

The Apparition and Capital

by Simon Soon

How does one begin to describe the spatial and discursive qualities of capital in relation to the histories of a specific built environment? A surviving reproduction of a painting that was in all likelihood destroyed during the Second World War, published as the front cover illustration of *Philippine Magazine* in August 1929, offers both instruction and allegory.¹ Through its narrative and subtext, we may proceed to unpack the historical density that characterises Mark Salvatus' assemblages that explore the post-war histories and futures of two Manila neighbourhoods, Binondo and Santa Cruz.



Fig. 1 - Chinese rebels storming the walled city in 1603 driven back by an apparition of Saint Francis, ca 1605, unknown Chinese artist, published 'Philippine Magazine' August 1929 front cover illustration. Image from public domain.

The picture in question describes an assault led by a band of Chinese rebels that took place at a fortified compound, the *intramuros*. Also known as the *Walled City*, the compound was the Spanish administrative seat of colonial Philippines. Outside its gate laid the Parian, an area in which the unconverted Chinese populace initially lived and served as entrepreneurial intermediary for the trans-oceanic trade between China and the Spanish America, even as they provided other economic services to the political elites of Manila as artisans and merchants.

However, tensions between the Chinese and Spanish resulted in a number of rebellions, of which the 1603 rebellion proved to be one of the most historically significant. The illustration shows a two-part narrative within a single pictorial plane. Both parts spotlight on the figure of Saint Francis, who appears larger in size in relation to the rest of the figures in the picture. According to the supplied caption, he is the principal apparition on the side of a divine ordinance, who successfully drove away

¹ *Philippine Magazine*, August 1929. Front cover illustration.

1335MABINI

the Chinese rebels. On the left section is an illustration of Saint Francis, who is seen kneeling in supplication to an equally large figure of Jesus Christ on the cross. On the right section is the following scene, where Saint Francis' gigantic presence appears to be dispersing an army of Chinese rebels hell-bent on destroying what the Spanish has so painstakingly and jealously built.

Perhaps one might begin with the long shadow of history as the sediment on which the foundations of Binondo and the neighbouring Santa Cruz is built upon.² How these neighbourhoods came to be relates in no small part to the early modern history of the Philippines. More specifically, it stems from the Spanish racial discourse that had come to terms with the fraught presence of the Chinese as a biological cipher of economy. For under Spanish discourse, there is a correlation between biology (race) and economic destiny (capacity).³ Because of this, the destroyed painting that is reproduced in the Philippines Magazine in 1929, recovers for a pre-war audience of a Philippine nation, now under American rule, of an older fable about the vicissitudes of unbridled capitalism and its consequences that could only be tamed by faith and imperial order.

Binondo, which was established circa 1594, was to serve this goal. Located across the Pasig river from the walled city, it was aimed at retaining the economic services of a group of loyal Chinese merchants of artisans, whom the Spanish Dominicans shaped into loyal zealots that would eventually assist them in their mission to spiritually win over China.⁴ With the passing of time, the influx of native inhabitants by the 18th century joined the existing largely Chinese and Chinese mestizo population. This resulted in a three-gremio arrangement. A gremio acts as a kind of Municipal Corporation and religious sodality, each claiming communal superiority in civil and ceremonial affairs within the township. The only other district with this unique three-gremio arrangement occurred in neighbouring Santa-Cruz.⁵

While this political and cultural configuration did not survive into the 20th century, it characterises the cultural demographics of these neighbourhoods. This suggests that the constitution of Binondo and Santa Cruz is demographically diverse, therefore it is perhaps inaccurate to reduce it to an ethnic enclave. However, its diverse demographics do surface certain kind of cultural tensions, which has certain types of reverberations. It is against this backdrop that Mark Salvatus' *muhons*, that primarily addresses the postwar histories of Binondo and Santa Cruz, also have to grapple with.

As one of the nine artists/architects selected to represent the Philippine Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale of 2016, Salvatus takes a less than rosy view of the cost of development, even if architectural visions as practised conventionally, more often than not, trade in the stock vision of progress and hope for a better future.

