

Article

Necessary Visions: Richard Sennett's Levinasian Neighbor in Pre- and Post-War Manila

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Abstract: This paper examines the deterioration of Manila's urbanism by contrasting the outward orientation of its pre-war elite with the enclave urbanism of present-day Metro Manila. Drawing from Richard Sennett's concept of the Levinasian neighbor, the paper explores how everyday opportunities for exposure to the "different stranger," persons who were not just unknown but also different, were available to the pre-war elite. This developed skilled interaction, undergirding an openness toward and even delectation in public life. Literary and autobiographical evidence is drawn from José Rizal, Nick Joaquin, and Carmen Guerrero Nakpil. The uricide of Manila during the Second World War not only destroyed the city's physical form but also cut short a thriving urbanism that delighted in urban complexity. We critique the metaphysical underpinnings of enclave urbanism and argue that Emmanuel Levinas' privileging of ethics over metaphysics is better for cities.

Keywords: Levinas, gated communities, Metro Manila, urbanism

This paper argues that Manila's pre-war elite had an outward-oriented urbanism. They were tolerant of public life and lived it with intensity and pleasure. By intensity, we mean that the everyday life of Manila's affluent was exposed to persons who were not just unknown or barely known. They were also different. Furthermore, these encounters had a greater range, from the structured to the carnivalesque. This is in contrast to contemporary Metro Manila's enclave urbanism, where citizens encounter the different strangers predominantly through hierarchical interactions in classed and fortified spaces like lifestyle malls, gated communities, and branded townships. On the other hand, the posture toward public life of elite urbanism in pre-war Manila can be characterized as Levinasian.

We divide our paper into two parts. The first part will argue the hypothesis that Manila's pre-war elite's urbanism (i.e., their urban way of being) was open to urban complexity. Literary and autobiographical evidence will be presented. Contemporaneous imaginative literature with reliable narrators is treated as primary sources with unique insight into everyday urban life. Rizal's fiction has long been treated as a record of colonial life. Nick Joaquin drew from first-hand experience of pre-war Manila, his home city, where he set his stories and was a frequent subject of his non-fiction writing. Carmen Guerrero Nakpil was a local of pre-war Ermita, the district she memorializes. The second part of this paper will expand upon what Richard Sennett has called the 'Levinasian neighbor' after the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in pre-war Manila's urbanism.

Before beginning, it is essential to note that, in the historiographic literature, the designation of "elite" is unsettled, especially in its application to the nineteenth century, when social classes became more complex. The two fictional persons this paper puts forward, Rizal's Ibarra and Nick Joaquin's Dr. Monson, once an officer in Aguinaldo's army, can both be classified as *ilustrados*. Highly educated, fluent in Spanish, often but not always comfortable or wealthy, the *ilustrados* saw themselves leading the national project through politics, letters, or war.¹ Ibarra performed this leadership through his school-building, while Dr. Monson, bitterly disappointed at Aguinaldo's loss and Manila's destruction in the Second World War, nonetheless hoped that his foreign-born children would inherit the free nation he strove but failed to bring into being. Both were men of means.

The term *ilustrado* is too weighted with the historical milieu that had long passed when Carmen Guerrero Nakpil lived and wrote about pre-war Ermita. For this reason, we prefer the general term "elite" or "urban elite" to designate a social class whose consumption and ideas shape cities worldwide and, more crucially, for whom engagement with public life was optional. This paper cannot establish which segment of the elite was open to urban complexity. Instead, it argues that Filipinos in pre-war Manila who enjoyed some combination of wealth, higher education, and fluency in the intellectual lingua franca had the option to engage in public life and took this option not on special occasions, but in the everyday, as suggested by the primary sources examined. The option to engage and leave the enclave is also available to Manila's present-day elite, but the enclaved city they inherited and reinforce makes taking this choice difficult.

¹ See Michael Cullinane, *Ilustrado Politics* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003).

Part One

When writing of the aftermath of Manila's liberation in February 1945, it is commonplace to begin with a comparison to Warsaw. Only Warsaw, it is claimed, was more destroyed.² Writers feel compelled to open with this comparison, as we do, because readers are usually ignorant of the deliberate destruction of Manila's most valuable districts and the murder of 100,000 of its civilians, even if these readers are Filipino. The Philippine state does not commemorate the urbicide of its capital city. Hence, the comparison to a European capital whose suffering is known gives Manila's death a place in memory, however transient. But unlike Warsaw, whose heart was carefully reconstructed, Manila's cultural and commercial centers were never restored.³

The urbicide of Manila was an immense loss to Filipinos and perhaps the world, but rarely, if at all, is the damage comprehended as a degradation of civilization. The cost is greater than what can be described in an indictment or treaty of reparation. Furthermore, because Manila is now a megapolis at the center of an economy on the way to becoming one of the largest in the world, we can be led to believe that the devastation of 1945 has been long overcome. In such a simplification, the passing of time is rendered as only salutary: The living carry on, new buildings are erected, and heritage is preserved; but the wound that urbicide inflicts is complex and insidious. Time, normally salutary, can instead exacerbate.

A people whose primate city is destroyed suffers more than material loss. They are also robbed of a future in which their civilization develops with a living past, not the historical past, which can be recovered by reading, but the everyday past, or time's accumulation of habits, attitudes, and knowledge that make an urban people more humane or refuse the humanity of strangers, and that are not deliberately learned or recorded.⁴

² See Jose Maria Escoda, *Warsaw of Asia* (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 2000).

