Rethinking Southeast Asian Cities: The Case of Manila

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Urbanization and urban growth are arguably the most significant demographic global trends of the past century. Over the last thirty years the Southeast Asian region has witnessed exponential urban growth rates. By the year 2010 it is predicted that some 270 million people in the region will be urban residents. There are now three megacities with populations of over ten million people—namely, Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila—and a further ten cities with one million or more people, all of which have annual growth rates of between two and four percent. The most important ‘world city’ in the region is Singapore, with Kuala Lumpur an interesting example of a regional city aggressively seeking to compete with Singapore for a stake in global significance. The rapid economic growth of the past two decades in Southeast Asia, however, is now under threat unless further innovations occur in urban governance and ecological sustainability.

Here I step back from the immediately pressing issues of technological innovation, economic reform, population control, urban governance

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1 A Public Lecture given as part of the Thesis Eleven-Budhi Series on February 6, 2003, Ateneo de Manila University. Delivered largely as an extemporary piece, this publication represents a minimally edited transcript to preserve the immediacy of the delivery. I apologize for the many infelicities of expression and argument that remain on the page. I would like to take this opportunity to record my thanks to my colleagues at Thesis Eleven and conversation partners at Budhi, especially to Luis David. Thank you too to the many friends in Manila whose local insider knowledge is generously shared to this intermittent visitor and interloper. In particular, I would like to mention here: Carlos Celldran, Andrew Dingwall, John Giordano, Antonette Palma-Angeles, Ruth Pearce, Raul Pertierra, Emma Porio, Felice Noelle Rodriguez, Fernando “Butch” Zialcita.
and poverty alleviation to invite us all to rethink the terms on which we are asked to think about our cities, especially as given to us by social scientists and urban historians from the metropolitan centers of the Northern Hemisphere. In particular, I wish to question the validity and utility of the term “Southeast Asia,” especially in relation to Manila. The myth of the Southeast Asian city is an invention of the imaginations of European and North American social scientists in the post WWII era of Cold War geopolitics. Its urban source and inspiration is Jakarta; as such the theory is very good for understanding Jakarta but therefore unable to shed light on the differing cultural trajectories of Bangkok and Manila.

I then survey alternative approaches to understanding Manila in broad comparative and historical contexts, and point to the respective strengths and pitfalls in competing narratives of explanation—namely, ecology, civilization, globalization, modernization, and post-colonialism theories. Instead I tentatively propose an alternative theory that places the social imaginary of the instituting cultures of Manila as central to an understanding the peculiar nature of this city, a city like no other in the region, despite analogous structural problems to Bangkok and Jakarta.

I conclude by offering some vignettes of the potential sources of cultural creativity that are immanent to Manila urbanism that offer mustard seeds of hope for urban innovations (cultural, economic, political and technological) for the solving of the apparently intractable problems associated with a mega-city of dynamic and unsustainable growth.

It was Marx (paraphrasing Hegel) who said that history repeats, first as tragedy then as farce. Here, we skip the tragedy and go straight to the farce. The farce is that I am an outsider with the temerity to talk about Manila. The choice of the topic when requested some months ago seemed easy. It was chosen as an ecumenical gesture to a local interest. How stupid I was. I am embarrassed to talk about a place where 90 percent of the audience here today in their everyday lives has a working, intimate knowledge of this city that I cannot possibly begin to match.
I now realize that my foolishness can be my gift to you. Here, I wish to play the role of clown. From my bumbling mis-readings of Manila, I hope to give you something to laugh about and to see how easy it is for outsiders to misunderstand and misrecognise what you know as second nature is your world. These misinterpretations can be productive, however, if they cause you to reflect critically about the presumed understandings that you have of your own home and place. So I choose the comic mode not in terms of wanting to tell one joke after another but because above all comedy is serious—if and when it provokes serious, critical self-reflection. Comedy minds the gap between what we want in life and what we achieve. It helps us laugh at our follies. It helps us to appreciate, without any sense of nihilism, that we are mere mortals. It helps us to re-appreciate that the dreams are worth dreaming, that we are worth treasuring. So in the first place, comedy is serious.

The second reason I've chosen the comic mode is that it incorporates and expresses tragedy. For me, Manila has suffered more than its fair share of tragedy. As so graphically identified and portrayed in James Hamilton-Paterson's superb novel, *The Ghosts of Manila*, the problem is that there are just too many ghosts, too many lost souls that haunt the families and communities of this city: "salvaged" by government and anti-government forces. There are too many people who have disappeared, the subjects of random or systematic violence. And I speak only of the last 30 years. One could go back across a century and think about the various independence wars, the struggles against imperial forces, and the struggles where the city and its inhabitants have been caught in the crossfire of one imperial army warring with another. There is indeed an important task in trying to understand the city of Manila in terms of violence, suffering, and loss. It is not something that I can address here but I would like to put it on the public record. As I have traveled around this city, I have become conscious of the many places of suffering which remain unmarked, unrecorded in the very fabric of the built environment. What is very striking is that this city has not yet chosen to leave an archeological record of the so-called 1945 "liberation" bombing undertaken by the Americans which did so much damage to the basic infrastructure of the city, a devastation which was not addressed in the aftermath of war and from which the city is still trying to recover.

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So there is a function in city analysis that might be called "grief-work." The tragic-comedy tonight, however, is of a more trivial kind and of my own doing rather than about Manila—of my "tragic misunderstandings." I hope they provide some comic relief and in turn some provocation to rethinking Manila and its future as metropolitan city.