Known for a sophisticated body of work that deals with refashioning chance encounters with familiar everyday objects into works of art across various media, Mark Salvatus' work is heavily informed by the urban landscape, the Internet, advertising and popular beliefs and cultures. Salvatus is not

² For a general history introduction of the Philippine cities, see Daniel F. Doeppers, 'The Development of Philippine Cities Before 1900', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 31 No. 4, 1972, pp. 769-92.

³ E. Wickberg, 'The Chinese Mestizo in Philippines', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 1964), p. 64.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 69.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 70.

1335MABINI

beholden to the conceptual density of the visual form that haunts many artists who went through a fine arts education.

Instead, like many of those agitprop artists of the Nagkakaisang Progresibong Artista-Arkitekto (NPAA) [United Progressive Artists and Architects] of the 1970s, his education in communications, having graduated from University of Santo Tomas with a degree in advertising arts, shaped his outlook and output. Salvatus has initially taken an interest in uncovering the lively youth culture of Manila, operating under the street art moniker of Boy Agimat and co-founded Pilipinas Street Plan, an online documentation of graffiti art across Manila's streetscapes. Later, he went on to co-found 98B COLLABotary, a multidisciplinary artist initiative located in Binondo.

Intimate knowledge of place figure significantly in Salvatus' practice and his approach towards the exhibition brief demonstrates such sympathy. A *muhon* is therefore a place marker, a kind of commemorative anchor. The driving questions seem to be predicated on both the temporal and the geographic as well as the formulation of an aesthetic strategy to address this. How does a place-marker address the quicksands of history in a rapidly changing cityscape? If it serves to arrest specific moments in time for the deliberation of a public, by what artistic means can this be achieved?

For the larger pavilion exhibition, each artist is invited to produce three *muhons*. Each of these respective *muhons* is displayed in a grid-like formation within three adjoining exhibiting rooms. Moreover, each room is dedicated, in both speculative and analytical terms, to a specific thematic. The rooms correspond to the following themes: history, modernity and the future. It is within such a serial configuration that a temporal rhythm emerges, to demonstrate a practice of place-making sensitive to time-scale.

The *muhon*, in this sense, is as much a kind of declarative action as much as an object. It operates as a process of staking, in the demonstration of inherence, alongside the desire to mark and affirm one's existence. As form, it condenses the spatial qualities of site into a plastic expression, and therefore configures the material into social inquiry. For this reason, *muhon* allows for the assumption of a critical lens as a series of linked biography, both real and speculative, of a city. In the case of Salvatus's work, it is an unflinching portrait of a city whose uneasy relationship with the notion of Chinese-ness and its looming discursive presence as the spectre of capital, come to bear on the uneasy multi-cultural fabric of Manila's post-war modernity.

In dealing with this issue, Salvatus speaks through an intergenerational fiction centred on the hardware store, as enterprise and signifier of the Binondo locale. The fictional conceit is inspired in part by *Ongpin Stories*, a collection of short stories written by Chinese Filipino author R. Kwan Laurel.⁶ It is also firmly rooted in the commitment to understanding the social lifeworlds of Binondo and its vicinity, constituted through the detritus and materials found in situ.

The hardware store as trope formulates the site as a metaphor for the aggregates of construction. They are parts that cohere into whole, and of a kind of perspicacity on the condition of the makeshift that characterises post-war modernity. As a business that is run primarily by the Chinese Filipino, it is also a reflection of a modern identity, a composite figure of the historical roles the community played as artisan and trader, in the remaking of Manila.

⁶ R. Kwan Laurel, *Ongpin Stories*, Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, 2008.

1335MABINI

What the Chinese did not manage to destroy in the numerous rebellions that occurred during Spanish rule, the Americans, as a new imperial power, succeeded in doing so in the closing months of the Second World War. Manila's built environment (including the intramuros) was razed following American bombardment of the city then under Japanese rule. The hardware store thus represents a kind of economic resilience as much as a suspended history, through which parts of the city is refashioned out of shards of the past, even if in its reconstitution, other currents are lost in the process. Yet the undercurrent remains with historical fable of how to address the question capital in relation to urban formation.