³ See Nick Joaquin, "Introduction," in *Intramuros of Memory*, ed. by Jaime C. Laya and Esperanza B. Gatabonton (Manila: Intramuros Administration, 1983; reprint, 2011), 1–14.

⁴ See Michael D. Pante, "Modern Living in Third-World Suburbia: Quezon City, 1939–1976," in *Modern Times in Southeast Asia, 1920s–1970s*, ed. by Susie Protschky and T. van den Berge, 15–38 (Leiden: Brill, 2018). The new capital, Quezon City, was envisioned as a modern city for an independent Philippines. However, not only was Quezon City's shortfall in low-cost housing the most severe, land intended for mass housing was diverted, with the state's cooperation, into building the country's first gated community for the middle-class and wealthy, Philam Life Homes. Pante locates Quezon City's failures within a trend of elite, American-led suburbanization accelerated by Manila's destruction. He sees the Manila elite as complicit and (neo)colonial in their consumption of American notions of modern (suburban) living. This paper suggests that this shift in land-use also involved a change in elite urbanism.

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Like all colonizers, the Spanish regime was racist and would remain so until its end. But not all was darkness. Faced with the necessity of rationalizing the governance of its remaining colonies and increasing revenues to the metropole, the nineteenth century saw the opening of Manila to world trade and the liberalization of education.⁵ By the middle of the century, Manila was cosmopolitan, the only such city in Southeast Asia.⁶ The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made education in Europe feasible, accelerating the influence of liberalism through young, multilingual Filipinos pursuing degrees or their fortunes on the continent. When discontent reached its high point in the *fin de siècle*, both peaceful reform and armed revolution professed the Western, mainly Spanish liberalism of their middle and upper-class leadership.⁷ Fluent in the civilization of Europe and Spain and expectant of recognition, educated Filipinos despised the racism that saw them as categorically inferior and sought to cast it off, first with journalism and literature and later with arms.⁸

The failure of elite liberalism to achieve justice in the Philippines is well-developed in historiography. Liberalism, because it sought only legal equality, was compatible with the elite desire to preserve and expand their wealth in a new nation. No program for redistribution was mooted at the Malolos Congress or the *Katipunan*.⁹ And even if we admit that members of the elite and middle class who led the Philippine Revolution of 1896 to 1898 simultaneously had both moral and self-interested reasons for taking up arms,¹⁰ the vestige visible to history, and what better explains the present, is a continuation of the patronage of the Spanish and then American colonial order.

The reforms instituted over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared to fail both the educated Filipinos who imbibed their “liberalizing logic,” for they were still excluded racially, and the people, whose betters did not develop their liberal thinking into a program of social justice.¹¹ Nonetheless, even if the Filipino elite behaved, for the most part, self-interestedly during the revolution and in their alliances with American colonial administrators, these are not the only tests of their role in the

⁵ See Vicente Rafael, “Revolutionary Contradictions,” introduction to *Luzon at War: Contradictions in Philippine Society, 1898–1902*, by Milagros C. Guerrero (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 11.

⁶ See David R. M. Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ See Rafael, “Revolutionary Contradictions,” 7.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ See *Ibid.*, 11–13.

¹⁰ See Fernando Nakpil Zialcita, *Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006), 130–131.

¹¹ See Rafael, “Revolutionary Contradictions,” 11–13.

development of the Filipino nation. It is important to discern how close to the surface the pursuit of self-interest is, and how certain events and situations can make such evident more readily than others. A time of revolution is one of ferment, and, as often pointed out, many of the elite seized singular opportunities to consolidate their wealth and power at the expense of the common good. On the other hand, revolution is also a period of intense vocation, where people feel called to pursue moral or human goals, even if these fall short of social justice.¹²

Surrounding the two years and five months of revolutionary ferment near the close of the century, there is the *longue durée* of everyday life in Spanish, cosmopolitan Manila, an urbanism that survives and flourishes in the American period, and whose mundanity makes tenuous connections to the grand political project that is nationhood. In this diurnal urban frame, “self-interest” as a litmus test becomes blunt because, unlike in nations, cities are agnostic toward self-interest. Mixing, the drawing in of disparate things, is the basic movement of cities and civilization. Unlike political virtue, urban virtue is not undergirded by a desire for purity. If we examine the urban virtues of the elite of the colonial period, we see that not all was dark.

The literary record of daily life in late 19th-century Manila suggests an upper class that had what Richard Sennett calls “exposure.” Their routine encounters with persons of very different circumstances developed in them a facility for “coping with and learning from [urban] complexity.”¹³ The political and moral goal of Jose Rizal’s two novels, required reading in the Philippines, was to demonstrate the racist ignobility of some peninsular friars and officials, which could not be cured by violent revolution because the people themselves lack virtue. Much ink has been spilled discussing these grand themes, but the novel form is also apt for representing everyday life, so it captures more than the movement of history. In Chapter IV of the *Noli Me Tángere*, the protagonist, Crisostomo Ibarra, walks in Manila’s commercial district, Binondo, after a long stay in Europe. Like any pedestrian, his eye wanders. What is remarkable are the seemingly insignificant details—a chipped paving stone, a bent grill, one of which he himself bent as a child playing on these very streets—that constitute the joys of homecoming. Moreover, he recognizes the faces of Chinese vendors from before his departure, years past, even if he does not know their names.¹⁴

This reminiscence suggests an exposure to and embrace of public life, which is complex not because of strangers, but because of exposure to

¹² See Zilacita, *Authentic Though Not Exotic*, 130-131.

