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# Housing Design for the Urban District

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## Abstract

*Planning by the public sector has often been carried out using a "template approach.". This approach takes off from the assumption that all areas being planned for are the same in terms of physical and social qualities. It is, however, important to note that each city is unique and that within each city exist various districts that also differ in function and features. Urban planning, therefore, should factor in the special characteristics that arise out of the district's role in the city and even national affairs. Districts can be categorized under any of the following: The Central business district serves as the hub for the service sector of the economy. Closely associated and oftentimes adjacent to CBD's are Downtowns that serve as the outlets for the manufacturing sector. Institutional districts are distinguished by the concentration of educational, religious, cultural and government buildings. Industrial districts are production centers where efficiency of operations is of prime importance. Tourism districts are defined by the presence of historically significant natural and man-made assets. Usually located on waterfronts, Market districts cater to wholesale trading. Circulation networks, terminals, parking spaces characterize Transport districts. All of these districts are products of organic development and territorial specialization. These are natural processes that arise out of very strong economic and social forces that physical planning must go along with.*

## Understanding the City

### The City is Evil

This is the often-visualized picture painted by scenes of traffic, blight, poverty and crime. And almost everyone would point to a single culprit, that is, over-population. Migrants just keep coming in. Hence, legislators and urban managers who dream of alternative urban scenarios would often have, in their list of strategies, what most people would perceive as 'the solution.'. Urban deconcentration or systematically and deliberately moving people away from the center, is the key to an ideal city. This stance obviously does not recognize that the very essence of a city is concentration. A city becomes a city because of the spontaneous convergence of people, information and capital.

### The City is a Parasite

Urban areas are also often thought of as parasites that feed on the resources of rural areas. Studies, however, show that cities actually subsidize rural areas. City revenues trickle down to the provinces either directly or indirectly. Paris subsidizes the rest of France in the same way that Shanghai subsidizes most parts of China.

## The Bright Lights Theory

It is theorized that many migrants are enticed to move to the cities mainly by their luxury-oriented and recreational facilities such as shopping malls, cinemas and the like. The main motivation, however, for people migrating from the rural to urban areas has to do with economics. Employment and business opportunities, that abound in the cities, attract the more qualified and educated segment of the population in the provinces.

## Urban-rural Dualism

A city will thrive only if it co-exists with the hinterlands from where natural resources may be drawn. But the city and the rural areas do not comprise a closed niche that requires a self-sustaining system of production and consumption. A city is part of a global order that effectively hinges it to a network of producers and consumers from various political jurisdictions.

Truly, a city is often misunderstood. It has, thus, been the backdrop used by many a literary and cinematic artist who wanted to project a chaotic, callous and dog-eat-dog world. A distorted concept of an urban area accounts for the failure by urban planners and managers to understand the life that the city breathes. As a result, planning takes its course with an assumption that cities are just political jurisdictions that are physically defined.

## Cities and the Concept of "Fit"

Architectural Systems are design products that are expected to accommodate a program. A program describes how things are and how they should be, based on people's needs. The built environment is supposed to accommodate human activity systems and behavioral patterns. A proper fit is achieved when the designer of the environment understands the individual or the social organizations, for which the design is being tailored. A city is a milieu for a complex network of social organizations that day in and day out give their share of the beat that throbs within. The forces that weave these organizations together towards common intentions cannot be ignored when laying out the physical container that will accommodate them.

In the same manner that designers exert efforts to understand the psyche and circumstances of a client, urban planners and managers must also start with a genuine 'getting to know you' phase when designing for a city. Figuring out the personality of the city entails the comprehension of its culture. Culture is the intangible force that manifests in economic systems, demographic profile, social and political structures, and technological adaptations. So powerful is this force, that going against it can drain

urban managers of their resources. Gliding along with them, on the other hand, can lead to self-maintaining and self-enforcing solutions.

## **The Unnatural Solutions**

With the non-recognition of the rationale for and organic nature of cities, planning by the public sector has often been carried out using a 'template approach'. This approach takes off from the assumption that all areas being planned for are the same in terms of physical and social qualities. It is, however, important to note that each city is unique and that within each city exist various districts that also differ in function and features. Urban planning, therefore, should factor in the special characteristics that arise out of the district's role in the city and even national affairs. The housing sector, in particular, should be sensitive to the peculiarities of the housing sites.