Another reason for using the comic mode is that as you know from the movies, comedies are often romances. To be comic is to finish with romantic endings, "happily ever after." Over two decades I have made many visits to Manila, and I am struck by the highly self-critical cultures that exist amongst its intellectual elites, of the nuanced analyses that locals are able to generate about your own culture, and the challenges of your own city. This critical tradition, this lively public culture, is extraordinarily impressive, and is far more developed than many other cultures throughout the world. But I also think Manila is in desperate need (and please remember, I say this as an outsider) of "re-romancing" the city, that self-critique should be grounded in hopeful engagement. And that's what comedy is about—being able to laugh because we are able to hope. (As one of my favorite Australian sporting tautologies has it, "more in hope than in optimism"). So let's move forward more in hope than optimism, a kind of willingness to think hard to continue this grand tradition of self-criticism and imagining of alternatives and reaching out to other possibilities. And that in effect is the task of hermeneutics, of interpretation, that does not sideline the normative, the ethical, but places it at the center of any critical analysis.

Let us endeavor, then, to read some signs about the city of Manila. When I first visited this campus here at Loyola Heights in January 2000, I had the good fortune to be staying at the Faculty Housing, next to the swimming pool. On my first day, I rolled up for a swim and I discovered there were no less than 14 signs around the 20 meter by 5 meter pool. My favorite is rule no. 6.2: "Public expression of intimate affection is prohibited." Actually, I thought I was going for a swim. I must confess, however, the prohibition was most suggestive and therefore quite corrupting. I looked around in hope but my optimism was not rewarded. Maybe Jacques Derrida had a point, one should stick to the text, so I continued to read the signs. By the time I got to the fourteenth, which read, a "limit of one hour only to swim in the pool," I realized my time was up. So in that sense, my approaches to Manila tonight may not get to the point that you really want me to be. My time may be up before I
begin to talk about the "nitty gritty" materiality of Manila. Rather, I wish
to start to think about the ways in which Manila is constructed in a range
of discourses about cities. This then is a kind of deck-clearing exercise.
As Mark Twain put it in his inimitable way, "the researches of many
commentators have already thrown much darkness on the subject and it
is probable that if they continue we shall soon know nothing about it at
all." But I think Manila is too important to be left to locals or to outsiders,
to experts or to populists, alone. Rather, it is in our conversations that
we might discover something about the significance of the city, so that
with Nick Joaquin, we can work for and reclaim again the city as: Manila,
My Manila (Manila: Bookmark, 1999)—a just, fair and beautiful city
for all of us, locals and visitors, young and old, rich and poor.

Manila is at the leading edge of a global movement of urbanism in
the world, a global movement that is historically unprecedented. You
are living in a city that has been classified by demographers as mega—
not just a city of mega-malls but a mega-city—Over 10 million at last
count and growing faster. It's a city with a dynamic population growth
curve with 42% of the population under the age of 16. I also want to
privilege the normative value of urban living: How can Manila be a
creative city? How can Manila face the challenges that it has and be
sustainable and livable? Manila matters and we want it to work. As an
outsider, I call upon the age-old technique of comparison. A good
starting point to talk about what I do know, my city. All people do this.
We discuss like with like and understand the different from the familiar.
As tourists, we consume difference, sometimes we consume difference
in order to destroy it. How many tourists travel the world and eat only at
McDonalds? How many people, when discovering that they don't speak
the same language, presume that the other person is deaf?

Manila and Melbourne

There are other ways of comparing cities, however, that don't reduce
the difference, but rather value it. I migrated to Melbourne by choice.
Many migrants in the world do not have choice but a forcefully pushed
to move, by natural disasters, war and economic need and political
tyranny. In 1990, the World Population Crisis Committee from
Washington, D.C. declared Melbourne as the most liveable city. What
were its criteria? From my unreliable memory, there were ten:
1. food costs—percentage of income spent on food.
2. (and this is where Manila drops out of the race), traffic flow, the estimation of kilometers per hour in rush hour. As rush hour here is 24 hours a day (or should that be “slow hour”?), that makes it very difficult to improve your traffic flow.
3. public health—the number of infant deaths per thousand births.
4. living space—the number of persons per room.
5. public safety—the number of murders, official murders, per 100,000 people.
6. education—the percentage of children in secondary schools.
7. services—the percentage of houses with electricity and water (direct provision, that is).
8. communications—the number of telephones per hundred people (I'm not sure if that was a landline or cellphone survey).
9. ambient noise.
10. air pollution.

From these ten criteria you can see that this isn't a description of Manila, nor even of a glamorous global city like Sydney. When Sydney discovered that it only came ninth in this index, they wrote to the organizers complaining that why wasn't “excitement” listed as one of the criteria of liveability? Can you imagine the interviews: Interviewer: “Does the city make you excited?” Respondent: “Oh yes, I can hardly contain myself!” But description only gets us so far. We must start asking “why” questions. Why is Melbourne the most liveable city in the world? Is it because the denizens of Melbourne have created a “superior culture”? If only! Is it because it is lucky? Oh yes, there are some contingencies. Between 1870 and 1920, Melbourne was the richest city in the world. It was because of gold. Melbourne struck it rich. But more importantly it was also because the access to the gold was relatively democratic. That is, there was no transnational corporation controlling any monopoly over the ownership and control of the gold—how it was sold and distributed. It meant then that at this very juncture in history when the nation-state was in formation (the “Commonwealth of Australia” was proclaimed in 1901), and city construction was booming, there was a strong civic consensus about the needs of public culture and cities to make its citizens proud. And it is these traditions that have endured as monumentalized in the built environment of Melbourne. So from this point of
comparison, we can start to see that cities have different histories, different cultures, ecologies, economies and different relationships to modern nation-state formation.

The next question, of course, is can Manila emulate Melbourne and become a liveable city? Well, one wonders whether Melbourne is a good example. Firstly, in the time that you’ve grown from 3 to 12 million people, Melbourne has gone from 2 to 3 million. So immediately you have a demographic challenge that is different. Secondly, the resources used to make Melbourne so liveable for its citizens simply cannot be copied by 6 billion others in the world. Let me quote from Urban Future 21 at this point:

If we calculate the land needed to provide all the services of a livable city, calculations based on all people using the same amount of resources as Canadians, it suggests something like 4 hectares per person.3

If we then apply this not to the half-billion lucky citizens of the developed world but to the 6 billion people of the entire world, we find that we will need three planet earths which, the authors of the Urban Future 21 report—with masterful understatement—are unlikely to be available in the near future. The challenge of sustainability, therefore, needs to be at the center of any economic calculus for the world economy and for cities. This suggests that the challenge is not so much the alleviation of poverty per se, but the redressing of the relationship between wealth and poverty production.