¹³ Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 304.

¹⁴ José Rizal, *Noli Me Tángere (Touch Me Not)*, trans. by Harold Augenbraum (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 24-25.

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strangers who are *different*. Strangers who are like us are no goad to growth, especially in an “archipelagic” city like Metro Manila where the elite and middle class can “network without exposure” by pursuing both work and leisure in islands of classed space linked through private vehicles.¹⁵ It is not just possible but common for the affluent in today’s Metro Manila to have only trivial contact with public life. On the contrary, exposure to the different stranger outside ‘safe’ contexts where they are ‘in their place’ can be discomfiting, even fear-inducing, so persons segregate into places which “remove the threat of social contact”. In doing so, the city as a “stage of life” is reduced and trivialized.¹⁶

On the contrary, Ibarra’s intimacy with the minutiae of the Binondo streetscape, his childhood pranks, and his recognition of the faces of vendors despite a seven-year absence all suggest a long exposure to public life from early youth to adulthood. His fond remembrance suggests not only exposure but delectation in Binondo’s street life. It is instructive to consider how unlikely such a character would be in today’s Manila. The history of exposure implied by Ibarra’s reactions to the Binondo streetscape prevents an explanation of his delectation as only the sentimentality of homecoming, which distorts through affectation. A contemporary author who creates an elite Manileño with a past of exposure to Manila’s public life must take pains to make such a history believable, but Rizal simply does. Neither does the *fin de siècle* setting of the *Noli Me Tángere* before the rise of the automobile, in what has been called the golden age of pedestrianism, fully dissolve the question. Another novel contains a similar reminiscence, but this time set decades later in American Manila when private automobiles had already become popular.¹⁷

Nick Joaquin, perhaps the greatest Filipino novelist in English, grew up in American Manila and would also represent upper-class characters exposed to the complexity of city life, which they enjoy. In his most well-regarded novel, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, Dr. Monson, once an officer in Aguinaldo’s army, like Joaquin’s own father, tells his sons of their grand old house on the banks of the Pasig River in Binondo, and their morning routine of being awakened by the calls of vendors on boats, from whom they would purchase their daily commodities. This reminiscence is followed by the family mourning their lost urban life in Manila, for that house was

¹⁵ 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), 179.

¹⁶ Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye*.

¹⁷ See Michael D. Pante, “Mobility and Modernity in the Urban Transport Systems of Colonial Manila and Singapore,” in *Journal of Social History*, 47:4 (Summer 2014), 860, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shu023>>.

reduced to ruin by the Second World War. They dwell not on the house as a space of private memory but on its daily interaction with public life on the Pasig River, which was once teeming with commerce. In his remembering, Dr. Monsoon valorizes a domestic life that is oriented outward, the memory of which he bequeaths to his sons.¹⁸

Though their writerly selves are separated by six decades and their fictional settings are in different colonial regimes, Rizal and Joaquin have designed the reminiscences of their affluent Manileños with an orientation to public life. Both authors could have sequestered their wealthy men within private spaces, away from the crowd. The materials to do so were available to Rizal: A beau monde, pervasive racism, servants, carriages, and commodious houses. All of these could have believably withheld Ibarra from the life of the street. Joaquin not only provides a setting oriented toward the city but marks it with value: of all the memories of home, it is a house's ease of encounter with the different stranger that the exiled Dr. Monsoon chooses for his foreign-born sons.

This outward orientation has survived the Philippine Revolution, the fall of the Spanish regime, the Philippine-American War, and the vanquishing of the First Republic. This suggests that this delectation is not merely a function of pedestrianism or mobility technology. Instead, it is an urban way of being which, as we see in its continuation from Rizal to Joaquin, has durability as daily life. It does not react to the different stranger with an "expectation of hurt but with the expectation of stimulation" or, as we prefer to call it, with delectation.¹⁹

A contemporary of Nick Joaquin, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, experienced the same public orientation in Manila's elite. Her memoir of pre-war Ermita in *Myself, Elsewhere* dedicates a chapter to her family's ardent participation in Ermita's many fiestas and rituals, which, despite her family's status, were intensely public. However, festival days are only the intensification of Ermita's vibrant everyday life, a portion of which routinely occurred in public spaces, such as the streets and plazas, enjoyed by all. Ermita was a socially, racially, and economically diverse district, yet it cohered.²⁰ Furthermore, Guerrero Nakpil writes of her coming to age in pre-war Ermita as a female in a conservative Catholic milieu, which, we would expect, would constrain her participation in public life. However real the constraints of childhood and sex – she recalls receiving a severe spanking after daring to walk home from school – it appears not to have prevented

¹⁸ See Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (Quezon City: Anvil Publishing, 2014), 13-16.

¹⁹ Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye*.

²⁰ See Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, *Myself, Elsewhere*, Kindle edition (San Juan, Metro Manila: Nakpil Publishing, 2006), 63.

participation in and an appreciation for public life. Because Ermita Church was not ensconced within a gated enclave but was the center of a very diverse one, the Catholic feasts and frequent Mass she was expected to participate in also meant exposure to different strangers.