Cases of unsold and unoccupied housing units, abandoned resettlement sites, high turnover rates, unauthorized alterations/ expansions, are reflective of cases of misfits between people and their milieus. A low level of satisfaction is the general sentiment that can be drawn out of many occupants of public housing. These cases obviously point out the fact that public investments in housing must be rethought based on better-defined assumptions relative to the needs being catered to.

The template approach that has been the basis for carrying out a lot of the housing projects of the government is analogous to scientific frameworks in the physical realm, where processes are programmed to generate predictable outcomes based on carefully calculated inputs. But unlike the physical world, the non-physical environment is a lot messier and, thus, difficult to control. The diversity and dynamism that characterize the cultural dimension cannot be dealt with using standard and neatly packaged approaches.

Centrally-developed approaches used by the public sector are offshoots of the following:

### **Industrialization**

The age of mass production and assembly line systems called for by the need to quickly respond to increasing demand for products has a lot to do with the standardization of solutions to urban problems. The factory setting where the environment is controlled and where pieces of equipment are programmed to generate predictable outputs became the model for many planning endeavors. With its calibrated equipment quality control standards, what comes out of the system easily matches with what was put in.

### **Computerization**

The computer processes if-then, cause-effect relationships between independent and dependent variables. In this similarly closed system, parameters can be set to direct and predict results of the process. The computer is a black box

that accepts data and feeds results to people, who do not understand the analytical process that happens in between.

### **Regulations**

The formulation and enforcement of design codes and guidelines have shaped the boundaries within which designers could create. Standards prescribing minimums and maximums are supposed to ensure the end-users' health, safety and well-being. They are also meant to protect the so-called 'public interest.'. Equitable distribution of resources, likewise, justifies the need for regulation.

### **Bureaucracy**

Centrally-developed solutions that only need to be replicated in various settings simplify the task of governance. Instead of going through the entire research and programming process that precedes the design stage, rules-of-thumb and pre-tested strategies are relied on to arrive at the more or less intended result.

## **The Consequences of the Anti-Urban Stance and Template Approach**

### **Housing as a Catalyst for Economic Development**

Too often, housing is used to spur development in a remote part of a country- far from the city center. Planners hope to stimulate economic activities by 'planting' a residential development in the middle of rural setting. This approach has led to unoccupied units that represent misallocated public and private investments. The role of housing in the process of urbanization highlights the fact that housing developments must be initiated in areas where they are most needed. Usually, these areas are within or are very close to city centers where livelihood bases exist.

### **Anti-squatting Policies**

Policies that label squatting as a crime negate the fact that people who resort to this practice are actually helping themselves. These people are providing for themselves what government cannot. Systems need to be instituted by the public sector to see to the provision of housing for the urban area's labor force. Economic activities in the city cannot be sustained without accommodating cheap labor, made available by the low-income workforce.

### **Model Houses**

The housing units are conventional, rationally-sited units that conform to the provisions of the design codes. They are standardized model houses that are replicated by the thousands without customized treatments required by particular project sites.

## Restrictive Housing Policies

The different housing programs being implemented by various agencies under the National Shelter Program is laden with limits in terms of time frames, cost and selling price ceilings and credit requirements. Entry into the system is highly regulated and, thus, excludes the greater percentage of households who are in need of housing.

## Gliding with Natural Processes

### Urbanization and Structural Change

Urbanization comes about as a result of the process of concentration of people and resources in a given area. As population density increases, the level of urbanization also increases. As people converge, so do activities, capital, information and other resources. With urbanization also comes the process of structural change that is brought about by the shift in composition of economic activities in favor of the service sector. The service sector is supposed to be the most productive sector since it requires the least inputs in terms of physical resources, particularly land. The process of urbanization is justified by productivity goals. A city is more productive and more efficient than its rural counterpart because of the lower cost per capita of providing the inputs of production. Urban areas are also rendered more productive by their wide and concentrated market base. Since the levels of patronization of goods and services are higher, revenues are also higher. Businesses, therefore, choose to locate their economic bases in cities where the levels of exposure are higher.

