Shopping and Urbanity

- A study in retail and urban space in Metro Manila

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1 Introduction

The retail landscape of Metro Manila is highly influenced, and maybe even dominated by, shopping malls. These large-scale facilities offer climate protected commercial places for the population of the city. The malls are placed along the larger transport routes making them most easily reached by car.

Looking outside of the shopping malls one can see that areas with bustling street life are few and scattered. Planned public places are few. This is remarkable for a city with around 12 million inhabitants (National statistics office, 2015). And even more so since the city is one of the most densely populated cities in the world.

Visiting Manila I, obviously, find myself in streets packed with people where the pulse is high, as you would expect from a metropolitan city. But somehow there's something that is different from most of the cities I have ever visited. It's not functioning in the way I'm used to. It feels like it's not readable in the language I've learnt to analyse urban environments. I soon realise that there in Metro Manila are few reasons to slow down your pace. Even though the sidewalks

are filled with people the retail is often very limited and the public spaces practically non-existing. The retailing that does exist is almost exclusively localized along the larger motorized streets, where the walkability usually tends to be limited. My impression is that areas with mixed use are rare. Adding to this impression, I notice the countless shopping malls I pass when driving in the city. Malls larger than any I've ever encountered before. I can't help but start to think that these have a significant influence to the urbanity, or rather to the lack of urbanity, in the city.

In this paper I'm trying to address the notion of urbanity and shopping. I aim to focus on the effects that the many developments of malls may have on Metro Manila.

2 Literature Review

"The relationship between shopping and the city has, over the last half century, inverted from shopping as a component of the city to shopping as a prerequisite to urbanity. Rather than shopping (as an activity) taking place in the city (as a place), the city (as an idea) is taking place within shopping (as a place)." (McMorrough, 2001 p.194)

This interesting quote, found in John McMorroughs essay *city of shopping*, suggests that urbanity, as we today define it, lies within the experience of shopping, or at least the possibility of shopping. That a city without shopping would be a city without urbanity, and thereby the city would not be a city.

2.1 The Malls

Metro Manila house some of the worlds largest malls. A quick search on Wikipedia gives, even though it's not the most reliable source, an idea about the importance of mall in the city structure of Metro Manila. 11 out of the 100 largest

shopping malls in the world are, according to Wikipedia, found in the city (Wikipedia 2015-04-28).

That this phenomenon ought to have a significant impact on the city structure is reasonable to assume. The 9 largest malls in Metro Manila have, together, a total leasable area of 260 ha (2.6 million m^2) (Wikipedia 2015-04-28).

In the book *Mall Maker*, the author, M Jeffrey Hardwick writes about Victor Gruen who's seen as the father of malls. Victor Gruen is talking about how malls can give happiness and meaning to the ever more suburbificated American cities. "The shopper could even conquer the weather and shop in eternal spring" Gruen says (Hardwick, 2004. p.121). One could imagine that this climatic aspect has to be one of the strongest arguments for shopping malls in Metro Manila. Even though the shopping malls offer, except for the usual shops and eateries, also bowling alleys, gyms, medical offices and even churches, Colin Marshall, columnist for the Guardian, mentions the air conditioning as the most important reason for the success of the malls in Manila (Marshall, 2014). With a hot humid climate, the air-conditioned spaces of the malls seem to be a perfect escape from the occasionally uncomfortable climate.

Another reason for the success of malls might be the cultural, and historical, bonds to America. That the Philippine society is influenced by the American culture is evident. In post war years Manila repurposed jeeps into an iconic vehicle, jeepneys, now working as one of the cities most important public transport. In the same way the tradition of the American malls are now being repurposed. The difference with the Manila context is that they are not built as a suburban substitute for the city, but built as the city itself (Marshall, 2014).

Accessibility is another motive to the success of malls. Marshall emphasizes that although the malls in Manila are targeting different classes very few of them give the impression of accepting only the top stratum of Philippine society. Instead the large range of complexes ensures for a broader clientele. Although the main target group is the growing middle class (Marshall, 2014).