It is easy to dismiss Sennett's virtue of exposure in Rizal's, Joaquin's, and Guerrero Nakpil's Spanish and American Manila as nostalgia for bygone times. But the exposure captured in literature is also seen in pre-war habits of consumption: Manila's fashionable did their shopping at stores that embraced the street, particularly those along Escolta and Avenida (today's Rizal Avenue). It is also in the famous practice of evening walks or drives on the Luneta, an authentically public space. Even the walled district of Intramuros, seat of the colonial administration and the Catholic Church, was open to all before sunset. Its festivals belonged to every Manileño,²¹ and not just to the resident elite. The following is an excerpt from Nick Joaquin's memoir of the Intramuros of his youth.

No month of the year but offered occasions for special worship in Intramuros; and those who now say that it was foreign ground with no relevance to our lives have no idea how intensely the prewar Manileño lived there and what importance it had in his communal calendar. While Intramuros existed, it acted as a center round which Manila moved as a coherent community, sharing and continuing certain observances and traditions. You were a Manileño because you shared in this continuity, and you felt your identity most keenly at an annual event like, say, October's *La Naval de Manila*. You became conscious that this was a ritual particular to your city and that countless generations of Manileños had participated in what now included and involved you.²²

Scholars have suggested that Intramuros is the model for post-war Manila's numerous gated communities.²³ The comparison is infelicitous. Intramuros is akin to a medieval walled town where entry was surveilled but widely permitted because public spaces and institutions were inside and, as we can see in Joaquin's memoirs, Intramuros' numerous religious feasts had

²¹ See Ian Morley, "City Profile: Manila," in *Cities*, 72:A (February 2018), 25, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.07.022>>.

²² Nick Joaquin, "Introduction," *Intramuros of Memory*, 7.

²³ Kenneth Verzosa Tanate, *Gated Communities in Metro Manila: An Empirical Analysis on Living Conditions and Social Functions* (PhD dissertation: University of Tsukuba, 2005).

an urbanizing function which transformed strangers into citizens by overcoming their atomization into the separate districts, racial backgrounds, and status. Intramuros was pre-war Manila's public square. The gated communities and branded enclaves of present-day Manila are an entirely different urbanism and, in their institutionalization through laws such as the Magna Carta for Homeowners and Homeowners Associations and seventy years of post-war custom, represent the ultimate truncation of the urbanism of the Pearl of the Orient.

That Manila was once but is no longer the "Pearl of the Orient" is a trope in Philippine studies. The loss of heritage and human lives was immense, but the cost was even greater. What was cut-off was a Filipino urbanism that was only beginning to flourish. Prior to colonization, there were no cities, not even ruined ones, on the islands. At the time of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, the inhabitants of the islands lived in independent villages or *barangays*, each headed by its chief, who traded with other *barangays* or raided them for slaves. The development of Philippine urban culture, we might even say Filipino civilization, if we stress the city as concomitant with civilization, began with colonization.²⁴

This urbanism, where the upper class tolerated if not embraced public life, and were exposed to difference in that public life, would likely have made a better, more humane basis for growth than what replaced it post-war. Today, Metro Manila is one of the world's most private and enclaved cities.²⁵ Public life is shunned by the upper and middle class, who usually live in one of the city's many gated communities, a suburban form that has since been universalized in the Philippines.²⁶ The elite shaping of post-war Manila has been unsuccessful, resulting in an archipelagic city that allows the privileged to move, live, and form communities but without exposure.²⁷ It would appear that this is only a continuation of the rapacity that motivated elite logics during the Philippine Revolution. However, what the elite do in their daily life in cities is not necessarily a piece with what they do with revolutions. The urban design specified in the Law of the Indies required the construction of a public, central plaza around which were the parish church, government edifice, and other important buildings. The Philippine elite built homes as close as possible to this central plaza, with the wealthiest homes beside it. These families lived in daily exposure to public

²⁴ See Zialcita, *Authentic Though Not Exotic*, 167.

²⁵ See Peter Murphy and Trevor Hogan, "Discordant Order: Manila's Neo-Patrimonial Urbanism," in *Thesis Eleven*, 112:1 (2012), 10–34, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513612450500>>; Marco Garrido, *The Patchwork City: Class, Space, and Politics in Metro Manila* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

²⁶ See Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*, 104.

²⁷ See *Ibid.*, 202.

life, especially on Sundays and fiestas. By the beginning of the American colonial era, this practice was two hundred years old, suggesting that upper-class Filipinos, if not adept at urban complexity, could inherit an openness to it.

Part Two

How do we return to an urbanism open to complexity? Joaquin's first-hand experience of Intramuros as the city's melting pot, the Pasig River teeming with commerce and interaction across social classes, Guerrero Nakpil's mixed-use and diverse neighborhood of Ermita, and Ibarra's pedestrianism are made possible by the city's physical form and land use. Nonetheless, however crucial urban forms and policy, they are perhaps not the starting point, especially if we consider how deep and enduring the obstacles are to building better in Metro Manila. The recognition of models from a city's past can also be the point at which a project ceases. Nostalgia, utopianism, romanticizing, and superficiality are pitfalls to projects whose impetus is bygone. We must acknowledge, in a spirit of conversation and conservatism, the lost urbanism of Manila. Now, the first thing to do, how do we use the past to orient toward the future?

