

From house to home

Memories as a source for making better outdoor spaces in Manila



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1 Introduction

British landscape architect **Claire Cooper Marcus** describes her childhood memory of living in a courtyard with an open space in the middle. *“I recall strongly the powerful sense of enclosure and of group territory in that cobbled courtyard. We children knew it was ‘our space’, and when they told us to stay there, our parents knew where we were”*.

Cooper describes an open space in between buildings. The space wasn't her own private garden or a public square filled with people. It was a semi-private space in a small neighbourhood where children could play freely, and parents could feel safe enough to let them do so because the neighbours knew each other. She claims that the spaces we experience as children establish a preference for which environments we prefer as grown-ups (Cooper Marcus & Sarkassian 1986, p. viii).

This paper focus on the need for semi-public spaces in the social housing areas in Metro Manila in the Philippines. I had the pleasure of visiting the Philippines and interviewing several families in social housing areas about their home and neighbourhood in February 2018. I learnt that the filippino dream is to own your own lot with a garden in the provins. Due to urbanization a lot of people had to move into the city to get closer to work opportunities. The city is trying to keep up with the rapid population growth which leads to small units which can squeeze in as many people as possible (Valenciano 2007, p. 150-152). Building are placed closely together which leaves less room for outdoor spaces and light. Few semi-public spaces in neighbourhoods limit the space for children to play and

neighbours to interact. I want to focus on how to create better open spaces in order to improve the conditions of the urban poor. I want them to be able to create a feeling of ownership outside of the residence, like a shared garden or a field in the province.

2 Literature Review

The Philippines is a tropical archipelago with 7100 islands and is located in southeast Asia. The climate is tropical with monsoons, dry seasons and five to six cyclonic storms each year. The Philippines have several active volcanoes with destructive earthquakes and landslides. The land area reaches approximate 300 000 km² and have a total population of more than 104 million people, while 12,9 million of the population lives in the capital, Metro Manila. The population of Metro Manila is larger than the size of Swedens total population (9,9 million) and have one of the worlds highest densities. A lot of people moved from rural to urban areas which have resulted in overcrowding in the cities, especially in Metro Manila.

The Philippines has not been able to produce enough housing to keep pace with the urban growth, which have resulted in a massive housing backlog. The low-income group has not been prioritized when building new houses and informal housing areas has increased as a result. Overcrowding is a fact when an average family of five is squeezed into units as small as 18 sqm. A lot of the filipino citizens live under the poverty threshold, which means that most people can not afford to buy larger units. Limited unit sizes increases the need for good public spaces where children can play and adults can interact (Valenciano 2007, p. 150-152, 157-158 and The World Fact Book, p. 1-3).

The Philippines have a long history of colonization, which I believe could be one of the many reasons why it is so important for the philippinos to have a secure tenure, to claim their own piece of land. Metro Manila was originally a small muslim tribal settlement ruled by Rajah Sulayman. The spanish came in the early 1500 and colonized the country for 309 years (1521-1898) and moved the capital from Cebu to Manila. The spanish built Intramuros, the walled city, where they resides while the natives lived in the suburbs. By the late 1800 the spanish lost control over the Philippines and the Americans took over. The Philippines became

a self-governing commonwealth in 1935, with elected president Manuel Quezon. The Japanese came in 1942 and the americans and filippinos fought side by side during 1944-45 to regain control. The independence of the republic of the Philippines is 4th of July 1946 when the land was declared free from the US. Ferdinand Marcos ruled the country for twenty years until the people power movement in Manila forced him to excile 1986 and Corazon Aquino was elected as the new president (Ragragio p. 2-3 and The World Fact Book, p. 1-3)

According to the **UN-Habitat** report *Emerging futures*, (2016) housing accounts for more than 70% of the land use in most cities. Housing determines the urban form, densities, employment and economic growth. 881 million people lived in slums 2014 which is an increase of 28% over the past 24 years. A slum can be defined as a “settlement in an urban area in which more than half of the inhabitants live in inadequate housing and lack basic services” . The mass eviction of slum dwellers in various part of the developing world have raised fears of tenure and housing rights for owners without a title. Globalization and a increased gap between rich and poor have forced the lower-income group to the edges of cities where there are few or no services provided (UN-Habitat 2006, p. 19, 49, 92).



Metro Manila from above (Photo: Hilmersson).

3 Field trip to Manila



Ingrid Rabo, myself and Gloria in her 18 sqm unit in Smokey Mountains which she shared with her family. The bars in front of the door and window protects the family from robbery (Photo: Hilmersson).

