God Builds:

Faith and Social Capital within Low-income Filipino Communities

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1. Introduction

The inside of the church was almost as impressive as its Disney-esque outside. The main nave was decorated with colourful geometrical patterns and furniture in the finest wood. To top it off, giant sized chandeliers were hanging from the octagonal dome, making the room look more like a ball room in some Russian oligarch's palace than a place of worship. The preacher's words in Tagalog were answered by the almost 7000 people strong voice of the congregation with a more universally understood "Amen". With every sentence their voices became more and more passionate, until finally, the sermon reached its climax as the preacher broke in to tears. Soon everybody around us were crying, still feverishly answering the call of the preacher, now cracked by his weeping.

-Personal reflections from a sermon at Iglesia ni Cristo central temple

In February of 2016 as part of my architectural degree I took part in a study-trip to Manila with the goal to understand how the government and NGOs work with the provision of shelters for the urban poor. Coming from Sweden, one of the most secular countries in the world (WVS, 2015) I was surprised by the importance religion seems to play in everyday Filipino life. was my first contact with Filipino, and South-East Asian, culture but also a step towards the realisation that religion and spirituality still matters in most peoples lives.

   The sixth edition of World Value Survey, released in 2015, is a proof of this. Their findings suggest that a huge part of the worlds population place a larger emphasis on *traditional values* (e.g. religion and family) than on *secular-rational* ones. The findings also suggest that there is a direct link between the emphasis on traditional values and GDP per capita, as many of the developing and least developed countries are present on this side of the spectrum . The Philippines is not an exception. According to recent data 98.1 % of Filipinos say that their faith is a very or rather important part of their lives. In Sweden the corresponding figure was 26.2% (WVS, 2015).

   Due to the Filipino government's inability to care for its population the religious institutions, most prominently the Roman Catholic Church, have since long been partly burdened (or blessed), with the responsibility to provide welfare, housing and basic services for the poor whose problems are often neglected by the government. However great of a responsibility, this relationship between a trusted

authority and its subjects must also immensely affect peoples lives, their values and their allegiance.

In this essay I have, with the help of numerous sources, problematised and investigated *how faith can build social capital in urban poor areas.* The essay is focused on the Philippines but I have also tried to take a more general and global perspective on the matter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Faith and Nation

According to several scholars Catholicism has been one of the, or even *the*, strongest cultural influences on Filipino society of the last 400 years (Cherry, 2013). It was brought to the archipelago with the Spanish colonisers during the 16th century. When Magellan arrived in 1521 he found the islands inhabited by and divided among dozens of different ethnolinguistic groups, with languages as well as cultural and religious customs of their own. Arranged in countless independent villages, so called *barangays* (still present in modern-day Filipino political structure) the decentralised area was no match for the expanding Spanish empire. Due to the presence of Islam within the Malay-archipelago the catholic monarchs of Spain saw the colonisation as an extended part of the *Reconquista*, the reconquest of former Moorish lands in the name of the Christian God (Hawkley, 2014). One could therefore assume that larger emphasis was put in establishing a Christian society here than elsewhere; effectively converting the indigenous, empowering the clergy and spreading the story of the Christian-Moro antagonism. 250 years after the establishment of the colony the archipelago had undergone dramatical changes:

> "A multiethnic community had come together to form the colonial beginnings of a someday nation: the Philippines. The powerful influence of Christian-Moro antagonisms on the formation of the early Philippines remains evident more than four hundred years later, as the Philippine national government continues to grapple with Moro separatists groups, even in 2013." (Hawkley, 2014)

In more recent times, the Roman Catholic Church acted as a key player during the 1986 uprisings against the Marcos regime, the so called *People Power*

Revolution, uniting the people under the flag of democracy while enlarging its significance in Filipino political life (Cartagenas, 2010). The deep connection between Catholicism and the creation of the colony as well as the Filipino nation explains the Roman Catholic church's uncontested role as a majority religion in present day Philippines. As Cherry notes, "[...] being Filipino has almost become synonymous with being Catholic as an ethnically fused religious identity" (Cherry, 2013).

About 85% of the population refer to themselves as Catholics and more than half of the adult population attend church on a weekly basis. The Pope is widely idolised and still considered one of the most trusted authorities (Cherry, 2013). Whether this relationship has changed due to a clash between the, generally, deeply conservative views of the Filipino catholic congregations and Pope Francis relatively liberal views is yet to be evaluated.

2.2 Faith and community

In the previous section I gave an historical overview of the importance of the Roman Catholic Church and the creation of a Filipino national identity. In this section I will zoom in to discuss the current and future role of faith within the smaller Filipino community.