Richard Sennett, an urban sociologist and philosopher, suggests an openness to complexity can be achieved not only through design but also through ethics.²⁸ In a lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in October 2017, Sennett presented an "ethical framework for dealing with people who are unlike oneself."²⁹ He develops his theory by comparing the ethics of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. For the former, interaction can dissolve the separation between people by means of reciprocal relationships. For the latter, the separation remains, no matter the proximity. "For Levinas, proximity is a relation which pre-exists that consciousness of the Other. [...] it-pre-exists the noetico-noematic structure of intentionality."³⁰ The epitome of proximity is the proximity of the Other - the neighbor. In the thought of Levinas, the dash in the I-thou cannot be overcome.

They don't integrate, they don't unite, they don't form a
community. Instead, they become neighbors to each
other. And the concept of neighbor, for Levinas, is

²⁸ See Richard Sennett, "The Open City," YouTube video, 10:02, posted by Harvard Graduate School of Design (10 March 2020), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PoRrVqJ-FQ>>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12:37.

³⁰ Craig R. Vasey, "Emmanuel Levinas: From Intentionality to Proximity," in *Philosophy Today*, 25:3 (Fall 1981), 186, <<https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday19812538>>.

somebody who is aware of another intensely, but is separated by that dash from ever fully becoming one with them. It requires skill to be intensely aware of somebody else, to interact with them, and yet not to try and abolish the boundaries between self and other.³¹

Sennett locates neighborliness in the impossibility of fusion between urban persons, a condition Levinas calls “illeity,” and which does not presuppose a community.³² Instead of community and the reciprocity it entails, Levinas proposes an infinite responsibility toward the unknowable and ultimately unreachable neighbor, which can be understood in terms of the Christian commandment to love one’s neighbor, which will admit no limit.³³ Sennett reinterprets this into an urban ethics of intense awareness and interaction that does not “suppose the local community is ultimately the ethical foundation of a city.”³⁴

In the parable of The Good Samaritan, the man – the victim, understood to be a Jew – was given aid by neither the Jewish Priest nor the Levite. The man, the priest, and the Levite all belong to the same (Jewish) community, and yet they (priest and Levite) both avoided him. Instead, it was the Samaritan, considered to be an enemy of the Jews, who offered aid and assistance to the victim. He, who was not a member of the community, a different stranger, displayed not only an awareness of the Other but also took responsibility for him. The Good Samaritan recognized the man as his neighbor and acted accordingly. The parable is not to be taken only as a directive for action but also as a way to expound on the notion of neighborliness in a richer and deeper sense. Interestingly, in the Parable, Jesus did not ask who viewed the man as his neighbor but who acted as a neighbor among the three. “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”³⁵ In other words, it is not just a matter of *having* a neighbor, but also, perhaps more importantly, *being* a neighbor. And being a neighbor orients outward. It does not rest on the consciousness of the Other but exists before it. We are neighbors even before the appearance of the object we designate as neighbor. In the parable, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan are all commanded by the vulnerability of the wounded stranger, their neighbor, even before intentionality and

³¹ Sennett, “The Open City,” 14:41.

³² See Anna Strhan, “And Who Is My Neighbour? Levinas and the Commandment to Love Re-Examined,” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 19:2 (2009), 157, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2143/SID.19.2.2044689>>.

³³ Love here is understood as charity or selfless love.

³⁴ Sennett, “The Open City,” 16:03.

³⁵ See Luke 10:36.

resulting judgment. On the other hand, inward-oriented urbanism by a violent bifurcation designates Others as neighbors and strangers, which ignores responsibility but cannot silence its demand.

Sennett's development preserves Levinas' radicality by contradicting sentimental prescriptions of urban renewal, which apply an ethics that aims to dissolve the separation between citizens, displacing the neighbor into categories of kinship or friendship. For the urban thinker Jane Jacobs, a basic characteristic of cities is that the great majority of citizens are strangers to each other, even those who live nearby.³⁶ If strangers are essential to the urban condition, urban ethics must not reduce strangeness if it is not to act against the city itself. Reducing the stranger through proximity or membership, the culmination of which is the "local community," is not just sentimental, a flattening of complexity, but also impossible and violent. Most strangers will fail to become familiar, and if we insist, we are on the precipice of an exclusionary ethic that pits us against them, fracturing the city and requiring the deployment of regimes and technologies, both ancient and new, that guard against the recalcitrant stranger who is the city himself.

Instead of ontological egoism, which focuses on the perspective of the subject (*vis-a-vis* an object), Levinas pays closer attention to the dynamics of the relationship between the self and the Other.³⁷ The Levinasian precept that our being is not an essence but infinite responsibility for the neighbor is demonstrated in the urban condition. A fragmented city where citizens admit responsibility only for themselves, their kin, or friends is a city only in designation. In reality, it is composed of local communities, more or less tight-knit, intolerant of strangers, and oriented against the city, which is to say it is on guard against an enlargement of responsibility beyond the local. The stranger is essentialized and rendered faceless.

This metaphysical urbanism creates not a city in the proper sense of the word, but suburban islands for which the surrounding city is only an abstraction seen outside the safety glass of private automobiles, one that approaches reality, looks real, but is always away, fleeting, and without dimension. At best, metaphysical urbanism creates simulations of cities, summarized through a brochure or slide deck for any global investor, in a global taste that will offend no one, and managed by an office. This is only the local community at a city-like scale, where the stranger must become either friend or kin or is essentialized into categories that dilute responsibility: office worker, laborer, maid, staff, tourist, local, et cetera. In such a city, the

³⁶ See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961; reprint, 1992), 30.