2.2 Malls and Urbanity

The Malls of Metro Manila are strategically placed along the larger central highways leading through the city (*see Fig.1*). Although this could be seen as a democratic way of assuring accessibility for as large part of the population as possible it's likely that it will also increase the already dominant notion of car dependency.

One could argue that the placement of the malls leads to a situation where the more intense parts of retail in Metro Manila are scattered. The areas of intensity are rather points of intensity. Urbanity gathered in multi-storey buildings. Alison and Peter Smithson uttered critique against this phenomenon already when CIAM proposed the street to be a space for neutral transport between the intense functional zones of the city (Kärrholm 2012 p.43). In some way one could claim that their fear have become reality in Manila. At least when looking at the retail landscape of the city.

Sze Tsung Leong discuss, in his essay *Mobility*, shopping as one of the best tools for providing urban connectivity, accessibility, and cohesion (Leong, 2001, p.477). This tool is though lost when the development inte the retail sector have come to focus on malls. The mall have, through continuously disengaging the surroundings, exposed itself as an autonomous figure that has nothing to do with existing patterns (McMorrough 2001 p.195)
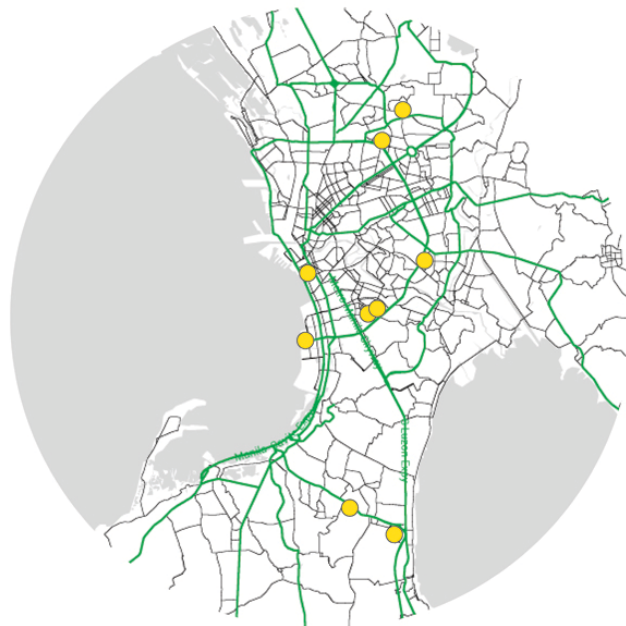
Fig 1. Map showing the 9 largest malls and the highways in Metro Manila. (Illustration by author)

2.3 Shopping and The City

Mattias Kärrholm explains in his book, *Retailising Space*, how the function of the city has shifted as the consumer society has grown stronger. He cites Miles and Miles who claim that that consumption has become the primary function of the modern city. "The city has been consumed by consumption and as a result has lost track of its broader social role" (Kärrholm 2012 s.6). To clarify, Kärrholm, and Miles and Miles, suggests that actors dealing with consumption have little, or no, concern in creating good urban environments. The actors, owners and developers, that operates in retail have as main target to sustain their own business. The quote mentioned implies that this has led to that the power of the city has shifted. Politicians and planners are now forced to give in for the market and its strategies.

But the possibilities for shopping, when used strategically, to act as a positive force in the city is argued by McMorrough. He debates that shopping has the potential to assemble heterogeneous and multidimensional aspects of the city into a connected fluid urban experience. Shopping will work as a reductive force for developments that do not support it. Developments within an area where there is shopping will more likely adapt, or even contribute, to the current situation (McMorrough, 2001 s.194). For example in a neighbourhood with well functioning retail spaces there ought to be less likely to be developed a gated community or a large motorized street that disturbs the existing urban patterns.

