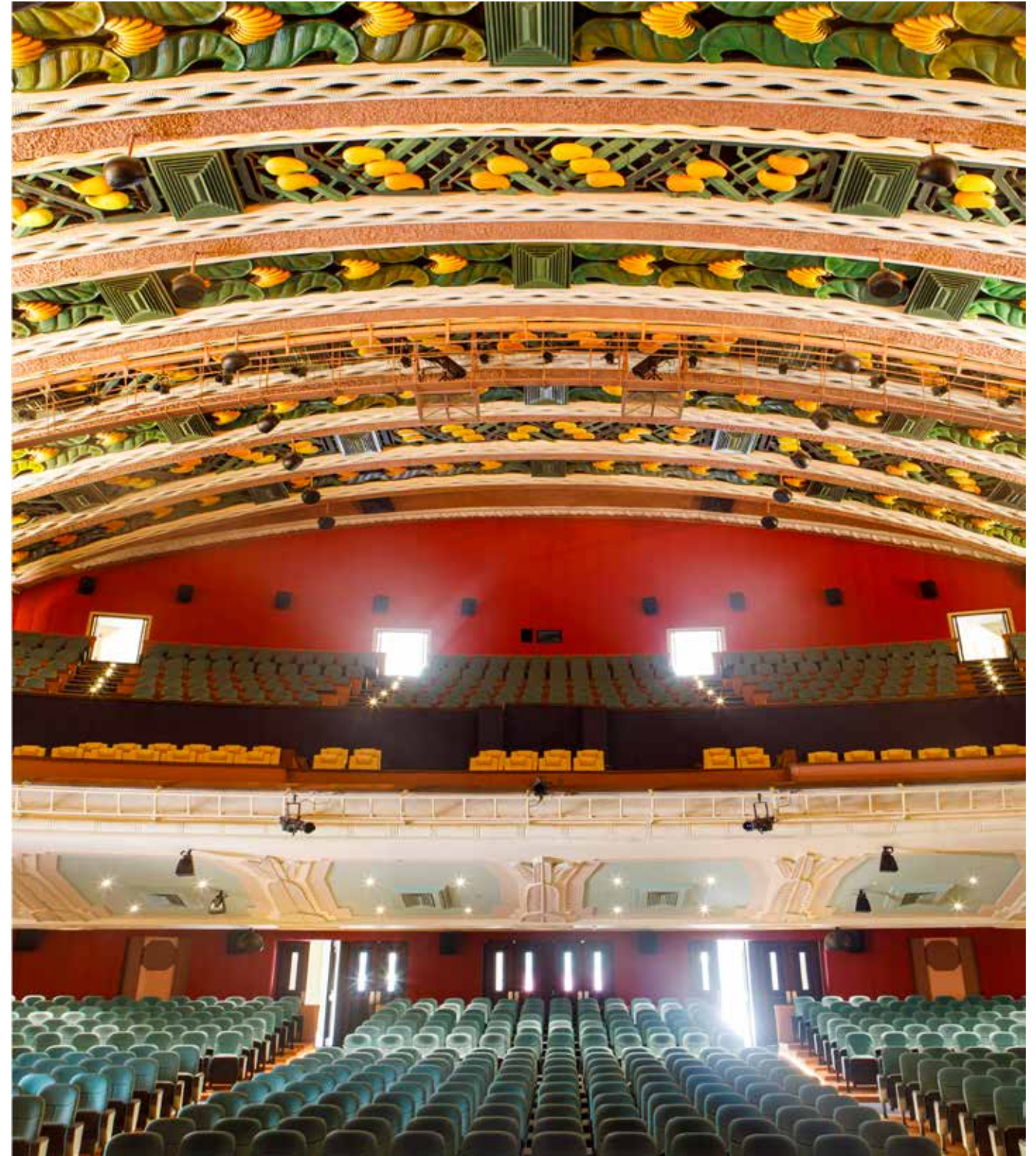




MADE IN MANILA

STORIES ON THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE THAT MAKE UP OUR CITY



A wide-angle, low-perspective photograph of the interior of San Agustin Church in Manila. The image captures the grandeur of the Baroque architecture, featuring a high, vaulted ceiling with intricate carvings and a large, ornate chandelier hanging from the left. The altar is the central focus, adorned with statues and flowers, and is flanked by tall, slender columns. The floor is covered in a red carpet, and the overall lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting the architectural details.

Photography by
Geric Cruz

History Lessons

Time leaves its mark everywhere. In places with deep history, these marks need to be tended to with skill, expertise, and appreciation. Meet the men behind the Escuela Taller Foundation, an organization that is restoring heritage sites, like the 400-year-old San Agustin Church, all around Manila.

By Nina Unlay

The San Agustin Church in Intramuros is so grand that it's hard to imagine that it was ever burned down. But those are the kinds of tricks time plays, especially in places that have had many faces. Way back in the year 1574, the first iteration of this church was made of only bamboo and nipa. It was destroyed during the invasion of Manila by Limahong; burned along with the rest of the city.