I don’t need to say anything about the problems of Manila that you don’t already know. Manilenos do not need a series of statistics about poverty, crime, pollution, congestion, governance, infrastructure.4 So enough on the bad news. The question is, why these problems and what can we do about them? People who can afford to attend the public lecture here now are not the victims, largely speaking, of the problems of Manila. Most of you here this evening live relatively comfortable

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4 You certainly don’t need to hear it again from another outside expert, especially such “experts” who charge exorbitant consultancy fees to tell you that Manila has very
material existences and can mitigate some of the externalities of living in Manila. However, may I suggest to you that in looking elsewhere for models of development, there has been a tendency to find private solutions to public problems. The most common because easiest response to the problems of Manila by its wealthy citizens is simply to flee—overseas, outwards but also inwards. There has been a progressive suburbanization of Manila. The old city gets too “hot,” relocate. The new city gets too hot, relocate. The third method is to flee inwards, to seek self-protection into the black, airconditioned four-wheel drive vehicles with “self-reflecting” windows, and into the “aircon” high-rise “condos” that shut out knowledge of Manila. I read in the “lifestyle” pages of the Philippine Daily Inquirer the other day of a young couple extolling one of the virtues of their condominium was that “they couldn’t tell what the climate was in Manila anymore.”

Manila’s wealthy are fleeing into the gated enclaves and the mega-malls, into what Kim Dovey (after Richard Sennett) in Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form, has called “inverted city”—where the public nature of the city is mimicked and replicated but privatized and so is secondhand simulacra. The denizens of “inverted city” are protected from really knowing what it means to dwell in Manila. By collectively inoculating themselves from local knowledge, the rich become placeless inhabitants of a cosmopolitan series of empty of non-places and non-activities. After all, a five-star hotel in Manila looks and feels exactly like a five-star hotel anywhere else. A Mega-mall is a mega-mall whether located in Madrid, Melbourne or Manila. A McDonalds burger tastes the same the world over. Now these private solutions to public problems are universal across time and cultures. It is a response that is perfectly

big problems but “don’t worry I have just the solution for you.” You don’t need this. You certainly don’t need to internalize these noises that are coming from outside too. As our visiting delegation heard yesterday, one local study proclaimed the slogan that Old Manila was “dirty, dangerous and disordered.” Ironically enough, whereas the local insiders saw problems, the outsiders didn’t see the danger and disorder so much as the very vibrant, dynamic culture that was doing very interesting things, and one we could all learn from. Quiapo, for example, is one of the few areas of Metro Manila where there exists a vibrant pedestrian street culture that has not yet been overwhelmed by motorized traffic.

understandable, perfectly reasonable, but perfectly unsustainable. We, the world over, are arriving at a critical juncture in history where we can no longer afford to continue to make these kinds of privatizing choices to collective challenges of infrastructure, services, transport and lifestyle. And we do need effective collective responses to these collective challenges. So Melbourne might be the most liveable city but it is not yet a sustainable city. The challenge of sustainability kicks back on those of us that live there as well.

When facing such enormous challenges and problems, the perennial temptation is immediately to seek instant solutions, the romance of revolution, the romance of command economies of benevolent dictators, the big-bang approach to social problems, to seek out again the redemptive political fantasies that have haunted the 20th century. We do need collective forms of creativity but this does not imply the zero sum games of absolutist politics of revolution or authoritarian states. I think that the collective forms of creativity in Manila are already extant, they’re already here. But they are not yet being used to their fullest potential for creating a sustainable, liveable, and creative city. And this is not least because the overwhelming focus of most contemporary political discourses here is not about the city qua city but about the Philippines, the nation-state. And one of the things that I’d like to advocate is that you become more city-centric. Manila produces over 35% of the gross national product. With only 10% of the total population, it is the primary growth engine of the Philippines. And it is a distinct case of Filipino urbanism in that connects to other places as much as it does to other parts of the Philippines. To take but one example, Manila still has the potential to be a highly significant trading port that connects China to North America in the 21st century. So, the challenge is not so much to endeavour to solve the immediate environmental, political, economic, technological and social problems of Manila as to start asking questions about the way we name the problems, the way we identify them, and by renaming our problems try to develop other ways of more hopeful creative city building.
Manila and Singapore