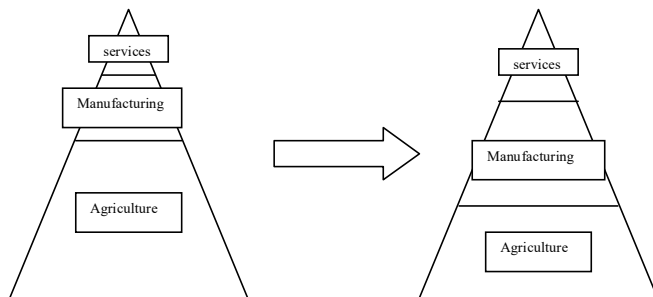


Figure 1 – Structural Change

### Territorial Specialization

Specialization, in general, means enhancing an area within a whole spectrum of things and being identified with it. It is a process that starts with the identification of strengths and weaknesses and gradually building up on the former. Specialization is finding a niche and becoming an essential part of the total order. The concept is applied in various types of organizations. In an industrial organization, for instance, the assembly-line production system is comprised of specialized stations that work on part of the end product. Workers in each station are trained to excel in their part of

the chain of activities making up the production process. Many types of offices are organized into departments, e.g. Finance, Legal, Technical Departments, that are assigned special tasks. The practice of many professions also requires expertise in chosen fields. Specialization is justified by productivity goals. A production setting allows mass-production that can be done within a shorter period of time. There is bound to be less wastage of resources because the inputs of production are highly regulated. Product development is also enhanced with specialization. Concentrating on particular fields of expertise or products allows individuals or organizations to build up or improve on what exists.

In the urban context, specialization is manifested in the settlement patterns called for by the economic activities. A city, just like production centers and professionals, can be very well known for particular products and services. International examples include London that thrives on finance-related businesses, Paris on fashion and Sao Paolo on shoes.

On a micro level, specialized areas within the city can also be found. There's the Tottenham Courtroad in London that is known for electronic appliances, Napierville in Chicago that people go to for antique finds, and the Fashion District in New York for designer item rivals. Several areas in Metropolitan Manila can be identified with particular products and services. Raon, for instance is a street in the City of Manila that is almost synonymous with musical instruments. Banawe Road is where most people would go for automobile parts. Tomas Morato is the place to go for a wide range of choices of fine dining.

### Organic Development

This is the type of development that will ensue with minimal planning and intervention at the statutory level. Settlements are shaped by natural processes that arise out of day-to-day encounters among individuals and among social organizations. Market forces, modes of subsistence and cultural factors determine the configuration of physical settlements. This is opposed to planned development, which is a product of a conscious effort to direct growth and pre-determine the final pattern of settlements.

The strong ties between settlements and economics have been clearly manifested by the settlement patterns that evolved from the neolithic age to the modern times. The nomadic economy marked by food gathering and hunting corresponded to temporary, resource-based abodes that were built out of light and perishable materials. Due to the constant movement from one place to another, people then had a very loose sense of territoriality. The agricultural economy which developed out of the need to produce surplus, required the formation of organized village systems with hierarchical orders. This form of economy fixated people to land. The age of feudalism further strengthened the need to defend territories. The radial form of settlements and heavily fortified sites were consequences of the need to

govern, preserve and defend the closed community system. The mercantilist economy emerged out of the realization by members comprising the feudal systems that there is life beyond the shores. Trading across the seas resulted in fragmented social organizations that manifested in relatively loose physical boundaries. This age saw the development of ports and retail outlets. Mobility rendered by sea vessels, thereafter, led to the conquest of new territories by the more powerful dominions. Colonization or the territorial expansion that ensued saw the varying degrees of erosion of culture of the colonies. Urban layouts were superimposed on existing ones while the cultures that went with them got assimilated. After the first world war, industrialization addressed the need to rise up from the rubbles. Massive destruction and homelessness called for the systematic production of components needed to rebuild the cities. Railways were built to expand markets. The process of industrialization, that brought more people to the cities because of job opportunities, continued beyond the thresholds of urban facilities. Quality of life in the cities degenerated until those who could afford to live elsewhere chose to move out. This exodus of the wealthier class led to the development of suburbia. Highways and automobiles linked the suburbs to the inner cities. Configurations of cities have, since then, transformed according to the systems of interrelationships among the social organizations that manned them. With the increasing trend towards a global economy, new settlement patterns continue to emerge.

### The Urban Districts

The urban districts are products of these natural processes. For each district corresponds a unique web of activities aimed at sustaining life. The higher the level of specialization of the district, the higher the level of its association with its products.

