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Furnishing the Streets

By Ian Malczewski

It's another hot day and the urge to drink strikes as you walk about the city. You stop at a nearby shop and purchase a bottle of water, which you've finished before you've even walked one block. Unfortunately, you're now stuck with an empty bottle. You could keep it to refill later, but maybe you already have a collection of empty water bottles and you want to recycle this one.

If you're walking through Metro Iloilo, you are probably stuck. There is an unfortunate lack of public waste and recycling bins on the sidewalks of the city, and this can result in frustrated people and litter about the city.

Metro Iloilo could make itself a model for encouraging a more sustainable lifestyle through addressing this lack on the city's streets by adding more garbage and recycling bins. But there's no need to stop there; bins are just one element of what is often called street furniture: public amenities like benches, bicycle racks, transportation shelters, and information boards that contribute to the public realm.

Street furniture is not only an important public amenity, but it is also a source of financial support for cash-hungry municipal governments.

The City of Toronto, Canada recently awarded a contract to an advertising company to "furnish" the streets of the city with garbage bins, bicycle racks, benches, transit shelters, and information boards. Although the length of the contract and the quality of the furniture has been called into question by public realm advocates, the city stands to benefit from the deal by earning money from the contract that it can then invest in other social services.

A similar plan could benefit Metro Iloilo. While it is important to be careful of the level of advertising a city allows to dominate its public realm, the fact remains that it is an important source of revenue. Thus, Metro Iloilo could offer a contract to a company that would produce garbage

and recycling bins, benches, and other public amenities that would improve the public realm. By allowing advertising on some of this furniture, the city could earn a new stream of revenue that it could then invest into social programs. And, of course, you wouldn't have to carry that empty bottle around looking for a place to get rid of it.

Street furniture offers more than convenience to citizens and funding to local governments. It also helps citizens form a relationship with the urban environment. Many cities around the world use street furniture not only as a means of providing public amenities, but also creating public art.

In a Toronto neighbourhood, an organization has sponsored the creation of bicycle racks that are designed by members of the community. These racks are designed in the shapes of trees, butterflies, and other designs that allow creativity to flourish on the otherwise drab space of the sidewalk. Unfortunately for Toronto, the street furniture produced by the advertising company is not nearly as creative or interesting, but their loss could Metro Iloilo's gain.

Metro Iloilo could blend the two experiences of Toronto to achieve some unique benefits. It could begin by launching a competition to design different elements of street furniture, insisting that creativity be an integral element of the design. There are many companies that produce creative street furniture, and by targeting these companies and offering them some of the revenues from advertising, the city would beautify its street, provide a much-needed public amenity, and increase its revenue.

If Metro Iloilo pursued such a strategy its public realm would be unique in the Philippines, and it would help define it as a cultural hub in the region. And, of course, you would no longer have to carry that empty bottle with you as you walked the streets.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Ian Malczewski is the Knowledge Management Specialist of the Canadian Urban Institute. A Master's of Environmental Studies candidate at York University in Toronto, he holds an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Toronto in English and Semiotics and Communication Theory, and has also studied at Melbourne University, Australia. He is interested in the public spaces of cities, especially as they relate the stories of the history and culture of a place. While he is visiting the Philippines, he hopes to listen to and tell stories about the public spaces in Iloilo City, and encourage discussion about sustainable urban development in the Metro Iloilo-Guimaras Region. To comment on his articles, please log on to www.ideasforthecity.com, the institutional blog of Urban Partnerships Program (UPP) Philippines.