So let’s continue our search for inspiration through comparison, somewhere closer to home than Melbourne: Singapore. Many natives of Manila tell me that they envy Singapore. I must admit I scratched my head the first time I encountered this envy. Why so? Sure, Singapore is clean, ordered, neat and safe, and wouldn’t it be lovely if Manila was like that too, I hear Manilenos say. And yes, Singapore is the world’s first successful tropical city. If you look across the latitudes, it is one equatorial city that works. Why so? It’s a long story. Partly it’s because what was a colonial entrepot, an outpost of gin-swilling British colonials squatting uncomfortably on mangroves infested with malarial mosquitoes has in the past forty years since independence emerged as a dynamic world-city. As an island city state of 3.5 million people, Singapore is unique in the modern world: it combines English Fabian-style planning, dynamic global economic thinking, (first regional thinking but then developed into a global logic), a Confucian work ethic, which combines an emphasis on purity, individual blessing through hard work, wealth accumulation, and family solidarity, and above all, a strictly utilitarian logic of means and ends for determining what should be done in the interest of Singapore. Not all are gains, however. With every gain there were some losses. Singapore reinvented its own built environment very much like Manhattan, New York did in the first half of the 20th century. It destroyed large parts of its own city but then realized that international tourists, expatriate business people and the newly emergent Singaporean professional middle class were all very interested in the old fabric of the city and the multicultural nature of its society. So in the nineties, it had to reinvent its history and its multi-cultures and turned these into theme parks. This reinvention of traditions and places, these simulacra, lacks authenticity and has done little to break down the ethnicised divisions of Singaporean society even if the omnipresent State has domesticated the socio-economic differences on ethnic lines. Moreover, Singapore is no match for Manila in terms of its democratic processes and civil society. And as one leading intellectual in Singapore said, “if you want culture you don’t come to Singapore, you go to KL, Bangkok, Jakarta.” Much to my disgust he didn’t mention Manila. It’s very, very annoying the way the region’s ASEAN members omit Manila in such discussions.
Nevertheless, Singapore is competitive, innovative, and it has liveable streets as well which are worth a closer look. I had the fortune of sitting next to a young man in the plane from Jakarta to Singapore two or three years ago. He spoke 11 languages, worked for a French computer software company in which he was an analyst of computer languages. At the time of our conversation, he was considering an option to migrate to Korea to work for an American company, not because they paid more (they didn’t), not because he was unhappy in the job that he had (he wasn’t), but because he wanted an opportunity to learn Korean and one of the other Chinese languages that he didn’t yet know. This is the best side of Singapore. This is the image that Singapore is consistently trying to develop: to be a global city that connects through cosmopolitans who are creative, imaginative and enterprising but who are not rootless or without a sense of their own city-state. Singapore’s comparative advantage in this region if you like is as a port city engaged in trading its own knowledge and entrepreneurialism.

The second sign of Singapore’s leadership in the region is its extreme self-reflexivity as a city, and as a city-state. The government’s Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has a permanent exhibition in its public offices. The URA presents the city not just as a series of tourist images but as a focus for creating a dynamic society which is sustainable over the longer term. And it envisions this city-building task in globally competitive terms as pre-eminently a matter of collective will, technological innovation, and culture-making. One of the audio-visual displays at its exhibition provides visitors with an opportunity to press buttons on eight world cities with which Singapore is consciously comparing itself. The viewer is asked how Singapore might emulate and match these cities. They are, namely, New York, Paris, London, Frankfurt, Tokyo, Sydney and Detroit, and San Francisco. And each of those cities are chosen for a specific characteristic: Sydney and San Francisco for their waterfronts; Tokyo for its rail transport system; Paris and London for their sense of history combined with “high-end” shopping; New York its exciting and glamorous, illuminated neon signs and for mythic sites of modern capitalism such as Times Square; Detroit for its industrial development and innovation and Frankfurt because it is a conference and financial center. But you see what the Singapore planners and governors are doing is picking out different aspects of successful cities.
that are neither purely economic nor political, but social and cultural as well, and even ecological (although this is defined more convincingly in terms of liveability for its citizens rather than as ecological sustainability in the fuller sense of that term). They are consciously combining the issues of liveability, sustainability and creativity. And as Peter Murphy showed in his magistèrial tour de force public lecture, “The Ethics of Distance,” it is a port city and by definition cosmopolitan. Port cities go beyond regional connections to catch the flows of long-distance communications and in this trafficking develop an urbanism that is beyond economic calculation.

Manila as Southeast Asian City?

Singapore as the exception to the rule in the Southeast Asian region, does at least raise the question: should we classify Manila as a Southeast Asian city? When I started my research project on Southeast Asian cities, I unthinkingly assumed that it was a useful term and concept. Coming to Manila on a regular basis has taught me that maybe this concept is less than helpful. The term seems self-evident. But geography and ethnography and cartography are always political acts and forms of inscription. “Southeast Asia” as a term is no exception. It was first coined in 1942 as part of postwar planning by European empire strategists. It was developed by North American state authorities in the fifties and sixties and social scientists were allocated areas within the region of “Southeast Asia.” A dubious political genealogy does not justify throwing away the term, however; that won’t help us either. This is not a simple matter of semantics to be solved by neologisms, but it is important to be self-reflexive about the terms of our knowing, the

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categories that we work with, and how they can shape and distort our knowledge of the object of our interests and concerns. “Southeast Asia” I would suggest is a problematic category for understanding and critically appreciating the difference of Manila.

But first, perhaps the problem is that we use the term “Southeast Asia” in too narrowly defined terms of geopolitical or economic interest? What if we rethink the term in civilizational terms? Does the term signify a longer term socio-historical and cultural regional unit? As Professor Johann Arnason, a colleague on Thesis Eleven journal, points out, however, Southeast Asia is a “labyrinth.” Zialcita asks whether the image should be a “jigsaw” or a “collage”? In a footnote to his article on the Southeast Asian labyrinth, Arnason refers to the Philippines as an exception and better thought of as a “West-Pacific fragment.” That invites a rethinking of its place in the colonization processes by the Iberian peninsula across the Americas and then stretching across the Pacific to the Philippines.

There has been one other attempt to rethink the region in civilizational terms by a Thai architect and theorist, Sumet Jumsai in his book, Naga: Cultural Origins in Siam and the West Pacific. Unlike Arnason and Zialcita who emphasise complexity and difference, Jumsai ties the whole Asia-Pacific region together in one civilizational complex. Jumsai develops a world-history and civilizations argument in terms of rethinking architecture through the customs and cultures and histories of the Asian region. He argued that, in terms of material culture at least, world history has witnessed only two civilizational forms: a water civilization that is in confrontation with land civilization. Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific regions represent a marine civilization confronted by the moving down of land civilization from continental Eurasia. What does a water civilization look like? Firstly he argues that it’s “fluid” as opposed to the rigidity of a land civilization, tensile rather than compressive, and flexible rather than monumental. It is mobile rather than sedentary, prepared to deal with nature’s demands by building

