

# **Wise, Edwin, *Manila, City of Islands: A Social and Historical Inquiry into the Built Forms and Urban Experience of an Archipelagic Megacity*<sup>1</sup>**

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A recurring comparison in Philippine politics is between the nation and our sovereign city-state neighbor, Singapore. One of the previous administration's lesser controversial headlines was the comparison to Singapore, especially amidst mounting criticisms during the height of the illegal drug crackdown.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the current president alleged that his father, the former president-turned-dictator, could have turned the Philippines into another Singapore had the 1986 EDSA Revolution not happened.<sup>3</sup> What this erroneous and pretentious comparison fails to

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<sup>1</sup> Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019, 238pp.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wilson Lee Flores, "Many investors see Duterte as the Philippines' Lee Kuan Yew," in *The Philippine Star* (38 August 2016), <<https://www.philstar.com/lifestyle/business-life/2016/08/29/1618110/many-investors-see-duterte-philippines-lee-kuan-yew>> and Rudy Romeo, "A tale of two mayors: Duterte & Lee Kuan Yew," in *Manila Standard* (7 June 2016), <<https://www.manilastandard.net/opinion/columns/business-class-by-rudy-romero/207528/a-tale-of-two-mayors-duterte-lee-kuan-yew.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> See Ping Galang, "Could Marcos have been a Lee Kuan Yew?," in *GMA News Online* (5 March 2011), <<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/opinion/content/214584/could-marcos-have-been-a-lee-kuan-yew/story/>> and Satur C. Ocampo, "Lee Kuan Yew on Marcos and the politics of the elite," in *Philippine Star* (15 April 2016),

consider is the sheer size of the states, with Singapore just being about a hundred square kilometers larger than the entirety of Metro Manila, a simplification of both the complexity and depth of the Philippine landscape. I find this an opportune start to my book review of Edwin Wise's *Manila, City of Islands* which primarily underscores the layered dimensions of both the built forms and urban experience within the archipelagic capital. This book tackles precisely how layered Metro Manila is from both a theoretical perspective of urban design and a lived perception of being a city dweller. This is evidenced by the divisions of the ten chapters of the book from "Theorizing Urbanism" (Part 1) to "Conceiving Urbanism" (Part 2) to "Living Urbanism" (Part 3), three chapters for each and the tenth serving as the conclusion.

This book stands, as the subtitle reads, as a query into the historical and social origins of the urban experience in Metro Manila, and thus provides a sensorial dialectic from a theorization of what I would consider fragmented design to its experience that can be attested by any sensitive city dweller. The book's first part is on theorizing the urban and is composed of three chapters. "Urbs and Civitas in a Fractured City" begins the book with a succinct literature review of the possibility of fractured or split design. What is noteworthy is the oscillation from the general views of Edward Soja, Max Weber, and Richard Sennett among others to a local perspective from the likes of Frank Lynch, Howard Dick and Peter Rimmer, and Rolando Tolentino. Where he ends is the contrast between the modernist and the archipelagic city, the former with its central gaze while the latter with its nodal or, to borrow a Deleuzian term, rhizomatic expressions. Wise ultimately portrays here the differences between modernist and archipelagic as projections of the city respectively between cohesion and fracture, connected (but not united) and insular (yet not isolated). This he does by working on Latin *urbs* and *civitas*, contextualized as the divided *urbs* (the gated communities and private spaces in the

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<<https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2016/04/15/1573342/lee-kuan-yew-marcos-and-politics-elite>>.

Metro) and the city as *civitas* (the composition of political unities), that define the Philippine capital between beliefs and associations (*civitas*) and a fragmented urban design (*urbs*).<sup>4</sup>

The second chapter, “City of the Tribes,” then proceeds with a situation of this *urbs-civitas* tension in the village and urban settings of the Ichananaw tribe, split between Chananaw and Tabuk in the Kalinga. Wise narrates his own accounts of settling with the tribe, interjected by sociological models, and shows the natives’ socio-spatial characterization, especially the shifting urban concerns from the *civitas* to the *urbs* represented by the high- (Chananaw) and lowlands (Tabuk), from the extreme of tightly knit kinship to its complete opposite of complete anonymity.<sup>5</sup> This characterization aptly captures the dynamic relationship in the rural-urban experience of the traditional highland *civitas* with the anonymous urban lowland *urbs*. The change of values in the latter directly influences the public affairs of the former. Despite their distant spatial aspect, persisting still is the strong social dimension.