Districts can be categorized under any of the following: The Central business district serves as the hub for the service sector of the economy. A lot of these services are dependent on technology and infrastructure support. Essential to most of these businesses to thrive is the concentration of people and establishments. CBDs, therefore, are characterized by high-density settlements and high-rise buildings. Closely associated and oftentimes adjacent to CBDs are Downtowns or commercial areas. These serve as the outlets for the manufacturing sector of the economy. Essential to commercial activities is maximum exposure of goods. Commercial areas develop out of the existence of a wide market base that will ensure sustained patronization of goods and services. Institutional districts are distinguished by the concentration of educational, religious, cultural and government buildings. Planning for these districts are often products of conscious efforts to project credibility and control. Heavy industrial districts are production centers where efficiency of operations is of prime importance. Industrial centers are located in relation to their forward and backward linkages. These areas should be able to

accommodate their much-needed labor force. Light industrial districts cater to non-pollutive and oftentimes backyard industries. Tourism districts are defined by the presence of historically significant natural and man-made assets. Many of these districts are regulated by special local administration organizations. Usually located on waterfronts, Market districts cater to wholesale trading. These districts are characterized by the predominance of informal organizations, ambulant vending and unregistered businesses. Transport districts give peculiar strength to the metropolitan area. Circulation networks, terminals, parking spaces characterize these districts. The presence of various modes of transportation and infrastructure allow efficient movement of people and goods. The Port Districts develop out of local and global trading activities that are facilitated by sea vessels.

All of these districts are products of organic development and territorial specialization. These are natural processes that arise out of very strong economic and social forces that physical planning must go along with.

### The Template Mode vs. District-specific Designs

Hereunder are examples of districts within Metropolitan Manila that illustrate the peculiarities of areas performing distinct functions. The relatively higher level of specialization that these districts exhibit has allowed them to find a niche that makes them productive components of the economic development programs instituted and carried out on a national scale. The economic linkages of these districts go beyond national boundaries. They have, at varying degrees penetrated the global economic order.

#### The Downtown – Cubao, Quezon City

The impacts of the planned and controlled development of the Araneta Center spill over the surrounding residential areas that have undergone a series of transformation over the last twenty years. A lot of the streets leading directly to the center are now lined with semi-commercial, semi-residential units. Due to the increase in land values that follow the development of the commercial center, households nearby respond by either selling their properties to businessmen or converting their units to accommodate revenue-generating activities. The problems arising from the set-up and the proximity to the center include noise and air pollution due to the entry of vehicles through the streets adjacent to the residences.

There are not enough residential bases in the district for low-income earners in the Commercial Center. These include the salespersons, cashiers and security guards. Due to the sharp delineation between commercial and residential areas, activities are not interfaced. Hence, the Center would be 'dead' after all the shops close at around 9:00 P.M.

## **The Central Business District - Ayala, Makati City**

Both formal and spontaneous housing sites in this district are threatened by the increasing rate of commercialization that results in the fast rate of land value appreciation. Public transportation serves the office zones but are not easily accessible from the perimeters of the housing sites. The dynamic economic setting requires design flexibility so that housing units can be transformed depending on the current needs of the district. Zoning, likewise, is expected to change according to the dictates of the market forces. Highly priced lots naturally lead to medium to high-rise developments that could fill in the relatively few voids in the center.

Ironically, the privileged few, who are economically based in the CBD as managers, stockholders and company officers live in the exclusive subdivisions and high-end condominium buildings ten to fifteen minutes drive away from the offices. The secretaries, clerks, janitors and security guards who, likewise, contribute to the productivity of the district have to allot a significant percentage of their meager incomes for transportation expenses because they live in the suburbs.

## **The Market District- Divisoria, City of Manila**

This district is located near the Port of Manila and has, since the mercantilist period continued to be associated with very cheap goods that are usually sold in bulk. Ambulant and unregistered businesses are the trademarks of the district. Sidewalks therein have been encroached upon by these petty forms of trade and the residences beyond them are almost invisible from the streets. The portable nature of the 'commercial stalls' requires storage spaces within the similarly informal dwelling units of the vendors. Trading hours vary but go beyond the operating hours of the formal establishments. Issues in designing for the dwelling units include security and adaptability. The unique behavioral patterns of women and children who are mainly engaged in the selling activities also have to be factored into the design of the units.

The amoeba-like configuration of the selling areas reflect the way of life and domestic spaces of the people that work and live in the district.

## **The Light Industrial District – Shoe Avenue, City of Marikina**

The district that is defined by the Shoe Avenue in Marikina City, is dotted by shoe-related establishments and spaces of various scales. These could be anywhere from a corner occupied by a vendor selling shoelaces to a huge leather processing center. A large chunk of the businesses are medium in scale and are operated within homelots where residential, commercial and industrial activities are altogether accommodated. The genuine mixed-use concept is in vogue here, where a lot of the businesses are of the

backyard type. The products produced at the back of the house can be sold in the commercial stalls in front of the same house. Since the economic and domestic activities are very much interfaced, the behavioral patterns of the family members are important variables in the design of houses.

