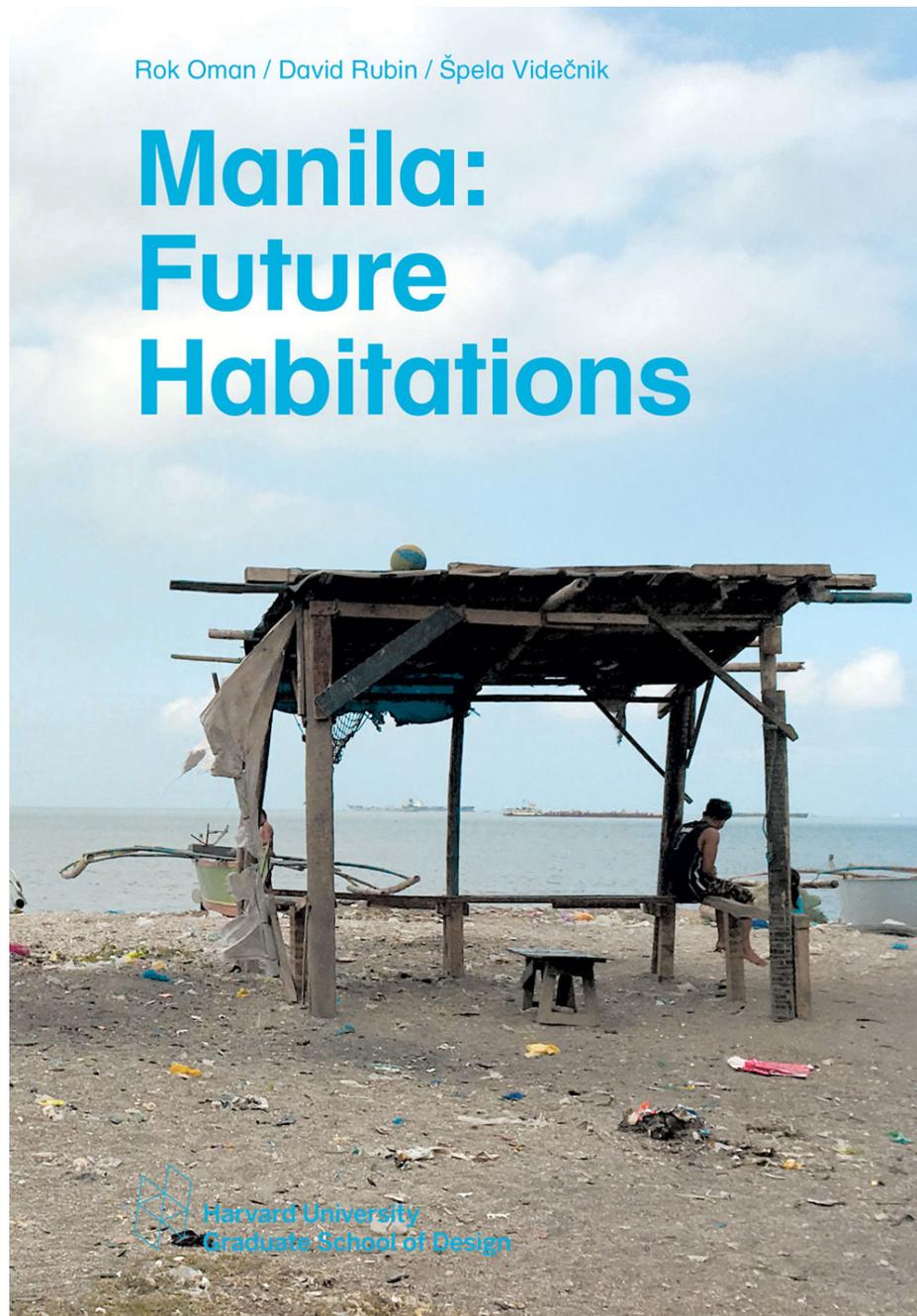


Manila: Future Habitations



Extraordinary cities are diverse in their populations, economic conditions, and opportunities, weaving a fabric of positive conditions holistically. The isolationist gated communities and internal cities of Metro Manila – neighborhoods where independent centers of commerce and population are established – are not sustainable. The trend of Manila developments is increasing the isolation of communities and fostering greater infrastructure challenges realized in elevated traffic and pollution, while increasing the extreme economic conditions that are not resilient.

The studio exploration involved the breadth of design disciplines and research, weaving landscape, architecture, and urbanism. Research, ideation, and the resultant publication, **Manila: Future Habitations**, was shared with Philippine government officials and agencies with oversight in aspiration of positively informing the prospect of change.

REFLECTIONS ON CACOPHONY

“Be prepared for sensory overload! In the city, one experiences extremes of stimulation.” This was our introduction to Manila—a warning issued by one of our AECOM colleagues as we landed for our initial reconnaissance visit in the fall of 2017.