The first part ends with the third chapter, “Modernity, Time, and Space in Manila,” which adds a third element—modernity—to the *urbs-civitas* tension theorized in the first chapter and demonstrated through the second chapter’s firsthand account. On the one hand, this third element questions the forms of associations (*civitas*) we have while on the other transfigures and develops the methods of how society further becomes divided (*urbs*). What is especially perceptive in this chapter is how Wise progresses in his discussion of it, beginning from a global view through Eisenstadt, Schmidt, and Heller, then proceeding with the Philippine experience in the Spanish and American periods. He then ushers a contemporary view of the metropolis interjected with parallel views from the global stage from Chatterjee, Anderson, Jameson, and Soja among

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<sup>4</sup> See Edwin Wise, *Manila, City of Islands: A Social and Historical Inquiry into the Built Forms and Urban Experience of an Archipelagic Megacity* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019), 14.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid.*, 22.

others. What is arrived at is a heterogenous perspective of the city: “Within Metro Manila, modernity has been unequally transplanted and divergently embraced/negotiated, to the extent that it would be problematic to speak of a singular urban experience, a singular indigenous modernity.”<sup>6</sup> Metro Manila is presented as this space that is both conceived and fractured at the same time.

The book’s second part conceives of Philippine urbanism and centers on the role of modernity through built design and its impacts on the creation and/or ramification of both *civitas* and *urbs*. The fourth chapter, “Spanish Urbanism in the Philippines,” outlines the four main forms of Manila’s Spanish-era urbanism that center on Intramuros: the port, the fort, the church, and the plaza. Each of these urban features of built design highlights the *shared* spatial element within the city that conjures a particular image of urban design—openness, closedness, vulnerability, and stability. These corresponding features determine the city’s characteristics that eventually may be identified with its own dwellers. However, since these refer to the walled city, exclusivity takes prominence among these forms, and the spatial dimension is ultimately a closed one.

The closed presentation of space in the previous chapter is contrasted with a more open one through the American colonial influence in the fifth chapter, “The American Era: Manila Beautiful and the Modernist City.” From an urban projection that focused on the dominance of the church over the town square found in Intramuros, the American occupation was defined by Rizal Park’s prominence, the proposed Burnham Plan of Manila that exhibits the City Beautiful principles. Wise focuses his discussion on the Burnham Plan, the Rizal monument, and Escolta Street to show the shift of colonial focus from Spanish maritime trade and religiosity to the American values of democracy and freedom and the introduction of the automobile into Philippine urban design. This era

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

in Philippine modernity may be understood as a reordering of spatial design due to the change in the colonizer's ideology and values that in turn reordered how a citizen identifies with the city and the values that govern this.<sup>7</sup>

The second part ends with the sixth chapter, "The Archipelagic City," in which Wise grounds the foregoing urban dialectic with a contemporary view of our fragmented social-spatial ordering. He provides the progression of urban governance, from its central power in the Metropolitan Manila Commission under the Marcos dictatorship to its fragmented status through the Local Government Code with the region-wide Metropolitan Manila Development Authority. Whereas the earlier two chapters featured an imposition of a colonial perspective, this chapter develops our own urban sensibility that is forked between private-public tensions, leaving the latter's force to provide the patches for the gaps around the former's boundaries. What Wise ultimately presents is a dystopic view of the capital region's governance in "a failure of the Philippine state to totalize daily life" as our current urban symbols and forms fall short of revitalizing our anesthetized urban sensitivity.<sup>8</sup>

The last part of the book dwells on today's urban experience, beginning with the seventh chapter, "Modern Form." This refers to the Makati model that serves as the template for urban privatization due to its highly consumerist and car-centric context, replicated by gated communities and malls-turned-cities. Wise demonstrates how this is another imagined spatial urban design, this time not from a foreign occupier, that causes the decline of a sense of public space. Such an urban framework secures a highly privatized and modern city with everything beyond its confines left to make good with its scraps. What ought to be realized in the face of this though is that "[t]he *urbs* is not merely a vessel for moments of everyday life."<sup>9</sup> These private spaces within the metropolis

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<sup>7</sup> See *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

should not simply be receptacles that may be filled by a consumerist mindset but rather fundamentally part of the expression of everyday life.