2.2.1 Altruism

In a 2012 *the New York Times* debate article chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks of *the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth* argues for the continuing need of religion as a builder of community and trust. In it he, with the surprising help of Darwin, praises the human virtue of altruism which makes it possible for us to form complex groups and networks. This is the reason, he explains, why the human race came out on top in the evolutionary game. It is also the reason why religion has survived in an individualistic world largely driven by science (Sacks, 2012).

"It [religion] reconfigures our neural pathways, turning altruism into instinct, through the rituals we perform, the texts we read and the prayers we pray. It remains the most powerful community builder the world has known. Religion binds individuals into groups through habits of altruism, creating relationships of trust strong enough to defeat destructive emotions." (Sacks, 2012)

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The author then refers to one of the foremost authorities on the subject of *social capital*, prof. Robert D. Putnam, whose publications in the 90's sparked a debate still very much alive today.

2.2.2 Social Capital

Although the concept that underlies the term *Social Capital* has been a part of discussions regarding democracy and society going back to at least the beginning of the 19th century it was not fully defined until 1988, by sociologist James Coleman. He described it as " (⋯) any informal network of relationships between people that is useful to those people in accomplishing their goals" (Allen Hayes, 2002).

 With this definition he implies that something which is positive for the smaller group can have a neutral, negative or positive effect on society as a whole. The term was used by various thinkers such as Jane Jacobs, emphasising the positive value of social networks in the city, and Pierre Bourdieu who used it in a more negative way, describing how social capital can produce and reproduce inequality e.g. through nepotism and corruption (Wikipedia, 2016).

 When the political scientist Robert D. Putnam released his first works on the matter during the early 90's, he chose to see social capital in the more positive light. His findings showed that USA during the second half of the 20th century had undergone a rapid decline in civic engagement, a growing distrust in government and an overall loss of social capital replaced by individualism. In his 2012 book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* he moved on to describe the one place he could find that was still affluent on both civic engagement and social capital: the religious communities. In fact church-going, he found out, was a better predictor of voluntarism and civic engagement than education, gender, income, age or race (Sacks, 2012).

 To deal with the actuality that there are social networks that cause negative effects, such as criminal syndicates and extremist groups, he distinguishes two different kinds of social capital: bridging and bonding. He argues that bonding social capital is much more likely to encourage anti-social behaviour, whereas bridging social capital broadens people's horizons, creates trustful relationships, and encourages people to engage in issues affecting the whole community, not just their own particular needs (Allen Hayes, 2002).

2.2.3 Social Capital, Faith and Urban Shelter

In the 2002 award-winning essay titled *Habitat for Humanity:Building Social Capital Through Faith Based Service* professor Richard Allen Hayes applies and further develops Putnam's findings to the realm of Urban Shelter, examining how a faith-based, christian, organisation like Habitat for Humanity can affect the expansion of social capital in its communities and how this in turn can affect citizen involvement. He questions Putnam's division into a negative and positive group, deeming it too simplified. Instead he argues that social capital should strive to achieve four goals to be considered positive for a community:

1. Mobilise resources that would not otherwise have been mobilised, and use these to address community issues, not constrained by a profit motive.

2. Raise consciousness about community problems among people that otherwise would not be aware of these.

3. Create links between a wide range of people that would otherwise not exist, and thus promote an openness between different races, genders and socio-economic groups.

4. Empower social groups that normally have little influence.

The author then moves on to describe spirituality's, i.e. religion's, role in enhancing social capital, stating that "[..] for many individuals, connections to other human beings are strengthened when placed in the broader context of a belief system that treats the full realisation of the interconnectedness of the human species as fundamental to an understanding of how human beings fit into the cosmos." (Allen Hayes 2002)

   According to the author religious institutions may provide a community of like-minded persons who can help the individual overcome his or her sense of isolation and powerlessness, both through shared ritual, through interpersonal relationships and pooling of tangible and intangible resources. However, Allen Hayes (2002) adds, religion as enhancer of social capital can also be problematic, as some (especially fundamentalist) congregations tend to look inwards rather than outwards and thus isolate themselves.

2.2.4 The Filipino experience – Basic Ecclesial Communities

Throughout much of history the Roman Catholic Church had predominantly been an arena of the rich and powerful. However, after World War II it became evident that the new demands imposed by the modern world required the church to make changes. During the Second Vatican Council between 1962-65 (Vatican II) the church's role was redirected from more concerned with spiritual salvation to a greater commitment to the work for social development and justice (Holden, 2009).

