Learning from an Ayala Mall

Seduced by the Superficial Urban Scene

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Why We Should Give Malls a Chance

I think malls are important and I think they are special. It's strange to be perceived as naïve and uninformed when I profess my faith in them, as if I have been beguiled by the ruses laid out by mall designers to enchant me.

“Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way…but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things…There is a perversity in the learning process…we can look downward to go upward. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.”

So I'm encouraged. I decided to look at the mall as a special space of inquiry, a place to learn from, because even though we complain about them, they serve to delineate the unique facets of the local in the hallmark of the ubiquitous. Global Malls are places of hyper-relevance and hyper-dependence on what is in vogue. It's a place that not only captures the things, the images, the people that is of the now, but they are also places that constantly projects what could be the new now. As a space that is created with the intent of constantly updating itself to remain relevant, the mall hovers between temporality and permanence. The time frame of interest is therefore of a moment, contrary to the elongated sense of time that we tend to desire for. We obsess over a miniscule duration of time.

The malls are also places that needs to be accepted in order to validate its existence. It's a built typology that can, quite frankly, just be ignored without having any...
and entity. Aesthetic principles, in order to understand how each mall functions as a unique place. The quotidian experience of the mall needs to be remembered as much as its consequences. So, contrary to what many claim, malls don’t impose, they entice. And, there are layers of excess in the spaces of the mall because everything is deployed to warrant attention and response, and ideally acceptance. The mall is a fragile space, somewhat like a beautiful sculpted existence fraught with insecurities. It’s a stagnant architectural construct but defies being just that with its personality and inherent controversies. There is much to be unveiled here.

I’m looking at a specific mall: The Greenbelt—a mall owned and operated by a single family corporation—the Ayala Corporation—in a city that is home to the family’s land bank—the Makati City—in a country that is emerging—the Philippines. The malls in this region of the world are somewhat different from the malls that we are commonly acquainted with in the primarily western context. They are situated in the world’s densest locations but resemble the sprawl and spatial voids often found in western suburbs and closely resemble these suburban aesthetics. But of course they are completely different from their earlier iterations with their implantations into the city fabric and the sheer number of people that occupy them. These malls transform the urban fabric completely to offer a form of everyday life that is unique to their place. The quotidian experience of the mall needs to be remembered as much as its aesthetic principles, in order to understand how each mall functions as a unique place and entity.

“Question by author: Why do you think malls are important in the local context of Manila, while it’s so readily controversial here in the American context?”

“Mark Taylor: It’s evolved to be a community environment type of thing. The American suburban mall is scale and class-oriented. Malls in the US are considered to be pushed out to the suburban landscape. Different people frequent the mall and the mall provides a different lifestyle. Sorkin shows how in the US, the private places is a place where you can’t freely express yourself and a place that can reject you any time. But this is an American culture. In the Middle East and Southeast Asia, in the Philippines there’s a different culture. The culture invites crafted environments much more willingly. These cultures are much more optimistic and flexible about crafted environments. Specifically, Greenbelt is about creating a place to stop and linger. Everything is geared for incidental consumption here. These are public spaces in the city. The design is deployed [for anyone to] come out and be in. The public and private here are a dynamic duo. Especially with consumption now moving to an online platform, the malls need to redefine themselves as a different type of space for consumption. Malls are now more for their “environments”, they are spaces to be in. They may start as private developments but they are constantly redefining themselves as public spaces when used. The precedents for malls such as Greenbelt should be Central Park or Bryant Park more than the regional malls when it comes to looking for similar constructs in the US.”

Many points of controversy surface when presenting a privately owned mall space such as Greenbelt. I fully acknowledge the concerns behind persisting social segregation based on class distinction, conscious strategies to encourage excessive consumption, aggressively capitalist and neoliberalist pursuits and values, as well as a blinding optimism for noblesse oblige upon large-scale private ownership, which this discussion may not fully encompass. Again, I return to Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour who argued that design morals should not keep us from investigating spaces of use and consumption.

“The morality of commercial advertising … and the competitive instinct is not at issue here, although, indeed we believe it should be in the architect’s broader, synthetic tasks of which an analysis such as this is but one aspect. Analysis of one of the architectural variables in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as all are re-synthesized in design.”

While ‘Learning from Las Vegas’ unveiled a manifesto responding to the anchors of purist modernism, this inquiry is much less ambitious. It is developed to highlight the mall and try to represent the spatial intrigues that this typology has to offer. The discussion constantly links the mall to the larger city context, specifically the Southeast Asian region as the malls that I want to highlight are so engrained in its city fabric. Eventually I arrive at a mini-theory of architecture prioritizing the surface condition—Superficial architecture. Perhaps this is what comes of the “Junkspace,” this blurry empire of blur [that] fuses high and low; public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed.”

2 Mark Taylor, interview and transcription by author, February 12, 2015.
He was exasperated because everything he presumed seemed irrelevant. He put it somewhere between ordinary and extraordinary. He didn’t know that in some places, like the City that she came from, various kinds of private-ness competed for public-ness. That private-ness could completely engulf public-ness. That public-ness was so fragile and Small because no one seemed to care for it. But something happened when entering the Void—the vast, truly private dome; that ultimate private micro-city within a micro-city within a micro-city. In the Void, even though Big God tantalized, bewildered and vied for endless attention, Small God—so cozy, so contained, ever so delicate—persisted with childish temerity. In the City that she came from, poised forever between the ‘city’ and the ‘non-city,’ the private-ness kept growing. So Small God laughed and skipped around Big God cheerfully. Like a small child, it appeared innocent, blissfully unaware. But it was aware. And just like a child, completely unpredictable in its potential to blossom. But this Small God always played in the Void, because outside the Void all becomes real.

Arundhati Roy’s “The God of Small Things”
Edited version by author
What is a City of Malls?  

A themed environment is now so commonly known to us that the concept of a city distilled within a single mall is not difficult to imagine. We’ve seen it before—think West Edmonton Mall as introduced by Margaret Crawford or the Mall of Asia by the SM Group. This contained, (supposedly) inauthentic space, which is nevertheless seemingly all-inclusive, is easy to grasp. But when an entire city is themed by its collection of malls, what kind of a urban fabric does this produce? When a city is described by the different experiences that its collection of malls provides, what type of city would that be?  

Makati City is the crown jewel of Metro Manila. Geographically located at its center, it is the financial capital of the Philippines with the highest concentration of multinational and local corporations in the country, and arguably in the Southeast Asia region at large. It is estimated that more than one million people gather in this city daily.1 Given that the land area of Makati City is one sixth that of San Francisco (8.33 sqmi to 46.87 sqmi) and a density that is twice that of New York City (57,240/sqmi to 27,778/sqmi), the city’s ability to attract people is indisputable. This has naturally allowed the city to emerge as the country’s cultural and entertainment hub. And this hub has been built atop a singular architectural platform—the mall.  

The malls in Makati City were themed as *global-city hubs*. They were created to mimic and encapsulate the experience of consumption in global cities such as London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, and Singapore. But now these malls are so ubiquitous in Makati and larger Manila that it can no longer be read as a *themed environment*, its theming breaks down to the level of the everyday and is now embedded into the local city context so much so that the malls are now spearheading Makati’s way to becoming the *next global city*. Makati malls are no longer themed environments. The great problem of the malls is their identity as private entities. But when a particular space or a collection of spaces services a significantly large population, is this not a public space? Even if the fundamental definition of this public space is private, can we still say it defies its original identity? Can we deny a public space its purposes just because it’s defined as private? Arguing against the privatization of the city through the creation of themed environments because theming equals disconnected, hyperreal and hyperrealized entities separate from the democratic realms of the city and public state, Michael Sorkin writes:  

“[There exists] a plead to return to a more authentic urbanity, a city based on physical proximity and free movement and a sense that the city is best expression of a
desire for collectivity. As spatiality ebbs, so does intimacy. The privatized city of bits is a lie, simulating its connections, obliterating the power of its citizens either to act alone or to act together… The theme park presents its happy regulated vision of pleasure… as a substitute for the democratic public realm.”2  

Sorkin believes that the very construct of private spaces defies all that validates a public space. So for him, a city of malls would be a vivid example of a city themed into *private city of bits*. But despite being composed of the themed spaces of the mall, Makati City defies all the three characteristics that Sorkin says mark the “undesirable new city”: it is ageographic, obsessed with security, and a city of simulations. But Makati City, while a city of malls, themed for consumerism and daily life, is not ageographic, it is not obsessed with security, and it is not one of simulations.3  

Rather, this epitome of the privatized city of bits develops and constructs malls as specific “sites of community” and “human connection”, as the centers much like the traditional agora, castle, piazza, or downtown. This anchors the mall to a “spatial city, a city in which order is a function of proximity.”4 And it is none other than the malls here that makes “social order legible in the urban form.”5 The malls are strategically located at the centers of major districts of Makati. The Ayala Center (complex for Greenbelt Mall, Rustan’s, Glorietta, SM Makati, Landmark) is adjacent to the central business district; Powerplant Mall sits at the center of the Rockwell Complex; Century City Mall anchors the northeast part of the city; Circuit Makati is the mall center for the northwest part of the city. The malls are the architectural emblem of the sophisticated community of the place. The malls mark the place and are what mark the dynamic lifestyle of the city community.  

Makati’s malls are not obsessed with security; security is one of the most crucial services that private spaces, especially malls, offer in Makati City. Sorkin would argue that this implies the malls are prompting a case for “managing selective development and enforcing distinction.”6 However, this tension of selection and distinction is not a quality of private spaces. It is inherently a quality of public spaces. It is embedded in the very definition of public spaces.  

“To be a functioning open or public space, [the park] had to be reordered… It had to be reclaimed so that it could be made available to an appropriate public… Public space is imagined in this vision to be a controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city… [There is also the secondary vision that] public space is taken and remade by political actors;
it is politicized at its core; and it tolerates the risk of disorder (including recidivist political movements) as central to its functioning... [This vision claims that] public space [is] an unconstrained space within which political movements could organize and expand into wider arenas.7

Mitchell thus introduces the “dialectics of public space.” The strategy of security in the malls of Makati City takes on a similar attitude as many city parks do—it provides an environment secured for “an appropriate public, a properly behaved public.” This issue of defining the proper patrons, of creating a space for a specific target audience is an issue that any city’s public spaces deal with. So, Makati city’s malls are not obsessed with security in a way that can disqualify it from serving as a public realm... This privatized city of bits has the potential to create a new model of a city that interlocks the public and private to extract a new notion of contemporary space of gathering, a place to function as a new place to simply be in.

