

The Missing Factor in Spaces for the People in the Philippines.

Considering the human itself to achieve quality in common spaces.



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1 Introduction

As part of the Urban Shelter course a three-week visit to Manila, Philippines was programmed in February 2015. The goal of this activity was to get in touch with people from all areas in order to get a better understanding of the city and its parties.

During this time, we conducted visits and interviews to professionals, households and members of organizations (governmental, NGOs, religious) which help us with information about the reality in Manila.

This way we got to know the city in a very particular way, meeting most of the actors that participate in the different scenarios and contexts, and getting conclusions that other way we couldn't had achieved.

We observed that the housing situation in Manila, the Philippines, has been getting worse every year. The aim should not only satisfy the needs of housing (because Manila is over populated) but to improve the people's condition, offering a better environment to live.

Also, the role of the architects and users all along the process of creating a new housing project is important, is the way in which a building really satisfy the needs and means something to the users.

The problem is that most projects in Manila have been designed with a poor intervention of the future users and/or architects, having as a result buildings with no human scale, lack of common spaces and only providing a minimum of space to live in.

This paper aims to analyze the actual situation of the common spaces in some projects in Manila, and how those spaces could be improved to serve in a better way to the users offering places to rest and in which they could perceive an appropriate use for their own benefit.

2 Literature Review

The fact that good design (actually) has a therapeutic value¹ (Casselmann, 2008) is not a recent discover or appliance of knowledge. It has been discussed since the 60s under other terms, but still making reference on how the built environment affects the perception of the space. The space, and mainly the house, have been linked to the culture of the people (Rapoport, 1969), looking at it as "an institution, not just a structure limited by the cultural matrix"; concept in which is reflected how thoughts and needs of the people are applied into the architecture.

Not only the psychological aspect benefits from a well thought design, when a space is designed to provide informal contact among the residents the children are better supervised and people enjoy the space much more (Jacobs, 1961). So is the need to create an interpersonal relationship which determines the success of a space, in the way that if it serves as intended people will make use of it and interact between them as well. This is what Jane Jacobs called "Social Capital".

Later on the relation between the humanistic and scientific fields are explored and defined (Rapoport, 1982) giving EBS (Environment-Behaviour Studies) and EBR (Environment-Behaviour Relations) a main part of the study on how to design needs the surrounding and the people to have a good implementation.

¹ Michael Alvidrez, architect. Executive director for Skid Row Housing Trust, based on Los Angeles, California, United States of America.

One way in which people won't face stressful situations in a building is creating a balance between five dimensions: *stimulation, coherence, affordances, control* and *restorative* (Evans & Mitchell, 1998). These dimensions includes a wide conjunction of qualities that offers character to a place which can support specific activities that improves the user's experience in a period of time.

The relationship between several axes has also been studied in a urban level (Jackson, 2002) understanding how the design should influence into three spatial scales (physical and mental health, and social and cultural vibrancy) as well as the way the outer and open spaces are a positive influence in the behaviour of the users, promoting informal contact and activities in such spaces.

3 Argument, Critique or Discussion

The five architectural dimensions mentioned previously represent a start point to analyze the actual situation of the housing in Manila. Each of this dimensions have a variety of components, which will be explained, analyzed and looked in the Filipino context.



Illustration 1. Taguig City, Metro Manila, The Philippines. Project by: Gawad Kalinga. Use of colorful facades. (photo: DARC)

Stimulation, is set by the amount of information present in some place. This information needs to be balanced in order to not cause boredom or distraction; the stimulation can be achieved in a visual or acoustic way, both influenced by configuration, circulation systems and the individual's location in space (Evans & Mitchell, 1998).

Complexity and mystery is the duality which determines the way users will receive information from the place. But, both qualities should not be over-present, in order to avoid insecurity in the user's perception.



Illustration 2. Quezon City, Metro Manila. Project by: Phinma Properties. "Endless" corridors leading to units. (photo:DARC)



Illustration 3. Barangay Commonwealth, Metro Manila. Project by: NHA. Use of different colours to identify each building. (photo: DARC)



Illustration 4. Quezon City, Metro Manila. Project by: VASRA. Facades change their composition, making it easy to get oriented. (photo: DARC)

For most cases in Manila the spaces are already set and at plain sight, lacking of some mystery for the user to *rediscover* the place. Also the projects are simple and there is no interaction between the user and the space, making them monotonous.

Coherence, is well related to the user's ability to get oriented in one place (indoors or outdoors), as well as with the organization presented in the disposition of buildings or corridors inside them.

The coherence also takes into account the complexity, which should be very low so the user can get its own conclusions about the surrounding in which he/she is. The shape of the spaces and the geometry of the buildings (in the layout or facades) is also important to not overstimulate the users' perception and cause a confusion or frustration.

Maybe this has been well accomplished in housing projects in Manila because most of them have an orthogonal layout, making it easy to know where you are and which way to go. The problem may be that, as mentioned before, the surroundings becomes monotonous as all the buildings or the inner corridors are the same.



Illustration 5. Manila, Metro Manila. The necessity of people developed a new use of the public space. (photo: DARC)



Illustration 6. Pasig City, Metro Manila. Project by: NHA. Locked community services. (photo: DARC)



Illustration 7. BASECO, Metro Manila. People makes use of what they found to define the owned space. (photo: DARC)

Affordances, is basically the ability of the user to understand the function of a space, for which the space should be clear on its intentions and provide the services it is supposed to provide.