Vatican II sparked an ecclesial engagement in activism with the poor, starting in Latin America and quickly spreading to the Philippines, especially to the island of Mindanao. In the 1970's grass-root driven groups were rapidly being set up the Latin American model of *comunidades eclesiales de base* or Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). This development was intensified due to Ferdinand Marcos's declaration of Martial Law, political repression and finally popular upheaval. In 1991 during the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines the Church committed itself to be a "church of the poor" with the BECs as its primary vehicle for achieving this goal (Holden, 2009).

In the 2009 essay *Post Modern Public Administration in the Land of Promise: The Basic Ecclesial Community Movement of Mindanao*, Dr. William N. Holden describes and evaluates the activity of the BECs of the Mindanao region. He defines them as "[...] small groups of people [generally between 40 and 200 families] who come together to engage in liturgical activities as well as activities to improve their living conditions and to improve society"(Holden, 2009). Although BECs are open to all social classes, the great majority of the members come from the poor classes. According to Father Amado Picardal this is because "[...] there is more of a community among poor people than rich people" (Holden, 2009). Even though some form of self-governing through group democracy usually is in practice, the BECs are not isolated islands, but stand in unity with each other, the local parish, the diocese and the universal church. Many of them have during the years also been able to create close collaborations to NGOs, FBOs and local authorities, acting as sponsors to the BEC-programs (Holden, 2009).

The members live in close spatial and social proximity to each other and the BEC can be seen as standing in sharp contrast to the individualistic, privatised and competitive style that signifies modern (western-imposed) culture. Through activities within the Liturgical- (e.g. bible studies), Developmental- (e.g.

livelihood programs) and Transformative fields (e.g. social action) the BEC aim to cater to the spiritual and material needs of its members while at the same time trying to transform the Filipino society into a better place. All projects are decided by the members and are drawn from their own research of their own needs. This strengthens the democratic dimension of the BECs while empowering the members, making them feel that they "own" the project. The BECs are also involved in the fight for democracy in a larger scale, many of them acting as monitors during elections and controllers of barangay spending and corruption (Holden, 2009).

3. Discussion

3.1 The Issue of Trust

Due to both lack of finances and widespread corruption, Filipinos have an extremely low trust for their government and its officials. In 2009 the Philippines scored a frightening 2.4 on the corruption scale that ranges from 0-10 where 10 is "no corruption". The same year public trust in politicians was down to 1.6 on a 1-10 scale where 10 is *complete trust* (J. Quah, 2010). A common example to illustrate this lack of trust is the use of the term *Trapo* to describe traditional politicians. Trapo also happens to be the Tagalog word for *filthy rag* (Holden, 2009). There is obviously a need for a trusted authority engaged in community-building for urban poor. The question is if this authority can, or even should be, the church?

When I asked one of the associates of TAO Pilipinas, a Manila-based NGO specialised in architecture, what makes a Filipino social housing project successful she answered that collaborating with the church is a well-supported method of establishing trust between housing provider and future residents. TAO Pilipinas have been involved in the establishment of several communities for urban poor, among them the St. Hannibal subdivision, a project initiated by a group of informal settlers in collaboration with the Rogationist Fathers, a Catholic order.

After having visited a number of publicly funded housing projects for the urban poor, St. Hannibal appeared to be a light in the dark. This feeling was strengthened during our interviews with the home-owners, happily telling us

about their involvement in the conceiving, constructing and care-taking phases of the project and how much better their situation had become after relocating to St. Hannibal. If the success of the project had to do with it being erected under "christian flag" was hard to judge. For me it was clear however, that the activities and programs initiated by the Fathers helped to create a tight-knit community and trusting relationships both among house owners and between these and the Rogationist fathers as well as the private sponsors of the project. New bonds had been made, crossing class-borders, effectively making the least powerful a part of civil society.

3.2 The BECs and Social Capital

When I first read Holden's (2009) description of the activities of the BECs it felt like finding the blueprint for Putnam's theories on social capital. The civic engagement that the involvement with the BEC sparks seem to know no bounds, maybe best illustrated by the countless number of hours some of the members, voluntarily, put into safeguarding the democratic system. This outward looking attitude and care for society as a whole would definitely make the BEC a builder of *bonding* social capital.