Wise continues to present the lived dimension of urbanity in the book's eighth chapter, "Popular Urbanism." While privatized space was the focus of the previous chapter, this current one dives into the "leftover city of the poorer classes" that "contains repetitive forms and modes that approximate shared spaces, shared urban practices, and shared languages of the street."<sup>10</sup> He goes through four popular forms of spatial design: (1) The house refers to the spiritual descendants of the *bahay kubo*, the *barong-barong*, which is adaptive to the restrictions of the private city and the needs of its own dwellers; (2) the *sari-sari* store representing the informal economy, commercialized yet personal in transactional nature; (3) the street that transforms from a modest pedestrian passage to a multilane highway that compliments the *sari-sari* store (with the *bangko*), hosts an expression of faith (with street Masses), or is subject to its acclaimed king, the jeepney; and, lastly, (4) the neighborhood signifying informal and peri-urban communities that maintain a fear of the outside and an arduous battle for urban recognition against the constant threats of modernization.

"Artists in a Dual City" caps off the third part by accounting for those who are able to seemingly traverse the two cities within the metropolis, focusing on the relationship between the artistic community—such as those found in Cubao X/expo, Future Prospects, and Green Papaya among others—with the dual city on the one hand and among themselves on the other. Wise notes how these individuals "move between and outside fortified *urbs*, creating a *civitas*, not open to all, of shared meaning through a shared occupation in a guild-like arrangement."<sup>11</sup> These individuals are able to traverse the modern urban forms while maintaining a certain relationship with the precarious second city, this latter serving at times as the subject of their artistic creations. They are even able to transcend an

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

imposition of spatial identity due to their, frequently deliberate, aloof if not marginalized relationship with the city as a whole.

Throughout the book's chapters, what is presented is the layered archipelagic reality of Manila's spatial urbanity. Sans any simplistic reading of the city, Wise presents how Metro Manila is an archipelagic city that contains a variety of tensions. He highlights the presence of a dual city between a highly privatized, gated one and another that is vulnerable, the first which seemed to shadow modernity's development and the other incapable of doing so, left to fend for itself. Another layer of tension is between the imagined and actual city, with such a great expanse between them being the current fragmented urban experience that everybody in the metropolis is confronted with. A third involves a colonial and insular urban projection with the great question of the basis for the latter if not the former. Where this book ends points to the need to go beyond one image of the city to another, from one island to another, going beyond oneself to encounter the other who lives in an entirely different city. In other words, it is the recognition of the paradoxical urban reality that necessitates a constant revaluation of the *urbs-civitas* relationship.

This work may serve as an introduction to critical Philippine urban studies or a critical social theory of Philippine urbanity. What is noteworthy in Wise's presentation is how he provides interjections in his narrative, best exhibited in chapters seven to nine, through the impressions of the towering infrastructure in Ortigas, the experience of walking down the street, or inklings of an artist's advocacy. This provides a balance to the numerous references from both local and foreign thinkers on the city. This though may likewise figure a limitation of the book since the overt sociological narrative contains a section loaded with references to seemingly establish a framework that is given an experiential perspective in the following. This may not appeal to some readers' fondness. Readers though who will find the themes of this work interesting would find merit in other critical views on the city such as Henri Lefebvre's *The Production*

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*of Space* or Anthony King's *Spaces of Global Cultures*.<sup>12</sup> For a more focused discussion on the Philippine experience, it would be great to consider Gary C. Devilles' *Sensing Manila* and Michael Pante's *A Capital City at the Margins*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and Anthony King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Gary C. Devilles, *Sensing Manila* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020) and Michael D. Pante, *A Capital City at the Margins: Quezon City and Urbanization in the Twentieth-Century Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019).

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