

"One should...be able to **SEE**
THAT THINGS ARE HOPELESS and
yet be determined to **MAKE**
THEM OTHERWISE." —F. Scott Fitzgerald,
Esquire, February 1936

Esquire

MAN AT HIS BEST
July 2017

PHILIPPINES

**ROBBIE
ANTONIO'S**
Revolution

Violent Thoughts
from
**CARLO GABUCO,
LAKAN UMALI,
G.M. ENRIQUEZ,
and MIRO CAPILI**

+
The Ascendancy of
**KIT
HARINGTON**

+
Wisdom from
**WASHINGTON
SYCIP**

+
**XYZA CRUZ
BACANI**
Bears Witness





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BOBBY The STEVENSON

of
Robbie Antonio



He sits on UNAIDS gala committees with the likes of Behati Prinsloo and Cindy Sherman; he makes Top 100 lists for art collecting with Miuccia Prada and Francois Pinault; he counts the Trump family as close friends and business partners. Now he's making prefabricated houses with some of the world's best architects. Who is Robbie Antonio, and what is his revolution all about?

by **Audrey N. CARPIO**

THERE'S A MONTAGE IN HBO'S *SILICON VALLEY* where startup founders pitch their product at a TechCrunch Disrupt conference. They each earnestly and nerdily claim that their app is going to revolutionize the world and/or make it a better place, using the rhetoric of technological determinism to capture the deep pockets of venture capitalists who hope to fund the next Uber or Airbnb. The Philippines, in actuality, has its very own contender in the quest for unicorn status—that is, a company with a valuation of \$1 billion—and it is one with roots in property development. “The revolution has begun!” declares Robbie Antonio, future-unicorn founder, sounding not unlike the Elon Musks of the world. Of course, he's referring to Revolution Precrafted, the

startup that's got the VC world abuzz.

Earlier this year, startup accelerator 500 Startups (incidentally founded by Dave McClure, one of the supposed inspirations behind the “incubator owner” Erlich Bachman character in *Silicon Valley*), poured money into Revolution, bringing the company's valuation to \$256 million. 500 Startups, which has been zeroing in on Southeast Asia as the next area of explosive growth, has successfully backed Grab, the Singapore-based ride-sharing app now valued at \$3 billion. “We're very happy. One of the world's more prolific seed venture capital companies funded us. They fought their way to come in, because we were funded already for our seed round,” says Robbie, who often speaks enthusiastically, if not forcefully,

that one can't help but yield to his vision. “The reasons are twofold—one, it's extremely, and I hate to use such a cliché word, disruptive, and two, it has a proven business model. I've been doing real estate for over a dozen years.”

Robbie has been the managing director of Century Properties, the real estate development firm established in 1986 by his father Jose E.B. Antonio, and is responsible for the company's direction toward branded collaborations like the Milano Residences by Versace, Acqua Livingstone by Missoni Home, Azure by Paris Hilton, Forbes Media Tower, Armani for Century Spire, and their newest luxury residences, the Trump Tower. At the Design Miami fair last December 2015, Robbie launched his own company,

Revolution Precrafted, showing a dining pavilion designed by Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumaker, and a mobile gallery by Gluckman Tang (Hadid passed away in 2016, making the “Volu” pavilion one of her last projects; Robbie donated it to the Cannes amfAR auction where it was sold for €1.3 million). He introduced the concept of branding to prefabricated homes, an industry not normally associated with aspirational living, and created something that has been done in retail—think Rodarte for Target, Balmain for H&M—but never before in homes and architecture.

Prefab homes have been around since the automotive boom, borrowing the idea of assembly-line production where housing parts were mass-produced in a factory. Starting in 1908, the earliest kit homes were sold by mail on the Sears catalog, and throughout the decades, manufactured homes became popular low-cost housing options. In post-war France, pioneering French architect Jean Prouvé designed “dismountable houses” to address the housing shortage. Though now hailed as innovative modernist masterpieces, they failed to achieve commercial viability during his time. In the 2000s, architects started taking interest in modern prefab structures that tapped into a higher-end market, and the “great 21st-century prefab revival” was arguably kickstarted when Dwell magazine issued a challenge to create stylish yet affordable prefabs that can be mass-produced. On the market today are architect-designed prefabs, slick little Muji Huts, and a \$1,100 Ikea flatpack shelter, as well as container vans, modular units, and artisan mobile homes that you can unmount and relocate, and the prevalence of these compact habitats has also fueled the tiny home movement.

