

# Envisioning a New Manila

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## **Abstract**

This essay argues the following thesis: that the people of Metropolitan Manila can and must work together to envision and create a new kind of city for themselves—a city that uses public transportation and public space to give all of its citizens a high quality of living.

There are four parts to this essay. The first section of the essay entitled “One of the Lucky Ones” is a personal account of the author’s experiences with urban problems in the city.

The second section of the essay entitled “From Irony to Prophecy?” can be divided into three parts. This section has three parts. The first part introduces the city of Metro Manila, stating its importance to the Philippine Archipelago, its brief history, and a summary of its urban problems which include traffic, pollution, sanitation, overcrowding, and others. After introducing Manila, the second part of the section poses the essay’s main question: what are some solutions to creating a better Metro Manila? The third part of the section addresses guidelines for what kind of solutions will be discussed in the rest of the essay. Both the technical and human aspects of solutions will be presented. Also, solutions that directly contribute to social justice and well-being will be presented. These are solutions are the improvement of public transportation and public space.

The third section entitled “Envisioning a new Manila” presents various technical and social solutions for creating a more people-friendly Manila. This section has four parts. The first part argues that city renewal must begin with a new visioning done by Manila’s citizens. Visioning can be catalyzed by critical mass actions that present new ways of seeing the city. The second part presents various ways of improving public transport in Metro Manila—including reducing automobile use and implementing a Bus Rapid Transit system. The third part presents various ways of reinventing public space in the city—by improving shopping malls, converting parking lots to green lots, and privatizing the maintenance of publicly owned space. The fourth part presents pedestrianization as a way of improving both public transport and public space. Improving the walkability of Metro Manila would entail building and clearing sidewalks, crosswalks, and designating car-free zones.

The concluding section summarizes the previous sections and presents the author’s personal reflection on how living in Manila has fulfilled her human desire to envision.

## One of the lucky ones

My daily commute to work: my mother is driving me to the Metro Rail station. Weaving in and out of jeeps, buses, motorcycles and pedestrians, she maneuvers our family's car down the Manila thoroughfare like a tank through a battlefield.

We approach the station entrance. A seven-foot-high chain link fence barricades it from the road, bearing a sign that reads: "Pedestrians keep off the street. Sidewalk entrance to the right"—an ill attempt by the local government to put walkers in place. There is no where else to stop the car, so I jump out and hit the pavement running. The menacing sounds of honking cars and revving engines keep me moving towards the sidewalk twenty meters away. I join other pedestrians and we form a moving mass large enough to keep passing motor vehicles at bay.

One by one we enter the sidewalk, which so narrow that it can barely accommodate two people walking side-by-side. The little space is shared by karaoke bars, street vendors, parked motorbikes, mud puddles, and piles of rotting garbage. People shout, push, and sweat. The air smells of exhaust.

There are thicker crowds at the train station. I already have a ticket, so I skip past the long lines at the booth head for the platform. As the train pulls up, everyone swarms towards the opening doors like flies, such that disembarking passengers must force their way out. I say a prayer of thanks that these people don't have their own cars.

On the crowded train, I stare out the window at the city rolling by. A gray haze hangs over a skyline of cold concrete towers. The only splashes of color are provided by glowing billboards that smile and tell me to buy cellular phones, wear designer clothing, and eat fast food. I look around at the listless faces of the other people on the train. It feels like I have mistakenly boarded a moving tax collection office.

I alight at the central business district and start off for my office. While walking I cross nine intersections, only two of which have pedestrian cross walks. I pass along a street lined with some trees (a rare oasis) and pause briefly to cool off, but the smell of nearby drainage is too much to bear. Finally I arrive at my desk located at the second floor of a government office building. I am dirty, tired, and exasperated--and it is only 9 a.m.

In this city, I am one of the lucky ones.

## **From irony to prophecy?**

I am one of around 13 million Filipinos<sup>i</sup> who make their lives in Metropolitan Manila, one of the twenty most populous cities in the world and the capital of the Philippine archipelago.<sup>ii</sup> Actually an agglomeration of 12 cities and five municipalities, Metro Manila is what some scholars of urban studies have classified as a “primate city”, or a city whose population and economic power dwarf that of any other city in the country.<sup>iii</sup> Metro Manila is by far and without question the political, economic, and cultural axis of the Philippines.

Metro Manila’s haphazard infrastructure, governance, and identity can be explained by her similarly haphazard history. Having passed from the hands of one colonial regime to another—including the Spanish, the Japanese, the Americans—Manila has been put together and torn apart more times than she cares to remember.<sup>iv</sup> And the scars have never healed. Today, Metro Manila is a third world urban mess facing major problems of poverty, air and water pollution, noise pollution, traffic, unmanageable waste, poor sanitation, inadequate housing and fragmented infrastructure. The city is a dirty, chaotic, inhumane mess.