...this new realm is a city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park. This is nowhere more visible than in its architecture, in buildings that rely for their authority on images drawn from history, from a spuriously appropriated past that substitute for a more exigent and examines present9

The malls in Makati are definitely hinged on Western building precedents, specifically suburban models of the mall. Interestingly however, in the process of acquisition into the local context, the reproduction no longer remains as a simulation. Faced with the city context of Makati, the malls acquire a distinctly local color. Many of the “box” mall models, mainly deployed by the SM Group, start to be layered with distinctly local fabrics with large scale metal frames lodged onto the façade for billboard advertisement. These facades play an important role in allowing the large malls to blend into the city fabric and context. Although out of scale, these billboards mimic the very prominent local billboard typology and allow the facades of the malls to transition from the highway into the city neighborhoods. The Ayala Malls also have a process of transformation into the local context upon acquisition. While mimicking the new urbanism models of the West, the use of the Ayala malls allows low rise and sprawled complexes to function as local parks for gathering. They provide a stage for daily outdoor activity, which is unusual for the hot and humid climate of the local environment. Through reproduction, the Ayala malls introduced a context which brings people to enjoy the outside environment in the multiple centers of the city. The acquisition of the wester precedent has now provided a departure for a new local condition.

Makati City and its malls are no longer a simulation: the mall further has a relationship to technology which asks us to reevaluate its status in our daily lives. While Sorkin stresses the ability of technology to make spaces unique, it also offers a way for them to be repositioned within a more global context.

“In a culture and an economy being dizzyingly remade by technology, architecture chose to embrace not the future, where architects, like so many creative people, can seem superfluous, but the past... Technology has made it easy for buildings to look exotic, futuristic and otherworldly. It has given young designers as well as consumers the ability to rifle effortlessly through the cultural past. (See: Spotify, Netflix, Google image search, etc.)”10

As Christopher Hawthorne noted above, the phenomenon of appropriating from the well of references and precedents for design is a part of the architectural practice today.11 This generation of designers has easy access to unlimited database of sources. The question is how these appropriations manifest locally. The malls of Makati play out this idea at the scale of planning, as how their schemes which started out as simulations, even copies, through their appropriation were transformed into something specific and new related to their context.

Makati City, the privatized city of bits, embodies the evolution of a contemporary city. It is a city that demonstrates how there is really no “ill wind blowing through,” but instead an emerging city generated from its private malls. These malls are the anchors through which the city becomes legible. And in this way, these malls can’t simply be described as mega-private-spaces. In their utilization by the people who visit them as well as their relationship with the greater city, private malls emerge as public constructions.

The coexistence and obstinate independence of the private and public spaces that define the mall as the core of new contemporary cities in developing countries such as the Philippines, demands that we reexamine their role in defining emerging urban fabric. The pockets of the city we once called malls, can no longer be simply treated as nonsensical, commercial machines, crude and hollow spaces of insignificance. Instead, we can now talk about cities of malls fundamental arenas of contemporary life in the city. This city of malls resembles a layered dynamic drawing depicting the pace and everyday life of its city dwellers—an image of a true city with all its idiosyncrasies and contradictions that make it so likeable but simultaneously problematic. So there is no ill-wind blowing, but really a hype and anticipation of a new contemporary urban phenomenon, the Mall City—opening soon in a city near you.
Ayala Malls, an Ayala City Collection

The presence of the Ayala Corporation is visible everywhere in Makati City. Ayala Avenue is the most prominent stretch of the city that is not only home to the Corporation's national headquarters, but also the address that allows Makati City to be the financial capital of the country and the larger ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region. All the land on this stretch is owned and leased by the Zobel de Ayala family. But it's not just this 1.2 mile land that the family owns. Most of Makati City is actually the family's land bank and the Corporation has been responsible for planning, developing, re-developing and managing Makati City since 1851, making it what it is today. The development of this former marshland mainly boomed after the Second World War. The Corporation focused its efforts on developing Forbes Park, Urdaneta, San Lorenzo and Bel Air as residential communities, which today are the prime real estate properties in the country. These residential developments have also attracted the country's wealthiest and most powerful businesses to the city, contributing to its development. Politically as well, the first international airport in Asia, the Nielson Airport, sat on northeast corner of Ayala Avenue. Built in 1937 and operating until 1946, the international airport is now preserved by the corporation and operates as a restaurant in the Ayala Triangle Gardens.

Today, the Ayala Land Corporation continues its tradition of land development, but with a larger corporate agenda for public service. The 180 years old family business is now headed by two brothers—Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala and Fernando Zobel de Ayala—who are the 8th generation leaders of the family. Both brothers are determined to position their corporation in the realm of public service as they publicly proclaim and celebrate the ordinary Filipino and reiterate their “commitment to the social development initiative without having any “political colors.” And at the forefront of their public service are the Ayala Malls.

“[The Ayala malls are central to the development plans at Ayala Land because we are] a developer of large-scale, integrated mixed use developments. Thus, we strive to create a live-work-shop-play environment in most of our projects. Doing so allows us to create distinctive addresses and a platform for our various business lines.”

Fort Bonifacio, known as Bonifacio Global City (or the Fort), is the newest addition to the portfolio of highly urbanized districts making up Metro Manila. As a city that is about a third the size of Makati City, it is located only 6.8mi away from the Ayala Avenue center. Although politically claimed by Makati City, Taguig City, and the municipality of Pateros, the Ayala Land Corporation has been a major player ever
since the 1995 development plans were made known. The Ayala Land strategically developed two major mall complexes to start their development plans—Market Market and Bonifacio High Street. With these malls in place, Ayala Land then started to build residential developments adjacent or atop the mall complexes. And this model of integrating mixed use complexes starting from the mall has become a workflow that is almost always deployed by the corporation.

“I think that retailing/shopping is an essential component for any city to survive, whether the building type takes the form of markets, malls, lifestyle centers or shopping streets. The building form of the shopping center in the Philippines has evolved over time, from arcade shops and emporiums in the 60s, to department stores in the 70s which were exclusively for shopping, to the enclosed multi-use malls that they are today. The various forms evolved according to the needs of the customers and the shifting preferences of tenants. Presently, the malls are able to provide a convenient and comfortable venue for people to shop, dine, be entertained and relax. The form, scale, composition as well as the architectural expression of shopping malls will likely continue to evolve with shifting market preferences. But I think the need for a place to contain these varied activities essential to urban living will persist.”

Ayala Malls, led by their slogan, Love’mall, dot every major Ayala Land development complex, which implies that they’re present everywhere in the city. Just in terms of the sheer physical presence, the Ayala malls alone are so present in everyday life of the city that they define an important aspect of the urban context.

“Everyone is moaning about everything becoming the same. Yet many things are becoming the same…So, what if you don’t complain about it? What if you embrace it? For instance, does it have any virtues? …or is there a reason behind it?”

That’s Rem Koolhaas clarifying the general intent, the main question behind his Generic City. There seems to be a similar attitude at work in the cities of Southeast Asia, a corridor as yet understudied for its urban development and notability its shopping streets. The building form of the shopping center in the Philippines has evolved over time, from arcade shops and emporiums in the 60s, to department stores in the 70s which were exclusively for shopping, to the enclosed multi-use malls that they are today. The various forms evolved according to the needs of the customers and the shifting preferences of tenants. Presently, the malls are able to provide a convenient and comfortable venue for people to shop, dine, be entertained and relax. The form, scale, composition as well as the architectural expression of shopping malls will likely continue to evolve with shifting market preferences. But I think the need for a place to contain these varied activities essential to urban living will persist.”

Undoubtedly, there exists an intricate partnership between state and conglomerate when it comes to rapid megacity development in cities such as Manila. David Harvey’s notions of a city becoming commodified to a sense and scale never seen before are clearly evident in cities around the world, and especially in Makati City. But both the state (think public) and the business (think private) are joining forces to create not only a commodified city but also an image of a commodified city. There are countless literatures that warn against this trend and the negative outcomes of neoliberalism and capitalism are a widely understood. Fully grounded on these criticisms, this discussion seeks to amend them to argue that public and private partnerships can boost the growth and presentation of an undoubtedly privatized city. As the cities of our future we can either shun them, or take the chance to learn from them and see what opportunities lie in their planning and design. This city stands. It is the current state of things. By examining what is there now, especially with a sense of naiveté might ultimately reveal and suggest an alternative, but a more passive and reflective alternative embedded within the dominant flow.

And the trend of the public seeping in to the private realm is an increased phenomenon around the world. Because it is so visible in the Ayala brand at the scale of the city, the Ayala Corporation designs make it an ideal first study. The public-partner relationship that is the basis of the Ayala brand permeates all their projects and those working for them, from the owner brothers to the actual designers and decision makers that physically construct the city fabric today. The following is the thoughts of vice president Joel de Luna who heads the Ayala Corporation’s group of architects.

“Author: How would you, as an architect working with Ayala Corporation, define public space?”

“Joel de Luna: I think there are several criteria for a space to be called public, the least of which would be ownership (I am speaking as an architect or planner, though I realize that being called public precludes private ownership from a legal standpoint). Among my criteria would be egalitarianism—the more inclusive the space is, the more public it is. Another is multi-functionality—a space may be open and available to anyone, but if the purpose of the space is limited, then it diminishes its public-ness (e.g., a highway, for instance, is accessible to anyone but its use is restricted). Thus, the more multi-functional the space is, then the more public it is. A third criteria would be its ability to be a venue for community gathering. If a space serves as a social center of gravity, then it becomes a public space. Thus, I may argue that a small urban plaza in the middle of the city would be more public than a forested trail. Lastly, I would add would be the sense of ownership that the people would have over the space. Not only should the users feel that they belong in the space, they should also feel that the space belongs to them (and therefore they have adopted a sense of responsibility over it).”
“Author: Do you believe Greenbelt malls serves the purpose of public space in Makati City?”

“Joel de Luna: I believe that Greenbelt functions as a public space. They may be privately-owned and are restricted in terms of operating hours and its stores may tend to but it does satisfy my basic criteria of what constitutes a public space (again, I am using the term public space loosely here. I am definitely not suggesting that Greenbelt should be declared as a public facility). The fact that people can come and go into greenbelt most of the time in any day of the week, then I would say that it is even more public than say the white house lawn. Note that being open 24/7 or nor having some controls is not necessarily a criteria for being considered a public space. Even public libraries have off hours and controls.”