During the **field trip to Manila** I interviewed both professionals in the field of architecture and local people that had been resettled from slums into social housing areas with secure tenure. I asked them “If you could where would you like to live?” and almost everyone answered “owning a house with a garden in the province” (Interview Smokey Mountains, Interview professionals National Housing Authority). It seems like they share the same ideal home but the city could not provide it for them. I visited several social housing neighbourhoods in the Philippines and the unit size was 18-25 sqm for an average family of five, but some families were even larger. I interviewed a family of 9 who lived in a 18 sqm unit (Interview Smokey Mountains).

While interviewing people I also learnt that most people socialize indoors in their small units and the thing they valued the most in a neighbourhood was safety (Interview St Hannibal). By listening to their answers I could see a need for a safe outdoor place where they could socialize outside their private unit. Most neighbourhoods only had a few public space where activities could take place: a public square with a basketball court and a community center. The basketball court seem to be mostly occupied by teenage boys (Observation Smokey

Mountain). I was looking for a semi-public space where neighbours could sit down and socialize and small children could roam around freely.

Indian architect **Charles Correa** writes about the population growth that lie ahead and the steady growth of the urban cities around the globe. Correa talks about the mismatch between the way cities have been built and how people want to interact and use the space. He claims that architects rather search for miracle materials instead of optimizing density and readjust the land use so people could have more open spaces for activities (Correa 2000, p. 106-107).

Danish architect **Jan Gehl** describes in his book *Life between buildings* (2010) three different types of outdoor activities that can take place in a outdoor environment; necessary-, optional- and social activities. *Necessary activities* describes activities that you have to do, such as going to school or work. You can choose when and if you want to do *optional activities* like taking a walk or sitting on a bench. The *social activities* depends on the interaction with other people, for example seeing or hearing people or greeting a neighbour. Gehl thinks that only a bare minimum of the activities take place in open spaces of poor quality. People choose to go straight home rather than stay and watch and interact with people around them (Gehl 2010, p. 11-13).

4 Argument, Critique or Discussion

The rapid urbanization have resulted in overcrowding in the cities. Lack of housing for the lower income has led to slum areas in the cities. The informal settlers in the Philippines have a constant fear of losing their home. The Filipinos have a history of colonization, which may be one reason why they dream of owning their own land which no one can take away from them. Some settlers choose to move back to their previous site or to another slum area. The reasons could be economical, lack of employments and lack of basic services like schools and hospitals, poor services within the area, few open spaces and small units (Valenciano 2007, p. 150-152). This can be prevented by improving housing and services in existing poor neighborhoods. Residents can gain confidence by getting secure tenure over their properties. They can continue their social and economic network and improve their housing quality over time without being afraid of eviction. Community participation can both preserve resident's sense of belonging

and ensure that they value and look after their neighborhoods (UN-Habitat 2006, p. 62).

It might be a good idea to let people stay in their current communities if they are safe, but some people settle down at dangerous sites that are exposed to natural hazards and must be resettled out of safety reasons. *How do we make resettled people feel at home in their new surrounding?*

Is it possible to create outdoor spaces which feels like an extensions of the limited space inside the unit? I think that it's important to create a sense of ownership with a strong community feeling in the new neighborhoods.

According to Gehl communal spaces at various levels allows movement from smaller spaces towards larger ones. Gehl thinks that residential areas with semipublic, intimate spaces near the

house makes it easier for people to get to know each other, which gives a feeling of security and stronger sense of belonging to areas outside the private residence.

The residential environment can extend beyond the dwelling which can result in a greater use of the open space. Parents may feel more secure and let their children play outside at an earlier age (Gehl 2010. p. 59).



Informal residential area in Quezon City
(Photo: Hilmersson)

Interviews shows that people generally wants to have a house in the province (Interview Smokey Mountain). *How can we get them closer to their ideal home, their childhood memories of the province?* The urban area has limited space for housing and public spaces. I want to focus on the open spaces because they can create a feeling of ownership outside of the residence, like a shared garden or a field in the province. If we include people in the design of the open spaces then we can create something together that everyone can be proud of. The government's standard residential design for low-income projects is a mandatory allocation for parks, playground, basketball court and multi-purpose center according to density. A density of 100 people results in 1 % allocated land for public spaces (Valenciano 2007, p. 150-152, 157-158).

The shared outdoor space need to be flexible so a lot of different activities can take place. I want to create a safe, clean and attractive community with open spaces that people can be proud of and want to protect. Heritage can be a vague subject, but I think that the historical and emotional context such as memories could be an inspiration for creating new urban spaces which people can feel attached to. A lot of settlers is originally from the provinces and by making them remember their favorite childhood spaces they can use them as a resource when creating new ones. It could be wide open spaces, green areas, vegetation and farming. Places they long for but cannot afford. By encourage people to revive their past memories of their favorite spaces they can use their past as an inspiration while creating new shared spaces in the urban context (Valenciano 2007, s. 164). A park can have a spot for growing vegetables or a flat roof can become a new shared kitchen garden, an open space can host a fiesta or religious rituals. By using old memories, people can create new ones and hopefully feel a stronger bond and attachment to their new home. The feeling of home could would reach out of those small units into the open spaces. The locals could design the public park together through volunteerism and create a sense of owning “their own park”. If the public areas is own by everyone then the community share the responsibility for taking care of the public space (Valenciano 2007, p. 161, 164).

