

Transforming Public Space through Public Participation in Geospatial Technology, Social Media, and Placemaking

Project Summary

Public spaces are central in delivering the benefits of urban life, especially for the majority of Filipinos who will actively depend on and participate in urbanization in the following decades. Unfortunately, more cities and urbanizing landscapes in the Philippines are becoming more sprawling, exclusive, segregated, and vulnerable. As a consequence, the urban commons – public spaces such as streets and parks – are being enclosed, fragmented, and marginalized.

How can the public navigate and negotiate such terrain to open, restore, and enlarge the urban commons? First, the placemaking process must involve the forms, values, and rules of urban space. Next, the public must be empowered to participate in such process through the use of geospatial technology and social media, both of which are potent tools for social and spatial change. This is the gist of the #UrbanCommonsPH project.

The paper operates on the claim that the social production of urban public space depends on how public spaces are imagined, funded, and governed. Central to this interplay are three (3) key elements of the social production of urban space: *forms, values, and rules*. For example, urban forms pertain to how a certain neighborhood street is imagined and built. This form influences, and is influenced by, (a) the use value of the street (e.g. whether it is a major road or a local street) and (b) exchange values such as prices of real property. The rules that dictate both the form and value of the street are derived from policies and institutional arrangements. For example, national laws provide standards on the rights of way, while development councils codify land uses through a zoning ordinance. This interplay of urban forms, values, and rules animate the project.

Next, the paper also claims that meaningful public participation is necessary to open, restore, and enlarge the urban commons. This can be achieved and sustained if the public is able to participate in the stages of information, consultation, decision, and action in placemaking. Instrumental to such ends is the popular use of geospatial technology and social media, both of which are potent tools for social and spatial change. Both technologies, which are asymmetrical in nature, are powerful entry points and vehicles for deeper public participation in placemaking. Hence, these can be the public's critical tools in challenging the traditional modalities of the development of urban public space.

To operationalize such principles, the #UrbanCommonsPH project is also about a system of a (1) geospatial app, (2) social media platform, and (3) public forums (a.k.a. place-a-thon).

These tools should function to help the public energize the placemaking process. First of all, the tools must work together to involve the public in higher stages of participation in placemaking. The mapping and discussions must graduate from merely informing and consulting the public; to deciding and acting together; and onwards to supporting initiatives by giving interested citizens the means for implementation.

All of these, while being energized by a nongovernmental organization, should be under the supervision of the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council (HUDCC), which influences the key agencies about shelter and land use matters for the nation. Such partnership will sustain the implementation of the mobile phone application, social media platform, and the place-a-thon of the #UrbanCommonsPH project.

In the process, the public will be able to create the necessary conditions to transform the urban commons; and make inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban development possible.

In summary, as the pace and scale of urbanization produce concentrating, extending, and differentiating effects, public spaces – the urban commons – are being enclosed, fragmented, and marginalized. This is due to the enduring social relations that affect and produce public spaces as they are today. And such conditions of public spaces in turn affect and reproduce the problematic social relations in urban life.

Public participation, empowered by geospatial technology and social media platforms, is necessary to open, restore, and enlarge the urban commons and deepen the democratic ways of negotiating and creating public spaces. Hence, the #UrbanCommonsPH project aims to serve as a catalyst to facilitate meaningful participation of the public in all levels of placemaking.

In the Philippines, we are witnessing an age when the urban is becoming the defining episteme, as cities in the country are increasingly at the crossings of crises and climate change. Against this backdrop, this paper was written with the hope of presenting both a compelling set of critique and viable alternatives with this vision:

A better future for the urban commons is possible.

Biographies

David Jonathan C. Garcia is a geographer and urban planner. His recent work with the United Nations was mapping and planning in both post-crisis situations (e.g. Super Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban and the siege of Zamboanga City) and urban development and design in key urban centers in the Philippines. His research and praxis is about the intersection of crises (disasters, climate change, and conflicts) with cities. To approach such crossing, he deploys

critical, constructive, and creative cartographies.

Vega Fria G. Postrano is a geographer and urban planner on duty in the Office of the President of the Republic of the Philippines. From the previous administration until the current one, she helps coordinate and expedite major initiatives of the President's Cabinet with respect to development and security. She animates her work by introducing spatiotemporal tools and technologies in cooperation with the government agencies on housing, health, finance, disaster risk reduction, and others.

Dazzle B. Labapis is an environmental planner and development practitioner. A human ecologist by training, he has intensive and extensive experience in planning with communities with regards to forest ecosystems and climate change. Currently, he spearheads the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Program in Asia as the Forum Facilitator for Civil Society Organizations. Simultaneously, he was appointed as a Research Associate for the World Bank in the Philippines and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for community-driven initiatives on urban development.