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Reclamation: Pros and cons

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All around the world, countries have been reclaiming land for as early as the 1600s. In the Philippine context, however, reclamation is an often discussed issue, especially when it comes to land reclamation of our bays in the metro areas. For an archipelago with the third longest coastline in the world with a lot of vacant and underutilized land, and the wrong land uses at the wrong place, at the wrong time, do we really need to reclaim?

My education and experience in architecture, urban planning, and real estate development, with projects in 38 countries, observing 2,000 plus cities in 63 countries say otherwise.

I have often been asked, why reclaim? In media interviews, however, I talk about both the disadvantages and advantages of reclamation. Even the Philippine Institute of Environmental Planners (PIEP) Board and its members, of which I am President for 2013 and 2014, are divided on the issue. One cannot resort to reclamation just because it is the most convenient solution toward a lack of urban space and new urban land for real estate development when there are still potential areas that can be developed elsewhere in the metropolis. Reclamation should only be considered as the last resort.

From 1975-1977, I was the Team Leader and Senior Planner of the Metro Manila Transport Land Use and Development Planning Project (MMetroplan), a project of the Philippine government funded by the World Bank, with Freeman Fox of London and Hong Kong as consultants). The Team made comments on the already existing reclamation and the proposed further reclamation in Manila Bay. The Metro Manila Plan included 40 towns and cities. Earlier, the Manila Bay Metropolitan Region Strategic Plan funded by UNDP, of which I was a Project Officer, included Bataan, Zambales, Tarlac, Pampanga, Bulacan, Rizal, the Greater Manila area, Laguna, Cavite, and Batangas. The plan also studied, among others, the limitations and potentials for future direction of urban growth, development and redevelopment of the metropolis.

Back then, our recommendation was no further reclamation should be done beyond what was already reclaimed in 1976 until comprehensive detailed planning socio economic, financial, engineering studies etc. are done in the wider urban context of Manila Metropolitan region.

Environmental planners, environmentalists, heritage, culture and arts, and religious groups disagree on reclamation in Manila Bay because it disrupts the natural environment during natural disasters. Moreover, the finances could be used for other developments, like environment rehabilitation, retrofitting of ruined and historic buildings, or in developing existing and underdeveloped areas, provide housing for the urban poor, improve transportation and other infrastructure. Land reclamation tends to be expensive because reclaimed soil is weak, compressible, takes many years to stabilize, and consequently not economic for tall buildings. Foundations are expensive because you can only build low-rise buildings on raft or mat footings and other expensive engineering measures.

Creating new urban land creates more access roads that connects to/from existing main roads and can contribute to further traffic congestion and slow down drainage and flood control.

Environmental planners, urban planners, and other professionals, meanwhile, also see the possible positive economical financial market that reclamation can bring into the country, as is seen and done in other cities like Singapore, Hong Kong, Manhattan, Tokyo, and Dubai. They are developed for tourism and economic Freeport zones and new urban land uses. Reclamation is sometimes seen as cheaper in terms of land development because all projects will be built on new land, and can be freely designed. Inland development can be more expensive due to the numerous permits that are needed to be obtained and bureaucratic red tape one has to go through (lis pendens, landgrabbing, resettling informal settlers) before any development can be done. Reclaimed lands can also act as natural barriers as wave breakers against tsunamis and storm surges.

Elsewhere in the world, reclamation has been done out of the increasing shortage of urban land. Singapore reclaimed over 6,000 hectares to enlarge the island from the original 65,000 hectares to 71,000 hectares to answer its need for more urban lands. Two-thirds of The Netherlands has been reclaimed to answer the city's flood problem. Dubai added 2,000 kilometers for water front urban development. In fact, most completed, on-going, and proposed land reclamation development projects today have been done to address the impending urban expansion of cities all around the world or to increase the city's economic, commercial, and financial activity.

However, development is not worthy of the name unless it is spread evenly, like butter on a piece of bread. The legacy that full reclamation leaves behind in terms of lost opportunities and the heavy burden that the future generation will have to carry should be carefully studied. The resources tied up to reclamation could be used to different competing needs elsewhere in Metro Manila. A properly planned, designed, engineered, and implemented reclamation area can do the country a lot of good if done properly in the right place, at the right time, at the right land-use type and density and correct planning and development.