

Where The Sidewalk Ends: An Essay on Why It Shouldn't

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*Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
And the dark street winds and bends.
Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow...
To the place where the sidewalk ends.*

Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*

The Philippine (or Quezon) City Streetscape

Larry Alcala must have drawn Quezon City into being. The streets are indeed a *Slice of Life*: Young men play basketball on the street, shooting hoops in between passing tricycles. School children, in hope of avoiding parked cars, tread the sidewalk curb as jeepneys whiz by. Street vendors pile mounds of onions and tomatoes on the road, oblivious to mounting gridlock and raging drivers. And street kids, sick of sun, roll on the asphalt in a desperate effort to cool themselves.

Welcome to the Philippines, where crossing the street is a mad dash for dear life.

What is it about our streets that seem to take on a cartoonish reality?

Outside the city's few pockets of greenery such as La Mesa Eco-Park, the UP Diliman and Ateneo campuses, and Quezon Memorial Circle, walking is anything but pleasurable. Funny how the most densely populated areas are the least people-friendly. Take a stroll down EDSA, one of the country's busiest thoroughfares. Or Commonwealth Avenue, the "most dangerous" highway in Metro Manila, which claims 5,000 deaths a year on average. Even Katipunan Avenue, fronting Ateneo de Manila and Miriam College, is not spared the telltale sight of cars parked where the sidewalk should be.

The Urban Non-Planning Paradigm

Technically, a street is a passageway for both vehicles and pedestrians. However, our streets have been transformed into extended parking lots where sidewalks are significantly narrower than residential frontage. Between the gate and the street is--now where did the sidewalk go?

So ubiquitous have our streetscapes been that they have indelibly been woven into our public consciousness. A trip to Quiapo brings to mind similar warrens in various parts of the metropolis--only ten times more crowded and impenetrable. Childhood visits to an uncle on Evangelista Street in Cubao imprinted on me the memory of lumbering vans struggling to pass through narrow, cramped streets teeming with life, where people thought it a natural occurrence to compete with vehicles for the right of way.

Multiply this street scene throughout the metropolis and one will get a fairly good grasp of what Metro Manila city life is about.

Clearly, in the Philippines, the street is considered primarily a channel for vehicles. Pedestrians are an afterthought. Our streets connect places, but not people.

It is not farfetched to conclude that what we've lived with for so long is an urban non-planning paradigm. The incoherent maze of our streets is a reflection of the disorganization of our minds. As the population increases, the pressure of this lack of planning will create problems greater than we can solve. It is not hard to imagine what Manila and its environs will be twenty years from now: a tangled sprawl of slums. The only exceptions will be gated communities, isolated clusters of comfort that will thrive in a sea of urban shanties. Today, high-rise residential and commercial buildings are mushrooming across the city and it won't be long before they edge out sidewalks in favor of bigger parking lots and wider streets. Metro Manila is in danger of morphing into a ghastly metropolis of overbuilding and underplanning, or 'progress' at the expense of the people.

We need to rethink our current paradigms...quick!

The streets must be reclaimed for people. What we need is a new urban vision.

The City Streetscapes of the Future

In 1981, Donald Appleyard, Professor of Urban Design at the University of California-Berkeley, wrote a book titled *Livable Streets*. This book published the groundbreaking findings of a study he had done 20 years earlier in the 1960s, in which he compared three residential streets in San Francisco that had different levels of traffic: Light Street, with 2,000 vehicles passing through it daily; Medium Street, which had 8,000 vehicles; and Heavy Street, with 16,000.

Professor Appleyard found that people living on Light Street had three more friends and twice as many acquaintances as those living on Heavy Street. He discovered that Light Street, with its lessened traffic flow, provided more space for social interaction among its residents, thereby creating a closely knit community. Children and adults alike found themselves spending afternoons playing on the sidewalks and chatting on the front steps, areas that bridged the private (residents' homes) and the public (the street). People on Heavy Street, on the other hand, kept to themselves and hardly ventured beyond their doors to socialize. There was very little sidewalk activity.

Ironically, Professor Appleyard was killed in 1982 by a speeding vehicle. However, his seminal work lives on and prompts urban planners and citizens alike to rethink the role of the street in community building, proving that streets indeed serve a social and recreational purpose. It asks: Why can't we think of the street as a destination in itself? Why can't the street be a place for dynamic human interaction, a pathway pulsating with life? A city's streets are its arteries through which courses its lifeblood, the people.

The concept of the livable street is at the core of walkable communities and pedestrian cities around the world. Mostly found in developed countries in Europe and North America, these places have succeeded in creating safe, sustainable communities for people. Perhaps the best thing about these true habitats for humanity is that they are quite achievable.

Take Denmark, one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. By prioritizing the development of its pedestrian street network, it shows great respect for the human scale. Copenhagen's Strøget, the longest pedestrian shopping area in the world, is a car-free zone that attracts tourists.

Woonerf in the Netherlands is another car-free group of streets where cyclists and pedestrians can claim legal importance over vehicles. Similarly, in the United States and Canada,

pedestrian networks are fast thriving in the cities of Boston, Princeton, San Diego, and Vancouver.

Creating walkable communities saves these countries from inflating transportation costs, as walking is still the cheapest form of transportation. People can enjoy healthier lives by getting a regular dose of exercise. These communities can be replicated on a national scale. Most importantly, residents will be passionately involved in the act of place-making, or claiming a city as one's own through collective social engagement. By reordering the built environment to suit the needs of the people, governments and citizens benefit from mutual support.

Walking Towards the Future

A poem that ought to be hung on every urban planner's wall is Shel Silverstein's "Where The Sidewalk Ends". It describes a fantastical place beyond the curb and "before the street begins" where nature blooms and life takes on a gentler pace. For the poet, his little paradise is found at the end of the sidewalk, far away from the city.

Why can't the sidewalk **be** the paradise?

The present urban reality calls for a shift in mental gears. People and planners alike need to rethink and re-evaluate the function of the street. The academe, business sector, government and citizens must come together and cooperate towards a sustainable future. Together, they can pull this country by its bootstraps and out of the urban mire.

Already, hope buds in the city.

Tomas Morato Avenue, which ten years ago was once a rather nondescript road riddled with seedy KTV joints and Burger Machine kiosks, is now enjoying wider and well-paved sidewalks that attract a thriving night life.

On a larger scale is the Bonifacio Global City. Touted the "city of the future" and a "complete cosmopolis," it is home to a bustling commercial district of high-end shops and an exclusive residential enclave. The city is planned around an efficient network of tree-lined, pedestrian-friendly streets. Naturally, the cost of living is high (dinner gossip places a Serendra unit at some PhP 15 million). It is encouraging to have Filipino urban planners finally think out of the box and towards a better future, but, regrettably, only the rich can afford it.

What we need is an urban vision that will embrace the whole metropolis, not just a fortunate few.

But with these new developments, the vision may just be around the corner. In that case, Silverstein need not lament any further. And urban pilgrims, now stumbling in this city's terrain, can look forward to walking safely and merrily to their hearts' content.

All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking, so Nietzsche once said. Can we not dream of Metro Manila as a pedestrian city, with a far-from-pedestrian soul?

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