## **The Heavy Industrial District - Ugong, Pasig City**

Factories are able to operate at low cost because of the cheap labor that could be accessed in the urban area. The factory workers subsist on the very low pay they receive because a lot of them do not pay rent. They would rather squat in vacant lands nearby because of the contractual arrangements that typically bind them with their employers. The instability of their livelihood sources reflects in the loose connection they have with their places of abode. A lot of these workers live on their own, occupying spaces that would just be sufficient for sleeping. Their families would live elsewhere and would be reunited only once a week with the breadwinner. Issues that need to be highlighted have to do with first, security because of the three-shift work schedules of most factories. Some workers would be walking back home at two or three in the morning. Health and safety issues also are main concerns considering the proximity to highly pollutant industrial bases.

## **The Historical and Tourism District- Binondo, Manila**

The Chinatown of Manila is rich in architectural heritage that can be better appreciated by the public if the quality of streetlife can be upgraded. Better circulation systems, lighting and landscaping can enhance the already acknowledged gems in the area. Many of the sights in here can be enjoyed by walking around, but a lot of the businesses therein also have to be served by vehicular traffic. There is, therefore, a need to balance pedestrian and vehicular movement concerns.

This densely built-up district can be in-filled by medium to high-rise rental housing that can cater to the mobile dwellers. These vertical structures could have in the lower levels, tourism-related uses such as museums, gift-shops, function rooms, and the like. While encouraging outsiders/tourists to flock to the district, issues related to security, privacy and mobility must be considered.

## **The Transport District – Guadalupe, City of Mandaluyong**

This melting pot, which leads everywhere, is home to public transport drivers and operators. The edges of the residential bases in this district are not distinctly defined because of the encroachment of jeepney and tricycle terminals on supposedly private roads. Economic activities spurred by the presence of these terminals also have spatial requirements. Roads almost disappear due to the

proliferation of vendors, magazine stands and eateries. The fast pace and constant movement of people and vehicles passing by this district can easily make life intolerable due to traffic and pollution.

### The Port District – Port Area, City of Manila

The area surrounding the Port of Manila is heavily congested with squatter settlements. A significant percentage of these informal dwellers are engaged in port related activities. Those directly engaged are hired by the port administration as stevedores, clerks and guards. Those indirectly engaged, on the other hand, operate petty businesses such as eateries. Many of the informal settlers came from the provinces to try their luck in Manila. The first encounter with the city got them anchored to the place a lot longer than they should have been due to inaccessible formal housing systems. The busy setting where port, commercial, market and business uses overlap accounts for the complexity of housing needs in the area. Privacy, health and security needs are again critical concerns when designing for the housing settlements. The transitional setting that the area should be providing must allow the cycles that migrants go through after setting foot in the city.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The important role that the city plays in the pursuit of national economic development requires planners to understand the processes that make the city work. Planning must go along, rather than against the very strong forces that lead to the spontaneous development of settlements.

In particular, planning for the housing needs of these districts must be hinged on the objective of enhancing the natural processes that will ultimately redound to a higher level of productivity. Designs of residential settlements can be standardized only up to a certain level. Beyond this level, customization is needed to address the particular needs of the site. Model units and residential buildings cannot be centrally developed and later mass-produced and constructed anywhere in the country. This approach, which was resorted to many times in the past, has resulted in housing units that either remained unoccupied, unsold or perceived to be inadequate in terms of meeting the users' needs. District-specific designs that relate to the existing economic and social networks are, thus, recommended in lieu of template solutions to housing problems.

A pro-urban stance that seeks to support the process of urbanization should translate to policies that will increase the opportunities for the homeless to access land and housing in the cities.

### Access to urban land

The prohibitive cost of land in the city centers cause people to either resort to squatting or to purchase lots significantly far away from the center. Government interventions could

be geared to allowing families, that are economically rooted in the cities, greater access to home lending windows.

### Infill Housing

Majority of the socialized housing projects financed by the government is located in the suburban and rural areas. While the initial cost of house purchase is lower because of the low-priced rural lands, the end-users eventually bear the high cost of transportation and access to basic utilities. Suburban developments need to be coupled with efforts to provide housing within the dense city cores.

We, architectural designers, exert every effort to know our clients – their characters, needs and aspirations. Urban areas also have this cultural dimension that needs to be understood. And the more cities are understood, the friendlier they become.

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