So what do you get when you marry the convenience of prefab with the design power of Pritzker Prize-winning architects? A concept quite confounding, yet brilliant in its audacity. Robbie, through years of fraternizing with Hollywood celebrities, star athletes, Forbes-listers, movers-and-shakers of the art and design world, and yes, world leaders and their kin, has developed a virtual Rolodex of potential partners for his business plans. It's not an overstatement to say that Robbie is one of the most connected young Filipinos in the country today. Franco Varona, Revolution's chief operating officer, breaks down the founder's strange attraction: “He has this magnetic personality—once you meet Robbie, you're not likely to forget him, and combined with his endless desire to close a deal, makes it very hard for anyone to say no to him.” This I can attest to.

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How Revolution Precrafted works, in a nutshell: You go online to Revolution's website, choose a designer house, then click buy. Somewhere in a factory in India, Korea, Italy, or the Philippines, the parts are fabricated, usually with robotics, then shipped to you and assembled onsite, wherever you are in the world. Your very own Marmol Radziner, or if you want to go Filipino, Ed Calma abode without the hassle of hiring a whole team of contractors, manufacturers, builders, etc., and of course the astronomical fees of commissioning a famous architect. Though the individual market is catered to, Revolution is primarily geared toward developers who can deal with building codes and mount many structures at once, whether for hotel and resorts, condos and residential areas, or commercial and art centers. In a couple of years, a “Revolution community” will pop up in Batulao, Batangas, where you can enjoy the cool mountain air in your prefabricated weekend home, or see art in a Jean Nouvel museum without having to go to the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

This democratization is at the core of Revolution's “disruptive” philosophy. As a client who commissioned the legendary Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas to design his own house—a black concrete private museum/residence in Forbes Park so stealth that only a select few have been inside—Robbie would know all about the tedious processes and prohibitive costs involved in building one's dream house. In the now infamous Vanity Fair article from 2013, Robbie had expressed that he wanted to work with five Pritzker winners by the time he turns 45. Now only 40, he beat his own deadline in

typical Robbie zealotry, and the new projects aren't just for personal enjoyment, like those pavilions he started acquiring.

If it's not obvious by now, Robbie is an obsessive collector of art, who has commissioned portraits from the likes of Julian Schnabel, Damian Hirst, and David LaChapelle. Artnet recognized him as one of the top 100 collectors in the world in 2016, putting him alongside Leonardo DiCaprio, Bernard Arnault, Paul Allen and other super rich people. It was in thinking about these pavilions, collectible by only a tiny fraction of people who are art lovers, that led to Robbie's eureka moment of developing branded homes for the middle market. “Honestly, in business, passion is not even enough. OBSESSION is key,” he says, and it's this obsession—almost like a possession—that drives him to take his company to a whole different level.

“I've worked with 13 Pritzker Prize architects, possibly more than any human being in the world,” he says. “I love doing this! It's not just about the valuation, it's creating something so inherently different. We have intellectual property over all these names, you can get them at a ridiculously high price and wait a number of years, or get it from us in three months at a much cheaper price.”

How much cheaper? A few of the homes Revolution recently released are priced for the local market, starting at P3.5 million. Robbie has been working with, or shall we say convincing, a renowned Filipino architect and getting him to do one for P1.5 million. It's a challenge on both their parts, creating something couture at Zara prices, while still keeping to the DNA of the architects/designers, who are used to blowing through sky-high budgets.

The first time I interviewed Robbie, the company hadn't announced the news about its latest valuation yet, but his unicorn mission was already well known. According to Varona, unlocking unicorn level is Robbie's singular focus, and all roads lead to that end goal. You can imagine what it must be like to work with him. In the office, there is an internal rule requiring people to answer emails and texts within 10 minutes of receipt, and accomplish tasks within 24 hours, regardless of how complex the task may be. The work culture in the Philippines usually allows for a little to a lot of leeway when it comes to responsiveness, but because Revolution's employees push themselves, the result is that everyone, internally and externally, gets pushed to complete tasks much faster than a typical Filipino company. “Everyone working with Robbie must have an incredible resistance to stress, and used to not having sleep,” Varona says, adding, “He has given us all three years to make it a \$2 billion company.”