Fig. Destruction of the Walled-City of Manila. Illustration 341 in Medical Dept., U.S. Army: [Surgery in World War II: Activities of Surgical Consultants, Vol. II](#), Office of the Surgeon general, Dept. of the Army, Washington, D.C., 1964. Image from public domain.

Geographer Wallace McIntyre notes that post-war Manila's retail culture was marked by three distinctive patterns or combination of patterns. These were the public markets, selling mainly foodstuffs, which anchors a compact retail district. Secondly, there are principal streets with a concentration of retail stores in a linear pattern. Then there were scatterings of tiny neighbourhood stores, *sari-sari*, in residential areas. Heavy retail concentration existed in the vicinity of Escolta and the Rizal Avenue midway between Quinta, Central and Divisoria Markets.⁷ However, since World War II, Rizal Avenue has replaced Escolta as Manila's main business thoroughfare.⁸ It would seem that post-war Binondo, and specifically its retail heart, Escolta, never recovered its former pre-war glory.

⁷ Wallace E. McIntyre, 'The Retail Pattern of Manila', *Geographical Review*, Vol 45, No. 1 (January 1955), p. 66.

⁸ McIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

1335MABINI



Fig. Escolta Street before World War II. This image is from the original negative held in the collections at the American Geographical Society Library (AGSL), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee USA. Image from public domain.

The hardware store as a concept and trope is therefore imbricated in a narrative of nationhood and modernity, parallel to the 1948 phrase 'to catch up with the world'. Catching up would entail a kind of belief in mobility, of the embrace of new values and the crystallisation of the modern amidst change and progress.

In this sense the first *muhon* captures the historical setting of this vertiginous pace. For if the destruction of Manila is consequential, then the reconstruction of the city translates into a remembrance of the wounded. The iron scaffold that carries the assemblage of objects remains skeletal in appearance. It is a flimsy support on which rests a number of objects that came together as if by happenstance. These are remnants of the street – a piece of black cloth, a pvc pipe, a grille plate, a conveyor belt. They are shored together with a map of Manila on which the artist has erased many of the place names forming a configuration of ink black rectangles.

These black grids are strikingly uncanny, for they resemble aerial photographs of a pummelled city following relentless American bombardment in the supposed liberation of Manila from Japanese occupation. In effect, it speaks of a postwar condition as essentially an urbanscape made up with detritus. The period of recovery that follows would then have to come to terms with the large-scale devastation as both physical wound and psychic scar.

The second *muhon* engages with the quest for modernity and moves forward into a period of growth. It occupies a similar floor space but is significantly shorter in height. The tray-like plinth is affixed with wheels, almost like a cart. In this way it conveys movement and the dynamic force as a principal condition of the modern. In Salvatus's estimation, the grid-like arrangement of cement trowels, are metaphoric of modernity as patterns. The trowels are also utilitarian in the way it serves the purpose of building and patching. In a way, it serves as a metaphor for the covering up of the ugly realities of the urban fabric through the promise of being part of a shiny external form.

Placed in between these trowels are also objects picked up from the street. They are the material testimonies of the city as a site of construction. A small slab of marble, straw, tiles, wooden chip, empty cigarette packet, granite tile, as well as cloth from the street seem to suggest an unruly growth in the cracks. The larger story speaks of the Manila under the rule of Marcos. The beautification of Manila and the cosmopolitan air it projects through the modernist edifices that were constructed during the presidential regime, such as the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, the Manila

1335MABINI

Film Centre, Folk Arts Theater, Philippine Trade Pavillions, masked the social ruins caused by decades of corruption facilitated by a dictatorship.⁹



Fig. Cultural Center of the Philippines, circa 1969. Designed by Leandro Locsin. Image from public domain.

