

Reliving History: A Conservation Management Program for the Gabaldon Schoolhouse in Iloilo City

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Abstract:

This study investigates the historical significance, architectural integrity, and current conservation challenges of the Gabaldon schoolhouse located at Iloilo Central Elementary School (ICES) in Iloilo City, Philippines. Constructed in 1915 under the Gabaldon Act (Act No. 1801), the structure exemplifies early American colonial efforts to institutionalize public education through climate-adapted architecture. Employing a descriptive-qualitative research design, the study utilized archival review, physical site inspection, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to document the building's material condition, cultural value, and maintenance practices. The findings reveal that while the Gabaldon schoolhouse retains many of its original design features, it faces serious conservation threats due to termite infestation, roof deterioration, and unauthorized modifications. Despite the presence of legal protections under Republic Act No. 11194 and the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009, implementation gaps persist at the school level, largely due to limited resources and lack of technical guidance. Stakeholder perspectives highlight a strong desire for preservation but also underscore the functional pressures of maintaining a heritage structure within a working school environment. The study proposes a site-specific Conservation Management Plan (CMP) and recommends capacity-building initiatives, inter-agency collaboration, and curriculum integration to safeguard the structure. The findings contribute to localized heritage discourse and offer a replicable framework for the conservation of Gabaldon schoolhouses nationwide.

Keywords: Gabaldon schoolhouse, heritage conservation, architectural integrity, Republic Act 11194, Iloilo Central Elementary School, conservation management plan, American colonial architecture, built heritage Philippines

Introduction:

The conservation of built heritage is a vital yet often neglected facet of cultural preservation, particularly in rapidly urbanizing societies. Built heritage encompasses structures that embody a community's historical identity, socio-political transformations, and architectural ingenuity. In the Philippines, one emblematic example is the Gabaldon schoolhouse, a series of standardized public school buildings constructed in the early 20th century during the American colonial period. These schoolhouses stand not merely as utilitarian spaces for education but as enduring symbols of national modernization and cultural hybridity (Ancho, 2023). However, while these buildings are often celebrated, their actual state—physically and administratively—reveals inconsistencies and threats that demand urgent scholarly and policy attention.

Education as a colonial project brought about significant reforms during both Spanish and American periods in the Philippines. Under Spanish rule, education was largely religious, exclusionary, and centralized. The American rule introduced mass public education, a secularized curriculum, and the use of English as a medium of instruction. This shift marked a turning point in Filipino society, aligning public instruction with civic training and industrial development. The construction of Gabaldon schoolhouses under Act No. 1801 in 1907 was part of this broader nation-building agenda, meant to democratize access to education and to project American ideals through architecture and pedagogy (Department of Education, 2018).

The Gabaldon schoolhouses, constructed during the early American colonial period in the Philippines, exemplify the standardized architectural vision promoted by the colonial government to modernize public education infrastructure. Designed primarily under the architectural leadership of William E. Parsons, these school buildings were carefully adapted to the tropical climate through features such as elevated wooden flooring, wide overhangs, large operable windows, and generous ventilation systems—elements that not only responded to environmental needs but also embodied colonial ideals of hygiene, order, and modernity (Kirsch, 2023). As highlighted in studies on American colonial architecture in the Philippines, these buildings formed part of a larger program to extend the reach of public instruction through durable, earthquake-resistant, and climatically responsive schoolhouses built across the archipelago (Yamaguchi, 2006). Later, Filipino architects such as Tomas Mapúa, Juan Arellano, and Antonio Toledo contributed to their evolution, incorporating Neoclassical and Art Deco elements into these public buildings (Alcazaren, 2015). Between 1907 and 1946, over 3,000 such schoolhouses were constructed, most of which continue to be used today—though not always in accordance with heritage conservation standards (Ladrado, 2022).