Already, the people of Metro Manila are suffering. Traffic costs citizens countless hours of lost time, not to mention wasted energy and frustration. Road accidents kill and injure thousands of people every year, making our streets among the most dangerous in Asia.<sup>v</sup> Air pollution has raised the average Manila resident’s chances of getting lung cancer by 16 percent.<sup>vi</sup> Nearly 30 percent of all crimes in the Philippines are committed in Metro Manila, especially robbery and rape.<sup>vii</sup> Living in Metro Manila can be threatening to one’s physical, psycho-social, and spiritual well-being.

Yet perhaps an even greater threat is the helplessness one feels in such an unkind environment. To many Filipinos, the woes of Metro Manila are vivid reflections of the failures of the Philippines. We see our urban problems are both symptoms and symbols of deeper social illnesses--ignorance, corruption, injustice, lack of leadership, and mediocrity--that have continued to hinder our country’s development for years. When we feel overwhelmed by the disorder and filth surrounding us, we feel powerless change anything for the better. The deterioration of Manila reinforces our loss of pride and self-respect as a people.

If anything must be truly feared, it is the vicious cycle of frustration and resignation that will keep people from even attempting to make things better. The problem is not that our troubles are too big to solve, but that we tend to believe they are. Actually, there are many opportunities for creating a better city for ourselves and future generations! Ready solutions are within our reach if we only pursue them. The question is, will the people of Manila choose to take flight or fight? The answer may determine the future of the city and maybe even the country.

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The “City Beautiful” movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a school of urban planning and design that advocated the beautification of cities in order to inspire citizens towards moral and civic virtue. The main proponent of this movement was an American urban planner and designer named Daniel Burnham, who helped plan the cities of Chicago, San Francisco, Washington D.C., and the colonial capital of Manila.<sup>viii</sup> In 1904, Burnham envisioned a Manila as both a tropical garden city and a waterfront city—a blend of Eastern ecology with stately American infrastructure and Spanish colonial architecture. Today, one can still catch glimpses of Burnham’s original vision beneath the city’s modern layers. Ruins of parks, boulevards, and period buildings seem to tell us stories of what might have been, or perhaps of what is still possible.<sup>ix</sup> Will Burnham’s original “City Beautiful” plan for Metro Manila remain an irony? Or can we seek ways to turn it into a prophecy?

As many solutions as there are available, it is important to set guidelines for which solutions will be dealt with in this essay. It is easy to come up with technical solutions to urban problems; yet more difficult and more crucial is determining how to change people’s behavior and values so that they work together for change. This essay will therefore address solutions on two levels: how to transform systems, and how to facilitate transformation and cooperation among people. By “people”, this essay refers to the three dimensions of Manila’s social capital—specifically, the government, private businesses, and civil society.

This essay will also deal with solutions that *directly* contribute to a higher quality of life for everyone in Manila, regardless of social status, gender, or age. Solutions that merely contribute to economic prosperity or that only benefit a few will not be tackled. Public goods that contribute directly to a higher quality of life for all are public transportation and public space.

## Envisioning a new city

The first step in renewing a city is to decide first what kind of city its citizens want. One reason why there is little public clamor for urban renewal is that most people cannot even imagine what a better city would be like. There must be a widespread movement among citizens to envision a new Manila for themselves and for future generations.

Citizens must ask themselves: do they want to live in a city where the needs of the elite few are placed above the greater good? Do they want to live in a city where beauty, ecological sustainability, and safety are often brutalized by a ruthless pursuit of economic efficiency? If not, then the new Manila must be a city for where all people, regardless of social class, age, gender, or religion, can live in freedom, happiness, and security. A city based on these values must have high quality public transportation and public space—two public goods that directly contribute to social justice and well-being.<sup>x</sup>

At the forefront of the movement for visioning must be Metro Manila's civil society. Communities must aggressively demand a more humane living environment from their government and the private sector. Civil society must therefore educate the public about their rights to public transportation and public space.

One very effective way of educating the public would be to effect radical changes in the city's routine every now and then. People must be given the opportunity to see new possibilities in their city. For example, in the year 2000 the city of Bogotá, Colombia closed off its main highway to vehicles in what was the biggest "Car-Free" event ever. The citizens of Bogotá enjoyed the event so much that they voted to have it annually. Following suit, Manila could also have its own car-free day by restricting the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue or EDSA from private vehicles. Such an event would not only introduce people to the possibility of a car-less city, but it would also be a symbolic reclaiming of civic space and memory, since the EDSA was also the site of the famous People Power Revolution of 1986.