When I meet with Robbie again, they had moved to a much larger, still all black, office at the top floor of the Pacific Star Building, and with it, more wall space to display their ever increasing portfolio of branded homes, as well as the press coverage that he welcomes. Two bottles of Trump-branded sparkling wine adorn an otherwise empty black side table, and a quick Google search tells me that they're produced in the state of Virginia, on the same valley where American president Thomas Jefferson tended his own vineyard. Robbie had just come back from New York, where he signed up a Victoria's Secret supermodel to be part of the roster. She's not an interior designer, but she partnered up with someone who is, and Robbie took a look at their portfolio and says he was convinced. If we're talking about the democratization of design, surely that's when a model can be given the same billing as Marcel Wanders, Philip Johnson, and the de Portzamparc, who all have designed structures for Revolution. One of Revolution's more interesting collaborations is with style icon plus Daphne Guinness, an heiress who works in fashion, music, film and philanthropy—the ultimate intersection of celebrity and art that, to Robbie, makes for one hell of a sexy branded home.

Revolution's goal for swift global domination is made possible by taking the business model of a real estate company and turning it on its head: "We're the complete antithesis of the traditional real estate company. We cater to the world. We don't have to be site-specific, we don't have to buy land, take out construction loans, or have inventory." Certainly, no one is handing out flyers on the street. Being asset-light has enabled the company's rapid growth, and rapid growth attracts VCs like flies to honey. "I've been through at least three cycles in my life. Boom and bust. It's so easy to have an economy taken from you, and I learned

from that. If an economy doesn't do well, I can go to one that is doing better. I can maneuver."

Aside from offering homes via an e-commerce platform, Revolution is on the same league as other tech startups because of what the company will eventually will be—a platform for a smart home. Robbie often says they are the "Ikea of homes," for its plug-'n-play simplicity, or the "Tesla of homes," because Tesla is a technology platform on wheels more than it is a car. "Revolution will be a technology platform on foundations," says Varona. More than just providing four walls and a roof over your head, the precrafted home can be as intelligent as you choose it to be. A house that behaves like Siri or appears sentient certainly gives new meaning to the phrase, "if these walls could talk."

The next day, we go see one of the model homes in person, the "Simple" by Jean Nouvel, which was on display at the Tuileries Garden in Paris before it was transported to a construction site in Taguig. As the name implies, it's a pretty straightforward structure, almost shed-like with a corrugated roof, aluminum exteriors, and Japanese-inspired mobile wooden partitions that allow the user to define the spaces inside. At 40 sq. meters, it's a cozy one-bedroom, but modular and expandable to up to four bedrooms. Nouvel has said of the house: "What we propose here is the most immediate way to inhabit a space, within a short timeframe, in places that are not designed for residential use today and that become so, spontaneously." Simple is a high-

end, thoughtfully planned emergency shelter that Ja Rule would have been wise to consider for the Fyre Festival.

Speaking of disasters, Robbie is in the perfect position to roll out relief shelters should catastrophes strike, and this is something he pledges to do as part of the company's CSR, having already supported Shigeru Ban with his "Paper Log" homes in Cebu. With temporary housing being subject to intense politicking and controversy—the FEMA trailers for Hurricane Katrina and the still-unfinished housing projects for Typhoon Haiyan come to mind—Revolution could very well provide sustainable housing solutions that need not be merely temporary; structures that can be erected in a few days, configured to suit different needs and unforeseen situations, and that also—why the hell not—look good. Shelters of all kinds have been imagined in response to the displacement of humans, but Revolution is perhaps the only Filipino company with the capabilities for mass-producing them, and more importantly, delivering them within a critical time frame.

"I'm known to be very impatient. I'm using my weakness as a skill set here, hopefully as an advantage, or an integral part of the business plan." Basically, the need for instant gratification drives everything he does. "Big time, all the time," Robbie grins. "Is that bad?"

GROOMING JOAN TEOTICO FOR NARS COSMETICS
HAIR JAYJAY GALLEGO FOR CREATIONS BY LOURD RAMOS SALON AND BRIX BATALLA

