

ESSAY

A Gutted Building and Fragments of Memories

Ricardo T. Jose

On April Fool's Day, 2016, I drove to the UP Faculty Center planning to park in my usual slot at the Faculty Center (FC) Parking Lot. I came in earlier than usual, at around 6 a.m., because I had to attend a conference in Pasay. To my surprise, the road to the parking lot was blocked and some trucks seemed to be occupying the road. This was an accident, I thought, and parked in the parking area overlooking the FC parking lot. It was then I discovered that the FC had burned. Proceeding to the parking lot, I met several friends from other departments, among them Kiko Datar and Butch Dalisay, some almost in tears as they lamented the loss of precious documents, manuscripts, and other materials. I thought only one side of the building had burned, and hoped the north side had been spared; my friends told me the second floor was gone. I walked around the building and confirmed that the whole History Department area in the second floor had indeed burned. And quickly thoughts of what was in my room, now probably hopelessly lost, flooded my mind. Memories of historic and happy days also came back. But there was no denying the fact that the FC as we knew it was now gone.

My first memories of the FC are from the early 1970s, when I had just graduated from UP Elementary School and was in high school. Since my father taught at the College of Music, we would occasionally pass the FC, although we did not actually enter it. It looked like a forbidding building, simple in design but daunting because of its businesslike appearance and the knowledge that it contained so much intellectual power.

The building was not so daunting once one knew people who worked in it. My first year in CAS exposed me to Prof. Concepcion Dadufalza, my teacher in English I and II, and subsequently in English 3 and 4. As any former student of Prof. Dadufalza knows, a close camaraderie built up in her class. We would gather in her room on the first floor, right across the parking lot entrance, to discuss readings we took up in class or to exchange ideas on virtually any subject. The discussions were fun and inspiring, and that room always had special memories for all of us who were Dadu's students. Close by, of course, was the room of poet (and one-time University Secretary) G  mino Abad, who had been one of Dadu's students as well. As students, we also got to know the rooms of the Spanish professors, and of other English professors on the first floor.

Two years into UP as a student, I gravitated towards the History Department on the second floor. Instead of spending time in the Physics labs, I enjoyed more the company of professors in History. Although a Physics major at the time, I felt more at home in History and became a History major. Several History Professors quickly became close friends, and I visited them in their rooms. Prof. Isagani Medina, a bibliographer, librarian, and historian, always surprised us who visited him with new documents, relics, and other things he found (or re-found, after clearing up stacks of papers). He was famous for his puns—he said historians always had a piling system, since they piled papers on top of each other and yet could find documents when needed. His room was a compressed library, museum, and archive in one. It had the most books in any one single room in the FC. (After he retired, his room became Merce Planta's. The shelves were still there. Prof. Medina became Professor Emeritus but did vacate the room).

It was Prof. Medina, I believe, who told me that one could walk the corridors of the History Department and start up a conversation with any faculty member there regarding the sources of history, or different aspects of historical events. Or also challenge existing paradigms. Indeed, how many discussions would be heard in those corridors—between faculty members, students, or anyone wanting to know more about history. No one left empty-handed, or without having learned something new.

The FC was well known to UP students for the lectures, symposia, and conferences held at the FC Conference Hall (later renamed Bulwagang Recto). Various visiting professors, both from the Philippines and abroad, delivered lectures on various topics; spirited discussions took place in that august chamber, which looked like a miniature UN General Assembly. Indeed, during the Martial Law years, many free discussions were carried out there. When I became director of the Third World Studies Center (it had a small room at the FC in the beginning), we used the FC Conference Hall for our Public Lecture Series, and the tradition of free and spirited discussions continued.

Students never know all the greatness that is around them. The FC had been the home of so many great minds, it would have been difficult not to spot someone

famous if one opened one's eyes. But as students, we always took these greats for granted, assuming they would be there all the time. Most of them were also unassuming, so unless one knew who they were, one could pass them by without recognizing them. When I joined the History Department in 1979, Teodoro Agoncillo had already retired, as did many of the senior faculty of his generation. Other members of the faculty were abroad, completing their doctoral studies. Some we knew only by the names on the doors, but gradually we got to know the others better. And some of our teachers became legends themselves, and we were proud to know them.

Junior faculty members did not have permanent rooms. Sometimes we squatted in a senior faculty member's room while they were out on special detail, or were finishing their studies abroad. We could not touch what was not ours, of course. Sometimes we shared with other junior faculty. My first room was FC 2032, or thereabouts. I shared it with Gil Gotiangco and Popoy de Vera (now VPPA). It was a crowded existence and being a lecturer, the lack of tenure was quite obvious. But it was challenging and fun to teach and be a member of the faculty. The room faced the inside of the FC, and was next to the men's room. It was thus easy to find: I told my students to look for the male comfort room in the History Department and my room was next to that. I heard that the room was Prof. Agoncillo's room before, and it had a telephone cable for a phone, which had gotten lost. This was before we had individual phones in our rooms. It was also rumored that occasionally, Prof. Agoncillo (after he had passed away) visited his old room and the smell of roses was there faintly. I never smelled anything in that room except the usual odors emanating from the comfort room next door.

It was also said that *dwendes* (dwarves) played around in our part of the FC. Once, our secretary came early and heard the sound of children playing. Wondering what they were doing in the FC so early, she went in and saw *dwendes* playing. As soon as she saw them, she ran out; the *dwendes*, on seeing her, ran the other way. But then our secretary was known for having a third eye or something.

