

LEADERSHIP SERIES

URBAN PARTNERSHIPS PROGRAM PHILIPPINES

MAIDEN
ISSUE

A learning tool for policy makers to promote understanding of pressing urban issues and encourage policy actions for urban sustainability this material is produced by the Urban Partnerships Program (UPP) Philippines, a program implemented by the Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) with funding assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

The New Public Realm and the Sustainable City

By Ian Malczewski

CONSIDER the public realm of the city as we live in it today: streets and sidewalks are clogged with air-polluting vehicles; green spaces are few and far between; waterfronts are dirty, unpleasant places to visit; food that could be grown locally is imported from across the globe; and citizens are detached from the very environment in which they live.

The way we shape the world reveals the way we view it, and, for a long time, we have treated the planet as something to be engineered according to our will and immediate needs. Urban regions are the most concrete expression of this attitude. Born as sites of industry and commerce, they are the physical embodiment of a worldview that has had numerous negative effects on the health of both humankind and the planet.

Yet urban regions simultaneously offer respite from the deleterious effects brought about by climate change. By living in a shared, compact space, we can work towards reducing the impact we have on the natural world and improve our own lot in life, too. If we can conceive of urban environments as places that exist in tune with the natural world rather than in domination of it, we and the planet will be better off for it. In other words, through carefully planned urban regions we can achieve a sustainable relationship with the natural world.

The planning of urban environments has always been - directly or indirectly - about influencing and reflecting social behaviour. Whether installing streetlights to control traffic, building churches to inspire fervour and reverence, or designing plazas for public leisure, urban planners have long shaped environments that reflect cultural priorities. In this way, the public realm of a city forms a collage, a collection of snapshots of the societies that lived in and shaped it.

If the generations before us left a concrete expression of misuse of the natural world, what will our traces reveal about us? What cultural priorities do we want to contribute to the public realm collage? How will we meet the challenges posed by climate change, and how will we plan our urban regions to express our response? Perhaps most



importantly, how will begin to think of the urban and natural regions as inextricably connected, with the actions taken in one having direct effects on the health of the other?

There are no simple answers, but we must discuss the questions if we are to prepare for a sustainable future. To continue living in the same manner that has caused climate change is to openly invite disaster. In urban regions, the first place we can begin to make this transition is in the public realm.

Now imagine a new kind of city: a city where vehicles are a minority on the streets; where green parks are filled with children at play; where the waterfront is a safe and pleasant place to visit for a walk, meal, or swim; where people of all ages can safely and easily access every neighbourhood; where public art connects citizens to the past and inspires them about the future; and where food is locally grown and prepared.

This column will look at the public realm as it appears today, and will also dare to dream about what could be, if, with proper motivation, support, and implementation, we allow our perspective of the world to shift. It hopes to truly re-imagine both the natural and the built environment as Our Space.

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.