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11 The binary logic of this argument is captured in that old joke that there two kinds of people in the world: those that divide the world into two and those who don’t. Jumsai belongs to those who divide the world into two.
temporary rather than permanent structures. The three technologies of tensile water civilizations (that he argues have shaped Japan, the coastal regions of China right down to Indo-China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the north of Australia, right across the Pacific) are rice agriculture, three-way basket-weaving, and houses on stilts. This is in opposition to the monumentalism of compressive, concrete, land civilizations. What he argues is that with modernity and the globalization of building technologies, these long-standing water traditions in this region have been overwhelmed by the monumental cultures of land civilizations. If we are to take seriously such an argument, we would then have to reconsider the built forms of cities in this region without being nostalgic or attempting to simply reassert the pre-modern over against the modern. Now, Jumsai doesn’t suggest how we can do this, but other architects in the region are thinking along these lines, and of particular interest are two architects in Singapore, Keng Yang and Tai Kon Soon. These two architects have independently proposed that we respond to the challenges of building tropical cities by developing bioclimatic designs. They advocate using the best of modern technologies for building cities and adapt these to the ecological conditions of equatorial economies and ecologies, so as to build smart buildings that are also ecologically sustainable. In place of a manic schedule of throwing up skyscrapers, they advocate more thoughtful construction techniques and designs that not only incorporate the latest information technology wirings but also ecological principles about air-flows, energy use, water recycling, waste heat and pollution, and so forth. And they’re starting to explore those kinds of expressions in all forms of building—in both public and private buildings, corporate and domestic. But this is not only about buildings. It is about constructing cities, not just their component, individual units.

This is not the only approach to classifying Manila as part of the Southeast Asian region. There are economic and geographical and sociological interpretations of Southeast Asian cities. My generic complaint is that these studies and disciplines too easily subsume Manila

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12 For discussion on these architects and Jumsai see Abidin Kusno Behind the Postcolonial: architecture, urban space and political cultures in Indonesia. London: Routledge, 2000 and my review essay “Postcolonial Cities: a View from Jakarta” Thesis Eleven, 73, May 2003: 113-121.
to other cities or to other levels of abstraction and universalization. Their own experiential and professional loci are more often than not either Bangkok or Jakarta rather than Manila. The primary place allegiance of the researchers is not only a matter of sentiment but often shapes their researcher’s perceptions and theories of the region’s cities in collective terms. For example, the first modern theory that proclaims the unique nature of Southeast Asian cities was by Terry McGee, a Canadian geographer in his 1967 book, *The Southeast Asian City: a social geography of the primate cities of Southeast Asia*. McGee coined the term *Desakota* meaning “village city” to explain the processes of city-building in Indonesia as the peasants moving into the cities and creating self-sustaining communities within the wider town or city not being connected in the same way. This term quickly became popular and McGee’s work has become a defining analysis for many comparative studies of Southeast Asian cities. But Terry McGee was very much influenced by the Jakartan experience. The German sociologists, Hans-Dieter Evers and Rudiger Korff have done most of their field research in Bangkok, but again they have endeavored to project their findings onto a phenomenon they have called *Southeast Asian Urbanism: the meaning and power of social space*.

Dean Forbes, an Australian geographer, is author of the popular textbook *Asian Metropolis*. Forbes’ own area of expertise is Vietnamese cities. None of these authors have much to say on Manila and even less in learning from the Manila story. Moreover I would suggest that each of these approaches over-determine the other cities in the region (or at least underplay the great diversity within and between the cities) in the name of understanding their own cities of specialization even as they claim to be talking about a thing called “Southeast Asian cities.”

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Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta: Globalization and the work of Culture

Such categorical thinking invites its own radical deconstruction. One way to deal with this problem of Manila's exclusion from Southeast Asian city thinking is to declare that there is no such thing as a Southeast Asian city. And this is the tactic used by the rather unfortunately named duo of Australian geographers, Dick and Rimmer. In their 1998 article "Beyond the Third World City: the new geography of South-East Asia," they argue that there's no such thing as a Southeast Asian city. In particular, they argued that the kind of thinking that "Southeast Asianists" and urban geographers have been undertaking is in itself a product of the particular historic juncture of post-WWII, of decolonization, nationalist-developementalist state trajectories and policies undertaken under the conditions of the Cold War and American intervention in the region. Instead, Dick and Rimmer argue that what we're witnessing today is a globalization of urban forms, and that all urban forms around the world are the same because derived from the same essential sources and drives of global markets, planning and imaginaries. So-called Southeast Asian cities are no exception to this global world-systems process. Theirs is a very clever argument. It explains a lot of things, and not least the contemporary political economy of Manila such as the growth of malls, new cities, motorways and gated communities. But it is also too clever by half because counter-intuitive. It's ultimately a culturally-empty argument. Like all systems theories, it pushes the bits of the system around but somehow or other human agency, and collective, self-reflexive culture, is missing in action. Secondly, it begs the question of cultural difference, and it leaves out the meanings and experiences and symbols of city living that its inhabitants bring to it.

So yes, at least globalization arguments put Manila back into the world-system and helps us to appreciate what's going on in broader terms. And yes, these arguments also help locals to be suspicious of universalizing, moralizing and reductive culturalist theories—you should be very familiar with these kinds of over-determinism: Filipinos are said to be too lazy, too American, too Catholic, or whatever. These

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16 Dick and Rimmer, "Beyond the Third World City: the new geography of South-East Asia" in Urban Studies (35:12), 2303-2321.
sorts of stereotyping masquerading as theories simply don’t work for explaining the problems of Manila. Yes, globalization processes are significant. Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta are all mega-cities in the same region facing similar ecological and technological challenges. Their respective growth paths, demographically, economically and technologically have been comparable over the past 30 years. But we are right as well to say that in cultural and political terms, Manila is not Bangkok, Manila is not Jakarta. So this point of comparison works two ways: on the ecological and technological challenges, there is a lot to learn from each other because we are all in a world system of cities. The three mega-cities of Southeast Asia are at the same level in this system facing comparable challenges: of infrastructure—providing efficient, equitable and clean sanitation, water, energy, transport and housing systems. All three mega-cities are located in similar bio-climatic regions although Manila has three extra challenges to those of Bangkok and Jakarta: volcanoes, earthquakes and typhoons. All three cities have the same transport and communication systems challenges.