The third *muhon* then leaps into the speculative future, but it is one grounded in the realities of the present day. A structure that resembles a tall cabinet frames the objects that can be found in this assemblage. It symbolises some kind of aspiration to reach upwards, at the same time, such ambition is pointedly an unfinished one. For Salvatus, the future is really about instability and the volatility of progress. In a way this particular place-markers ties the larger narrative into the geographic specificity of the hardware store located in Binondo.

Binondo, as one of the oldest districts in Manila, has been there for a long time and it is where the city of Manila obtains a large part of its construction materials. In a sense, the hinges, screws, planks, tiles, glass panels, nails that appear here constitute aggregates of a city that is perennially under construction. It is in the hardware stores of Binondo that we see the district as a microcosm for the urban history of Manila – from being a centre of trade in the past to becoming a centre for the retail of hardware. The denizens of Binondo have facilitated the reinvention of the city, again and again.

On this note, the third *muhon* is also a commentary on the construction frenzy that besets Manila today. Property development, as controlled by a network of oligarchy whose members are largely Chinese Filipino, is a point of contention. This is not an indictment of a community on the whole; after all, it is not the entire community who are beneficiaries of these commercial monopolies.¹⁰ At the same time, resentment are coloured by racial undertones, more so that many recent developments across Manila are also joint business partnerships that have brought in Mainland Chinese capital into the redevelopment of the city.

⁹ See Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth and Marcos State Architecture*, Manila: Ateneo University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ For scholarships that try to complicate Chinese identity in the Filipino context and speak of its plural conditions, see Richard T. Chu, 'The "Chinese" and the "Mestizos" of the Philippines: Towards A New Interpretation', *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 3, 2002, pp 327-70.

1335MABINI

The building of condominiums that increasingly blocks off and privatizes the view of the Manila bay are essentially commoditizing a significant feature of the Manila landscape into a lifestyle aspiration. This issue has already surfaced in Salvatus' 2012 installation titled *Model City*, which satirically envisions a mock-up city made up only of illustrations of condominiums cut out from advertisements.



Fig. Mark Salvatus, *Model City series*, 2012-ongoing, Multi-media installation (Cut-outs, cardboard, rotating motor, table, CCTV camera, audio and single channel video projection).

If this aspiration has become the new Filipino dream, which architects are selling through CGI renditions of the pristine domestic enclave, alien and removed from the great unwashed, Salvatus' conjecture of the Manila future is not an optimistic one. What he offers instead is a kind of searing social realism. The screen laid flat inside his cabinet frame brings to life daily images of life around the Binondo district. The moving image in turn brings to life a different quality of motion, one that submits the camera's roving eye to the reality of life on the street. Alongside this documentary testaments are again found objects, an exhaust fan, a found shirt belonging to a labourer, gloves, a rock, as well as advertisement fliers selling new condominium units. It is social realist in the unmasking of the co-extensive environment on which such condominiums will be situated within.

Through the coordinates of these *muhons*, that scale the past to present to future, Salvatus offers a critique against the architectural rhetoric as a proposition of utopia. Perhaps as the definition of the word 'utopia' itself suggests, it is very much a kind of no-place, a figment that could not possibly exist because such imagination will ultimately have to square up with the rest of Manila – a city of slum dwellers who are equal stakeholders in the urban fabric of the city.

In this sense, what is writ large through Binondo is a story of capital in relation to the city of Manila. In this story, a long-standing racial discourse is grafted onto the issue of economic privileges. If the apparition of Saint Francis can be read as a proxy of Spanish colonial policy that managed to smooth over the cultural friction that is ingrained within the economic structure of Manila since the arrival of the Spanish, then perhaps all faith in such system only induces a temporary stupor, in which religion merely forestalls radical inquiry.

Conversely, the recovery of a space for such inquiry is an excision through a rehearsed strategy of the bricolage, that bring into some form of alignment the temporal axis of a place. As a strategy of the avant-garde, the technique of combining together disparate objects or images to produce new meanings or render existing or conventional ones ambiguous, is also at the same time, producing a new framework for the surfacing of new questions about our social relations. In doing so, such active configuration also submits architecture's *raison d'etre* to judgement and re-evaluation.