

Photography by
Sonny Thakur

Let the Children Play

Museo Pambata may have been built by grownups, but the place is what it is because of the kids. From their energy to their ideas, their visions and hopes, the museum's president Bambi Mañosa is creating new spaces for kids and she's letting them take the lead.

By Nina Unlay

There is a giant man made out of plastic that hovers around Museo Pambata. He's around 10-feet tall, and he stands in the museum's backyard as a threatening message about plastic pollution.

The staff says the sight of him has scared some guests that didn't see him coming. When Bambi Mañosa-Tanjutco, president of Museo Pambata, is asked why the museum had chosen to weld together such a menacing presence, she says it wasn't her decision—it was her kids'.

"It can no longer be about adults telling kids what to do," Mañosa says. "If there's anything I've learned from raising my two girls is that your ears have to be bigger than your mouth. You need to really listen to them in order to understand them. You have to make them dream."

That's exactly the kind of place Museo Pambata has become; thanks to Mañosa's vision, if kids want to talk about plastic pollution, then the space exists to amplify their voices. In one of its many rooms, an exhibit called "Under the Sea" is designed to look like its underwater but with garbage strung across the ceiling. The art installation's message is a somber one, but it's honest; the kind that only comes from a young, earnest perspective.

"My kids know more than me about these things

actually," Mañosa says. "When I used to take them to [Museo Pambata], I would show them: this is the aquarium, this is the ocean. But now there's more depth to this exhibit. It's also a reality check. They know more about the ocean and the trash in it, and maybe I'm still living in the past. I want Museo Pambata to be a space for kids to put all their ideas out there."

The whole reason Museo Pambata was created was for the kids. Back in the early 90s, Museo Pambata Chairperson and former President Nina Lim-Yuson wanted a place that she could bring her own children. She was inspired by a trip to the Boston Children's Museum in America, where exhibits were interactive and hands-on, and kids could use all of their senses. At the time, there was no museum in the entire country designed for Filipino children. With support from the former Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Secretary Estefania Aldaba-Lim, Yuson made a plan for their dream museum: a place where children, particularly the underserved, could play and learn.





On December 12, 1994, Museo Pambata opened in the Elks Club Building along Roxas Boulevard. The Elks Club Building, prior to the reopening, was essentially a large clubhouse for businessmen built in the year 1910 by the Americans, designed by an architect named William E. Parsons.

The original lease granted to Yuson by the City Council of Manila for the

Elks Club Building was for 10 years; and it was a lease that continued to be extended in short increments over time for this private-public partnership. But during the term of Francisco “Isko” Moreno Domagoso in 2019, the mayor granted the museum a 25-year lease; this gave Museo Pambata a long lifespan, opening doors for much bigger possibilities.

“Wow, I thought,” Mañosa said,

“That’s great. It’s more than enough time to show that we are so relevant, not only in the city of Manila but in the Philippines. We would actually be the only Children’s Museum about the Filipino child and childhood, anywhere in the world.”

THE RIGHTS OF A CHILD

Mañosa took on her role as president—the second person to take this role after Chairperson Yuson—back in 2019. She remembers how her late father and National Artist for Architecture Bobby Mañosa gave her the seal of approval: “I think you’ll do wonders in that place,” she recalls him saying to her back then. Her father used to take her to the museum back when she was child, which is how she fondly remembers it.

So she pitched a big vision to the board of directors: A lot of enhancements for the space. She wanted to fix the things that she picked up as an interior designer, including the smaller, practical things like how lighting or white noise detracted or added to a room. She wanted to work with more Filipino designers, and have them redesign each of the rooms to create a stronger sense of play. She prepared a plan to rework the building, get more partners, and create more dynamic programs. “Because I was an interior designer, I really wanted to fix the design, the inside. I wanted this to be really like, like the beacon of light in the city of Manila, you know?” she says excitedly.

When the board approved her plans, she thought Museo Pambata was going to be her playground. She decided to start with one of the most iconic rooms: Karapatan Hall,



a large room where the Rights of the Child are immortalized on the wall.

“This [museum] was made because of the rights of the child. In the late 80s, early 90s, these rights were so important. They have the right to play and learn at the same time. For the community to really value, and place value, in the child. Most of the time in our society, the child is in the background,” Maricel Montero, who has been the Executive Director at Museo

Pambata Foundation for almost 15 years.