Despite their status as “built heritage” under the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 (Republic Act 10066) and specifically under Republic Act No. 11194, many Gabaldon schoolhouses remain under threat from poor maintenance, inappropriate renovations, and insufficient awareness of their historical value. Several of these buildings have been altered in ways that diminish their authenticity and architectural integrity, including the use of modern materials, unregulated expansion, and neglect of essential repairs. This gap between legislative protection and actual preservation outcomes reflects a disconnect between heritage policy and school-level implementation (Ancho, 2023). Conservation scholars emphasize that heritage preservation should go beyond physical restoration; it must encompass authenticity, cultural context, and sustainable use (Jokilehto, 1986; Kiarie, 2024). In this respect, the Gabaldon schoolhouses pose a complex challenge. On one hand, they continue to serve their original educational purpose, which supports their relevance and functional value. On the other hand, the day-to-day pressures of accommodating growing student populations and administrative needs often lead to interventions that violate heritage principles (Ancho, 2023). For instance, the installation of concrete partitions, air-conditioning units in capiz windows, and conversion of courtyards into covered gyms are common examples of pragmatic but destructive alterations (Borri & Corradi, 2019).

The concept of authenticity in heritage conservation is not fixed; it is culturally contingent and multi-dimensional, as outlined in the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994). Authenticity must be evaluated not only in terms of materials and construction techniques but also in relation to use, setting, function, and cultural continuity. In the case of Gabaldon schoolhouses, authenticity may persist in continued use, memory, and community value, even if some materials have been replaced. However, this view must be balanced against the risk of cumulative alterations eroding the architectural character and historical evidence embedded in the physical structure (Lipe, 1983; Feilden & Jokilehto, 1998).

Another essential consideration is the role of Local Government Units (LGUs) and community stakeholders in the conservation process. The law mandates that LGUs support conservation through funding, permitting, and policy compliance, yet implementation often depends on available resources and the awareness of local actors (DILG, 2019). In many cases, school heads and maintenance staff lack training in heritage-sensitive repair practices and are driven by budget availability rather than conservation protocols. This underscores the need for capacity building, localized conservation plans, and technical guidance from heritage agencies.

Within the field of heritage education and school infrastructure management, few studies comprehensively examine the implementation of Republic Act 11194 at the school level. While national reports highlight the importance of Gabaldon structures, there is a scarcity of localized assessments that document their actual condition, architectural modifications, and adherence to conservation standards. This lack of micro-level data undermines the ability of policymakers and heritage advocates to formulate context-sensitive strategies for preserving these buildings (Ancho, 2023; Ancho & San Juan, 2021).

This research focuses on the Gabaldon schoolhouse at Iloilo Central Elementary School (ICES)—a historically significant public school in Western Visayas. Estimated to have been built in 1915, this structure embodies the architectural and educational ideals of the American colonial period. However, over time, it has undergone several modifications, many of which lack documentation or approval from heritage bodies. This study seeks to assess the current condition, document the cultural significance, and propose a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) that aligns with national legislation, international conservation principles, and the practical realities of school operations. In light of the above, this study fills a critical gap by offering an in-depth case study that integrates historical analysis, architectural assessment, stakeholder consultation, and policy alignment. It contributes to both academic literature and applied heritage practice by presenting a replicable model for other schools housing Gabaldon buildings. Moreover, it advocates for an interdisciplinary and participatory approach, where education, architecture, and heritage sectors collaborate to protect not only the form but also the meaning of heritage schoolhouses in the Philippine context.

Methodology:

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research design to explore the historical development, physical condition, and conservation practices of the Gabaldon schoolhouse located at Iloilo Central Elementary School (ICES) in Iloilo City, Philippines. The descriptive-qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this investigation, as it allows for a contextual and narrative-based understanding of architectural heritage, drawing from physical observations, stakeholder perspectives, and historical documentation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the research sought to generate a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) grounded in evidence from both material and intangible heritage sources.

The locale of the study was Iloilo City, a historically significant urban center with one of the highest concentrations of Gabaldon schoolhouses in the Western Visayas region. A total of thirteen Gabaldon buildings were identified within the city based on official records from the Department of Education (DepEd). Among these, Iloilo Central Elementary School (ICES) was selected as the focus site due to its architectural prominence, central location, and documented

structural interventions. The Gabaldon building at ICES was constructed in 1915, and it retains major design elements typical of the American colonial period, particularly those based on William E. Parsons' Standard Plan No. 20 (Ancho, 2023).

To collect data, the researcher used a purposeful sampling technique, targeting key informants directly involved in the management, maintenance, and use of the Gabaldon schoolhouse. The sample included one DepEd facility coordinator, the school principal, the school maintenance officer, one local government engineer and planning officer, a faculty member, a parent representative, and a school maintenance personnel—seven informants in total. These individuals were selected based on their roles in heritage management and firsthand knowledge of the building's history and condition.