³⁷ See Jaeseung Cha, "Are you my neighbor?: Jesus and Levinas," *New Brunswick Theological Seminary - Think Critically, Act Justly, Lead Faithfully* (19 April 2024), <<https://nbts.edu/neighbor-jesus-levinas/>>.

stranger whose presentation prevents effortless categorization, to remain strange, is importunate and an irritant. They take us “hostage,” to use Levinas’ arresting verb, by provoking “a responsibility against my will.”³⁸

The self does not become responsible solely by itself, for he only becomes a responsible (Levinasian) neighbor when he is made responsible by the presence of the Other. Levinas writes that:

Ethical freedom is *une difficile liberte*...Consequently, the Other is the richest and the poorest of beings: the richest, at an ethical level, in that it always comes before me, its right to be preceding mine; the poorest, at an ontological or political level, in that without me it can do nothing that is utterly vulnerable and exposed. The Other haunts our ontological existence and keeps the psyche awake, in a state of vigilant insomnia. Even though we are ontologically free to refuse each other, we remain forever accused, with a bad conscience.³⁹

The acceptance of the gift of responsibility transforms our being, without necessarily transforming that of the Other. They remain a stranger, but one to whom we are being a neighbor. There is no point at which we are released from tension to rest in intimacy with the Other or in perfect indifference. We are haunted and kept awake. The Samaritan left two denarii and promised to repay expenses when he returns. We are not told when that return will be. It hangs over the parable as a moment of freedom. He may or may not return. And, if he does, he will not discover that the victim has, in his absence, already become his friend or brother. They will part ways but in the moment they face each other, the Samaritan interacts with skill. His response will forever be considered in the context of his responsibility towards the other. Ethical freedom, as Levinas states, is a difficult freedom.

The “Levinasian neighbor” can only appear with skill, to carry forward Sennett’s remarkable development. “It requires skill to be intensely aware of somebody else, to interact with them, and yet not to try and abolish the boundaries between self and other.”⁴⁰ In present-day Metro Manila, the elite and middle-class urbanscape of gated communities, shopping malls, and branded townships is a domesticated space “promoting familiarity” by

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 11.

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. by Richard A. Cohen (Albany, NY: SUNY Albany Press, 1985), 27.

⁴⁰ Sennett, “The Open City,” 14:11.

“reducing the risks of unplanned social encounters.”⁴¹ In the private city, no skill can develop because every citizen, no matter their age or intelligence, is forever in an urban infancy whose primary retardation is an inability to deal with the different stranger. Or, to use Sennett’s development of Levinas, an inability to face the stranger with intense awareness and interaction, refusing to let them disturb us with their demand for our responsibility, is a functional retardation disguised as elitism, NIMBYism, parochialism, or “exclusivity.” It is caused by a lack of opportunity to exercise the skill of intense awareness and interaction, colloquially called “street smarts,” which, like all skills, deteriorates without use. By making nearly all social encounters predictable, measured, controlled, and thus safe, the self loses all motivation and means to be responsible.

Although American suburbia has been exported around the world, in the Philippines, they “are deployed primarily through master-planned gated residential projects” that have “entrenched themselves in the rhythms of everyday life.”⁴² The success of this form is seen in how it “is now common practice even amongst the poor communities.”⁴³ However, gated-ness is not fate. Before the 1950s, there were no gated communities in Metro Manila, with the very first, Philam Life Homes, built amidst elite fear of the Hukbalahaps, a communist peasant rebellion popularly known as the Huks.⁴⁴ In 1949, President Manuel Quezon’s widow, the former first lady Aurora Quezon, was killed with her daughter, her son-in-law, the mayor of Quezon City, and eleven others in an ambush on the road to Baler from Nueva Ecija, which was blamed on the Huks by the sitting President Elpidio Quirino.⁴⁵ Three years later, Quirino presided over a meeting that would lead to the sale of public land intended for social housing for the building of Philam Life Homes.⁴⁶

Besides the Huk rebellion, gating was also a reaction to the (Corazon) Aquino administration enhancing the political stature of the urban poor, leading to a significant increase in squatting, and surging crime in the post-Marcos years, which would fall sharply in the decade after. However,

⁴¹ Peter Jackson, “Domesticating the Street: The Contested Spaces of the High Street and the Mall,” in *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity, and Control in Public Space*, ed. by Nicholas R. Fyfe (London: Routledge, 1998), 176–191.

⁴² Arnisson Andre Ortega, *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines: Suburbanization, Transnational Migration, and Dispossession* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2018), 168–169.

⁴³ Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*, 104.

⁴⁴ See Pante, “Modern Living in Third-World Suburbia,” 28–29.

⁴⁵ See “The Philippines: Murder in the Mountains,” *Time* (9 May 1949), <<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,800220,00.html>>.

⁴⁶ See Pante, “Modern Living in Third-World Suburbia,” 29.