“Author: If the lack of political character, the lack of political tension is the greatest critique against these privately managed places being and acting public, do you think Greenbelt and other Ayala Malls can invite political agenda into its spaces?”

Joel de Luna: That may be one of the drawbacks of a privately managed space, however, I wouldn't rank that as an important criteria for a space to be called public. I would say that Greenbelt is apolitical or politically neutral (or some might say politically sterile) because it purposefully doesn't allow itself to be a venue for political rallies, events and activities. But because of this, it also becomes more effective in attracting a broad audience. The absence of an agenda makes it less vulnerable to exploitation by those with a political agenda. It also allows the place to be more effective as a place of respite, a social space and pasyalan, which to my mind are more important activities to the ordinary office worker in Makati on a day-to-day basis. I would like to think that most people go to parks for reasons other than listening to or participating in political activities. Other public spaces such as the Washington mall (or even our own Ayala Avenue) have allow people to express their political sentiments, but Greenbelt purposefully did not aspire for that role and is intended for other purposes which I think are just as meaningful. I wouldn't say that it is less of a public space because it precludes political activity. Being multi-use doesn't mean it can be a venue for anything we want. It simply means having a broad mix of activities. Again, I will go back to my analogy of a public library. Having restrictions on use doesn't necessarily diminish the value of a facility as a public space.”

Grounded on these intents and early discussion, the inquiry into Greenbelt Mall seeks to learn from the architectural compositions deployed within and realize where the lessons can take us. The study starts from cropped moments of the mall, each identified for being special points of interest to generate stories. The stories allow the imagined to be merged with real observations and personal experiences of the spaces. Then the new compositions, new visuals of the same mall space but one that also talks about design and the potential to be deployed elsewhere. Ultimately there is a newly imagined site plan of the Greenbelt complex and the vistas of the cropped moments. Observation, writing, and production of a layered composition is the process of study. And what is achieved at the end—the epilogue—which is a departure to draw the mall by making what has been written, discusses notions of architecture, sensibility, ambience, obsessing over the surface.

The mall is a gallery of figures, who shift smoothly between particular concrete individuals and social types to capture the real and multifaceted diversity of the Ayala mall and Makati city at large. Eventually, this inquiry hopes to touch on a larger social and urban subject that are represented and grounded on the figures presented here. These are personal stories with figures that I believe are unique to the malls. People here occupy the mall to experience the city. Ayala's malls thus transforms to something beyond simply a place to shop through these figures. This investigation starts from these figures and their cropped stage within the mall.

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, sid-sid.
6 Ibid
8 Ibid
12 Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala and Fernando Zobel de Ayala, interview by Andrea Stevens, Brothers Running the Philippines’ Ayala Corporation, CNN Talk Asia, April 27 2012.
13 Joel de Luna, interview and transcription by author, February 01, 2015.
14 Ibid.
17 Joel de Luna, interview and transcription by author, February 01, 2015.
To the ordinary man. To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets... This anonymous hero is very ancient... is the murmuring voice of societies..." And this ordinary man wanders the malls. It has to be the malls, because our next hero will emerge from this burgeoning setting where much is happening but little is told. In the so-called third world cities, in the 'non-city,' the malls are intriguing spaces of multiple parallel narratives. They are simultaneously social spaces of leisure, political spaces of haven, economic spaces of consumption, scientific spaces of experimentation and even religious spaces of pause. Formally, these malls are often large chunks of space that are scooped out of the city's mass and refilled with a new sense of scale, place, and time, usually wrapped around a single theme to ultimately generate the new narrative of the greater city within and beyond its own boundaries. It behaves much like a prosthetic. It's foreign and artificial but with it, everything gets realigned and redefined. And so the hero acts within and through the mall as he wanders innocently through it, and ultimately weaves together an 'ordinary city' to the 'non-city'.

Michel de Certeau's "The Practice of Everyday Life"
Every time I see that red glass wall I’m startled. It’s only about 4 meters wide, so it ends as abruptly as it begins. It’s an acrylic red panel attached to the rough concrete wall and clad in a sheet of thin glass on top. It’s shiny and glamorous. And as soon as the wall ends you see a face, a smiling face, and once again, I’m startled. And this happens all the time, every time. But I still go there. Sometimes, I even travel three levels down the winding escalators to R1 and walk towards the little nook where the red wall is nestled. You pass by Lacoste, Prada, and Kate Spade. Then you enter the intimate nook, where the lighting is dimmer. The shift is stark especially because the Rolex and the Body Shop display windows are so bright. Still, you have to travel to this one, because none of the other ones have this red wall.

I once asked the polite, smiling face why the wall was red as she handed me a towel. She continued smiling. I waited. She looked back, smiling. I smiled back. I waited. Suddenly she looked behind her, walked around the stone clad wall. I still waited, not forgetting to smile. She poked her head around the corner and replied, “like red carpet ma’am.” Right. Of course. We kept smiling at each other.
But never directly at each other, just at each other’s reflections in the beautifully polished mirror above the washbasin.

I have a sense of uneasiness when I’m met with that smiling face beyond the vertical “red carpet.” Perhaps because I’m not sure about the title “ma’am” and it’s evident that I can’t “act the part.” But the uneasiness quickly passes as I cross the “red carpet” of the washroom. I wonder if a thin sheet of acrylic is enough to transform me into a “ma’am,” and whether it will transform the bathroom attendant as well. When her shift ends, she will enter one of the immaculately clean, 2 by 3 meter stone clad stalls. She will change out of her designated white outfit and into another. She’ll walk over to the marble washbasin, check herself in the beautifully polished expensive mirror, and step onto the vertical “red carpet.” She will walk past the “red carpet,” turn to her right facing the interior palm trees that span 3 floors and emerges from this nook flanked by the Rolex and the Body Shop.

The crowd she is a part of now is a carefully selected one. No public transportation routes have direct access to the complex. It’s an island within Makati city that is sustained by her and her colleagues. They allow this paradise for the few to stand and yet even though they are present everywhere, they are also not present anywhere. Everyone in the crowd here has a clearly defined title—foreign resident and family, ma’am and family, elite Ateneo Law School student. And, I wonder, when my smiling ladies room attendant changes out of her designated white outfit, walks the vertical red carpet and emerges from the nook flanked by the Rolex and the Body Shop, will she be transformed and become a part of the crowd that is extraordinary in their status within the city? Can she play the role?

She’s met many “real ma’ams.” They are her clients after all. So she’s an expert. She has observed them ready themselves to walk the “red carpet” back to the backdrop that was meticulously designed for them to “be in.” She has observed that the “real ma’am” is subdued in her hair and makeup, her outfit is more everyday casual but pristinely ironed, she takes her time, never rushing, she always smiles back but makes it evident she is deserving and different, and she says very few thank you’s. So once the ladies room attendant changes out of her outfit and removes herself from her work, she takes her time, looks into the eyes of the people that pass by as if she expects to recognize someone at any time, she stops in front of the display windows of Kate Spade, Prada, and Lacoste. She looks in and makes sure to step back to indicate that she’s taking note of the brand. She knows the crowd and she knows how to be a part of the selected crowd.

But eventually, she unnoticeably makes her way to another nook on the same floor. The one nook that the “real ma’am” is never aware of. The one nook where she and all her colleagues go because that’s the only way out—to take a cab, a cab that comes so seldom—just two blocks or so away onto EDSA or even just Makati Avenue where public transportation routes are permitted. Or maybe she lives just behind the complex in one of the numerous “local towns.” The humble town that is adjacent to this complex but the crowd in it never sees and never knows about; the humble town that is differentiated by the quality of the paved roads; the humble town that begins at the end of the row of the unusually straight and cared for palm trees of the complex. But for the few minutes of her promenade from one nook to the other nook she was a perfect “real ma’am,” a rightful patron for which this paradise for the few was meticulously designed.

Then again, I guess the premise of my imagination is flawed. She can’t walk into one of the 2 by 3 meter stone clad stalls to change. She enters the complex already dressed for her part, her part as the ladies room attendant. Her attire is her identification that will allow her to cross over from the cracked cement road to the shiny black asphalt paved ground of the complex to be welcomed by the oddly perfect palm trees and tropical landscaped gardens. That’s her title in this stage created for the select few Makati City. So she will always hold her title true as the responsible, communicative, able, and smiling ladies room attendant at the end of the vertical red carpet.
Our Great Optimist Brothers

JA AYALA: This is the old International Airport of Manila. It was I think the first international airport in Asia. And Makati Avenue and Ayala Avenue were the two runways, I guess, that's the—

STEVENS: So, this road, here, was the international runway?

JA AYALA: Absolutely. Yes. And then, you know, Makati then obviously got developed, but we kept it as a—I guess as a fitting symbol, I guess, of what this area used to be.

From CNN Talk Asia Transcript of “Interview with Brothers Running the Philippines’ Ayala Corporation, Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala, Fernando Zobel de Ayala” by Andrew Stevens aired on April 27 2012

It took me a few years to realize that all the spaces that I reveled in while growing up in Makati City belonged to the Ayala Corporation. Granted I had quite a protected lifestyle, always confined within an interior space, I actually don't think there was one place that I frequented that was not designed by the Ayala's. Even the residential neighborhoods where my friends lived and I went for countless sleepovers were
managed by the Ayala's. Perhaps the story is different outside Makati City. Perhaps not. But realizing that one family owns and manages all these childhood playgrounds doesn't dampen my affection for these settings. The private-ness of these spaces is irrelevant to how much I enjoyed them privately, and with friends and family. Own spaces, they still serve as sites of nostalgic recollection.

It's only now that I wonder whether the blurry boundaries of private-ness and public-ness that the Ayala spaces operate on, is something that I should rethink, reconsider, re-evaluate; problematize. Because isn't public space sacred?

The Ayala Corporation, a family business, boasts 180 years of public service. Two brothers – Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala and Fernando Zobel de Ayala—head the corporation, and they’re the 8th generation to receive the baton. It's a public service, because through numerous campaigns and reports, the family has emphasized the publicness of their services. They continuously heroicize the ordinary Filipino and reiterate their “commitment to the social development initiatives” without having any “political colors.” I pause. I present noblesse oblige at its finest. I can't problematize it.