Although usually consisting of a rather homogenous socio-economic, and probably even more religiously uniform group of people the BEC would in my book also score high on all of Allen Hayes's requirements for deeming if a social capital is positive or negative for the society. The outward looking nature of the BECs not only when it comes to protecting democracy, but also with its possibility to interact with other actors such as NGOs, undoubtedly creates links between a wide range of people, further promoting an openness within society. By coming together, spreading their costs and sharing their resources and experiences the community is able to invest in projects addressed specifically to their needs and wishes, independent of the market or politicians. And since the BEC-members evaluate community-issues themselves they also deepen their understanding of their situation, take control over it and try to better it by providing ingenious solutions that would probably not even be considered by an outsider.

Although I am very positive to the social capital building capabilities of the BEC, the BEC described in the section above must be seen as an utopian archetype or prime example. In reality things are always more complicated, and in

the following section I will discuss some of the limitations the BEC might stand up against.

3.3 The limitations of the BEC

In an essay from 2010 Filipino theologist Aloysius Lopez Cartagenas describes how the results and promises that the early BECs showed have been slowed down by the larger organisation, i.e. the Roman Catholic Church, and its inability to adapt. If the strives to implement the BEC initiative would have been stronger within the leadership of the church it"[...] would have held tremendous impact for renewal of church and democratisation of society" (Cartagenas, 2010). The power structure would have shifted from ministers to the laity, building a sense of community beyond the family and thus affect the whole civil society.

However, as the BEC-program was adopted at highest level in 1991, each diocese was free to interpret it in their own way, often distorting or minimising its holistic, ideological and political framework and instead emphasising the cultic agenda. Instead of working for the greater good of the community and Filipino society it is now common for the BECs to be used as a prolongation of the leaderships agenda in the public sphere and as a display of power during religious processions (Cartagenas, 2010). One reason for this might be that the often left-leaning political initiatives of the BECs are hard to accept for the central organisation, colliding with the Roman Catholic Church's traditional affiliation with and support of conservative politicians. Reports on BECs being infiltrated by the New Peoples Army, a Mindanao-based communist guerrilla, have probably not helped to encourage the church to politically engage its BECs (Holden, 2009).

The Roman Catholic Church is still more connected to the state than civil society, despite its claims of being a church of the poor. The focus on building religious values instead of creating concrete projects to help the members means that the parish priest still holds a powerful position rather than being subordinate to the the laity. Wether or not a BEC is successful in its mission is thus highly dependent on the minister that leads it, proving that popular empowerment is yet to be achieved (Holden, 2009).

3.4 The Sectarian Issue

One of the areas in which the BEC programs have been most successful is preventing catholics from converting to fundamentalist and/or sectarian christian churches. The reason, Holden (2009) argues, is partly due to that the BEC chapels are located close to where its members live, making it truly a part of their community, and partly because the BECs do not impose taxes on its members. However, in the Philippines as a whole there has been a huge conversion to evangelical fundamentalist churches since the 1980s up until today (Holden, 2009). The largest one of these is without comparison Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), an indigenous sect that has attracted roughly 2.5 % of the population (NSO, 2014). Since its foundation in 1913 in Manila it has established itself throughout the archipelago,over all class-borders, posing an evident threat to the Roman Catholic Church (Ando, 1969).

When accepted as a member of the church, the follower has to live by the set of rules created by the INC to not risk expulsion. These include attending two weekly sermons (attendance is checked through a system of stamp cards), no interfaith marriage, refrain from sinful activities (gambling, excessive drinking etc.) and voting however the leadership see fit (Gutierrez, 2014).

One reason for the success of the INC is the rather extensive socio-economic safety system that its followers enjoy. The safety-system includes mutual-aid programs, disaster relief , livelihood programs and gatherings that connect job applicants with employers. This system is described by Hirofumi Ando as early as 1969, when the INC was a tenth of its size today, but also by more recent sources like Al Jazeera's Jason Gutierrez, who also argues that the INC now have deep connections within the most powerful segment of Filipinos, making the sect a major player within both civil- and political society. Both of them describe the various safety nets of the INC as highly centralised, top-down programs originally designed to recruit new members (Ando, 1969, Gutierrez, 2014). Furthermore, much like the BECs the INC try to use the advantage of geographical proximity to tie members to its organisation. Between 2009 and 2015 1091 INC chapels were erected in the Philippines, many of them in direct connection with informal settlements.

The INC is with out of doubt a builder of social capital within the Filipino society. However, the effects of this social capital on the society as a whole could according to Allen Hayes' theories not be seen as anything but negative. The

organisation has managed to mobilise resources that most likely would not otherwise be mobilised (requiring or at least pressuring its fellowship to pay collections and/or tithe). However, due to the INCs grand ambitions of growth, these resources are primarily used to raise the profit of the organisation or attract even more followers marketing their religion with lavish churches and beneficial programs.