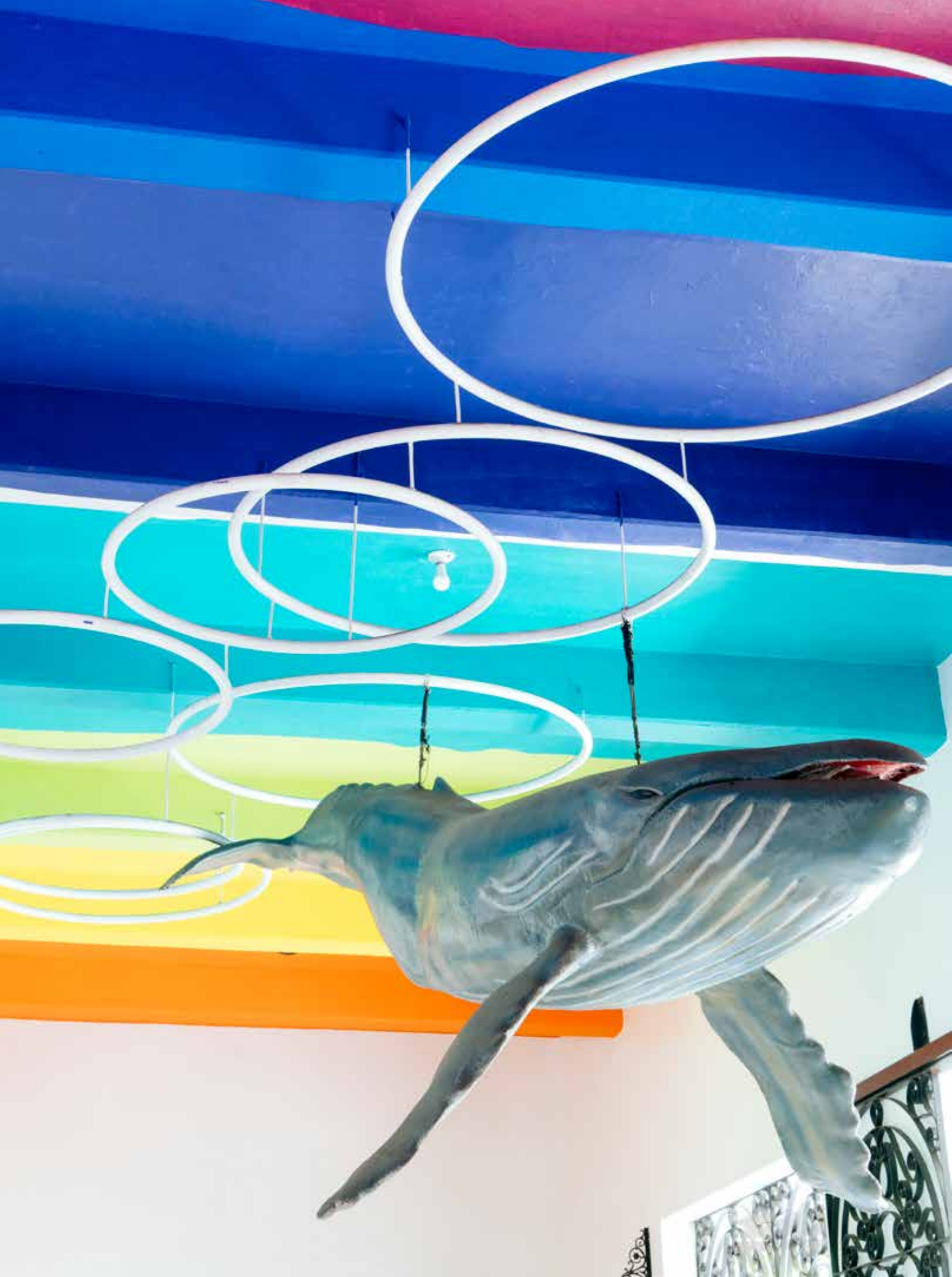
There are still many children in the Philippines that need support. A Situation Analysis of Children in the Philippines conducted by UNICEF found that in 2015, 2.85 million Filipino children between the ages of five and 15 years old were still out of school; only 91 percent were enrolled in primary school, and even less at 68 percent were in secondary school.

The foundation continues to run an informal school within the museum, where out-of-school youth or under-performing public school children can learn, as well as other advocacy programs.

A CHANGE OF PLANS

The first exhibit that Mañosa started to work on was called “Batang Katutubo,” a partnership with the National Commission for





Culture and the Arts (NCCA). In this space, children could learn about the different indigenous peoples in the Philippines; they could learn to write in indigenous script and weave together textiles with their own hands. There was also a corner where they could simulate planting rice, making the connection between the environment and the food that they eat. But the kids got to see this exhibit with their own eyes.

“I really think God has a great sense of humor,” Mañosa says. Right before the board meeting, where she was meant to present the new curatorial, the Covid-19 pandemic reached the Philippines and the entire country went on lockdown. What initially seemed like a postponement carried over into months, and then a year, until it became clear that there would be no kids coming to the museum for the foreseeable future.

“That was when I worked more than I’ve ever worked before,” Mañosa says. “How am I going to pivot to be relevant? [It was a question] I kept asking myself.”

The answer—again—came from listening to her kids. In trying to pivot, Mañosa found herself consulting with her partners and her kids, who convinced her that she needed to shift focus from the inside to the outside, literally. On June 24, Museo Pambata inaugurated its new playground called Bahay Pukyutan: the actualization of a very old dream by Bobby Mañosa, which takes inspiration from the shape of a honeycomb. The original design was made for a much larger structure in the old Parks and Wildlife Bureau in Quezon City, but the version of this playground in Museo Pambata was adapted to be smaller according to new regulations.



And Bahay Pukyutan is just the beginning—the entire outside area of Museo Pambata is Mañosa’s new target: where she envisions a living wall, covered in all kinds of endemic plant species, as well as a greenhouse where kids can learn about different herbs. She points out places for murals, and sitting areas, and ways that the kids can run in the fresh, open air; where families can come

together. A place that will be waiting for them, once they can come out to play.

“People need to breathe, and they want to be outdoors. I want to be ready with a space where people can read, the kids can feel safe and parents don’t have to worry about where the kids are running off to. That’s the whole new direction.”



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