Even in my younger days, there was an Ayala that I was aware of—the Ayala Avenue. But I just assumed that this 1.2 mi stretch of a thoroughfare, which serves as the Philippines’ response to Wall Street, was named after a national hero, as would any major thoroughfares servicing the entire city would be named after. But actually the whole stretch and every parcel of land on the stretch is owned and leased out by the Ayala Corporation. The public sentiment is that the Ayala Corporation is doing a great public service to the government and has given a place for the economic development of the country to brew, having matriculated with the 2014 World Economic Forum being hosted right on this Avenue. I can't problematize it.

Makati City has no public park. The only parks I remember enjoying while growing up in the city was the beautiful backyards of my friends' homes in the neighborhoods managed by the Ayala's or the beautifully landscaped swimming pool in my condominium. Now the city has Ayala Triangle Gardens, a 20,000 sqm landscaped garden in the backyard of the Tower One Ayala Corporation headquarters at the juncture of Makati Avenue and Ayala Avenue. The garden also houses the first international airport of Asia, where the runway actually ran along a portion of Ayala Avenue in the 1940's. I visit it frequently, and as much as I don't want to be fooled by propaganda of it being the “contemporary oasis” giving “calm and peace” amidst the city life of Makati City, it fulfills its goals. I enjoy this private garden. I think it provides a quiet tranquility where people can be outside. The towers of the business district encompass the three sides of the garden. But the rain trees, golden palms, fire trees, kamuning, and podo cerpus' mixed with public art installations (of which some are pieces by Jaime Zobel de Ayala, the father of the two brothers) and lighting fixtures, really is quite beautiful. The official public park in the city being private—I pause. I can't problematize it.

But public space is sacred. And advocating the private spaces even on public programs such as a city park should be a problem, right? But I adore these spaces. They form the basic routine of not only my personal rendezvous but also of massive population that work and play in the city. And this massive public is also enjoying these spaces. These spaces are what allowed the Ayala Corporation to define the publicness and to idolize the ordinary Filipino. The family creates spaces to serve the ordinary citizen, and in return the ordinary citizen, the public, the protagonist consumes and generates more private spaces of public nature. I think this operation is creating the Filipino contemporaneity I can't problematize it because, to do so would be to unmoor my memories; to make my city foreign and sinister, rather than the streets of hopeful aspirations and important childhood encounters. To problematize it would be to suggest it wasn't mine, that I didn't find pleasure in its history and open, colorful spaces. So I can't problematize it.

A story from the Ayala Triangle Gardens, An Ayala Mall and the current city park for Makati located behind the Ayala Corporation headquarters at the juncture of Makati Avenue and Ayala Avenue.

Title illustration is 12”x12” digital montage by author, January 2015
Beloved Priest Among Us

Art 4. The Time and Place of the Celebration of the Eucharist

Can. 931 The celebration and distribution of the Eucharist can be done at any day and hour except those which the liturgical norms exclude.

Can. 932.1 The eucharistic celebration is to be carried out in a sacred place unless in a particular case necessity requires otherwise; in such a case the celebration must be done in a decent place.

Can. 932.2 The eucharistic sacrifice must be carried out on a dedicated or blessed altar; outside a sacred place a suitable table can be used, always with a cloth and a corporal.

Can. 933 For a just cause and with the express permission of the local ordinary, a priest is permitted to celebrate the Eucharist in the place of worship of some Church or ecclesial community which does not have full communion with the Catholic Church so long as there is no scandal.

(From the Vatican’s “Code of Canon Law”)

The image of that Catholic mass is still vivid in my mind. It’s probably so vivid because it was so surprising. The scene was unexpected, the silence was refreshing, the
sacredness genuine. The juxtaposition of a Catholic mass embedded between the Zara store and the Marks and Spencer Grocery seemed inappropriate, but at the same time appropriate. The hall was open all the way to the roof letting the natural light shine on the altar. There wasn’t much that made up the altar. A gold cross, the holy bible, the white tablecloth was all that I could see. The people were seated on plastic chairs and many more were standing on the staircases and balconies above that looked down at this temporary religious ceremony. There were a few shoppers standing on the sides with shopping bags in hand, but obviously a part of the service. The priest, in his alb and green stole, spoke into the microphone, but he wasn’t trying too hard to project into this massive space. Still everyone could hear him. All the frenzy of the Saturday afternoon was just white noise in the background. There was an invisible dome around this Catholic mass, nestled amidst one of the busiest malls in the city. And I thought it was absolutely striking.

I guess transformative is the best way to describe my initial response to the scene of a Catholic mass amidst the mall. Instead of the stained glass telling the stories of the saints and the script, you saw a Zara model beautifully dressed in fall clothes walking the streets of New York promising success and professionalism. The Marks and Spencer grocery items showed off bright colors promising health and nourishment, and not far away the Marks and Spencer underwear models displayed themselves in shiny display windows. But all this context, all this materialism, and all the representations of everything worldly seemed irrelevant for the time being. When this Catholic mass took place, obviously appropriating a space that wasn’t designed for any religious programs, the hall became a sacred space. And as easily as the sacred space established itself within this hall, this lobby that transitions between Glorietta 3 and Glorietta 4, it disappeared without a trace and was quickly flooded by the Saturday afternoon mall-goers.

The acquisition of a large, open, air-conditioned, unprogrammed space within the mall to serve a somewhat antithetical purpose to its very conception is so amusing. And this is solely guided by the issue of population and conglomeration. According to Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, the retired archbishop of Manila, “We have to go there because the people are there. If we will wait, we might just wake up (one day) and nobody’s in church anymore.” And this phenomenon is clarified further by Father Rufino Sescon Jr., the chancellor of the Manila Archdioceses. He talks on how, “we cannot just sit on our laurels and wait for the people to come to us.” The people are in these spaces. The people of the country that boasts to be the third largest Catholic nation are in the malls. So the Catholic service is entering these pillars of consumption and popular culture. The sacred rituals are moving within the boundaries of the mall to find the people.

And this is a way that the malls in Makati City are ceasing to be ordinary, through temporary sacred spaces that have entered into the liminal spaces of private-public production, to meet people, leading to the creation of extraordinary spaces are being created within the confines and regulations of the ordinary mall. The juxtaposition seems crude and inconsiderate. The layering seems independent and discordant. The result is the creation of a silent and sacred space that is collectively created and cherished. And this temporary establishment is so malleable that as easily as it happens, it disappears with the removal of a few elements—the plastic chairs, the modest altar, the priest. But what the priest among us makes us realize is not simply the presence of an extraordinary place within an ordinary lobby, but the productive nature of the consuming bodies within these spaces which make them special.

A story from Glorietta 3 and 4, the first Ayala Mall brand designed and developed by Jaime Zobel de Ayala the father of the two brothers that currently lead the family business.

Title illustration is 12”x12” digital montage by author, January 2015
Checkpoint Duo

“Why don’t they just use metal detectors?”
“Because it’s cheaper to hire security guards.”
“But the machines will do a better job. And it won’t cause a long line at the door.”
“That’s not the point. They need a show, a performance. It gives a greater sense of security. The machines are too convenient, so much so that soon you won’t notice them. You’ll always notice the security guards. And it’s cheaper.”

There are always two of them. One is a male and the other a female. Sometimes the partnership constitutes a guard dog. But, eventually they always come in two’s. The duo stands right at the door. The physical doors are always there with the guards. They’re glass doors. But it’s sometimes hard to notice the actual doors. I guess you could say it’s redundant; these doors. They’re just ordinary glass doors you expect in places like these. Sometimes they’re glass pivot doors that you have to push or pull as instructed and sometimes they’re automatic glass doors. But, actually it doesn’t matter because no one will ever really use it. Or even if they do, it’s just a thin layer that doesn’t really go anywhere. Even if you open the door and get through it, you can’t...
go in before you get through the guards that always come in two’s. The two security guards are the primary doors. They physically block you, stop you, check you, and when you pass their scrutiny send you through. Only with their checkpoint ritual can you be granted access to the space within.

That’s why the real glass doors are becoming archaic. Sometimes they don’t even need to clean it since there are no handprints to wipe off. And the fact that these physical doors can simply not exist means the complex is creating different types of spaces. Because the two security guards are the real doors, we don’t need to build an operating glass door anymore. Especially since the guards that come in two’s are cheaper. The security guards can position themselves in any open field, put up the tape barrier, a wooden desk, and a wooden stick and they will become the door, the grand gates to the cherished space within.

So where is the security beyond these doors? Are there more guards that come in two’s inside? I don’t ever see them anywhere else except at the peripheries. The complex sprawls over 250,000 square meters. But there are only two guards at each of the sixteen checkpoints. So there are presumably 32 security guards present in the site at any time with no patrolling security guards around the complex both interior and exterior. But, I always feel safe in here. Everyone that passes by, everyone that I share this space with went through the same checkpoint ritual. They all had to open their bags, let the female guard sift through the bag with a wooden stick, and then be scanned by the metal detector rod. However cursory the checkpoint ritual is, we all went through it. I guess that’s why the glass doors are being replaced by the security guards that always come in two’s. They’re not really checking you and your things. No one seems to know what the guards are actually looking for. The guards that always come in two’s are there to put on a show. A show that gives you a sense of security. A show that levels everyone inside as a fellow consumer. A show that will assure you that you are safe when you suddenly realize there aren’t any patrolling guards in this 250,000 sq m complex. Because everyone went through the checkpoint ritual conducted by the checkpoint duo.

And because the doors play this role, there is no real need for security beyond the boundaries of the mall complex. It’ll all have been contained at the doors constituted by the security guards that always come in two’s. They are always wearing this particular uniform, which anyone can buy at any common department store. But the uniform, the starched white shirt and black pants, the emergency kit hoisted at the waist, a metal baton, a small gun, shiny black shoes, and stern faces gives a strong sense of security and trust. Upon closer observation, everything about this checkpoint duo is just for show. The pristine uniform that anyone can buy, the customary bag and body checks, and the surprising porosity of these seemingly secure doors are all part of the show. A show that leaves a lasting impression of security within a city so widely publicized to be unsafe. But every time I have doubts about the real ferocity of the security guards that always come in two’s I meet the next checkpoint duo to enter a different part of the space, and I go through the same checkpoint ritual. And upon the completion of the ritual, I am once again overcome with a strong sense of security and trust. A trust that these Ayala security guards will protect this cherished space and its patrons.
My Seasoned Citizen

“We see the balikbayan who, after years of toiling and perfecting their craft overseas, come back home to roost and build their local communities. This is another species of the exchange process that we have been witnessing and experiencing for the decades past – people realizing that there is much potential right here if only we set our minds to it. There is no better template for brain gain.”