3 Discussion

With a high urbanization growth rate, and the similar patterns within the economic growth, the planning and development trends that are now taking place in Metro Manila could soon reveal themselves to be troubling. The traffic infrastructure in Manila is already today undersized and congestion is causing problems with connectivity and accessibility. Development of malls, close to the

highways, is not only increasing the incentive for the automobile use, it also disrupts the urban fabric and prohibits the use of shopping as a tool for connectivity. With a more diverse strategy for shopping in Manila, the walkability could be increased and barriers could be bridged. In Malmö for example, Kärrholm illustrates, malls have been located strategically along a network of pedestrian streets and streets with good walkability (Kärrholm 2012 s.52). This way one could provide the climate controlled shopping within the malls, and yet be able to use shopping as a connector.

Kärrholm is also leading an interesting argumentation that could be a strong case on mixing smaller malls and walkable streets in an urban network. He talks about the concept of synchronization of shopping. Substantially he debates that shopping, and all of its actors, could learn to gain from the urban rhythms. These rhythms are set by a number of factors, such as time, working hours, seasons, timetables (Kärrholm, 2012 p.69). Translated to the context of Manila one could imagine the weather and the seasons to be two of the more important factors controlling the rhythms of the urban environment.

As stated earlier, the placement of the malls along the main transport routes, both for private automobile and public transport, could be seen as democratic in the way that they are accessible to as large part of the population as possible. At the same time one could certainly argue that the concept of using malls as the main shopping condition is in a way neglecting the way of using retail as a democratic tool. As discussed above, shopping could work as an integrating connector in the city. Creating networks that connects heterogeneous areas of the city. The malls, on the other hand, are not able to provide this transboundary meeting point for the population. In its mission to sell, the malls tend to get somewhat one-dimensional. Even though public spaces often are provided within the mall they, compared to the city, seem to lack in both complexity and unpredictability (Herman 2001, s.461).

To further emphasize the importance of complexity and unpredictability Leong stresses how the nature of shopping is most volatile. Shopping has to continuously be reinvented and adapt for the ever-shifting tastes in social and urban patterns (Leong 2001, s.131). The sustainable way of planning shopping would then be to encourage diversity. A diversity including pedestrian streets, mixed streets, malls

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and all imaginable alternatives in between. The more typologies included in the mix the more dynamic and prepared the city will be to changes in the patterns of shopping (Leong 2001, s.131). The dynamic and flexible strategies of using different typologies includes a suggestion of mixed use. This would certainly ensure more layers and diversity to the urban environment.

Unfortunately, from experiencing the Metro Manilas urbanity, one could ask if the social and political will to integrate neighbourhoods into a continual urban fabric exists? Developments that aim for complex and unpredictable environments that support transboundary meetings seem, from my observations, to be more or less non-existing. The trends for developments rather seem to be the opposite. Malls, gated communities and larger motorized street are all disrupting the urban fabric and increase the segregation between different parts of the city.

4 The Role of Architects

Even though planners and architects have some say in the development of the city, my personal conclusion would be that the actual control lies at a political level. Planners are undoubtedly trying to influence the city and its urban fabric to become more connected and integrated. But with the tools given one could assume that they're limited.

Without any actual knowledge on the area, I experience parts of the population in Metro Manila unwilling to connect and integrate neighbourhoods with diverse socioeconomic status. This is maybe most clearly shown in the many gated communities within the city, but as well the fascination for shopping malls, rather than shopping streets, further suggests how segregation is favoured among many of the people living in the city. With strong political power and a strong economy this could be regulated by the city planners. But the cities of Metro Manila seem to be very dependent on the private sector, consequently leaving the private sector with most of the power. The city is left in the hands of developers looking for the largest possible revenues rather than actors that have a holistic strategy for the urban environment.

This progress has similarities in the planning trends in Sweden from the 1970s and following decades. Mats Franzén means that the forces of the market outgrew the housing units. The retail in the city had to be complimented with other, larger typologies, mainly meaning larger shopping complexes outside of the city center (Franzén 2004 s.104). For Manila the "forces of the market" have had a very rapid growth, as a result of the rapid economic growth, and, like in Sweden, it's likely that the demand for retail has been out of synch with the urban development. The challenge then for planners and politicians would be to sustain a holistic strategy. Strategies that can satisfy both the short term demands for retail and the more long term plans for a pleasing urban environment.

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