In terms of the technological logic of modernity then, the more conversations conducted by urbanists in Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta about these issues, the greater the possibilities there might be for generating a creative milieu for solving these problems. However, to reiterate yet again the obvious, Manila has very different cultures to those of Bangkok and Jakarta. Take by way of example, religious and symbolic capital of Southeast Asian cities. I cannot do justice to this complex set of issues here but nevertheless wish to refute a common cultural prejudice that Bangkok and Jakarta have more complex and significant cultural, religious traditions and capital than Manila. Many people talk about the significance of the sacred space of Bangkok and its sacred meanings to the Thai people and how it centers and organizes the way in which the city is built and structured and how people use spaces. This is all too true. Manila does not have an indigenous, pre-European, set of courtly and religious traditions to match Bangkok or Jakarta. This does not mean though that Manila is in any way less complex in its modern forms of religious cultures, organization and symbolic forms of its built environment. In the historic district of Quiapo alone, there are many significant religious sites, Catholic, Chinese and Islamic. The religious meanings of Manila are very important for understanding the built environment and its changing uses. In the pioneering work of such
local scholars as Fernando Zialcita we are beginning to learn what this means for understanding Manila as a whole.

Another interesting, because complex, point of comparison which also points to the difference of Manila from other cities in the region, is the ways in which the city is used as the theater for political action in relation to the nation state. This again is very different from Jakarta and Bangkok and therefore the point of comparison is one of difference rather than of similarity. Research on this important theme has barely begun however and there is still much to be learned.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Modern Manila: Economic Systems, Social Ordering, Political Power and Cultural Creativity}

All the theories of globalization, regionalization, civilization, and inculturation still beg the question of how we deal with understanding the difference of Manila. How do we avoid over-reductive theories? I'd like to suggest here one evocative way of thinking about cities provided by a Hungarian social theorist who used to work at La Trobe University, Agnes Heller.\textsuperscript{18} Heller argues that there is one dynamic of modernity that reaches out across and encompasses the world. We are all moderns now. This she calls the dynamic of unfounded freedom. It undoes the foundations of pre-modern societies but doesn't provide new foundations for the responsibility of instituting our own orders and cultures. She also argues that there are three essential logics of modernity. There is the logic of technology, which is problem-solving, utilitarian, concerned with efficiency, of logic-chopping, solving technical problems by devising appropriate technologies. The second logic is that of the functional allocation of social positions—status systems, classes, hierarchies, language games, and so on. Social ordering is about

\textsuperscript{17} For an understanding of some of the ways Jakarta has been used I invite you to look at the work of Abidin Kusno (2000). For Bangkok, take a look at the work of Kim Dovey (1999) and Marc Askew's \textit{Bangkok: place, practice and representation} (London, Routledge, 2003). For Manila, I have seen one suggestive short conference paper by Eldiberto de Jesus that should be taken up (and published?) and explored more fully by urbanists with an intimate knowledge of the built forms of Manila, its history and of the urban politics of the Marcos and post-Marcos years.

who gets what and how in the process of distributing social positions. Thirdly, there is political logic, political power—the institutions of freedom and of government, of coercion and authority.

These three logics then—the economic, the social and the political—in analytical terms at least, are independent of each other; even though they overlap and are intertwined in reality, they cannot be reduced one to the other conceptually because they are not determined or defined in terms of the other. These logics in combination are also conflictual. But in the particular societal combination of these three logics—that is, the combinations of technology, functional allocations of social positions and political power—there is generated a developmental tendency that is uniquely that society's own. This then is not an explanatory social theory that over-determines collective human agency. Heller doesn't try to say this is how your society is going to be in the future, because these things can switch very quickly, very rapidly and in specific localities. We can always see the logic of the developmental tendency in history but we can't see forwards.

What is useful about this argument is that it shows that all cities and all cultures around the world today are modern in their own distinctive ways of combining these independent logics. Here too I'm very much attracted to the work of Nestor Garcia Canclini on Mexico City where he talks of everyday and popular "Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity," and where there is a kaleidoscope of different Hybrid Cultures, and of different combinations of technologies, of politics and social life. But there's another nice thing about Agnes Heller's argument: she subordinates the logics of modernity to the double hermeneutic of our social imaginations. Recall her main argument that modernity is a global dynamic of unfounded freedom. And that is that what these logics produce, and therefore the dynamic of modernity produces, is a "double bind of our imaginations": on the one hand, the technological imagination of control and on the other, the hermeneutical or historical imagination of meaning. Too often in many cities around the world, the technological imagination dominates and the production of meaning is made difficult. Now, if we shift our focus from modernity more broadly to the question of urban modernity per