From “Essays on the End of the Republic: Here I Stand” by Geronimo L. Sy

In 2012, my husband’s white American uncle asked him, “Why do you want to go back to the Philippines? It’s a sinking ship!” He shrugged and simply replied, “But it’s my sinking ship.” And we all had our answers. Perhaps my husband would be an ideal candidate of the “seasoned” and “mature” Filipino that the Ayala brothers refer to when they’re describing an ordinary Filipino. This ordinary Filipino is acting as the impetus behind the demand-driven market. And this demand-driven market in return is allowing for the unprecedented positivism in the local economy. And the playground for the ordinary Filipino is the malls that dominate the city.
A very close friend of mine from Korea visited me the summer of 2014 with her family. They planned a trip to Manila for a long weekend. Usually, you’d recommend guests to go see the beaches, the tropical landscape of the Philippines far away from the cities. The common assumption is that the city they come from has more to offer than Manila. But I’m not really a local and I knew that the malls provided unusual sceneries and beautiful backdrops to be in within the heart of Makati City. The Ayala Malls were unprecedented. So every day I brought them to a different Ayala mall. They were, as expected, awed by the uniqueness of the landscape within these malls. We visited Greenbelt 3 for after dinner drinks. The central garden lights up, the palm trees take on a completely different character of festivity, the lounge chairs are embedded within the gardens and candles light the conversations. There is live music, a pleasant movement of people and voices, just enough of a crowd to be in. The high-rise buildings and their lights dot the skyline and this is a beautiful nightscape composition with the lit palm trees. The pleasantries continue until 2am of the night. Everyone is relaxed, enjoying the music that never ends and the tropical breeze recreated at the heart of Makati City. This is the everyday city life that an ordinary Filipino can revel in. And so few people know of it.

The next day, I brought her and her family to High Street Bonifacio, another Ayala mall in the new corner of Makati City. This new mall development ceases to be an interior condition. It’s more of an urban condition, a contemporary mall interpretation of Main Street. But of course it’s larger in scale and landscaping—fountains, public art installations, and palm trees—is central to the linear park bounded by the retail spaces. Once again my tourists are awed. This everydayness, this ordinariness, this contemporaneity, this advanced space is unexpected. Makati City is more beautiful, more unique, and more modern. I was proud to present it. And I was proud to introduce this side of Makati City through the Ayala Malls. Many deride the mall. They see it as dumb constructs by mega-conglomerations to gain profit. Yes, profit drives these malls. But they are not dumb. And they are not dumb because, unlike what is commonly known, they are not simply spaces of consumption. Although everything that the mall stands for is interpreted through a framework of consumption, the Ayala malls are actually converting consumption into production. How? A great example is how I produced a new understanding of Makati City with my guests through the Ayala malls. I used the images present within it, the experiences of the mall itself to curate a different Makati City for my foreign guests. The malls produce experience. As my friends’ guide, I was a consumer but also a producer at the same time. And this interplay of consumption and production are what make the malls complex constructs. They are the spaces that have the potential to easily convert any seasoned citizen into a producer rather than simply remaining a consumer.

I curated a scene. I chose the specific time, a designated areas to pause in, the right articles to be consumed, and the positioning of all the figures within the scene. Like curating a photo-shoot, not unlike the images that drape the walls of the mall spaces, I consciously produced an image. And I had so much fun. I was no longer simply a consumer of the Ayala malls, but a patron that appropriated the givens to project a certain understanding of my (un-)sinking ship.

A story from High Street Bonifacio and Greenbelt 3, both Ayala Malls. High Street Bonifacio is known to be the first mall that Ayala Land designed with Greenbelt Mall as their precedent.

Title illustration is 12"x12" digital montage by author, January 2015
Visionary Agents

“You have to see the model units.”

“Sure where is it?”

“It’s in GB5. On the opposite end of Kimpura and Peking Garden.”

“There’s room there to put two different units from Ayala Land Premiere’s projects?”

“Yeah. Barely though. Both Park Terraces and Garden Towers are showcasing one unit each. They’re showing the oddly shaped octagonal unit for Park Terraces and the two bedroom unit for Garden Towers. Usually once the model units are up and since both projects are highly visible during construction phase as well, most of the units will get sold out before turnovers start.”

“Can I get in though? I have to make a reservation to view the model units right?”

“Well the construction isn’t done yet. But I have to go and check whether they re-finished the lobby ceiling because they used the wrong material last time. I can bring you with me after our family dinner on Sunday. Oh and you’ll finally get to see the half scale models of the towers. I think you’ll like it.”

On one of the trips back home, perhaps it was the summer of 2013, I started to notice the young agents and their pamphlets in every one of the malls I visited.
The booth was always set up on top of a carpet. It was usually in the middle of one of the busy promenades. I think the carpets were red. But I might be wrong. They were carpets though, quite unusual for the Philippines. And in the center of the booth was a model of the residential tower encased in a clear acrylic box sitting on top of a white acrylic pedestal. And the young agents eagerly tried to catch your attention, passing you a pamphlet that always had unusually fantastic renderings of the model encased in the acrylic box. The renderings were dramatic and spectacular. It didn’t fit my aesthetics for renderings. Everything seemed way too promising. But I guess they had to be. One would have to buy this promise to purchase a product that only exists in these splendid representations at the time of purchase and cost millions of Pesos.

Every mall has an owner. And every owner of the mall seemed to have a residential development going on that summer of 2013. Glorietta had agents from Ayala Land Avida and Ayala Land Alveo everywhere. SM Malls had agents representing SMDC’s collection of residences. The malls were now showcasing speculative products of a different scale and time frame. Intangible products were the hot items in this space that was all about tangible, of-the-moment products. And the agents were no ordinary salespeople. They were eager, knowledgeable, persistent, and aggressive pursuers to passing by consumers. I was so confused. I was actually scared. And what frightened me about the energy of this new hot item within the malls was how palpable they made the changes of the real Makati City outside. I had always imagined the mall spaces as reposes, places home to frivolous items, for light mood and entertainment. But with the introduction of these agents, their promises, their speculation, their splendid renderings and models, the mall was embedding within it a future of Makati City, the real Makati City. And this made me uneasy.

It seems the layering and juxtaposing of completely different elements within a mall is usually effortless, it doesn’t need justification. So, the introduction of agents selling property seems appropriate. It’s where the clients are. So the agents come to advertise, to make their projects known, and hopefully procure buyers so that the development can really materialize with more investments. But the serious implications of this business in the larger city of Makati City made me rethink the relationship between the mall and the city. Can the mall now be a testing ground to understand public sentiment, to speculate public optimism about the real city beyond its walls? Consumer activity obviously reveals a country’s economic conditions. But can this be drawn further to a level where consumer activity is actually affecting the construction of the real fabrics of the future Makati City? These agents definitely seemed to believe so. And the owners of these malls, simultaneously being the owners of the residential developments were treating the consumers to be active agents to build the city that they envisioned.

In any of the retail stores in the malls, the salesperson seems always to be a part of the background of the store. She only emerges when I specifically need assistance. But with the agents selling property, they were always the main actors of the display. Their young spirit, obviously curated words and actions, extremely optimistic outlooks was essentially what they seemed to be selling. And I usually walked away with a pamphlet of a spectacular rendering in my hands and faith that Makati City was prepared for great leaps and great residential towers. The malls promised me that the real City outside had a bright future ahead.

A story from Glorietta 2, an Ayala Mall, the first Ayala Mall brand designed and developed by Jaime Zobel de Ayala the father of the two brothers that currently lead the family business.

Title illustration is 12”x12” digital montage by author, January 2015.
Something is there, in these malls. Something beyond being engines of consumption. Something beyond being the temples of entertainment. Something humbler, subtler, more meaningful, and dialectical. There are the objects—the escalators, the glass walls, the air-conditioners, the palm trees, the sunlight that frames a vast hollow void; the images—the planar compositions that are sacred but easily replaceable when the season ends, and that which the space is subservient to; the figures—those personalities that stand out against the ground of everyday life that use the mall. What would happen if the objects, the images, and the figures were taken beyond the construct of the mall? What would remain if the objects, the images, the figures were appropriated and collaged in the actual city? The malls stand against the larger context of Manila. The malls are validated by the unpredictability, the lacking-ness, and the unreadability of Makati City. And that’s why the malls are now micro-cities, havens from the actual-cities. They are enclosed, embedded but removed, strictly protected. And everyone recognizes the elements, the language of these micro-cities. What happens when these familiar compositions pop-up outside the mall, in the actual city? The familiarity could perhaps give a moment of pause and quiet. It could recreate a micro-void amidst the frenzy of the city. But now, the collaged mini-construct is really of the actual city, part of the fabric of it. Like an ornament, the collaged construct won’t herald attention but when noticed allow moments of familiarity and readability in Makati City.
View to Greenbelt 3 and Greenbelt 4 on Makati Avenue showing the "hard urban edge" as well as the "peek-a-boo" effect hinting at the park embedded in the mall’s complex.

The main entrance to Greenbelt Mall from the dela Costa overpass pedestrian walkway that connects the Greenbelt complex to the Ayala Center complex.
The sunshades over exterior seatings for restaurants along the northern part of the complex extending out of Greenbelt 5. The walkway is to the right of the seating and the interior of the restaurants are layered further right to the walkways.

Looking out into the central Greenbelt park from the walkway embedded between the interior restaurant and the exterior seating. Across from the park is Greenbelt 4.
The building surface of Greenbelt 3 visible walking from Greenbelt 2 towards the central park. The horizontal appliques which are metal frames that are painted to “look like” wood is clearly visible here.

The walkway that traverses the central park and the free-standing sunshades that enclose the open-air walkways. The balconies extending out of the third level of Greenbelt 3 can be seen at the distance.
Looking down from the dela Costa pedestrian overpass at the east end of the complex. The guard stands in check bags before patrons enter the open-air seating extending out of the Greenbelt 5 restaurants.

Entrance of Greenbelt 5. Notice the tape and the small wooden desk that always “furbish” the station where the security guards are located. The guards also each have a wooden stick to sift through bags.
A view into the rich landscape that is meticulously tailored for the everyday crowd.

