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Looking into a calm body of water, we often see our reflection staring back at us. In the urban environment, however, we have developed the land around the water so much that it is virtually impossible to do so. As we distance ourselves from the water, we lose our ability to see ourselves reflected in the natural world, and, in so doing, run the risk of forgetting our connection to it altogether.

Waterfronts are much more than natural mirrors, of course: as an element of the public realm, they are places of recreation and social interaction that can make a city a beautiful and welcoming place for both its inhabitants and visitors. A people-friendly waterfront invites investment as well, improving the lot of all city residents.

Metro Iloilo is blessed to have multiple waterfront sites: its position on the Iloilo Strait offers many opportunities for interaction with water on a large scale, and the multiple rivers that wind through the city, including the Iloilo River, afford opportunities for a more intimate connection.

Because Iloilo's waterfront developed as an economic and commercial hub, industrial manufacturing and shipping facilities dominate the area. By prioritizing the needs of industry and transportation, the element of recreation has been ignored, forgotten, or paved over, and urban dwellers have lost their primordial connection with an important natural resource.

All hope is not lost, though. The Iloilo River Masterplan, prepared by the Iloilo Business Club in partnership with the Iloilo City Government, United States-Asia Environmental Partnership Program, and the Asia Foundation, proposes to restore the Iloilo River to its rightful place as a source of nourishment for and interaction with the natural world.

The Masterplan counts no fewer than sixteen current issues with the Iloilo River, including poor water quality, high incidences of respiratory diseases among nearby residents, deficient garbage disposal, and encroachment on the river banks by informal settlers. Its vision is for a "community



Urban Waterfronts: The Wave of the Future

By Ian Malczewski

river that promotes ecological balance; develops society's total well-being and quality of life; displays aesthetic harmony of nature and structures; and supports local, regional and national economic activities for a more progressive Iloilo City." These are lofty goals, and will require political will and public pressure to become a reality.

To that end, in August 2007, House Bill No. 1338 was introduced seeking to create the Iloilo River and Muelle Loney Development Authority, "which will pave the way for the gradual

development of the long neglected Iloilo River and its inland harbor at Muelle Loney both as a business-oriented harbor and a centerpiece tourism project of Iloilo City."

While creating a legally-empowered body to work towards this goal is a necessary and important step towards revitalizing the Iloilo waterfront, there are some noticeable omissions from the Bill. On the nine-member Board of Directors, for example, there is space allocated for Regional Directors of the National Economic Development Authority and the Department of Public Works and Highways, but none for the Department of Environment and Natural Resources or the Iloilo City Cultural Heritage Council, two bodies with important voices that should not be ignored in the redevelopment process.

While both the Masterplan and the Bill make a priority of the Iloilo River, there is little mention of the city's other great waterfront asset: the Iloilo Strait. While it is important to tackle one area at a time, considering the city's aquatic environment as a single unit rather than as a collection of disparate parts would show greater respect of the natural world and, ultimately, result in a vastly improved public realm for all residents of the city.

Through its waterfronts, Metro Iloilo has an enormous natural bounty that would be the envy of most cities. Beginning from the principle that the water ought to be a place where we can spot our reflection in the natural world, we might begin to appreciate how this bounty can be enjoyed by all residents of Metro Iloilo.