Several research instruments were employed to triangulate data. These included: (1) a historical timeline matrix to trace the architectural evolution of the structure; (2) a physical observation checklist based on the Burra Charter's guidelines for assessing cultural significance (Australia ICOMOS, 2021); (3) a visual documentation tool for photographic and measurement records; and (4) a semi-structured interview guide designed around the conservation principles outlined in Republic Act No. 11194 and the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994). These instruments were vetted by two experts in heritage conservation and architecture to establish content validity. The observation checklist and interview protocols were pilot-tested in a nearby Gabaldon schoolhouse, resulting in minor revisions to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data gathering followed a multistage process. First, a formal request was submitted to the DepEd Division of Iloilo City, seeking approval to conduct research and access archival documents. Upon approval, the researcher conducted preliminary visits to the site to document the schoolhouse's layout, structural features, and past interventions. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted in person with the identified participants. These interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and coded for thematic analysis. Physical data such as floor plan measurements and material conditions were verified through onsite inspections and evaluated with the assistance of a licensed structural engineer.

The qualitative data were analyzed using Lichtman's (2013) "3Cs" approach: coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. In the coding stage, significant statements and descriptive observations were highlighted across interview transcripts, field notes, and visual data. These codes were then organized into broader categories such as "Architectural Integrity," "Material Deterioration," and "Community Value." The final themes that emerged—Historical Significance and Legacy, Architectural Authenticity, and Urgent Conservation Needs—informed the formulation of the CMP. As a qualitative study, statistical treatment was not employed; instead, the focus was on thematic synthesis and pattern identification grounded in the cultural heritage framework.

The study strictly adhered to ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews or site visits. The purpose of the research, intended outcomes, and participants' rights were explained in detail, and written or verbal consent was secured. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by using role-based descriptors (e.g., "school principal") instead of personal names. Institutional approval was obtained from the appropriate DepEd and LGU authorities, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Furthermore, a non-intervention policy was observed—no physical changes were made to the heritage structure during the course of the study.

Results:

This section presents the findings from the archival investigation, physical assessment, and stakeholder interviews conducted on the Gabaldon schoolhouse of Iloilo Central Elementary School (ICES). The results are organized according to the study's key objectives: historical background, architectural features, current physical condition, and stakeholder perspectives on conservation.

Historical and Architectural Significance

Archival research confirmed that the Gabaldon building at ICES was constructed in 1915 as part of the national school-building program under Act No. 1801. The structure adheres to the standardized design principles of William E. Parsons, notably Standard Plan No. 20, which includes elevated wooden floors, wide overhangs, capiz-shell windows, and high ceilings—all tailored to suit the tropical climate (Ancho, 2023).

Stakeholder interviews affirmed the building's enduring symbolic value. Respondents described the Gabaldon as a "legacy structure," reflecting both colonial influence and the community's educational heritage. Table 1 summarizes the architectural features observed during the site inspection.

Table 1

Original Architectural Features Observed in the ICES Gabaldon Schoolhouse

Feature	Status	Notes
Elevated wooden flooring	Retained	Shows signs of termite damage in sections
Wide roof eaves	Intact	Minor warping in certain areas
Capiz-shell windows	Partially retained	Some windows replaced with glass; others in disrepair
High ceilings	Retained	Ceiling panels intact; some discoloration observed
Transom windows and vent grills	Intact	Essential for cross-ventilation
Symmetrical facade design	Retained	Paint peeling; minor structural cracks near entrance

Physical Condition and Material Deterioration

The physical inspection revealed that the building remains structurally stable but exhibits moderate to severe deterioration in specific components. The most urgent concerns relate to termite infestation, rusting roof sheets, moisture ingress, and surface cracks. Table 2 details the observed defects and their locations.

