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Lifestyle » Design

More greenery, less grime as tallest vertical garden rises along EDSA

By ROEHL NIÑO BAUTISTA, GMA News September 19, 2013 3:55pm

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Tags: green architecture , MMDA , vertical garden

Near the Cubao station of the MRT, commuters have been greeted with the unusual sight of a glass-walled building partially covered with mondo grass and bromeliad plants for several months now.

The high-rise vertical garden adorns the left side of the 12-storey Public Safety Savings and Loan Association Inc. (PSSLAI) building, which is still under construction. It's a refreshing distraction from the drab structures along the lengthy span of EDSA, and holds the promise of more green architecture in the burgeoning metropolis.

"We wanted to create something that the country has never seen before," says architect Liza Crespo, whose firm designed the "living wall" to fulfill the vision of its client.



Formed in 2003 by senior and retired officers of the Philippine National Police, the PSSLAI will soon be moving to the green building after serving policemen from its nearby Camp Crame office and satellite branches for many years.

"Our client wanted an iconic building, something that would depict a progressive organization. Among the fastest growing savings and loan institutions in the country today, we wanted to make sure that we captured their vision with the look of the building," said Crespo.

Her firm, Liza Crespo Ecotecture, has been involved in many green building projects all over the world.

"Knowing how much pollution is generated on the busy thoroughfare known as EDSA we wanted to do our bit, by helping reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emissions through the gas exchange process we know as photosynthesis," she explained in an email interview with GMA News Online.

"The vertical green wall has been oriented at the southern facade of the building, where it is hottest, to shield the employees from the hot afternoon sun," Crespo added.

With their seemingly precarious position, how will the plants get watered and how will the staff ensure they don't wither away?

"We have consulted with landscape architects, horticulturists etc. to find plants that are not extremely sensitive to changes in temperature," said Crespo. "These plants, once full-grown, will require minimal trimming."

The living wall uses collected rainwater for an automated drip irrigation system to save on the precious resource. This is connected to a system that "regulates the amount of watering and fertilization based on readings gathered at the source," she added.

Biggest vertical garden

American landscape architect Stanley Hart White is said to have first conceived the idea of a "green wall" in 1937, but the invention of the modern vertical garden has been credited to Patrick Blanc, a French botanist.

"Plants don't need soil in any situation because the soil is merely nothing more than a mechanic support," Blanc told Ping Mag in 2006.

"Only water and the many minerals dissolved in it are essential to plants, together with light and carbon dioxide to conduct photosynthesis. Wherever water is available all year long as in tropical forests or in temperate mountain forests, plants can grow on rocks, tree trunks, and slopes free-of-ground," he explained.

Blanc's work on plants has taken him all over the world, including Palawan where a species of begonia has been named after him.

The biggest vertical garden is currently found in Milan in Italy, but they are found all over the world.

Dubai is reportedly aiming to grab the record this year.

Greening EDSA

In Manila, the vertical wall of PSSLAI may be the tallest, but it is not the first such garden to sprout along EDSA. In 2012, the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) installed "vertical greeneries" in tunnels across the metro's main thoroughfare as part of its anti-pollution schemes.

"We want to revitalize Metro Manila's ecosystem against rapid urbanization and this planting of ornamental plants is a big help," said MMDA Chairman Francis Tolentino. "We're hoping that urban designers and architects will incorporate environment conservation in their infrastructure projects."

Crespo is right on the mark, even as green architects face the challenge of erasing mistaken perceptions on the supposed high cost of environment-friendly architecture versus conventional designs.

"Typically, the roof and the perimeter of the building are the main sources of heat infiltration," she said.

With features such as a green roof, the building itself can help bring electricity costs down, Crespo asserted.

"We reduce the amount of air conditioning needed, provide a healthy environment for its users, reduce the Urban Heat Island effect (Heat island is the phenomenon in urban environments where the average temperature is much higher compared to rural areas because of the heat from hard surfaces), the list of benefits goes on. You can't really put a peso amount on most of those items on the list," she added.

"Green design is still in its infancy in the Philippines. However, there is that desire from everyone: builders, designers, clients for sustainable structures," said Crespo. "The major stumbling block is the availability of legitimately green products." – YA, GMA News

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