Critical mass actions can also impact on public consciousness. One Manila-based organization called the *Firefly Brigade*, which advocates the use of the bicycle as sustainable transport, has been organizing mass bicycle rides in Manila for the past six years. Participation in the annual rides has risen from a mere 600 cyclists in 1998, to 3,000 participants in 2004.

This shows that more and more people are beginning to take notice of progressive visions such as the Firefly Brigade's.

And what would Manila look like without billboards? It would surely be an amazing sight if billboards were replaced for one week with huge reproductions of children's art or poetry. There are various ways for the government, civil society, and private sector to cooperate for this. To this author's knowledge, no such project has even been undertaken anywhere in the world. Manila could be the first.

## **Moving People**

Nothing affects the quality of an urban environment more than transportation. Cities with car-based transport systems experience problems of urban sprawl, air pollution, noise pollution, misused land, traffic, and individual immobility. Less than 20 percent of Metro Manila residents own cars, and yet so much public time and money goes into building more roads and managing traffic. Fortunately, Metro Manila has a high population density and the majority of its citizens do not drive personal cars. There are already forms of public transportation available, but they have to be improved for greater accessibility, affordability, and attractiveness to all city dwellers.

By all means, there should be moves to reduce automobile use—these include higher taxation on private automobiles, licensing, and parking. An alternative for the car should then be provided. Although the city currently has three rail transit lines, the high costs of construction and operation prevent more systems from being easily set up. An alternative is the implementation of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, which was developed and successfully used in various Latin American cities. The BRT system runs like a rail transit system, except that it utilizes buses and highways instead of trains and railways. Major highways are turned into BRT-only lanes, while ticketing stations with turnstiles are set up at strategic points. The BRT system is a collaborative effort between both the public and private sectors, with government handling the building of BRT infrastructure and the private sector managing operations.

The BRT system is especially promising for Metro Manila for several reasons. First, it costs just one-fourth the price of a rail transit system, but is just as effective. Second, it does not displace former private bus operators, but rather, incorporates them into the system.

Thirdly, a Manila BRT system could partner with the Department of Energy to use Clean Natural Gas (CNG) instead of gasoline. A natural gas powered Bus Rapid Transit system is the most feasible solution to the lack of quality public transportation in Metro Manila -- economically, politically and ecologically.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Reinventing public space**

Public space is a hallmark of a democratic city. In public spaces, people are free to be human beings and to interact with one another as equals. Public spaces are the wombs of communities. They are where people go to meet and greet their neighbors, to exchange ideas and conversations, and to develop their sense of belonging in a greater society.<sup>xii</sup>

In Manila, most open spaces in the city have either been turned into parking lots or buildings, while the few remaining public parks and plazas are poorly maintained. This has supported the rise of shopping malls as semi-public space. Shopping malls are where everyone goes to stroll, shop, dine, meet with friends or family, even attend Catholic mass. They are readily accessible from anywhere in the city, and are open to anyone who is properly dressed.

Shopping malls, however, are not ideal as public spaces. Because they are privately owned and operated, there are limitations to who can use them and for what purposes. Malls are not socially-inclusive because they usually only cater to people of similar income levels. Also, mall management can control the kinds of activities that take place on their property. This is why shopping malls are hardly appropriate venues for civic demonstrations or public debates, for example. Furthermore, most shopping malls are not designed to blend easily into the urban environment. They are often isolated boxes of commercialism without cultural, historical or aesthetic relations to their surroundings.

Shopping malls may not be ideal public spaces, but they are nonetheless present and more will be built. One option for creating more public space in the city is therefore to maximize these shopping centers, already abundant and self-sufficient. This can be done by regulating the design of new shopping malls and redesigning old malls to be more open and inviting to the general public. More malls should be developed as outdoor commercial areas. Indoor malls should be designed to seem visually and psychologically connected with the outdoor

surroundings, particularly the street.<sup>xiii</sup> Incorporating the use of greenery and natural lighting can give the building an open atmosphere while also saving on energy.

Private-public spaces must be able to draw a diverse mix of people in order to become worthy alternatives to the town plaza. Business establishments should cater to people of various tastes and income levels. Wide open areas with benches and tables must also be provided so that even those who do not want to spend money can still enjoy the space. Areas for community activities like concerts, theater presentations, and meetings should be provided.

Old parking lots can be converted into green lots. Parking places, especially in business districts, are spacious, plentiful, and dispersed at various locations throughout the CBD. Many are already planted with tall, wide-canopy trees in order to give shade to parked cars. The same consideration should be given to people! If public transport were attractive and accessible enough so that even car-owners would use it, there would be less need for parking facilities. Parking lots can be purchased by the government and converted into green parks that are maintained by communities or by commercial establishments who set up shop in the park. Few metropolitan cities choose parking lots to occupy their valuable downtown or CBD space. Parks or squares, on the contrary, contribute highly to an area's value. Business deals are not made in parking lots but in classy parks, during lunch or at sunset.