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19 Nestor Garcia Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: strategies for entering and leaving modernity (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
se, and from Agnes Heller to Peter Hall, a geographer, planner, and historian and theorist of cities, we can apply this notion to urban creativity. Hall asks the question: What are the great cities of the world in modernity? How have they managed technological logics and kept, to appropriate Peter Murphy's language, the rhythms and meanings of cultural innovation in harmony? Peter Hall plucks out three significant metropolitan global cities: London, Tokyo, New York. It is these three cities, for Hall, that have long traditions of producing their own cultural capital, their own cultural creativity in harmony with the times of technological changes and challenges, in the ways in which they reach out to the other sections and other cities of the world. He also mentions, though, the significance of semi-peripheral cities, that is, cities that are on the edge of dynamic, metropolitan centers. And in the industrial revolution of Europe, the significant cities here are Manchester and Glasgow. And in America in the 20th century, he mentions Memphis for its production of music in organizing of different American traditions of music, and Los Angeles, both for its emergence as the cinematic dream factory and as a leading scientific-industrial-military-space complex. How quickly such cities arose from insignificance to nodal portal strategic importance to global development. I suggest to you that for Melbourne and Manila alike, it is the semi-peripheral cities that are the true inspiration for us. We know, together—both Australians and Filipinos living in Melbourne and Manila alike—great empires at first hand. We have been colonized. We are familiar with the ins and outs of the ways in which the metropolitan centers work. We are port cities. Manila, in particular, is presently on the edge and in between the emergence of one great empire, namely China and on the edge of the greatest global power in history, America. You are critical to the marine region of both Asia and Pacific. So Manila is special. It has great potential. The question is: how to combine in a creative and different way, the three logics of technology, social order and political power? How to recapture your own sense of the cultural importance of creativity in the city and focus on the city as a site for your own action?

I turn then finally to the threefold question and challenge of rethinking Manila as creative, sustainable, and liveable city. I ask you to remember the spirit of my reflections as comic, not that I’m trying to be funny, but to take the seriousness of these ideals and continue to recognize the gap between what we aspire to and what we can achieve. So I continue to be the clown and beseech you to “keep your mind in hell, and despair not” (Staretz Silouan, 1866-1938). First to the matter of creativity, I propose that you should recognize the central place of the urban poor for the future welfare of Manila. I suggest to you that, contrary to popular prejudice, the urban poor are not so much the problem but rather part of the solution to the challenges facing this city. Indeed, and moreover the middle classes and the elites are not automatically the solution but are intrinsically linked to the problems of good governance, economic development and poverty alleviation. So perhaps it’s time for us to rethink the ways in which we classify the poor. As John Giordano remarked at the Thesis Eleven-Budhi Colloquium, let’s stop using the term, “squatter settlements” as if the notion of temporary shelter was morally dubious and reminds us too much of our own insecurity and mortality. Let’s stop de-legitimizing the poor.\(^{21}\) Let’s stop referring to their economies as “informal.” The poor have demonstrated time and time again (who I understand constitute up to 60% of the current Metro Manila population), that their existence is neither accidental nor marginal to Manila’s developmental tendency. Neither are the poor a threat to the dominant order but rather constitute the power-house of the dynamic Manila economy. They have shown themselves, time and time again, to be self-reliant, stoic, pragmatic, in fact they embody the very tensile culture of water civilizations that Jumsai identified as intrinsic to the Asia-Pacific region. They’ve shown themselves to be lateral thinkers and above all doers.

To use one example only here: I remind you again of the self-reliant solution the urban poor developed at the end of WWII when the city lay in ruins, the cable car system had been destroyed, and the state resources under able to provide collective solutions to urban infrastructure needs. I refer of course to the invention of the “jeepney.” I know this is a tired example to Manilenos’ ears as it is a tourist cliché and the recurrent

fallback of all outsiders to Manila. But I am very happy to romanticize
the jeepneys again not so much as a technological solution to transport
problems but rather as an example of the work of culture—of an unheroic
and ordinary act of collective ingenuity and creativity. The American
army jeep left behind after WWII is appropriated and turned into a
public form of transport that uses local resources, a developed,
customized, craft production for collective use and ends. The production
process calls upon traditional craft techniques and adapted to the new
modern technology. The transport itself reflects social traditions of
cooperation and trust and the ingenuity of thousands of craftspeople,
panelbeaters, mechanics, drivers, and users. I am not suggesting to you
that the jeepney necessarily is the longer term answer to contemporary
transport challenges of Metro Manila in the 21st century but rather to
recognize the cultural traditions that made possible such a pragmatic
form of cultural creativity and technological innovation in times of
scarcity over the past 60 years. And I ask you too to compare the jeepney
to the way in which the motor car has been received and deployed in this
city. The motor vehicle is the form of technology that no city in the
world has actually managed to culturally appropriate in a way that makes
the city ecologically sustainable. This city in which the average speed is 4
to 6 kms an hour hasn’t worked out a way of dealing with this form of
technology in a creative or sustainable way. However, when you observe
the behavior of the traffic itself, I for one wish to pay homage to all local
drivers, not only for their ingenuity and their acute sense of space, but
for their amazing capacity for cooperation. Manila drivers show
remarkably low levels of aggression and seem to be able to go with the
flow, to weave and wind their way through the smallest of spaces without
excessive aggression to those competing for the same space. There is a
kind of perpetual process of negotiation—these are things not achieved
by Melbourne drivers with four times the road space. I am also impressed
that most drivers drive around Manila without street directories. It’s all
oral and perceptual knowledge. This is an extraordinary resource of
creativity that needs to be tapped into as an image, as a metaphor for the
ways in which Manila culture organizes itself. And I’m particularly
impressed with the guys who I understand are called “parkers” in English,
those men in the traffic jam sections who do a deal with the local jeepney
driver, solicit business for them, hold up various other jeepneys so that
they could squeeze them into the traffic, and then pay the traffic cop a bit
of extra to change the direction of the flow. This is not a problem. What they don’t need is more governance and new laws to say “don’t do these things.” What they need is encouragement to apply these very same principles in all areas of life. So this is creative, this is collective creativity that can only happen between people and in groups, in public dealing with their differences. Secondly, that is only one example, I can offer you many more examples but that will do for the day. Notice that I am not inserting that this is not evidence of some intrinsic genetic code in Filipinos. Rather this is a universal capacity of all human cultures to adapt and use what is there and to make sense of it. The number one challenge for all mega-cities of the world today is how to use and combine the range of modern transport technologies (public/private, collective/individual) so that mobility is enhanced in ecologically sustainable ways.