The end pond and rich landscape near the east end of the complex adjacent to the Ayala Museum that sits at the southeast corner.
The metal frame structure that encloses escalators that move down into the pond and central park.

Another threshold condition with the guards stationed in the open space and act as the physical doors to the complex. This is the main entrance at the north end of the complex.
From Main Street Back to the Pasyalan then Forward to Greenbelt Mall

Greenbelt officially opened in 1991 with the “interim” programs installed to serve the neighboring business district—a long the stretch of Ayala Avenue. Today, the 2.7 million square feet complex has 5 different mall center ed on the central open-air park, providing a total of approximately 250,000 square feet of retail. And the complex is still being developed, refining and expanding to serve the ever-increasing population of Makati city as well as the ever-shifting sentiment of the public crowd. So, the development of the complex that began in the late 1980s is still not officially complete 3 decades later today.

“Greenbelt started as a piece of land that was held in reserve by Ayala Land for future development. It was treated as a land bank—a store [for] future value. Unlike other parcels in Makati that were sold as commercial lots, Greenbelt was among the few strategic properties (along with Ayala Center, Ayala Triangle, [Ayala Avenue] …) that we deliberately held onto for future use. As such, mostly interim uses were placed on the property with the rest of it being kept as gardens and were intended to be redeveloped over time. Small retail arcades, the old Ayala museum, some fast food outlets, a bus terminal, an aviary, a chapel and some surface parking were placed around the garden that was intended to support the surrounding business district.”

The concept of a mall is largely seen as a Western import. In the mid-1800s American cities such as New York and Chicago imported European department stores that ultimately defined city centers and shaped the city’s experience. Similarly, Makati City imported the American department store. In 1952, Bienvenido and Gliceria Tantoco opened the city’s first department store—Rustan’s—to provide a similar city experience as those offered in American cities. The address of the first large-scale department store in the Philippines was (of course) Ayala Avenue within the Ayala Center complex that sits just across the street from Greenbelt Mall.

Then, American cities began to change. In the newly emerging cities such as Los Angeles, the department stores and city centers needed to decentralize to reflect on the rise of suburban developments. Main Street, the American vernacular, surfaced as the new retail frontier and neighborhood center that was suitable to the changing urban form. Throughout the 1920’s up until the 1940’s, the Main Street model had gained significance, validated and invested on by the political, economic, and social impacts of the Great Depression and the New Deal. And with Los Angeles’ changing urban form, the hybrid of downtown’s massive department stores with the character of the regional Main Street was a natural evolution. Thus emerged the regional malls of suburban America—the American model.

“As such forms appeared on Main Street, usually in combination with stylistic motifs derived from streamlining and art deco as well, they heralded the arrival of popular assimilation of European modernism, producing a distinctly American hybrid. But they also heralded the New Deals’ vaunted return to prosperity as the forms quickly became identified with progress, optimism, and an all-consuming quest to be modern.”

The modernized American regional malls served as precedents to the Ayala Malls. In 1991, the Ayala Corporation opened Glorietta Mall, Philippines’ first mall in the heart of the Ayala Center complex beside Rustan’s. So began Makati’s mall-expansion, a process of development that shapes the experience of Makati City and perhaps most of the Southeast Asian cities at large.

The American cities appropriated the European department stores and merged them with Main Street to produce their very own models—regional malls—that responded to local patterns, processes, and policies. How about Makati’s malls? Are Makati’s malls still just Western imports? Do Makati’s malls remain as symbols of Makati City mimicking, glorifying a foreign, non-local product? Ayala’s Greenbelt Mall proves that a Filipino hybrid, a local precedent is emerging. Just as J.W. Robinson Company’s 400,000 sq ft emporium located at the very edge of LA downtown “became the catalyst for a cross-axial corridor” thus impacting the overall shape of downtown LA, Ayala’s Greenbelt is realigning the experience and form of its city through its own means and is becoming not only its own precedent but also a new exportable scheme of a mall.

“Admittedly, the typologies and forms of our shopping centers (if not most of the buildings in the Philippines) are largely derived and heavily influenced by the West. Still, I think that if you look beneath the architectural typology and study the composition of Greenbelt, you would notice some elements that are unique responses to local needs. For instance, the presence of elements such as a church and a park in the midst of a commercial area is reminiscent of traditional plazas. While the physical form would be very different from a plaza, the building and the spaces create a venue for a deeply engrained social experience. Greenbelt is thus, more than a shopping center. It is a pasyalan—a place of convergence, a multi-use space that people use to dine, to meet friends, to hear church services, to hang out, to shop. Occasionally, one might watch a performance there. One
Greenbelt: Ayala’s New Standard

Greenbelt Mall has almost identical social, political and economic implications as those offered by the American Main Street and regional malls. However, it provides different architectural implications. Architecturally, the Greenbelt Mall has provided an option that is locally devised to respond to the hot and humid climate that limits outdoor living. Whereas the original models of regional malls have overlooked the spatial implications having derived from strategies that emphasized the visual over the spatial, Greenbelt mall has come to be all about architecture serving the creation of space through ambience. Greenbelt’s architecture emphasizes spatial ramifications over visual ramifications. The visual ramifications are secondary in this highly image-heavy environment. They are simply strategies to create a feeling, an air, an atmosphere of a space where people mingle.

Greenbelt Mall completely detaches itself from its Western precedent in that it depends on the dense city context to be validated. Whereas the regional mall responded to a changing urban form by moving away from the city center, Greenbelt Mall embeds itself deeply within the city fabric. It is a response to the changing city nevertheless. Urbanization in Makati City is slowly expanding and is showing signs of decentralization. As the city peripheries are expanding though, Greenbelt Mall made a conscious decision to embed itself deep within the city center relying on its own effect to draw the population towards this center. It may construct its hard edge, protecting what it holds within as sacred, but its built environment is all about porosity to the wider city. Greenbelt Mall is starting a new precedent, which ceases to remain local. The Greenbelt mall model is now exported to other cities such as Dubai, Jakarta, and Singapore. So, let’s look at the space, the architecture of this mall to understand what constitutes this new precedent, this city mall or this mall city, and what we might learn from it.

Thresholds: Architecture Prioritizing the Exterior

Like many malls, Greenbelt mall is a vast space that displays goods to be purchased. Continuing the tradition of modernity the Greenbelt complex is a materialization of the demand and supply chain for pure consumption. Even though the notion of consumption harbinger a baggage of negative implications grounded on the larger critique against capital agglomeration, Greenbelt allows for a consumption of space (or a space of consumption) that is fundamentally a basic need.

Embedded deeply into one of the densest urban contexts in the world the vast void of (interior and exterior) space that Greenbelt carves out, and preserves as simply transition and rest spaces, is a moment of break and pause that is set apart from...
the rest of the city. Although consciously set apart, Greenbelt adds to the range of experiences that Makati City can offer and is made more meaningful with the city context. Pounded by sheer population, extremely dense composition of the city's built environments, the unparalleled traffic, as well as the hot and humid climate; the experience of the outside and being outside is not always pleasurable in Makati. Yet, Greenbelt's layered interior and exterior scheme allows for the pedestrian to continue to be on the streets and to sustain the human scale experience of the city. While that is certainly by design, the seamless transition has meant that the mall feels more integrated into the city, and by default, is so. If dwelling in the city is central to experiencing a public city life, Greenbelt mall allows for that to unfold. Greenbelt mall becomes Jane Jacob's sidewalk. Whereas much of the city's sidewalks simply focus on traffic flow and the endpoints, Greenbelt's free spaces allow for social functions and provide a human scale experience of Makati City. It is an extension of the city scape and the free space—the interior transition spaces and the central park—allows the mall to no longer simply be a mall. The mall now attains the social role of enhancing the city experience to its patrons and provides a sense of the community to the city dwellers. But how does this unprogrammed space, this free merchandise that the mall offers, become significant? The vast voids are common features of the mall, so how does Greenbelt treat it differently?

"The layering organization of Greenbelt complex is most important when it comes to the scheme. We're following the traditional scheme of mental transitions of space. You're moving in from the street to the porch to your private home in a way. The urban context surrounding Greenbelt is extremely busy and dense. Greenbelt's built environment eases the transition from the harsh urban environment to the mature landscape within.”

Threshold 1 Central Greenbelt Park
The open-air, elevated overpass bridge connecting Greenbelt 3 and Greenbelt 4 serves as the grand entrance to the mall. This entrance however is not to access the mall interiors where the shops are, but the way into the Greenbelt park. There are no physical doors just frames that allow for a 'peek-a-boo' effect to the 'oasis courtyard' within. In essence, this scheme mimics the courtyard vernacular that is often deployed in hot and humid environments. It uses the built environment to block hot blasts of wind while being porous enough to allow a soft cooling breeze to flow through. From a sustainability standpoint the central park that was preserved by the mall absorbs the heat of the exterior city. It's estimated to be 10°C cooler just 2 feet into the park from the street edge. This is without any hard built constructions closing the interior outdoor space off from the rest of the city and any mechanical units. One simply walks for the exterior edge into an exterior center passing through frames as a visual cue to imply 'entering into' a space.

Threshold 4 Strong Urban Edge (the exterior of the interior mall buildings facing the city)
Although the five interior malls that stand on the complex are generated by simple geometries, these geometries simply enrobe and disappear when experienced on the ground. The built environments where all the products are displayed behave much like thickened walls, just thick plates without form and definition. These thickened walls simply enclose and prioritize the volume of open space (the Greenbelt park). This space is a continuation of the city's open spaces, but offers a different experience of the city—one that is more pleasurable, one where the transition is not about moving from one point to the other point, but rather about just being in the moment now. The strong urban edge may sound harsh but it makes sense of the vast void within that emphasizes the “journey to discover unexpected moments.”

How does Greenbelt treat the vast void differently from other malls? Greenbelt treats the void differently by focusing in on it, by prioritizing the unprogrammed void as the most important space of the mall. It does so by emphasizing spatial ramifications over visual ramifications. This is revolutionary for a mall. It is achievable because Greenbelt Mall is private and owned by a singular entity and able to nest it within Makati City context. The void is hollowed, it is luxurious, it is sacred, but it is also open. With the central park, the outside condition/the exterior space emerges as the most profound space of the mall. All designs align themselves to prioritize the nested outside within the mall—the interior opens up to the central gardens and the interior mall is no longer looking in. The whole mall becomes porous to the city and visually to the park. Every architectural element—all that is built, that is physical—is positioned to emphasize the central open-air park and the interior transition spaces works to link the free spaces as one. And the architecture becomes secondary. It simply behaves to support the exterior space held within. The mall is no longer presenting its consumable articles at the frontier. The free space within the city is the ultimate merchandise of Greenbelt mall. Here is the city's true sidewalk.