I think that the dwellers feelings and memories is a great source for creating good outdoor spaces that they will enjoy and relate to. This feeling of belonging will open up for more social, necessary and optional activities because people want to use and protect “their space”. It might not be a house in the province, but they will have a secure tenure in neighborhoods with open spaces which they together can improve, protect and use as their own. Spaces where children can play, adult can grow vegetables, watch people, overhear conversations, sit on benches, greet neighbors, play hide and seek or pass on their way to school. Spaces where they can dream of the province and create new memories in the urban context.

5 Urban Shelter Design

Some suggestions on how to improve the social housing areas.

- Create open spaces by placing buildings further apart. This will make it possible for multiply open spaces instead of only having one main square.
- Build vertically to allocate more open spaces on ground level but keep the same density in the neighbourhoods. Green slabs and roofgardens can create the feeling of living closer to the ground.
- Create more shaded outdoor places for more activities to happen. It doesn't have to be an actual roof, I would recommend to use materials which the dwellers can use and build themselves, like a bamboo-trellis or textile and ropes.
- Use greenery for shading, better air quality, improved biodiversity, holding water and the making the dwellers proud of their neighbourhood
- Potted plants for growing vegetables and spices. Possible to have a shared kitchen garden in some semi-public spaces which could lower the food cost and increase the community feeling.
- A diversity of benches in different heights and sizes, which would make people stay longer in the semi-public spaces.
- Semi-public spaces in different sizes to create enclosure and more open spaces for a diversity of activities.



Plastic bottles, green shading device (Photo: Hilmersson).



Trees for shading with playful benches (Photo: Hilmersson).

St Hannibal is a successful low-income neighbourhood project designed by TAO Philipinas in collaboration with Saint Hannibal Empowerment Center in Manila. The residents of St Hannibal live in mostly rowhouses and two-story buildings. The front yard with the outdoor kitchen is facing each other and the open space in between the houses function as an outdoor extension of the unit where the children can play and neighbors can interact. The community have a rule that every unit need to take part in making the neighborhoods green, by planting ten potted plants in the stairs or in front of their unit. Everyone takes care

of the shared spaces together which leads to greater community feeling and a well-kept neighborhood that have already lasted more than ten years (Interviews St Hannibal).

6 The Role of Architects

After talking to local architects of the Philippines, Sweden felt like a playground with occasional small natural disasters, plenty of space, low population and just a few squatters. The Philippines have more urgent problems to think about. They have several natural hazards every year which blow away houses, flood streets and buildings, humid climate, bad air quality, rainy seasons, dry season, overcrowding, poverty and so on which leads to complicated housing design. The struggle is real. I remember one professor at the University of Architecture in Manila, Michael Tomeldan, who told us that he feared for the moment someone would call him and tell him that his housing design had failed which resulted in people dying (Professor Tomeldan, Manila School of Architecture). Maybe they couldn't find a way out of the house during a flood or someone miscalculated the durability of the concrete which resulted in a destroyed house.

I am so thankful that I live in a country with a balanced nature with just a few natural hazards. There are people living on the street in Sweden, but it's nothing compared to all the squatters and informal settler of the Philippines. It must be a huge responsibility to provide housing for all those people, but an important and inspiring one.

I think that the role of the architects in the Philippines, but also in Sweden, is to create homes not houses by listening to what people want and wish for. We should not build with economical figures or traffic as the main design source, I believe that housing is about people. People who sleep, cook, take a walk, sits on benches, watches other people, overhears conversations, strolls around in a park, take the bus to work or children playing hide and seek.



Potted plants in the stairway, St Hannibal (Photo: Hilmersson).

I strongly believe that we can learn from our mistake and together share experience and information that can create more safe, resilient, durable, social, environmental friendly and magnificent future homes. Homes where the residents can voice their opinions about their homes and shared public spaces and use their memories and dreams as a resource. Those who want can help out with the construction, plant new trees, sing karakoke on public squares and arrange fiestas to add to the community feeling. We can merge our ideas together and create neighbourhoods that people will cherish and take good care of. When they get older and the grandchildren ask them about their childhood, they will remember these places that we created together. These neighbourhoods will be their precious childhood spaces who will become our inspiration, as architects, for future housing designs.



Future architects in St Hannibal (Photo: Hilmersson).

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Photos

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