

TEXT AND PHOTOS
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A DIFFERENT WORLD

*Nelly Garden is Iloilo's version of Tara,
Scarlett O'Hara's fabled home*

The presence of grand ancestral houses and mansions is one of the many things that visitors will notice in Iloilo. Architecture lovers and those who are fascinated with heritage homes will find their place in the city. All these trace back to one period of Iloilo's history, the sugar boom.

When British Vice Consul Nicolas Loney modernized sugar production, many families in Iloilo gained wealth with vast sugarcane haciendas in the neighboring and fertile soil of Negros Occidental



Nelly Garden in Jaro, Iloilo is the most majestic of mansions built by sugarcane hacienderos during the late Twenties.

and some parts of Panay. With this economic boom came the rise of sugar lords who built the grandest homes in the country; many of them still stand today within the city.

Visiting old mansions and homes is one of the activities that you must have in your itinerary when in Iloilo. If you are looking for the most illustrious, no need to argue that the must-see is Nelly Garden. This is not just a *babay na bato* but an all-concrete mansion built by one of the country's most prominent families.

Referred by the locals as "*balay daku*" (big house) this mansion was built by Vicente Lopez y Villanueva in 1928. A gift for his spouse, Elena Hofileña y Javellana, the grand home was named after their eldest daughter, Nelly.

Don Vicente Lopez with engineer Mariano Salas built this family home following the Beaux Arts style, which was the most influential style in the United States during that period. This is the reason why Nelly Garden bears a resemblance to other plantation houses and mansions in many

southern American states as seen in its flat roofs, grand staircases and arched windows. The most notable description of this style is Tara in the classic novel "*Gone with the Wind*."

Nelly Garden is located along a street carrying their family name in Jaro, along with other mansions and houses by other members of the clan. When it was built 85 years ago, it was actually located outside the city center. The Lopezes wanted a quiet location to raise their family away from the bustling commercial center and even from the neighboring Jaro Cathedral. Only rice fields and sugarcane plantations surrounded it.

The Lopez family utilized the sprawling four-hectare property to the full, building a horse stable, swimming pools and a mini lagoon. Nelly Lopez and her mother had green thumbs, and the property had a total of five gardens. Thus, it was officially called Nelly Garden.

With the family's wealth, Vicente Lopez made sure that his Nelly Garden was the grandest among the mansions built by sugar barons in Jaro: tall ceilings with intricate designs, walls made of *narra* and floors of *tindalo*, a wood that is one of the rarest and known for its durability and resistance to scratches. Furnishings, from the 24-seater dining table, a gift from Vicente's brother, to the musical instruments that the Lopez children played, added to the divine beauty of the home.

With its size, beauty and the family's social status and influence, Nelly Garden hosted the best and the grandest events in Iloilo. During the height of Iloilo's economic boom, when the province bore the title "Queen City of the South," it was not just a venue for Mardi Gras parties and soirées, but its walls witnessed the formation of political allies and business partnerships. It hosted gatherings and events in its big living area, while the elite stayed at its staircase balcony, watching the dancing and socialization below. Its five suites also accommodated both presidents and foreign statesmen, like Ramon Magsaysay and Theodore Roosevelt Jr.

Good things are destined not to last long, and the lavish lifestyle of Nelly Garden came to a halt with the coming of the Second World War. During the war, the Japa-



It's easy to see why the Iloilo mansion was named Nelly Garden, with beautiful lawns flourishing all over the estate.

nese used the biggest homes as headquarters, and to prevent this from happening, Filipino forces would burn down these houses. After the family fled to a safer place, Nelly Garden was ordered burned by the commanding officers of the Filipino fighters. For the first time, guerilla forces saw for themselves the beauty and luxury of this house that only the rich and the powerful enjoyed.

Awestruck by the treasures inside the house, the Filipinos looted Nelly Garden, the ornaments, décor and the family's personal belongings proved too tempting to resist. The house held so many treasures that, before the Filipino rebels could finish looting the mansion, the Japanese had already arrived. Fearing for their safety, the Filipinos retreated with what they could carry, failing to accomplish their mission of burning the house. Thus, Nelly Garden found a way of saving itself from the misery brought by the Second World War.

After the war, the family of youngest daughter Doña Lilia Lopez and her husband Don Francisco Jison returned to the mansion. They opened a small restaurant just in front of their home serving American troops and other diners. Slowly, the family picked up the broken pieces of their lives and restored Nelly Garden to its grandeur. They gradually replaced the treasures they lost in the war. As frequent travelers, the family added pieces bought from their trips around Asia, which explains the strong

Asian touches in the house today.

Nelly Garden continued its role in Ilonggo society, hosting events and accommodating more important figures in the Philippines. Imelda Marcos stayed in one of the suites as she tried to build allies with the family on behalf of her husband; ironically, President Corazon Aquino also stayed in the same room Imelda slept in.

The house is still used by the descendants of Vicente Lopez, who reminisce about their family's history, especially during family gatherings and reunions. Aware of the need to preserve the family's best heirloom piece, the house opened its gates to the public. Today, Nelly Garden is the top wedding venue for couples who want not just a classical-themed nuptial, but a celebration the will forever remember, as well as by their guests.

Tourists coming to Iloilo can book a private tour inside Nelly Garden, although this option is limited only to small groups.

This is the family's way of sharing their home with the public.

Wide well-manicured lawns replaced the flowering gardens. The horses are gone replaced by a few sheep grazing on the grasses. The lagoon can no longer entertain boating, and the parties are not as frequent. But this house continues to defy time and secures its spot as the grandest of all houses in Iloilo.

One remarkable story about Nelly Garden is that, unlike most ancestral homes around the country, the descendants of Vicente and Elena Lopez still call it home, staying here whenever they are in town.

Iloilo's ancestral homes do not just mirror opulence and lavish lifestyles but are a big factor in preserving Iloilo's rich heritage, a heritage and culture that are not only shared by affluent families, but among all Ilonggos, an invisible string that connects and pulls them back to their lovely home city of Iloilo.

HOW TO GET THERE:

Take SLEX all the way to Startoll Expressway, then exit at Malvar and turn left after the tollbooth. Go straight until the National Highway and turn right. When you get to Caltex and Citihardware, make another right. Look out for Cintai Corito's Garden on the left side.