My place in the FC changed two or three times. At one point I had a room facing the inside of the FC, one of two quadrangles with a reflecting pool in the ground floor. Another time I was facing the road. I think that was FC 2019 or 2021. Being a junior faculty, I shared the room at one time with JC Parrenas who later moved to the University of Asia and the Pacific; Ambeth Ocampo and I were also roommates at one point. Later I was moved to FC 2015, where I stayed on until the FC burned. By that time I was no longer very junior, had the room to myself, and filled it with books, relics, curios, and other things to show my students, and to entertain children (and several did visit me for not very deep intellectual discussion).

While in the FC I kept an open door policy—feeling that the FC looked so cold and heartless with all the doors closed, I made it a point to keep my door open when I was in the room. This made it easy for my students to find me, as they knew an open door was mine and they could visit any time. Naturally, during

brownouts this policy led to some light shining in the otherwise dark corridor. It also saved electricity since I hardly ever used my air conditioner and preferred natural ventilation. Children of friends and co-faculty also wound up in my room since I had some toys which could entertain them; a few times we raced wind-up toys of Pacman and a ghost down the corridor (after office hours of course).

Keeping the door open also invited people selling insurance, paintings, or simply asking for directions. Once in a while a bee or a wasp would fly in, which posed a problem since if the insect got into the corridor there was no way out, and it might sting someone. So if one did get in my room, I carefully left the room and closed the door, to let the insect find its own way out.

My door was open to all. When I found out that some of the history majors did not have an organization of their own, I encouraged them to form one. It became known as the History Society, or HISOC. (An alternative name was the History Majors Association, or HIMAS, but the acronym sounded funny so we stuck with HISOC.) As they had no *tambayan* or a place to gather, I volunteered my room as long as I was on campus, either in my room or at class. So my room became a *tambayan* and temporary library for the students, before my own books crowded everything else out.

Apart from the FC Conference Room, another popular room for lectures and meetings was FC 2104, where HISOC and the History Department held occasional lectures and meetings. This was before the College of Arts and Letters (CAS) had split into three, so the different departments and the colleges were in essence one big family. Not always happy, but active.

It was good to know people in the other departments, although as junior faculty we hardly cared about the administration and focused on teaching. Next to History in the second floor was the Math Department, so it was easy to talk with friends from there. I had many friends in the English Department too, and knew faculty in the Department of European Languages, all in the first floor. Also on the second floor were the offices of the Humanities Department (later Art Studies), Linguistics, and some rooms of the English faculty. The third floor I did not get to visit very often at first – it seemed dark and forbidding, initially. However, I did get to have friends in the Philosophy, Geography, Speech and Drama, and Anthropology Departments as well. Everyone gravitated towards the Faculty Center Canteen in the second floor, where interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary dialogue was easy. After CAS split into three, colleges claimed their own places and the canteen faded away, to be resuscitated under the term of President Francisco Nemenzo. But by this time, Math had moved to its own building, and the departments became more conscious of their territories.

There was much intellectual dialogue in the FC. Others have written about the travails of being a faculty member in the early years of Martial Law, when FC rooms were searched by the military. Even such innocuous books as *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* were seized as being anti-government! (I later came across this

book; it was one of those lost in the fire). When I came in as a faculty member, dissent was rising and there was more freedom to discuss things.

One only had to look at the names on the doors of the FC to realize that there were so many greats in it. I got to know and interview only a few: Leopoldo Yabes on the third floor, S. P. Lopez on the first floor, and a few others. I myself was interviewed in my room by local and foreign scholars or journalists; I cannot remember them all anymore. An American documentary team produced an excellent film on the Spanish-American War, including the Philippine-American War; Malou Camagay and I were interviewed in the History Department Library for this. I recently found it being circulated on Facebook. History Channel Asia interviewed me in my messy room one evening; they installed a small rail system so the camera could move in and out. The resultant docu short was aired on the History Channel several times some years ago. The BBC, NHK, most of the local TV stations then and now also came to my room. The media also interviewed many other faculty members, and it was not uncommon to see vehicles of different networks parked in the FC parking lot.

There was much that was great in the FC. Great in the sense of the persons who occupied the offices and the works produced by such occupants, many of whom were physically in the building. Great also in terms of events that took place in the FC—conferences, lectures, discussions, book launchings...there are too many to cite. In February 1986, just to cite one example, UP faculty members gathered at the FC Conference Hall to discuss what they could do in the light of the blatant cheating in Marcos' snap elections. Faculty from all departments attended, bringing back the idea of multidisciplinary (or interdisciplinary) joint action. Several lines of action were decided upon, but were overtaken by the People Power Revolution.

One might also say there were opportunities for romance in the FC and I have my own fair share of happy (as well as not so happy) memories in this regard. But that is not of much interest in an article such as this, so let this trend of thought end here.

Now the FC is gone. One sees the gutted remnants of a building that once was so alive—with ideas, discussions, music, the arts, publications, students, and faculty. So much happened at the FC in its almost half a century of existence. It would be impossible to write all these down in a short article. I hope that with these short reminiscences, some idea of what the FC meant might surface. Others have written of their own memories. These are some of mine. May others write of their experiences as well.