Before it became what we know it was today, it was remade in wood and then destroyed once again in 1583 when a lit candle turned into a raging fire during a ceremony.

And yet despite all it has endured, today, the San Agustin Church was built for a third time, some time between 1587 and 1606, making it the oldest church in the entire country. It withstood earthquakes and battles, and now stands as one of only four Baroque churches in the Philippines; a historical landmark named in 1976 and a World Heritage Site recognized by UNESCO. It has become a must-see tourist attraction for Filipinos and international travelers as well.

But like many historical landmarks, the signs of age are there. Paint fades and wood chips away. Enter the Escuela Taller Foundation—a non-profit organization based in Intramuros, Manila, that trains out-of-school youth in construction and conservation techniques. The foundation was established in December 2013, as a way to support the Intramuros Program which had been going on since 2009 as a collaboration with the government of Spain and the

Philippines' National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Joining the team of heritage workers and artisans at Escuela Taller means 12 months of intensive training in construction school: the skills covered are everything and anything in this highly technical area ranging from masonry, carpentry, woodworking, painting and finishing, metal works, plumbing, and electrical works.

According to Communications and Special Projects Officer Philip Paraan, Escuela Taller is so much more than a regular training center.

"We're one of the few institutions that do what we're doing," Paraan says. "Our approach is 'learning while doing.' It's part of the training that we field our workers right away to the heritage projects. Hands on sila talaga sa cultural heritage."

In 2014, Escuela Taller embarked on one of its biggest restoration projects: the 400-year-old wooden choir stalls and ceiling paintings of the San Agustin Church. The entire project took nearly three years to complete.





A FAITHFULNESS TO THE PAST

The name given to the paintings on the church's ceiling is trompe-l'oeil; a French term that literally translates into "deceive the eye." It's a style of

painting that was popular in Baroque style churches and among old Roman muralists. The idea behind it is to trick the viewer's perception, and in the San Agustin Church these murals look like intricate carvings worked into the ceiling. It's only upon closer

inspection that one would realize that these illusions were made with paint.

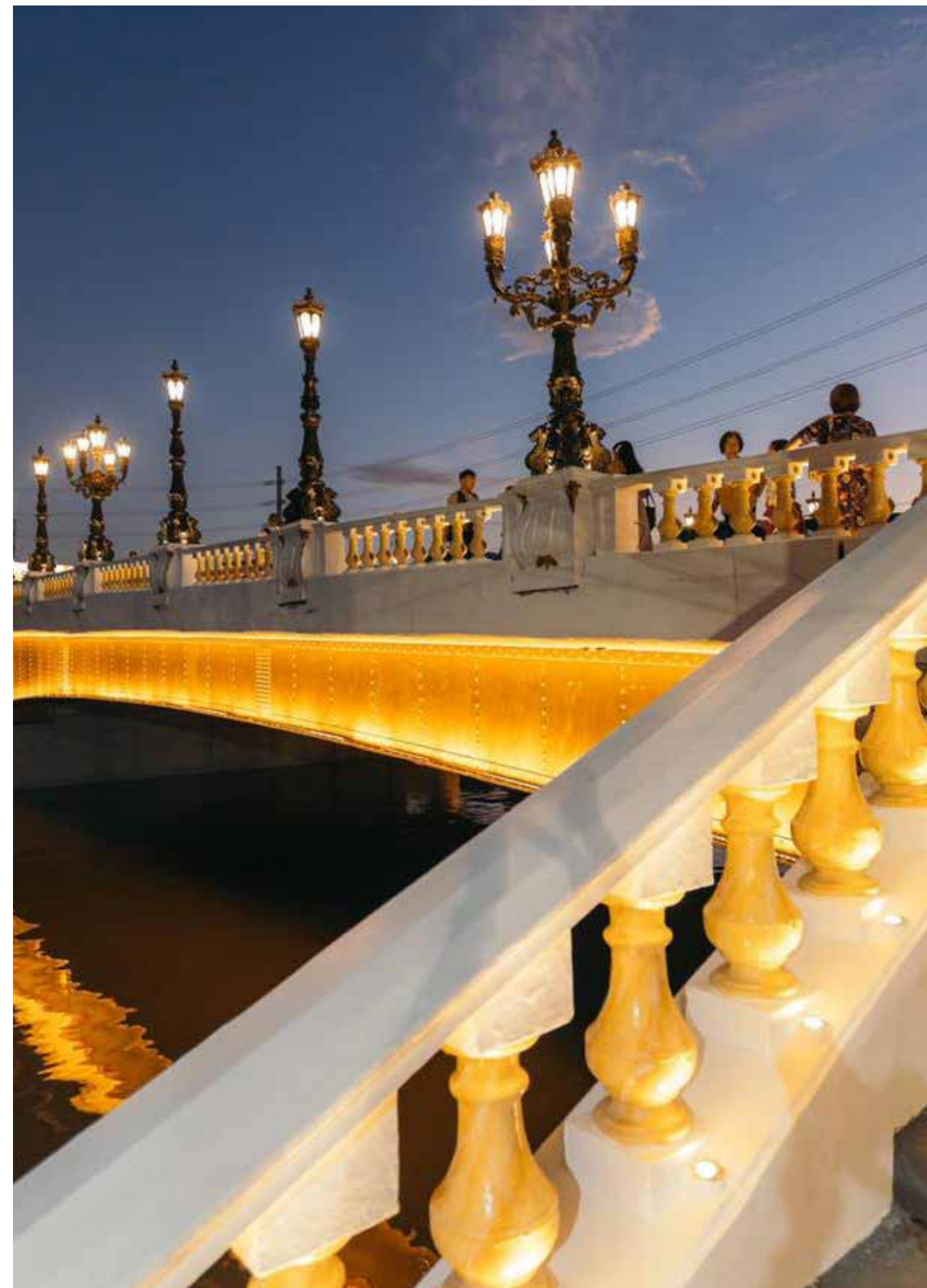
There had been restoration attempts prior to the Escuela Taller Foundation, which only resulted in deepening the damage done by time. This time in order to ensure success, restoration artist Guy Custodio was called in to lead the revival of the trompe-l'oeil mural, using a technique called "fresco-secco" wherein painting is done on dry plaster, using a binding medium like limewater mixed in with the pigments.

