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Breaking Free From the Concrete Prison

By Ian Malczewski

THE 1984 film *Ghostbusters* contains a scene in which two dog-like statues come to life. The monsters burst from their concrete shells, roar into the night, and leap off in search of human hosts to possess. The ensuing relationship between the demons and their human hosts is parasitic, with the demons benefitting while the humans become their slaves.

The metamorphosis of the natural world into urban regions mirrors this transformation, only in reverse. Humans have imprisoned living entities in concrete, abandoning the symbiotic relationship that benefits both us and the planet. As opposed to the film, the real-world parasite is not that which has been imprisoned, but rather those doing the imprisoning: human beings.

There is one element of the public realm that remains an exception: the plaza. Here, trees dominate the air, and people are free to gather, converse, and relax. If the urban environment is a prison for the natural world, then plazas are the windows in its cell. Although the monsters in the film burst from their concrete encasements with evil intentions, the natural environment bursts from its prison with only one desire: to breathe.

Iloilo is fortunate to have a plaza in each of its six districts, making it a true City of Plazas. When Spanish colonizers came to the Philippines, they enacted a policy known as *reduccion* in which they mandated that towns be built around a central plaza. The plaza's central purpose was interaction, providing a *paseo* (promenading area) during the day and an *adelance* (night market) at night. These plazas continued the Filipino tradition of *pakikipagkapwa*, a holistic interaction with others that resulted in two social benefits: *pagtutulongan* (mutual self-help) and *kawanggawa* (charity).

When the Americans took over, they transformed the plazas, adding stages and basketball courts, and moving public markets to a separate part of the community. Later, as plazas again became increasingly commercialized, the *paseo* and the spirit of *pakikipagkapwa* that characterized them were lost.



This is an issue which still affects the city-region to this day. In 2007, the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) of Molo asked the city to restrict the number of commercial kiosks and carnivals in the Molo Plaza during its annual fiesta. The PPC was concerned that the number of kiosks and stalls impeded the perspective of the adjoined Molo Church, reducing the quality of the public space.

Still, an active and busy plaza, by the standards of most urban and city planners, is a successful one. Why else might we protest this kind of commercial infiltration of these culturally and historically crucial public spaces then?

Perhaps one explanation is that the commercial atmosphere of the plaza has more in common with an SM Mall and its self-interested commercialism than the altruistic spirit of *pakikipagkapwa*.

Rampant self-interest and a loss of holistic interaction is one of the cultural causes of the degradation of the natural environment. While there is nothing wrong with commercialism in and of itself, when taken to excess it can lead to a self-obsessed and uninvolved public.

As changing environmental and economic conditions demand us to lead more sustainable lives, humans have to re-learn mutual interdependence. Given the historic role of plazas as sites of holistic interaction and their importance as a place of liberation for the natural environment, they are ideal places for this sustainable future to begin.

Perhaps a restriction on the number of stalls and days of commercial activity would begin to restore the spirit of *pakikipagkapwa*. Plazas may still be used for commercial purposes, but there are many other uses that can serve the public; environmental education campaigns, for example, can embody the ideas of mutual self-help and charity by helping citizens understand the need for a more symbiotic relationship with the world than the current parasitic one.

Ghostbusters ends with the demon-dogs cast out of their human hosts and destroyed, along with the evil they serve. It is in all our best interests to shift our relationship with the earth in order to avoid a similar fate. Perhaps the plaza can serve as a stepping stone to reaching this sustainable urban future.