Still, authentic public spaces are needed to provide venues for civic demonstrations, public debates, and other democratic activities, aside from leisure activities. Since the government does not have the capacity to maintain public parks, one solution might be to privatize the maintenance of public spaces. For example, a private corporation can be awarded credit on real estate taxes in exchange for maintaining a public park, garden, or market in its locality.

## **Putting feet first**

Walking is the most basic form of human transportation, available to anyone with a working pair of legs and feet. To walk is to actively engage with the people and things in one's environment. People think, talk, hold hands, and see the world while walking. Cities for people must also be cities for feet.

Yet in Metro Manila, people who prefer to walk are perceived as a crazy. In a way, they are. Manila sidewalks are so emaciated and obstructed that they can hardly called spaces, but

rather, marginalized edges of roads.<sup>xiv</sup> Most motorists treat pedestrians as mere obstacles to be maneuvered around, if not run over. Pedestrians' rights are almost always considered inferior to the conveniences of motorists.

This must change. Of course, more and better sidewalks have to be built for the vast majority of Metro Manila residents who don't have cars. This will take strong political will from the government, since widening and building sidewalks will mean shifting priority from wealthy car owners to ordinary people.

In the meantime, citizens themselves more actively reclaim their walking space. Illegally parked cars are among the most frequent and most insulting sidewalk obstructions. Citizens groups can take charge of this situation by doing a sidewalk clearing campaigns. Volunteers will go around taking pictures of illegally parked cars on sidewalks. Then they will place big, colorful stickers on the car window that read "Don't park on sidewalks! Sidewalks are for walking!" These stickers can be difficult to remove and therefore will deter motorists from usurping pedestrian space. At the same time, the stickers help to educate people about pedestrians' rights. Ideally, these volunteer groups should be deputized by the local government to carry out their campaign.

Pedestrians are also in need of more and better crosswalks. Many crosswalks are not taken seriously by both drivers and pedestrians. Timers and stoplights can be installed above pedestrian crossings to inform motorists and pedestrians of exactly how long they have to wait for one another to cross. If they know how long to wait, they will probably be more willing to give one another the right of way. Less expensive are so called "sleeping officers": purposefully placed bumps in the road to slow down cars.

Densely populated commercial, residential, school, and leisure districts should be closed to automobiles to create people-friendly spaces free of pollution, noise, and traffic. Support for pedestrianization must especially come from the communities, who would be in the best position to police, protect, and even maintain their walking zones. Business establishments have to be convinced that pedestrianization will actually bring more customers to their area. It shouldn't be hard to explain to family households and school principals that pedestrianization will improve safety in their community. Walking zones can also serve as venues for community events like concerts, festivals, parades, and more.

## The Need to Want

It is possible to envision a new kind of Manila if government, businesses, and civil society abandon their failing mindsets and take active responsibility for transforming the city. If people value social justice, happiness, and environmental sustainability, then the quality of public transportation and public space in Manila must be improved. Public transport in Metro Manila can be upgraded by regulating automobile use and implementing a Bus Rail Transit system. Public space can be made more accessible by improving shopping malls as public space, by converting parking lots into green parks, and by privatizing the maintenance of public parks and plazas. People-friendly walking zones are two-fold improvements over both public transport and public space. All these solutions are possible once people realize that they are not victims of the city, but take active part in shaping it.

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When I reflect on the obstacles I face in my daily life, I realize that there is not much I can claim to want. I already have almost everything I need to live a good life: a home, a family, food, water, medicine. I have had a good education and many opportunities for employment. I am free to express myself and my beliefs without fear of persecution or violence. In fact, my life seems to be the kind that the United Nations wants for everyone.

Yet the troubles of living in a third world city are very present and real for me. I feel these troubles keenly everyday when I go out into the city, walk the streets, breathe the air. Perhaps this just demonstrates that there are some human needs—such as justice, peace, and beauty—that are not easily defined or quantified. A person may have all the material necessities, yet continue to pursue invisibles that are nonetheless essential.

Yet there is perhaps one human essential that living in Manila has helped me to fulfill—and that is the desire to envision and imagine. Living in Manila challenges me to see beyond what is, and instead search for what is possible. This city may be dirty and chaotic, but at the root of my frustration is an awareness that things *can* be better. I am a lucky one, but not because this city gives me what I need. I am a lucky one because this city gives me so much to want. And I'm going to have some fun chasing after it.

## Notes

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