“despite the falling crime rate, the gates stayed up. Moreover, by the 1990s, they had come to be seen as necessary.”⁴⁷

Gating in Metro Manila is an emergency response that endured long after the crises have passed. Today, the gates protect against the city itself. However, this does not mean that residents of gated communities also imbibe a consistent ethics of siege. Arnisson Ortega, in his *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines: Suburbanization, Transnational Migration, and Dispossession*, writes of the ambivalence that residents of gated communities have toward the outside. His respondents speak of the dullness and alienation of life within the gates, dissatisfaction with having to course neighborliness through the Homeowners Association, an intimidating access regime, and “guidelines” that prescribe even the games children play while, at the same time, insisting upon the importance of security enforced through perimeter walls and armed guards.⁴⁸ This ambivalence is not entirely explained by security being so fundamental that it overcomes other desires, such as that of having neighbors or *being* a neighbor, but that the basic need for security is achieved through ancient and, in a metropolitan context, obtuse solutions based on weapons, walls, and gates that cannot but exclude the city which is “construed as dangerous, polluted, and crowded.”⁴⁹

While police and their threat of legitimate violence are sometimes necessary, they do not play the foremost role in ensuring street safety. A city’s peace “is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves and enforced by the people themselves.”⁵⁰ Cities do not succeed because walls abound with armed watchers on every byway. Those are symptoms of failure, at first, because there is barbarism about and, later, when the enemy has receded, because citizens are unwilling or unable to rebuild the skill of living amongst strangers without having to turn these strangers into kin, friends, or ‘residents.’ Seventy years of emergency have retarded the urban virtue of the Philippine elite and middle class. This wound lies deeper than intentionality, where we deliberate wrong or right. Undoubtedly, the residents of Metro Manila’s enclaves can know what the common good is, are capable of experiencing authentic emotions of fellow-feeling with the strangers of the city, that is, with its citizens, and may act accordingly. What is doubtful is whether this ability to think the right thoughts, in which is latent right action, can ever be brought to the intensity of awareness and proximity in which Levinas and Sennet locate their philosophy while everyday life is lived apart

⁴⁷ Garrido, *The Patchwork City*, 70–71.

⁴⁸ See Ortega, *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines*, 218–226.

⁴⁹ Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*, 112.

⁵⁰ Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 34.

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from the public city and while old and new technologies are deployed to prevent routine encounters with the stranger. Ultimately, we face the ancient question on the gulf being knowing the good and doing the good. Reading Levinas and Sennett from within the enclave, does it count for something? We can only hope that it does.

For Edwin Wise, Metro Manila's popular urbanism, which is the urbanism of some informal settlements or of formal but open communities, "resembles far more the growth and nature of the city prior to large-scale projects like Makati or Fort Bonifacio's Global City."⁵¹ Furthermore, the "dynamism of popular urbanism comes close to what Sennett calls exposure: the complexities of daily life can be vivid for all inhabitants of popular urbanism."⁵² Life in popular urbanism exercises the skill of intense interaction and awareness of Levinasian responsibility but without self-debasement. In fact, for Levinas:

the condition of infinite responsibility is worked out in practice against the needs of many others. Thus, as Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, 'Everything takes place here 'between us' concerns everyone, the face that looks at me places itself in the full light of the public order' [citation omitted]. My responsibility for my neighbor is enacted within human community and fraternity, and I have a responsibility for myself therefore as well as my neighbor. Although the responsibility to my neighbor is infinite, what that responsibility means has to be worked out within the bonds of human kinship and against the background of responsibility for myself.⁵³

Levinas' philosophy assumes a *public order* which, for most of humanity, is urban. If responsibility has to be "worked out in practice against the needs of many others" then it must require skill, and if it does, then the ideal conditions for exercising this skill are in neighborhoods where complexity is at its fullest, outside the denatured urbanism of the enclaves, and where the city is 'as it was.' It is no surprise then that 'street smarts' is commonly believed to be an attribute of the working class. Their facility with public life is not an essential feature of poverty. But, at least in Manila, indigence almost always means living in close proximity to neighbors,

⁵¹ Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*, 164.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵³ Strhan, "And Who is My Neighbor?," 153.

constantly sharing the same pedestrian spaces and interacting intensely, so one must skillfully negotiate continually being a neighbor and caring for oneself.⁵⁴

The starkness of Levinas' ethics may make it seem that it is also joyless. "Infinite responsibility" is heroic, even Sisyphean, and anything but pleasurable. But this is only when in the abstract and, if placed within the concrete, one informed by a sentimental, sentimentally tiresome context of relentless charity work. There is, however, one way to understand Levinas while avoiding both melodrama and, on the other extreme, gesturing to the possibility of violence and trauma "in the neighbor's approach."⁵⁵ This is to interpret Levinas as describing an urban community with a flourishing public life. Such an interpretation requires only an easy advance, for Levinas' emphasis on community and the "third party" in understanding "infinite responsibility" toward neighbors with whom we have no other bond readily suggests the community of strangers that is the city. However, urbanizing Levinas reveals a vital nuance: Responsibility toward my neighbor is not just imperative. It is also pleasurable. The allure of a great city is, to a significant degree, social. To belong to a city with a flourishing public life is to possess "subjectivity as ethical" and to be infinitely obliged toward the neighbor prior to knowledge, before conceptualization,⁵⁶ but simultaneously to take pleasure in it. A public orientation is not learned but lived, and even if one denies it through enclaves, the demand of the urban neighbor that we be responsible for him is unceasing, grows in urgency as the city grows, spurring the reinforcement of exclusivity and, ultimately, the use of violence.