The caution became increasingly real as we traveled over an hour to traverse five kilometers to the hotel—a distance easily negotiated on foot at greater speed, but an impossibility given the infrastructure (or lack thereof) and traffic congestion between the airport and our accommodations.

What we found upon our initial exploration of Manila surpassed that early admonition: extraordinary extremes in so many aspects of living. To circumnavigate the inner city took the entire day, moving slowly through congested passageways and connector roads filled with cars, motorcycles, jitneys, trucks of all sizes, moving lugubriously through the streets and avenues—a perpetual traffic jam. Their exhaust combined with factories and infrastructure made the act of breathing a challenge, irritating the back of the throat, making it tough to swallow, and stinging the eyes. The waterways and tributaries along the Pasig River and along the bulkheads of Manila Bay were rich in the stench of raw sewage, and mired in islands of plastic and garbage. But perhaps the most affecting aspect of this “sensory overload” was the extremes of living conditions and the disparate accommodations for those of economic challenges.

How can future habitation support this economically-challenged community aspirational of a positive future without displacement or eradication of what is inherently good about the difficult environment in which they live?

As Spela Videcnik and I toured the city in search of an area upon which to focus the studio, it was clear there was nothing we could do, even as a multi-disciplinary design studio aimed at problem-solving, to comprehensively improve these challenging conditions. The sensory overload was overwhelming. Too much. Too much trash, too much pollution, too much traffic and congestion, and too many people, most of them impoverished. An entire social construct where few have too much wealth, while far more have nothing.

But as sensory overload was tempered by additional time and thoughtfulness, the overwhelming scale of the scenario became more manageable. With review of city maps, a confluence was identified wherein four distinctly different but significantly impactful conditions meet. They represented in individuality and in collective adjacency many of the challenges facing this extraordinary city and so many other growing metropolises across the globe: elevating population density, acute economic extremes, a post-colonial legacy, multicultural palimpsests, pollution, rising

sea levels, spontaneous settlements, and civic engagement. Upon review, the sites selected were identified as the Baseco, a densely populated spontaneous settlement formed on the detritus of landfill set within Manila Bay; the Port, Manila’s infrastructure for commerce that positioned truck traffic in the core of the city; the Intramuros, the city’s Spanish colonial fortification whose interior architecture is an imagined post-war reconstruction of what American bombing had destroyed; and the Pasig Riverfront, Manila’s contaminated brackish fluvial connection from Manila Bay to Laguna de Bay.

As identified, the selected areas of study represent in microcosm much of Metro Manila’s greatest challenges: the convergence of transport and infrastructure; colonial settlement, post-industrial urbanism; and extreme habitation; the union of past and future histories (the colonial outpost of Intramuros, Daniel Burnham’s Beaux Arts implementation, and infill of the Bay to create more land); as well as water’s edge, both river and bay, and the inherent challenges associated with sea level rise, a need for biological diversity, and elevated environmental degradation. And a site that represents the breadth of a challenged population, from spontaneous settlements to an ever-shrinking middle class.

Within the colonial constructs of the Intramuros is a diverse population comprised of daily office workers, tourists, students, and settlements of citizenry who have staked a claim for themselves in-between the formal grid of an urbanism redefined after the bombardment and decimation by American bombing in World War 2. The architecture of the site is not genuine. Rather, it is in response to a need to re-establish an identity for the colonial fortification, offering tourists and nationalists an understandable identity. Around the Intramuros perimeter, the former defensive moat was transformed into a semi-private golf course – a use of limited purpose.

The proposed interventions attempt to address the challenges of habitation within the walls - a solution is sought to give place to those that have no “formal” habitation, and to reinforce community, to establish key linkages both within and without the walls, to reimagine the sacred spaces for communal engagement and to redefine the singular use of the links into working infrastructure that serves many and in multi-purpose.

Working within the vernacular, a new housing typology is derived from the tradition of the “bahay,” one that attempts to engage community and give opportunity to positively inform habitation while establishing identity through creativity, rather than through historicism. On the sites of lost sacred spaces, the use of indigenous bamboos give form and space to ritual matriculation and thoughtful contemplation. The team established a new vision for the limited engagement and expansive golf course, replacing the singular use with a park that balances infrastructure and water cleansing properties with equitable social engagement. The new surround complements the adjacent City Beautiful construct with a 21st century progressive parkland that establishes Manila as a forward-thinking and enviable metropolis.

As one of the world’s most populous cities set within an island environment, Manila is dependent upon manufacture and trade. The Port of Manila is presently situated at the northern shores of its historic core, creating an unceremonious conclusion to Burnham’s esplanade and isolating the IntraMuros in solitude along the Pasig River. A walled construct, itself, the Port’s truck traffic and diesel engines add to the eternal congestion of Manila’s roadways and feed the ever increasing, pollution-heavy air. In a move to reduce the congestion and liberate the waterfront, The Port team reconsiders value of commerce against the opportunity for increased and diversified habitation, uninterrupted access to the water’s edge, as well as increased protections against sea level rise and storm surges. In a balancing act of industry and urbanism, the team revisits the expanse of the site in search of establishing a new community capable of providing future habitation for the breadth of the citizenry, with aspiration of accommodating a missing middle class. The connective tissue is the equitable asset which brings the new neighborhood together.