Terraces and Sunshades: Architecture as Accessorizing and Decorating

Threshold 2 Terraces Extending Towards the Central Park
The terraces are the most prominent architectural element that comprises Greenbelt 3, a 'building' that best reflects the intent of the complex. The four levels of terraces all step towards the main plaza to the south of Greenbelt Park and are therefore opening up to its north. This allows for the best expansive view of the open-air central space. As the terraces extend out of the built environment, they are open. They seamlessly transition from air-conditioned interior space to the cool-air open-air terraces by extending out the ceiling plane and simply doing away with the vertical walls. The 3rd
level terraces extend out from the cinemas and are mainly used as viewing platforms. This is the prime position for “people watching” and for “looking into the whole park” as well as “out into the city beyond.” The 2nd level terrace extends out of individual restaurants to be offered as outside seating areas. The terraces here encompass greater square footage than the interior floor area of the mall because this is the ‘street’ where people mingle, walk, and eat. The walkways are intentionally layered between the interior and the exterior seating. The layering and embedding of private and public functions fruition into providing a “happy chaos” and an “energy that is infused into the environment” allowing for a “high energy ambience.”

Threshold 3 Terraces: Sunshades and Appliqué Frames

Sunshades and appliqué frames are the most identifiable physical constructs along the walkways as one traverses through the Greenbelt complex. And these are “deployed to create a different sense of scale, a human scale to break down the large scale spatial organization and building constructs on the 2.7 million square feet complex. The sunshades and appliqué frames are much more approachable to a person using the space. These are all means to manipulate the scale to a human level.” The appliqué frames are actually metal that are painted to look like wood and mimic a softer form of construction. The lines that are created by the appliqué frames is the constant, recognizable size that breaks the vast space down. Visually, it becomes more manageable. More importantly, spatially, it makes the space approachable and readable allowing a person to easily be in it. The sunshades and appliques are the core elements that allow the entire space to be filled with light and air to create a vibrant environment. Again, one can enjoy an outside lifestyle in this hot and humid climate.

So, while threshold1 and threshold4 is responsive to the overall scale of spatial layout and response to the city context, threshold2 and threshold3 are all about communicating the space to the single person within the space. But in addition to breaking down between the large scale compositional spaces to the human scale, the terraces, sunshades, and appliqué frames act to mediate between the interior and exterior conditions. By extending the ground platform out from the interior (terraces) and maintaining the ceiling plane out (sunshades) but at a height lower than the high ceilings of the interior mall, the exterior still maintains an intimate enclosed feeling. Even though the person is outside, the transition is soft and seamless. The only vertical walls that frame the outside experience are the facades of the mall.

The interior malls (that is, the ‘buildings’) are so big extending the whole expanse of the complex. The appliqué frames are added to not only break up the scale but also as a way to clad the walls that enclose the exterior. Just like the finishes in the interior spaces the exterior walls are treated in much the same manner. Upon entering the outside and moving deeper to the outside away from the built malls, the sunshades are free-standing. Sometimes, there are parts that are stone clad, some are wood, some are low, some are very high, some are thin, some are transparent, some are opaque, some are outdoor umbrellas. The various types of sunshades act as floating planes that further break up the outside space and give personal intimacy to the open outdoor condition.

There is a form of exterior designing with these furnishings. These furnishings that are mostly decorative, perhaps superfluous, all act in their own ways to create an outdoor ambience that is intimate but vibrant simultaneously. The terraces, the sunshades, and the appliqué frames allow for various nooks and crannies. If you want energy and dynamic spaces you can go to the main plaza; if you want to people watch sit under one of the umbrellas from Café Havana, Starbucks, Seattle’s Best Coffee—purchasing a drink is optional. It’s a new way of being out, of being in the city. But not too different if you think about it. After all the pasyalan is the precedent here. It’s a reintroduction of being outside, a defiance to the normative way foreign built environment imports respond to the local climate. This space is about being in the city that is specifically Makati City and only Makati City.

Palm Trees: Architecture for Ambience and Against Form

There’s no singular, readable form in Greenbelt mall. The architects and the planners describe that the forms of the five mall ‘buildings’ that sit on the site are regular geometries with simple spherical carve outs. On the ground and even on the drawings however, the form is not apparent. At first glance, it may seem like it’s the exterior furnishings, the appliqué elements, the array of mechanical units, and the tight city fabric encasing the complex that interrupt the translation of the coherent architectural form. It’s the trees and the meticulously manicured landscape of the central Greenbelt Park that keeps the built environment less legible. The landscape is just so rich with the different textures and colors. It also constantly vies to spill out of the contained complex, offering visual hints at what lies within this mall.

“Author: What was the most important concept of the Greenbelt project?”

“Mark Taylor: We believe that people attract people. The idea is so simplistic but true. We are attracted to people. So Greenbelt needed to be a place where people attracted more people. [And the central Park was the opportunity to play this scenario out]…Greenbelt was not an empty site when we went in… Fernando Zobel de Ayala realized that they would have to cut down 20-30 old-growth Banyan trees with the construction of an internally facing Greenbelt 3. He didn’t want to face the
community with that responsibility of cutting down those trees. So [the dichotomy about what was there before emerged]. And, our scheme transformed drastically. It became a hybrid of an indoor and outdoor condition. This is revolutionary in that the climate is always such a big concern. But the client realized that this could transform their mall brand. They could transition their malls to a different level and differentiate their malls from other local malls such as the SM mall series. Then our third scheme went all the way. We fully embraced the central park and preserved all the old-growth trees. This final scheme recognized the park as the gem, the open center to always be seen from everywhere. So the stepped and shaded terraces came about and it’s difficult to distinguish the interior and the exterior states.”

It is not an exaggeration to say that the development of the entire mall complex revolved around the old-growth Banyan trees that had grown on the site for over many decades. By embracing the mature landscape on the complex, Greenbelt was able to appropriate an air to the whole complex that is authentic. Much of the landscape in the park is of course meticulously cared for. The grass has to be constantly trimmed, the small lake with the cods cleaned excessively and filtered, the reeds, the palm trees, and the banyan trees need constant attention to be presentable to the everyday crowd. At its essence though, the landscape is original. It was there before the mall moved in and has been preserved and built around to ultimately formulate a new typology in the Ayala mall brand.

What Greenbelt mall, as the first of its kind presents is an outdoor ambience that is tropical, true to the Makati City nature. The ambience is all about celebrating the urban-tropical landscape. The tropical landscape is not just about the white sand beach and the ocean with the complete absence of an everyday life. The mall's ambience showcases a tropical landscape embedded within the high-rise financial district, a tropical palm tree and the decades-old banyan tree right alongside the glamorous city lights and live music and honking cars. Greenbelt showcases the tropical landscape for the everyday worker and dweller of Makati City. This is the Southeast Asian global city ambience. It’s not about uprooting the local landscape to import in global standards of a city. The international standards of living, working, playing in the city are introduced and have been preserved and built around to ultimately formulate a new typology in the Ayala mall brand.

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Mark Taylor: The inherent culture, that is the people that use the malls are what makes Greenbelt local. It's the fact that people gather to produce an extroverted environment that allows Greenbelt to be successful and function the way it functions. Also, we were conscious of its very restrictive hot and humid environment and so we were always mindful of the “vernacular” that responds to this climate. But the park, that was the restriction, served as the vernacular solution that responded to the climate restriction. And this became special. Now my clients in Dubai are exclaiming “We want a Greenbelt!” after a strategic visit to the mall.”

The ambience that Greenbelt offers is fundamentally dynamic and animated. The daytime scene is more quiet and calm but the green landscape in the park and the bright sky offers an immersion into the full tropical landscape. The nighttime scene is all about lights with the city’s lights pouring in and the brightly lit palm trees stimulating the bustling dinnertime and after-dinner drink parties. The glamorous and sprightly ambience is further enhanced by the live music played and freed to flow out into the city. This ambience is the true essence of a pasyalan. It’s intriguing how everything is accentuated most vividly in the open-air central space, where there exists the least amount of architectural constriction. In other words, all the architectural strategies are only minimal human scale exclamations. The small free-standing metal frame sunshade colored in wood that encloses one person; the embedded cushion seat shaded by a tree that extends out into the water; the small bridge that crosses the shallow and thin stream of a lake; and the Christmas lights that outline the palm trees forever standing ever so straight and tall as a constant reminder that this is Makati City. Isn’t it great that this city offers an urban experience so pleasurable, so sophisticated that you can’t believe this is a mall? Makati City, this is the type of ambience that the city should provide in its streets. Come look and learn.

Walkways: Pack-Donkey’s Way and Architecture for Incidental Happenings

The ambience is set. The lights are on, the live music is flowing, the people are gathered, the food and drinks are plenty, and the city is invited. Now what? Now, the incidental happenings—the social layering—that serves as the final architectural layer that completes the Greenbelt mall.

Just as Greenbelt mall was determined to preserve the mature central landscape, it was also ready to recognize the earlier “interim” programs placed on the complex. As Ayala Corporation waited for the land to appreciate enough to be worthy of development, interim programs such as the church, the Ayala museum, and a chain of restaurants were embedded into the complex. Once Greenbelt started being developed as a mall, these programs were preserved. Greenbelt still remains open to any programs to implant within its space and unfold. The vast interior and exterior spaces await different temporary programs to install themselves within the mall space. The mall is not only home to the Greenbelt Chapel or the Sto. Nino De Paz Chapel holding regular masses every day of the week, but also to a number of model units built to full mock up size in Greenbelt 5. Private organizational functions as well as
Greenbelt mall presents a reason to be about the mall. This or even a new outside bench to sit on for a while watching the coy fish swim about, for purchase, or simply a discovery of a new scene within the mall to consume visually, mall. There’s always an opportunity for discovery. Whether it be a discovery of an item dramatic outdoor plazas and fountains create a story that can be altered by different changes. The way that the walkways expand and narrow, sometimes opening up to viewing points more than simply transition routes from point a to point b. That’s why it always feels like the mall is moving, changing, never stagnant.