The closedness of the sect, both within itself and towards society is yet another problem. Even though members of the INC come from a rather wide backgrounds and socio-economic classes, the strict rules of the leadership and its low tolerance of nonconformity (expressed through threats of expulsion and excommunication), creates an environment where openness is impossible.

My biggest concern with the INC is nonetheless related to Allen Hayes fourth requirement for positive social capital: empower social groups that normally have little influence. At first glance the organisation may be understood as giving poor and marginalised people a stronger voice. However, the demand on its followers to vote as a block completely disregards personal needs and wishes and forcefully removes the rights that the Filipino people won after Marcos's removal from office. Instead the already powerful, i.e the leadership, multiply their political power by a thousand. This is also where the INCs negative effects on society as a whole is most visible. During election season candidates compete over the blessing of the current leader, Eduardo Manolo, and according to Gutierrez (2014), the INC is now big and powerful enough to ensure a win for a candidate in closely-fought election. This means that the voting block of the INC has huge influence on the already mangled Filipino democratic system, and not for the better.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The Role of the Architect

Working for or with an organisation such as a BEC requires a deep understanding of the community issues it strives to rid. After visiting several housing projects in Manila and having done the research for this essay I strongly believe that these issues are best explained by the members of the community, not an external authority such as the Local Government. This means that the architect initially

must take an auxiliary position, at most acting as a guide for the community to go through the process of creating a programme.

It is also important for the architect to understand and evaluate the dynamics and hierarchies of the group. If one or a few people, e.g. the minister and his assistants, always are the ones in charge other members voices are overlooked. To overcome this problem the architect must engage all parties of the community by for example hold interviews or arrange workshops for different subgroups of the BEC (boys, girls, old etc.). If the democratic issue is evaluated as too big it could be wiser not to be engaged with the community. Instead of empowering the people one is trying to help the architect would then risk to play in the hands of the already powerful, further tying them to their masters.

Architects are according to me often overlooking issues of democracy and ethics. The last few decades we have seen an explosion of Western architectural offices working in non or semi democratic countries such as China and Dubai, designing projects that are built by underpaid workers under horrible circumstances and replacing thousands of poor. At the same time our built environment is, along with nature, one of the few things that regards all of us. An intensified collaboration with BECs and similar communities fighting for empowerment can be a way for our profession to break from our ties to authority, and ones again turn our focus to the ones that truly need it.

4.2 Designing for Social Capital

The creation of a BEC or similar community should never be initiated by an architect, or any other outsider for that matter. The community should be allowed to form itself under the umbrella of common values, problems and wishes for a brighter future. Nevertheless I believe that the design of neighbourhoods and houses on some level can promote the formation of such beneficial social networks.

Investing in collective spaces, in and outside of the building, can give the residents a greater opportunity to interact. This interaction might be free or full of conflicts, but even conflict is according to me an agent of mutual understanding. To broaden the traditional Filipino circle of trust, usually restricted to the family, this method can be applied on different levels. From the small balcony shared with the family next door; via the larger terrace where the kids of the building floor play and neighbours meet for a BBQ; to the common allotment gardens and

the community house for which all residents can feel ownership. The collective spaces within a project should be flexible enough to be used in whatever way the community democratically see fit. The following transformation of the spaces as they are modified to fit their decided use should also be community driven, hopefully further strengthening sense of place, ownership and community engagement.

From Allen Hayes (2002) we have learnt that a wide range of people is preferred for a social network or community to act as a positive force within society. Ties between e.g. different genders, races and socio-economic groups are extra valuable as everyones background can bring something different to the table. Even the INC have realised this, using their broad spectrum of followers to for example arrange match-ups between applicants and employers. The closer these ties are the more the groups can benefit from each other. The BEC projects show us that, despite us having entered the age of globalisation and IT, geographical proximity still is the most important factor of community-building. If an architectural project aims to build and sustain social capital this should be highly considered. To give shelter for a mixed group of people, apartment sizes have to vary, maybe not only within the building but on every floor. Provided activities for both children and adults should also be diverse and not only follow a stereotypical pattern.

The size of the community is another factor that should be considered by the designer. "Anthropological evidence suggests that a human group cannot coordinate itself to reach such decisions (coordination of public services, communal land etc.) if its population is above 1500, and many people set the figure as low as 500" (Alexander, 1977). To be able to keep a democratic structure within the community it should be kept rather small, or be divided into sub-communities.

Finally, in a country where trust in authorities is an issue, religion can definitely act as a bond between people. However a belief system should never be forced upon anyone and thus religious features should not be a part of the design if not especially asked for by the community.

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