For the woodwork, Escuela Taller also looked for those with experience to work with. They partnered with conservation experts from the University of the Philippines Los Baños in order to find the right kind of wood needed to replace the missing parts.

"The general principle in conservation is that when something is made from a particular material, you have to be faithful to that material. It has to be compatible," Paraan says. "In any conservation process, there has to be fidelity to the materials. We have to do things according to the way they were built in the past."

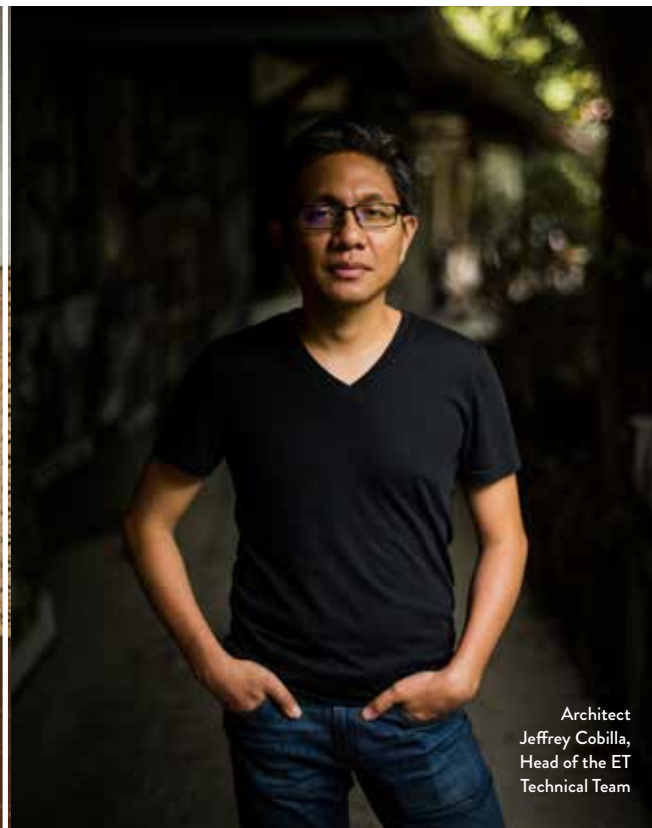
THE VALUE OF HERITAGE

Heritage conservation is a relatively young field for the Philippines, but there is a wealth of sites in the country. Within the City of Manila, the district of Sta. Ana alone has 88 heritage sites; closely followed by the districts of San Nicolas and Malate with 78 and 55 heritage sites respectively.





Left Page: The trompe l'oeil ceiling mural at San Agustín Church. The French term roughly translated means "deceive the eye."
This Page: Carpentry, masonry, woodwork, metalworks, painting, plumbing, and electric work are some of the skills taught in Escuela Taller's training program.



Architect
Jeffrey Cobilla,
Head of the ET
Technical Team



Rommel Rivera,
a trainee at
Escuela Taller



For Escuela Taller, the work that they do goes beyond providing opportunities in construction: it's also about developing value in heritage work and deepening appreciation for these important sites. This begins with instilling a sense of pride in their heritage workers, making them proud of the part that they play in preserving the history of the country.

A big part of that is thanks to the exposure they get from the training in Escuela Taller. They are taken on trips to different historical sites, from ancestral homes to churches, so that they can better understand—and appreciate—the foundations this country was built on.

“We teach our workers Culture and Heritage. This means they are taught the basics of history and archaeology, architecture—they are taught about civic buildings, bridges, all sorts of things,” Paraan says. “Then we take them on regular tours where there is a large concentration of heritage properties.”

The San Agustin Church, although it is one of Escuela Taller's biggest projects, is not the only one—they've worked on various sites across the country. Within the City of Manila alone, they've started the conservation process in both the Luneta Hotel and Paco Park. Their team of heritage workers have already started studying the various details that make up the architecture of these landmarks, so that they can work their magic and bring them back to life.

