

## Not My Manila Anymore

I was born in prewar Manila, in 1939. Growing up, I often heard older cousins, aunts, uncles and family friends refer to the 1930s as “peacetime,” the best of times. We were a Commonwealth, with a government of elected Filipino officials, an American Governor General, all under the aegis of the United States of America. The Field Marshal of the Philippine Army was no less than former U.S. Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur. Our safe haven was an illusion that was soon to be shattered.

Manila is a small, compact city, first laid out by the Spanish regime, who constructed an enclave called Intramuros. After the American fleet decimated the Spanish Navy and later, the Filipino army of the First Philippine Republic, the American regime started the work to create a Philippines “In Our Image.” First was an urban plan designed by no less than Daniel H. Burnham. He also created a plan for Baguio, the Philippine summer capital located at an altitude of 5,000 ft. in the Mountain Province. Mr. Burnham had a hand in the design of Chicago, IL as well as Washington, DC. Both Baguio and Chicago have a Burnham Park. He designed notable buildings in New York City. The quotation “*make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood*” is attributed to Burnham. Thus, the Manila of the 20th century had a world class city planner. The federal government in Washington DC had grand designs for its newly acquired colony. There would be wide, tree lined main thoroughfares, neoclassical government buildings and a boulevard along Manila Bay, with unobstructed views of the water.

The Spanish regime had bequeathed to its former colony some invaluable crown jewels. Manila was first declared the capital of the Spanish East Indies in 1571 by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi. The University of Santo Tomas was founded by the Dominicans (OP or Order of Preachers) in 1611. The medical school was started in 1871. The Philippines national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, started his medical studies there. Shortly after the founding of Santo Tomas, the Dominicans founded another school, Colegio de San Juan de Letran, in 1620. There were other schools, such as the Jesuit Ateneo de Manila, founded in 1859, the Christian Brothers De La Salle in 1911, and my alma mater, the Benedictine Colegio de San Beda, a relative newcomer founded in 1903. There were women’s schools as well, mostly founded by religious orders. Manila Bay was a natural port, with stunning sunsets. Pan American Airways had a service to Hawaii and California, taking off and landing its Clipper flying boat on the bay. Manila was truly The Pearl of the Orient. But WWII, the Japanese occupation and the Battle of Manila in February 1945 changed it all.

I walked to San Beda College, less than a kilometer away from our house. It is on Mendiola St., site of four other schools. My sister and a cousin went to Holy Ghost (now Holy Spirit) College; another cousin went to Centro Escolar University. But now the area is under the Malacañang presidential palace security zone, ringed by checkpoints manned by M-16 armed soldiers. Back in December, the sentry wouldn't even let us through since we were not residents or having some official business. We just wanted to pass by our old house. We could have lied and said we were going to church, and we would have been permitted to enter provided the driver surrendered his license.

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In the ensuing decades, government buildings were rebuilt, but the master plan of Burnham went by the wayside. There's been talk about reviving them, but Filipino politicians are good at verbal grand plans that never materialize. Today, Manila is overcrowded, garbage strewn, seedy, with a patina of grime on most buildings. The Pasig River, which bisects the city, was declared devoid of life years ago. Only pathogenic bacteria survive its fetid waters. Manila holds the dubious distinction of being the most densely populated city in the world. With the worst traffic. Yet people continue to flock and condominiums keep rising from its swampy bowels. A city meant for 300,000 is now home to 1.7 million, and growing. For perspective, the population of Manila is slightly larger than that of Philadelphia, PA. But Philly's area is ten times that of Manila.

Google "most densely populated cities" and Manila comes to the top of the list. But some of its neighbors, parts of Metro Manila, aren't far behind. Of the 45 or so most dense cities and municipalities, no less than 9 are in the metro Manila area.

The center of gravity has shifted from Manila. The legislature is in Quezon City, the financial hub is Makati. The shopping centers consisting of hundreds of thousands of square meters of mall space are everywhere. Malls may be on the decline in the United States, but not in the Philippines. The town square has been replaced by the mall. You don't even have to look for a church to fulfill your Sunday Mass obligation. Every mall has a Catholic chapel, with regular Masses on Sundays. The Landmark mall in Quezon city has a chapel that would be the envy of parishes anywhere. Unlike most churches, the mall chapels have central air.

In front of the historic Quiapo church (founded in 1586) is Plaza Miranda. This was a favorite venue for the politicians of the postwar era to hold their campaign rallies. If you were running for office, this was the first campaign stop. The bombing of a political rally in Plaza Miranda led to Ferdinand Marcos' imposition of martial law in 1972. Today you can't even see the plaza, it is occupied by street vendors. They have even spilled over onto the surrounding narrow streets.

The Manila metro area consists of sixteen cities and municipalities - Quezon City, Pasay, Caloocan, Navotas, Pasig, Makati, etc. Every neighborhood seems to have gates and security guards. Incoming drivers and pedestrians have to show an ID. Properties are ringed by concrete walls topped off by broken glass, barbed wire or electrified.

High rise condominiums have sprouted everywhere. But most units are less than 500 square feet. That's not a typo, some units are even smaller, about 300 sf., smaller than our living room. They sell for the equivalent of \$200 per square foot. Most of the buyers are Filipino expatriates.

Manila reminds me of Clean Curtains, a poem by the American poet Carl Sandburg. It tells the story of a family who moved to a new house and installed clean white curtains. But the dust and dirt overcame the curtains, which the family then took down.

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I am being overly critical. But other cities brushed off greater tragedies and rebuilt without turning their city into a teeming concrete encampment. The Polish city of Warsaw was leveled by the Germans after the uprising in 1944. What was left standing was deliberately destroyed. It was not collateral damage but calculated, wanton destruction. Not one human being lived in Warsaw after its destruction. Yet today, it is totally rebuilt. The old section, called Stare Swiat, dating back to medieval times, was reconstructed to exactly its former glory. Need I mention cities that were firebombed during WWII, or the scene of prolonged horrific battles.

Manila has much to offer. It has a rich history, with enduring institutions. Intramuros has mostly been restored. Inside Intramuros are the Ayuntamiento (city hall); San Agustin, the oldest church in the Philippines, completed in 1607; and the Manila Cathedral. The colleges and universities I mentioned before are thriving, building satellite campuses outside the city. The district of Binondo lays claim to being the oldest Chinatown anywhere, with the best street food. Check out Anthony Bourdain's trips to Manila. The Galleon Trade between Manila and Acapulco went from 1565 to 1810. It was a perilous months long journey. The galleons littered the oceans with sunken treasure, some recovered by intrepid treasure hunters. One of the malls is constructing a Galleon Museum with a full sized replica. I can hardly wait.

Concerned Manileños, past and present, have formed groups to try and influence its rebirth. Facebook's Manila Nostalgia has grown to thousands of members. They keep a constant drumbeat to restore Manila and keep its heritage buildings from being demolished. Progress is being made to restore the Pasig and its tributaries. Once they're cleaned, Manila Bay would follow. Perhaps it will be my Manila once again.

In the meantime, there's still that stunning sunset.

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