A very polyvalent space could be misunderstood for having so many functions but at the end it is not used in the way it should. Defining a space, with furniture or directions to let the users understand its value is enough, always trying to stick into the simplicity of actions.

The functions of the spaces are well defined in Manila, especially in housing projects. The issue is the lack of spaces that serve for community use, as much of the space in a project is dedicated to the housing part, parking space and few basic services for the community.

Control, is the ability to either alter the physical environment or regulate exposure to one's surroundings (Evans & Mitchell, 1998). The main concepts taking part in this dimension are flexibility, privacy and symbolic elements, which in conjunction creates a space that can be managed by the users without any problem.



*Illustration 8. Smokey Mountain, Metro Manila.
Project by: NHA. Sense of control/security achieved
by the use of metal fences in windows and doors.
(photo: DARC)*

As a physical manifestation of control, the density and volume of a space plays a big role in how it is developed and used. Robert Sommer (1969) proposed the basic control of a space by the set-up of furniture, defining Sociopetal and a Sociofugal arrangement. The first one encourages the interaction by the use of movable components, eye contact and comfort while in the place; the

arrangements of the second configuration are inflexible, with inappropriately interpersonal distances and discouraging social interaction (Sommer, 1969).

This might be one of the less dimensions taken into account in Manila, having so many problems in matters of define “what is mine and what is not”. Maybe in recent projects that boundary is present, but in previous projects it has been missed, developing into bad neighbourhoods (problems between families, things missing, break ups in houses, etc.).



*Illustration 9. SHEC, Metro Manila.
Project by: Rogationists of the Heart of
Jesus. Implementation of greeneries
outside the units, the owners take care
of it. (photo: DARC)*

Restorative, is the quality a place have that can serve the user with a therapeutic value, reducing fatigue and other stress factors. Providing spaces to retreat or in which to be exposed to nature is one way to give the human being time and space to recover.

The most common way to deal with stress is to link the inside and outside visually, so the boundaries between the user and the unit or building will be less solid and more permeable. Having green spaces outside units/buildings have a positive impact in the way users’ perception works, granting them a better environment to live and a space to share and enjoy (Jackson, 2002).



Illustration 10. Smokey Mountain, Metro Manila. Project by: NHA. Room in a loft, very limited space. (photo: DARC)

There is a lack of this kind of spaces in Manila. First reason, small units (24 m² for 5 or more persons), which mostly have one bathroom, kitchen space, one room and a multifunctional space (used as living and dining room). Then, the dimension of the buildings is set in a way that only the most basic services of the users are solved, which means no meeting points inside the building. The interest of the organizations in charge of new housing projects are always concerned about the costs of the building, rather than focusing in the needs of the users.

4 Urban Shelter Design

The following points are the result of the analysis from the theory, always taking in consideration the social and psychological influence a change will bring to the perception of the space.



Illustration 11 A community hall which allows activities inside of it instead of parking space.

As response to Affordances:

The spaces that have been assigned to serve other type of users (vehicles in this case) should be modified in order to give space for the residents to meet.

Defining the real function of a space will increase the interest of the people on it, as well as triggering a sense of belonging.

As response to Stimulation:

Some projects we visited have a nice space which could be improved with simple interventions. Creating some shadow for people to enjoy the view in terraces is a way to impulse the use a space.



Illustration 12 Putting some shading devices will increase the use of a place previous "dead".

This kind of interactions promote the informal contact with neighbors, creating links and a best sense of security when you know who is living around you.



Illustration 13 Cedar Crest. Project by: DMCI. Common green space in a high storey. (photo: GXOR)



Illustration 14 Greenery makes a big difference and impact in the perception of the space.

As response to *Restorative*:

From a personal point of view the *Restorative* factor is the most important to develop in a new project. As housing projects in Philippines tend to pack large amounts of people in small spaces, the environment should provide spaces in which they can “reset” their state of mind.

°A good example present in a project by a private developer (Cedar Crest, by: DMCI) is a common-green space in a high storey. Such spaces bring a different feeling inside a building, as mentioned in the theory, they offer better quality not only to the place but mostly to the users. This solution also allows the light to get to the corridor of the building, having brighter spaces inside.

The point is not only to create open empty spaces. The spaces should also have some “personality” and give something to people making use of it. Greenery is a way in which an empty wall could achieve a better aesthetic, and as shown in various studies plants improve the condition of the users, as they help to reduce the levels of stress.

5 The Role of Architects

It is a big responsibility for us to understand the context in which a project is going to be developed, because that's the only way we can propose something that will satisfy and serve the real needs of the users.

Visit the site, get in touch and get to know the people, communicate with them and understand their situation, and create links in the communities is the most effective way to propose a project with a solid base that aims the real needs of the users, instead of make decisions from a desk.

Even if it is not an usual thinking among architects, it should be encouraged to develop in order to guarantee the satisfaction of needs for the people is going to be living in a project. As well, the connection between organizations and future users would develop into a better project, with the application of ideas, concepts and criterias gathered by both parties, creating a strong base for the project.

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² DARC: David Alejandro Criollo, Urban Shelter 2015, Ecuador.

³ GXOR: Gaudy Xiomara Orejuela Ronquillo, Urban Shelter 2015, Ecuador.

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