Table 2
Summary of Structural and Material Deficiencies

Deficiency	Affected Area	Severity	Remarks
Termite infestation	Flooring, wall panels	High	Active damage in three classroom sections
Rusting galvanized roof sheets	Entire roofing system	Moderate to High	Replacement needed in several panels
Surface cracks in masonry	Rear facade, inner corridor	Moderate	Mostly non-structural; aesthetic concern
Moisture-related stains	Ceiling, lower walls	Moderate	Linked to poor drainage and humidity
Warped wooden doors/windows	Entrances and fenestration	Low to Moderate	Due to exposure and age

Community Value and Stakeholder Perspectives

Interview data highlighted the community's strong attachment to the Gabaldon schoolhouse. Respondents emphasized the building's symbolic and functional value. Alumni, teachers, and local officials noted that the structure represents educational continuity and identity. One respondent stated, "This building is not just a school—it's part of our memory as a community."

However, stakeholders also reported conflicting pressures between functional modernization and conservation. Teachers raised concerns over spatial limitations, citing the need for additional classrooms and ICT integration. The maintenance personnel acknowledged budget constraints and lack of technical guidance in conducting repairs aligned with heritage protocols.

Table 3
Thematic Summary of Stakeholder Responses

Theme	Frequency (n=7)	Representative Insights
Educational/historical value	7	"A legacy from our great-grandparents"
Functional use and relevance	6	"Still being used for Grade 6 classes"
Maintenance and funding gaps	5	"No allocated funds for heritage materials"

Lack of technical expertise	4	"We do repairs based on what's available"
Desire for preservation	6	"This should be restored, not replaced"

The responses point to both a commitment to preservation and the practical limitations faced by the school and local government.

The results affirm the historical and architectural significance of the Gabaldon schoolhouse at ICES. The structure retains many of its original design elements but suffers from various physical deficiencies. The building holds high community value, yet the conservation process is hampered by insufficient technical capacity and funding.

These findings provide a strong basis for the proposed Conservation Management Plan (CMP), which addresses structural interventions, stakeholder collaboration, and compliance with Republic Act No. 11194 and NHCP conservation guidelines.

Discussion:

The findings of this study reaffirm the multidimensional significance of the Gabaldon schoolhouse at Iloilo Central Elementary School (ICES), emphasizing its value not only as a physical structure but as a cultural artifact embodying historical memory, architectural ingenuity, and educational legacy. The study supports prior claims that Gabaldon schoolhouses are more than utilitarian buildings—they serve as enduring symbols of the American colonial project of public education and architectural modernization in the Philippines (Ancho, 2023; Department of Education, 2018). Consistent with the literature, the architectural features observed—elevated wooden flooring, capiz-shell windows, wide roof eaves, and high ceilings—reflect the climate-responsive design ethos of William E. Parsons, whose plans adapted Western design to tropical conditions (Kirsch, 2023; Yamaguchi, 2006). These features remain largely intact at ICES, affirming the building's architectural integrity despite over a century of use. This aligns with Jokilehto's (1986) notion of "constructive continuity," which advocates for the retention of original materials and functions as a means of preserving cultural value.

However, the study also reveals critical tensions between preservation and practical functionality, which resonate with concerns raised by Ancho (2023) and Borri and Corradi (2019) about the vulnerability of heritage structures to ad hoc modifications. The presence of concrete partitions, non-original materials, and poorly executed repairs indicates a gap between heritage policy and practice. Despite Republic Act 11194 and Republic Act 10066 prescribing conservation protocols, many interventions at the school level remain uninformed by conservation science or formal architectural guidance. These observations echo Kiarie's (2024) argument that heritage conservation in developing contexts is often challenged by limited resources, technical capacity, and institutional follow-through.

The thematic insights from stakeholder interviews further highlight the community's affective connection to the building. Participants consistently expressed pride in the Gabaldon's historical importance and advocated for its preservation, demonstrating what Lipe (1983) termed "cultural salience." However, their responses also exposed the practical limitations—budget constraints, lack of training, and competing demands for space and modernization. This duality illustrates the need for context-sensitive conservation approaches that consider both the intangible cultural value and operational realities of school buildings (Feilden & Jokilehto, 1998; DILG, 2019).

The physical deficiencies noted—termite infestation, rusting roof sheets, and moisture damage—underscore the urgency of proactive conservation planning. Left unaddressed, these issues could compromise the building's structural safety and accelerate material deterioration. This reinforces the literature's emphasis on regular condition assessments and preventive conservation as essential to sustainable heritage management (Australia ICOMOS, 2021; Alcazaren, 2015). The proposed Conservation Management Plan (CMP) thus serves not only as a technical response to these issues but as a strategic tool for institutionalizing preservation within the daily operations of the school.