Greenbelt mall understands how to capture the change of time—through people. The mall identified the crowd to be the element that attracts a larger crowd. This is not simply for profit but vital to the very sustenance of the mall space. The walkways were laid out meticulously to provide different perspectives. The walkways are laid out as viewing points more than simply transition routes from point a to point b. That’s why it can meander through the complex instead of going in straight lines from one end to the other end. The people moving along the walkways traverse the complex and are always presented to a different view, a different scene of the mall. The people seated on one of the numerous beautifully crafted outside furniture are always aware of all the people moving about the walkways also giving them a scene that constantly changes. The way that the walkways expand and narrow, sometimes opening up to dramatic outdoor plazas and fountains create a story that can be altered by different routes throughout the continued visits to the complex.

These walkways are ideal in showcasing the constantly diverse programs within the mall. There’s always an opportunity for discovery. Whether it be a discovery of an item for purchase, or simply a discovery of a new scene within the mall to consume visually, or even a new outside bench to sit on for a while watching the coy fish swim about, Greenbelt mall presents a reason to be about the mall. This being out about the mall can easily translate to being out about the city. The interior mall spaces are never thick enough to traverse it without ending up being outside in the open-air environment with the palm trees and banyan trees, constantly reminding the pedestrian that this is a day in Makati City, and not simply a day at the mall.

Skyline: Editing the City Beyond and Architecture as Medium

“I think Greenbelt was designed to fulfill and address different needs—one of them was to achieve a commercial objective by creating a lifestyle center. This however, was balanced by the intent to make sure that we preserve the park, which by then already had a lot of mature trees. We needed to make sure that as we redeveloped greenbelt, we didn’t diminish its purpose in the city as an urban open space. Thus, the park was enhanced and became the amenity of the commercial spaces. This entailed a big sacrifice of the commercial opportunity inherent in the property (Ayala has been paying commercial tax rates on the land and we couldn’t maximize the allowed density on the site), but in the end, we felt we came up with a compelling product that benefited the whole central business district.”17

A singular architectural element links the disparate program of Greenbelt: the walkways that weave in and out, under and over connecting the different spaces of the complex. The weaving walkways follow the layered organization where they are always embedded between the interior and exterior spaces. By pulling the exterior spaces further away from the interior spaces even if they share the same program, the walkways display the people and the flow of people to take advantage of this movement for creating a dynamic ambience. That’s why it always feels like the mall is moving, changing, never stagnant.

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Within the Greenbelt mall complex, the presence of the Makati City fabric is constantly reinforced as a visual background. Within the malls, the large openings look out not only to the gardens but also the high-rise building facades adjacent to the complex. From the central open-air park, the high rise residential and building towers hover over the roof edges of the mall, enclosing the mall complex further and embedding it deeper within the city. It’s interesting to note how the mall’s built environment edits out parts of the city only allowing buildings and towers high enough to register as the city skyline within the mall. More interestingly, there is a cozy play where much of the newest buildings of the city that are edited in and showcased by the mall are Ayala Land developments. This seems to be a happy accident for the Ayala Corporation than anything as premeditated as developments happened at different times. Nevertheless, by editing out much of the older establishments and capturing the tallest towers of Makati City, the view of the city from within the mall is somewhat different. It’s impossible not to notice the glamour and the promise that Makati city’s posh high-rise towers offer. The mall reinforces an overwhelming sense of optimism and confidence in the well-being and future of this city.

This is where the agency of the mall lies. Through these malls, the Zobel brothers are materializing and propagating their sense of positivism towards this city. The message is obviously translated to the patrons that use Greenbelt mall as evidenced in how the Ayala brand is unparalleled by the local crowd when it comes to investing
in prospective projects. By presenting a local model of a mall and showcasing the
glamor and glitz of this construct, where the local crowd takes pleasure occupying,
the Ayala brand is firmly depending on their “seasoned and mature citizens”19 to
ultimately help propel the corporation into creating a global Makati City. This effort
can easily be seen through their public slogan “Make it Happen Make it Makati,”
which is the corporation’s campaign sponsored by the local government to deploy all
developmental schemes for the rest of Makati City.

The Ayala Malls are leading the way, becoming the medium that encourages change
and development. The commercial space of the mall is communicating a message of
promise and optimism. No wonder the Ayala Land developments always start with
the mall complex first as an architectural node that draws interest, draws people, and
ultimately draws capital. The mall is no ordinary built environment anymore. It has
the power to drive speculation, to realign city plans, to be utilized as a means to mold
public sentiment. Greenbelt Mall proves the point. Simple architectural strategies
deployed for seemingly spatial reasons are coming to have social, economic, and
political manifestations. It is now a major player. Architecture is no longer irrelevant.
Commercial spaces are relevant and malls are important.

With all these implied readings aside, when we treat the Greenbelt Mall as a medium as
an agent to produce something to the larger discussion of architecture specifically, what
could that be? A potential answer is Greenbelt’s means of appropriating everything
commercial and attractive to the crowd, the public. The mall constantly utilizes the
city conditions outside the complex. Greenbelt mall is brazen about it. The complex
unabashedly builds itself over a major cross section to the main thoroughfare through
Makati City allowing the mall to be stand as a tunnel directing through traffic within its
complex; it extends out pedestrian overpasses to attach itself to other buildings in the
city; and public transportation outlets open up directly to the mall. It all works because
it doesn’t simply serve the mall but it actually services the larger city organization.

1 Joel de Luna, interview and transcription by author, February 01, 2015.
2 Ibid.
3 Richard Longstreth, City Center to Regional Mall (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).
5 Ibid, 9.
7 Joel de Luna, interview and transcription by author, February 01, 2015.
8 Ibid.
10 Mark Taylor, interview and transcription by author, February 12, 2015.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Joel de Luna, interview and transcription by author, February 03, 2015.
18 Mark Taylor, interview and transcription by author, February 12, 2015.
19 Jaime-Augustin Zobel de Ayala and Fernando Zobel de Ayala, interview by Andrew Stevens, Brothers
Running the Philippines’ Ayala Corporation, CNN Talk Asia, April 27 2012.
Passing through Makati City and her malls, the archetype of the emerging Southeast Asian city is at its purest and most intense. A careful documentation and analysis of the malls’ physical forms and relationships to the larger city context is therefore necessary. Ultimately, the mall needs to be liberated from its western precedents. I believe the mall will be the central architectural construct that will help to define a new type of urban form emerging in the cities of the global South, radically different from what we have known; one that we have been ill-equipped to deal with and that, from ignorance, we define today as merely peripheral or remnants of the colonial past. So, through open-minded and nonjudgmental investigation, I am trying to understand a mall in Makati City and to begin to evolve techniques for its representation and potential acquisition and handling.

Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour’s “Learning from Las Vegas”

Edited version by author
The Piazza is for Rome, the Strip is for Las Vegas, the Ayala Mall is for Manila.

Rome’s Piazza was at the roots of theorizing space as sacred for the purist architects, and therefore the tradition of subverting symbols and allusions in favor of physiognomic form.[1] Las Vegas’ Strip was at the basis of theorizing ugly and ordinary (U&O) architecture that reintroduced the significance of symbolism in architectural form.[2] Following this tradition, Manila’s Ayala malls are the grounds for superficial architecture, one that recognizes the surface as sacred, and where space comes together as planar forms as the basis for individual and collective experience. Superficial architecture always starts from a shallow surface. And the shallow surface is excessively worked—material is applied; texture is applied; image is applied; scent is applied; sound is applied—for the purpose of communicating to an audience. Anything can be appropriated and reworked to treat the surface. This is the lesson from the Ayala Malls. To allow for an architecture that produces...
Beyond the Mall: Superficial Architecture

an ambience that entices, gathers, and continuously redraws, excess is never bad. In fact, it is desired.

Surface has value because it is the quickest way to attract attention. Attention is what leads to consumption and consumption is related to value; social, cultural, political. Now architecture can attract attention in a moment. It can impress itself into our lives.

Superficial architecture is not concerned with the slow passing of time, or even the already past, it's only about the current, the now. Its about what is hot, what is sexy, and revels in the snap judgment. Superficial architecture is always moving to the next thing, the next fashion, the next way to garner attention. Superficial architecture is the architecture of consumption. It can't be ignored by the public because it is the new basis of public culture. It is always fastened to an audience, to a crowd. Ambience is the sentiment of the crowd generated through the architecture of the surface. It is key to obsessing over the working of the surfaces and what delivers a coherent space at the end. It is how it is felt and intuited, what gathers and collects meaning. Through superficial architecture, architecture can now be relevant to the everyday and can really matter. Life moves at the pace of desires. It goes from instant to instant. Constantly in search of the next new thing, the next hot new spot, we crave ambiances of the here and now; of the always looking. These are the outcome of superficial architecture, an architecture that can change, that can adapt; that can matter.

Drawing an Ayala Mall: The Wall Surface

What I learned is that the mall creates ambience. It adds, engages, conflicts and connects to the city through the creation of atmospheric environments centered on the changing and fleeting desires of consumption and daily life. My design intervention was to study the way the mall created these ambiances and to use them as a method for creating a wall to generate a new ambience while representing the mall. The ambience is one of advertisement and publication, the everyday visual stimulation and communication we are all bombarded by. This wall could be applied to the existing surfaces of the mall, adding greater nuances to its multivalent structures, or used as the basis for new construction, weaving the city together. Like it or not, advertisement connects us. Malls are where we go to do our shopping and to mingle. They are the new urban centers of Southeast Asia. We can shun them, or embrace them, looking for new ways to connect and integrate them into the city, and into our lives.
Final Thesis Wall Piece. Perspective-illustration lightbox model for 'The Ladies Room Attendant'

Final Thesis Wall Piece. Perspective-illustration lightbox model for 'Our Great Optimist Brothers'
Final Thesis Wall Piece. Perceptual illustration lightbox model for ‘My Seasoned Citizen’

Final Thesis Wall Piece. Perceptual illustration lightbox model for ‘Checkpoint Duo’
Final Thesis Wall Piece. Site Plan of Greenbelt mall diagramming the architectural elements.
Final Thesis Wall Piece. Detail of perspectival illustration lightbox model for 'Viscenary Agents'.

Final Thesis Wall Piece. Detail of perspectival illustration lightbox model for 'Beloved Priest Among Us'.
Test pieces for Final Thesis Wall. Text cut outs from museum board on etched acrylic.
Sources


