, n.d.)

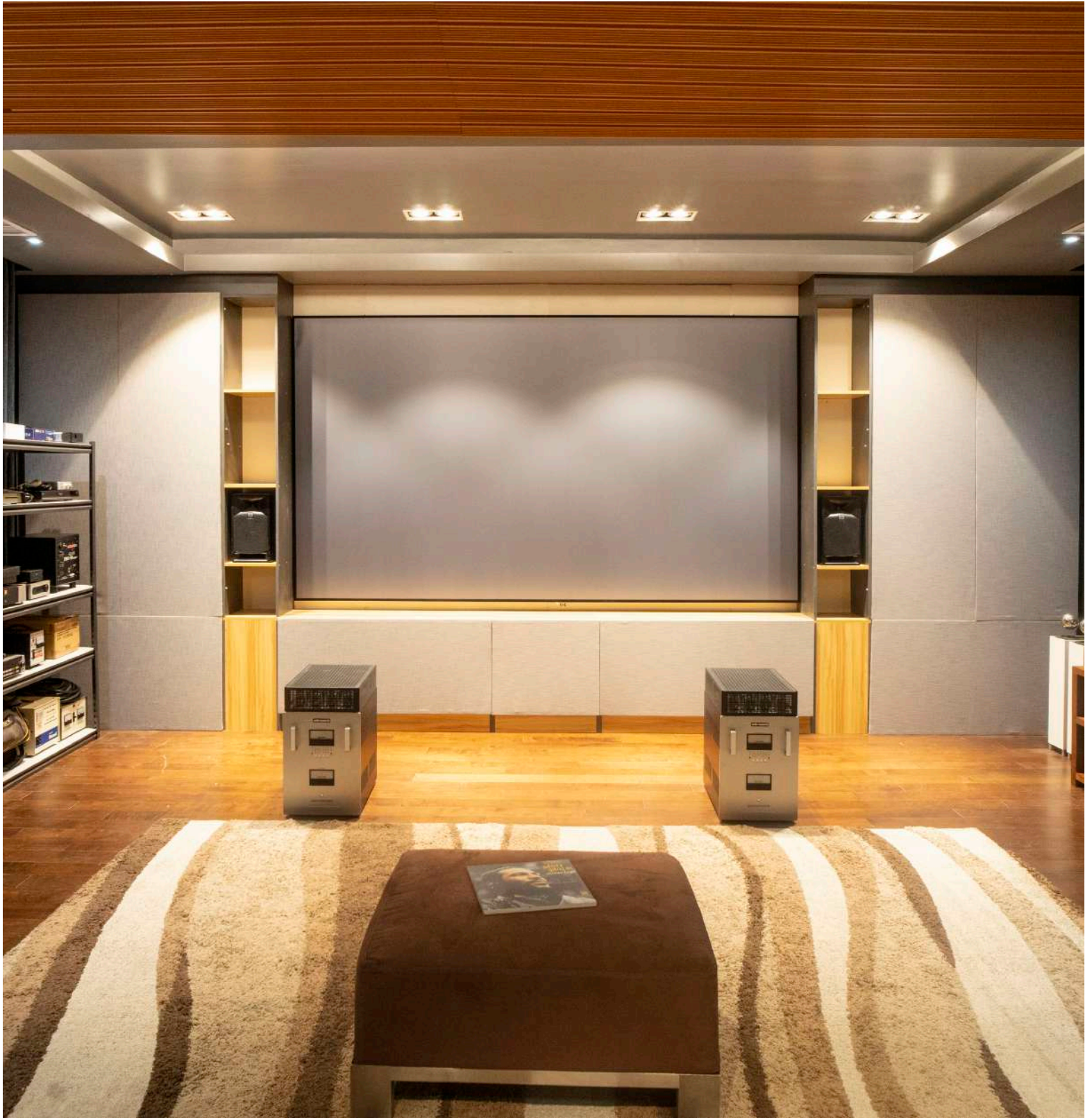
Other elements were also diligently cataloged before dismantling and carefully restored in the reconstruction. Holes in the capiz shell windows were patched and the wooden elements were refinished. Even the furniture returned refurbished and restyled in an elegant Filipiniana setting by interior designer Vanessa Gaston Copeland, creating a warm and inviting interior (Medina, 2022). These traditional features such as flooring, siding, and metal work function as covert cladding to the home's modern skeleton replete with brand-new cooling, plumbing, and security systems. Lounging on a hot summer day, one may never know if time had rewound a century to simpler times (unless hit by the cool breeze of air conditioning of course). As the client put it, the home is "an oasis in a concrete jungle" (ANCX Staff, 2022).

















In a fast-moving city where development often favors a “tear down, rise” approach to land use, Casa Floria models a comparatively radical alternative (Santos, 2022). “It shows that these buildings are not mere relics of the past for us to look at and consume from an antiquarian perspective, but can be living, breathing places that grow with us,” says ARC LICO founder Gerard Lico (Abanes, 2022). The “hybrid conservation” approach proposed by ARC LICO thus charts a new direction for Manila’s heritage buildings beset by both the ravages of time and socio-political neglect. Although it will likely be a long struggle for local governments to invest in heritage preservation, Casa Floria demonstrates that even private individuals can partake in historical preservation at smaller scales. An option for commercial and government developers for now, hybrid conservation projects like Casa Floria prove the potential to conserve Manila’s rapidly dwindling heritage building stock.

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