The hedonism possible in Levinasian relations between neighbors is seen in the delectation of the elite and middle class in public life in pre-war Manila. The pleasure taken in public life is not superficial, for just below it is the current of responsibility. An urban ethics of the Levinasian neighbor, that is, of awareness and interaction that is as intense as it is skilled, is implied in Ibarra's recognition of vendor's faces in Rizal's *Noli Mi Tangere* and the history of exposure suggested by his reminiscences, in the old veteran of Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* who passes to his sons the memory of a home embraced by the city, in the urbanizing festivals of Intramuros that made individuals into Manileños, in the racially, socially, and economically mixed district of Ermita that nonetheless cohered into intense public life, and on all plaza complexes in the Philippines that preserved a way of life exposed to the different stranger. The everyday life suggested by these literary and

⁵⁴ See Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*, 167–168.

⁵⁵ Strhan, "And, Who is My Neighbor?," 146.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

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historical vignettes suggest that exposure was not exceptional but carried out with finesse, enjoyment, and naturalness. In short, with skill.

It is important to note that the communities formed by such skill are different from the communities comprehended by Metro Manila's present-day enclave urbanism, with its subdivisions, villages (i.e., semantic narrowings and euphemisms for gated communities), branded estates, and barangays. Except for the last, all of these are closed systems that, for Richard Sennett, are linear systems driven by "hypothesis testing" and not exploration, a Boolean logic of yes/no and not Bayesian logic of maybe, and where failure is not an option. On the contrary, an open system is explorative, Bayesian, and can learn from failure.⁵⁷ Enclave urbanism describes an archipelagic city form,⁵⁸ in which the affluent can move from island to island, or from enclave to enclave, without exposure to the different stranger. The deep assumptions of enclave urbanism, or its philosophy, is metaphysical and incompetent in everyday, urban life.

For open systems, there is no community, only the street. A street is not bounded. If one end is closed, as in a cul-de-sac, the other must not be, or it would cease to be a street. A network of streets can form a distinct community or neighborhood, as they do in Ermita, Intramuros, and Binondo, but as long as they are porous, share fuzzy boundaries with the neighborhoods that surround them, they will remain complex and open to complication. They can be dangerous and, at the same time, exhilarating, profoundly human and, by being so, provide an education in how to live well with and for others. On the streets, we learn how to render our unceasing responsibility toward our neighbor with skill and even style. As Sennett writes:

A city ought to be a school for learning how to lead a centred life. Through exposure to others, we might learn how to weigh what is important and what is not. We need to see differences on the streets or in other people neither as threats nor as sentimental invitations, rather as necessary visions. They are necessary for us to learn how to navigate life with balance, both individually and collectively.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See Sennett, "The Open City," 17:39.

⁵⁸ See Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*.

⁵⁹ Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye*, xiii.

Conclusion

When Filipinos reflect on what their capital city might have been, they often remember Daniel Burnham's plan for Manila.⁶⁰ Burnham and the colonial government that employed him not only aimed to beautify Manila and Baguio through urban design but also sought to "alter the nature of life within them."⁶¹ His City Beautiful plan for Manila was to achieve nothing less than a modern national identity for Filipinos, albeit under American terms.⁶² The grand ambition of colonial urban design in Manila was matched by President Manuel Quezon's for the city that bears his name. "Civic virtue became the underlying ideology in the founding of Quezon City: an ideal city to mold ideal citizens."⁶³ Both plans, however, would be abandoned. Whether they would have achieved the urban virtue Burnham and Quezon envisioned can never be known.

This paper suggests that a model for urban virtue is not in the dreams and parchments of architects and politicians but in the everyday past of pre-war Manila. The urbicide of Metro Manila six months before the end of the Second World War deprived Filipinos of much more than the capital's architecture. The nation mourns the 100,000 dead, but we should also mourn the loss of an urbanism that would have made for a better metropolitan life. The Pearl of the Orient is dead, but the urbanism that made it can be reimaged. Many Philippine towns, even the towns that comprise Metro Manila, still have their town plazas, some of which are being recovered as public space from deterioration and retrogressive usage as car parks or enclosures.⁶⁴ However, the greatest difficulty will be dissolving the borders that form an enclave to Metro Manila. Because of the urbicide of their capital city, the Filipino elite have lost the urbanism born from two centuries of exposure to public life through the plaza complex. Most are now ensconced within the enclaves of Metro Manila, networking without exposure, in what

⁶⁰ See Trisha Macas, "Burnham's Century-Old Ideas Can Still Be Used to Improve Manila—Architect," *GMA News Online* (16 October 2014), <<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/383820/burnham-s-century-old-ideas-can-still-be-used-to-improve-manila-architect/story/>>.

⁶¹ Ian Morley, *Cities and Nationhood: American Imperialism and Urban Design in the Philippines, 1898–1916* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 16.

⁶² See Morley, *Cities and Nationhood*, 3.

⁶³ Michael D. Pante, "Quezon's City: Corruption and Contradiction in Manila's Prewar Suburbia, 1935–1941," in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 48:1 (February 2017), 91–112, <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463416000497>>.

⁶⁴ See "Plaza Libertad's Major Facelift Starts," *Panay News* (5 February 2021), <<https://www.panaynews.net/plaza-libertads-major-facelift-starts/>>.

has become one of the world's most privatized cities.⁶⁵ Re-urbanizing the elite is a generational project, beginning with refashioning their most basic propositions about city life. As Sennett points out, coming from Aristotle, the city "cannot come into being by people who are the same."⁶⁶ In the big city, purity is vice.

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⁶⁵ See Wise, *Manila, City of Islands*, 179 and Murphy and Hogan, "Discordant Order," 10.

⁶⁶ Sennett, "The Open City," 10:53.

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