Secondly, I turn to the question of Manila’s ecological sustainability. I was twice in Manila for periods of time in 1985 and 1986, either side of the fall of Marcos. It was my first exposure to civil war. So I found it deeply disturbing that people kept getting shot at in the street at various times of the night. I was not able to visit Manila again until the beginning of 2000. Without in anyway underestimating the severity of the challenges and problems that beset Metro Manila today, I remain impressed at what you had achieved in those 14 years. Despite the rapid growth in the city, in many ways Manila is a better place today for its citizens than it was in the 1980s. While political violence has not been entirely eradicated Manila is a much safer city than it was during the Marcos era. There are many things about the built environment in Manila which represent extraordinary changes and extraordinary achievements—and this is in

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22 In other words, recall my earlier reference to the generation of signs around the Cervini Hall swimming pool as an indication that most people don’t take any notice of the signs. Increasing the number of signs is not going to change their behavior. This just indicates the degree of anxiety amongst governors, or else a surplus labor-force in the sign writing departments of local governments. Note here I am not simply making a literal claim that Manila should reduce the number of signs (many of which are very humorous in themselves) but rather that the question of instituting good form and planning does not necessarily emanate out of the rationalization process of bureaucracy, whether it takes the corporate forms of government or business. The cultural pluralism and labyrinthine energies of Manila civil society does not need to be tamed so much as harnessed and given direction for addressing its challenges. As this is not an essay on politics of urban planning and governance I have desisted from commenting directly on such matters.
spite of endemic corruption, political instability, economic downturns and erratic social ordering of the city. I doubt very much that the citizens of Melbourne could cope with the population increase of something like 9 million in 26 years that you have had to face during this time, without also experiencing the same kind of infrastructure problems. So my message today is to stop punishing yourselves with things you haven’t achieved but also acknowledge over the longer term what is being achieved and to use these resources of hope for addressing matters that do need fixing—such as chronic dependence on familial forms of patronage and crony capitalism.

One obvious challenge to sustainability is the provision of collective forms of transport. The fact that Manila is managing to put in place four light-rail transit systems in these recent years, two about to be finished, (and I might add Jakarta has not managed this) is going to make a dramatic difference to the flows to the city. Its success will very much depend on the middle class’ capacity to embrace collective forms of transport to solve some of the other problems of car dependence. Another crucial component of sustainability is the water systems of Manila. I say to you, Manila, remember your economic life depends on its success as a port city: turn the city back to face the sea, focus on the harbor and the bay, remind yourselves (and you’re students) that Manila is a port city connected to the world by sea and to nature by water. Also turn back to the river, see it as a resource for city-making rather than as a refuse point, the place to dump your garbage and sewage.

Thirdly, and finally, the question of liveability and I’ll finish on this point. Part of rediscovering the water systems of Manila is also the rediscovery of public life. To turn back to the sources of life in water is to enhance public spaces. The historic, inner city of Manila was designed in part according to Spanish planning codes. Consequently, Manila has at least 17 plazas that were designed as civic spaces for pedestrians. But in recent years most of these plazas have been completely overrun by the motor car. The restoration of these plazas as civic spaces for pedestrians would be a major reclaiming of the city for its citizens. I’ve had the good pleasure of seeing the development of Plaza Lawton opposite the Post Office near the Pasig River. Whatever one may make of the aesthetics of the urban design, and the politics of urban planning involved, it’s a great achievement to have a public space reclaimed for people to use to sit, read, for lovers and friends to meet, walk and for strangers to play the
role of flaneurs, for everybody to look at each other. In the wider scheme of things, the redevelopment of Plaza Lawton is a pitifully small achievement but not if interpreted in symbolic terms. This is a little step but it inspires the next steps. For the first time in a long time, there’s a vista through to the Pasig River and already I’m hearing that there are plans for cafes and restaurants to be located next to the river and as a promenade. And if when standing in the plaza one looks back at the Metropolitan Theater, a magnificent art deco theater that I understand was built in the 1930s and restored in the 1970s, the view and access is cut by a flyover. The possibilities are there though that with enough imagination that flyover could be removed or at least made an underpass and then you’ll have a straight vista and walkway between an art center and the river, creating a variety of different living spaces for the people, the citizens of the city.23

Now here the agents of change are not the working class, not the urban poor, but yourselves, the professional middle class—those trained in the universities. Here you have an opportunity, a historic opportunity, to become the bearers of collective memory for the city. That you could look for ways in which you could make your city carry the memories of the different stories and identities, cultures of the city, reweaving stories in and through the cultures and built environment of Manila. You could also make an effort of returning to the city instead of escaping to the suburbs. It’s a great irony that the global elites of Manila are the actually the great localizers. You are the suburbanizers not the city dwellers. If you turn back and face the city, you might make Manila so interesting that the rest of the world will come to look and see what is going on. So at this moment of information economies and global integration, educators and academics have finally got their great moment: to rephrase Marx, “academics of the world unite!” Education is the other key dimension of liveability: producing the knowledge economy and knowledge cultures. Why not make your curricula city-centric? Get people to think about Manila and get them involved in research projects as knowledge groups worrying about technological logic, the functional positions of social power, the instituting of freedom and good

23 This is no trivial issue. Manila is one of the least friendly cities in the world for pedestrian traffic. Yet, over 80 percent of traffic movements in the city are by foot. Ask yourselves then why is the city designed against the needs of the average citizen.
governance—all of which are necessary to make the creative, liveable and sustainable city. If you do these things, my ultimate dream of re-romancing Manila has a chance of taking form in the real, everyday worlds of your city. Manila between the wars was claimed variously as the “Havana and Seville of the Pacific”; photos suggest that these were not hyperbolic descriptions. Why cannot Metro Manila recapture this grace and panache on a grander scale? If you do these things and turn back joyfully to the city, unafraid of difference but embracing it, seeking peaceable difference, and celebrating your right to the city in its public places. Then, as I said, the rest of the world will come to see what’s going on. ☀