The Pasig River connects Manila Bay with Laguna Bay 22-kilometers to the east. An underutilized asset, the brackish river is highly polluted and clinging to life as part of the region’s ecological systems. Access to the river is limited and barely desirable given the pollutant and contamination levels, and yet, it has the potential to be a socially-purposeful asset, connecting neighborhoods and giving communities identity along a long, sinuous thread, and a revived environmental element in support of the region. The Pasig River team envisions a river of floating forms that serve to redefine the social edge and embankment of the river while providing incremental and additive water-cleansing and habitat mechanisms. In this construct, people are invited to experience the river as an asset wherein episodic elements amalgam to form infrastructure for boat and ferry traffic, for markets, performance venues, and socially-purposeful constructs to give Filipinos the opportunity to experience the river in a manner not dissimilar to the early settlers of the region. It is not enough to apply artifice along a river’s edge to instigate developmental change. Such an approach might temporarily address the challenges aesthetically, but would fail to drive a needed, long-term mindset shift about the value of the river and its ecosystem. As described here, constructs must include elements to engineer change in support of life in all its forms,

however incremental – ecological and social interventions that are seamlessly interwoven to positively inform habitation and development holistically. Here, small interventions aggregate to inform big changes.

Within The Baseco, a spontaneous settlement built upon layers of detritus and landfill forming new ground in Manila Bay, the structures are largely comprised of materials found or purchased through minimal economic means. But within the rabbit warren of passageways and limited infrastructure, there is a genuine and thriving community. One need only walk through the narrow corridors to find neighborhoods of people aspirational of a positive future and responding to their challenges with sincere pride and fortitude. How can future habitation support this economically-challenged community aspirational of a positive future without displacement or eradication of what is inherently good about the difficult environment in which they live? Envisioned here, the Baseco team explores the spectrum of opportunities for redefining future habitation: through a modular architecture that supports the relative permanence of ephemeral necessities: water, energy, life-supporting infrastructure; and through the super-structure of an exoskeleton that offers similar opportunities to reinforce the necessities of life but in support of the eccentricities of individual and collective dwellings. In both cases, the landscape is the connective tissue that embraces the community as a whole. It is productive, increasingly resilient, embracing of life and the expanse of the people it supports.

It is clear that incremental, additive application is what is needed to truly render a positive impact

Evolutionary change begins with a catalytic spark—a moment in which the tipping point shifts from one destiny to another. Through the process of study, it is clear that incremental, additive application is what is needed to truly render a positive impact. In the construct of the Manila studio, the challenge became quickly evident: what obstacles can also be opportunities? In its present state, inequity and separation are manifest in the city’s organization and the resultant divisions. In the studio’s explorations, inventive solutions become the identity of Manila: design problem-solving in which citizenry can see themselves as integral to the prospective positive outcome. They are Manila.

In the face of all of the challenges identified by the students of this studio, the overriding goal was to positively inform the human condition. There is a place for everyone in a well-designed city. The goal of the studio was to find a better condition than what is prevalent, and to work with the constraints of the existing

conditions to find opportunity for all—not only for human habitation, but the unification of all systems, natural and man-made, into a harmonious whole. Aspirationally, there is a new urban condition that is realized in a unified fabric of dwellings and public spaces, where infrastructure and accessibility are not mutually exclusive, but rather supportive of the common good. The goal of the studio is to recognize opportunity and demonstrate how, through urbanization, the stratification of the economic conditions can be reconsidered into a new model, one where there is a greater opportunity through a variety of housing types, significant and valuable public spaces, and infrastructure that allows for productivity and a future of opportunity.

At the conclusion of the studio, it became clear that, even in what can be perceived as overwhelming circumstances—the sensory overload that is everyday life for so many—there are strategic opportunities. Incremental steps might support significant positive change, and the network of imagined interventions embraced the cacophony of stimulation head on. And although not every issue was resolved, penultimate visions established a direction to follow.

If there is future study, the next steps would be to consider in greater detail the connections between the project areas, to understand more completely how and where the inherent issues overlap and intermingle. A necessity of future aspirations is the need to stitch the sites together, and to demonstrate how these distinctly different urban experiences—urban fabrics—can be made whole cloth. They will be ideas worth exploring further to see where and how they might positively inform other locations, not just in Manila, but throughout the globe. Therein lies the ultimate challenge: tangents become aligned cohesively, representing a new vision of Manila and Future Habitations, everywhere.