Moreover, the study affirms the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement in conservation. The collaborative consultation process used here aligns with the participatory ideals of the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994), which advocates for localized understandings of heritage and community-defined standards of authenticity. In this case, the community's emphasis on maintaining the building's educational function—while preserving its original features—reflects a dynamic and functional conception of authenticity, as supported by Feilden and Jokilehto (1998).

Lastly, the study exposes a research and policy gap. Although national frameworks and inventories of Gabaldon buildings exist, micro-level assessments such as this are rare. Without localized studies, policy recommendations risk being too generic to be actionable. This study contributes to filling that void by providing empirical data and a replicable methodology for assessing Gabaldon schoolhouses at the community level (Ancho & San Juan, 2021).

In sum, the findings illustrate the complex but navigable landscape of heritage conservation within public education. The Gabaldon schoolhouse at ICES retains high architectural and cultural value but faces structural risks and policy-practice inconsistencies that must be addressed through integrative, community-based conservation planning.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study documented and analyzed the historical, architectural, and physical conditions of the Gabaldon schoolhouse at Iloilo Central Elementary School, offering a comprehensive basis for a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) grounded in heritage legislation and conservation theory. The research affirmed that the structure, built in 1915 under Act No. 1801, remains a significant representation of early 20th-century American colonial architecture in the Philippines. Despite retaining many of its original design features—such as wide eaves, capiz-shell windows, and elevated wooden floors—the building is facing increasing threats from material degradation, ill-informed modifications, and insufficient institutional capacity for heritage-sensitive maintenance.

The findings reveal a recurring tension between the building's continued educational use and the neglect of formal conservation protocols. While community stakeholders strongly value the Gabaldon schoolhouse for its cultural and historical significance, they are constrained by limited funding, technical expertise, and competing infrastructural needs. These factors contribute to patchwork repairs and irreversible alterations that compromise the architectural authenticity and structural integrity of the building. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that with proper assessment, community engagement, and strategic planning, heritage conservation can be successfully integrated into the ongoing use of educational infrastructure.

The research contributes to the field by offering a localized, participatory model for heritage assessment, aligned with national laws such as Republic Act 11194 and international charters such as the Burra Charter and the Nara Document on Authenticity. It also highlights the importance of micro-level analysis to complement national heritage inventories, ensuring that conservation responses are tailored to the needs and realities of individual school communities. As such, the study not only advances scholarly understanding but also provides practical guidance for institutional heritage stewardship in the Philippine education system.

In light of the findings, this study recommends the immediate implementation of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) specific to the ICES Gabaldon schoolhouse. The CMP should include a phased restoration program that prioritizes urgent repairs—such as termite control, roof sheet replacement, and drainage improvement—using heritage-appropriate materials and methods. This should be followed by long-term interventions that promote structural stabilization, aesthetic restoration, and adaptive reuse strategies that respect the building's historical integrity.

Second, it is strongly recommended that the Department of Education and the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Iloilo City establish a collaborative technical working group dedicated to heritage schoolhouses. This body should include representatives from DepEd, the LGU engineering and planning offices, cultural agencies, and conservation professionals. Its purpose would be to oversee implementation, offer technical guidance, and monitor compliance with RA 11194 conservation guidelines.

Third, there is a need to build the capacity of school administrators, maintenance personnel, and local officials through training workshops on heritage conservation, repair protocols, and adaptive maintenance practices. These capacity-building efforts can be supported through partnerships with academic institutions and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA).

Fourth, the integration of heritage education into the school curriculum is also encouraged to instill among learners an appreciation for built heritage. By making students active participants in the care of their school's historic infrastructure, schools can cultivate a culture of conservation from within.

Lastly, this study recommends further research to document and assess the remaining Gabaldon schoolhouses across Iloilo and the broader Western Visayas region. Comparative studies can help identify recurring patterns, best practices, and policy gaps, thereby contributing to a more coherent and sustainable national strategy for Gabaldon conservation.

These recommendations, if pursued systematically and collaboratively, can ensure that Gabaldon schoolhouses are preserved not just as relics of the past, but as living monuments that continue to shape the educational and cultural landscapes of Filipino communities.

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