



Looking Beyond the Walls

It was a sunny morning when Jose Estrella decided to take a walk by the Maestranza plaza in Intramuros, Manila City. Estrella was the administrator of the Intramuros Administration (IA), an organization attached to the Department of Tourism (DOT) of the Philippines. He was walking by the plaza because he wanted to check on the current state of Maestranza in preparation for several meetings he had lined up for the week. A concert had recently been held at the Maestranza plaza, and an exhibit had been held a few weeks ago. A civic organization was currently eying Maestranza as the venue for its annual meeting six months from now. A few years back, however, this portion of Intramuros where the Pasig River can be seen had an unwelcoming sewage-like smell that dominated a person's senses. It consequently was not a pleasurable place for a walk. There were informal settlers who had made their homes and lives right in the middle of the street, blocking important historical markers and obstructing the view of Pasig River as well as portions of the historic walls of Manila. A few meters from Maestranza were ruins of what used to be the Central Bank of the Philippines. No matter how historic and rich in potential this area was, it was not a prime tourism destination. As the administrator of Intramuros, Estrella was proud that in the two years' time since he had assumed his position, the plaza had a facelift, allowing it to become a viable venue for different events and an open space good for a morning or afternoon stroll. Furthermore, the area's focus was back on its historical significance thanks to numerous support groups and conservation experts that had pitched in their time and expertise. Estrella needed to



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ask himself and the people working with him how they saw Intramuros and what they would like the place to be known for.

Talking Walls and a Capsule of Philippine History

Prior to Spain's colonization of the Philippines, native communities resided by the banks of the river that traverses what is now known as Metro Manila. Upon the arrival of the Spaniards, a heavy wall structure of 4.5 kilometers in a pentagon shape was made as a fort.¹ A city of its own, the enclosed area was approximately 64 hectares and consisted of the domiciles of distinguished officers, churches, religious structures, palaces, schools, and government buildings. The walls served as a protection from the insurgent natives and foreign pirates. Entry was restricted by drawbridges that were closed at night and opened only during the day. This manner of governance earned the area the name – *Intramuros*, which in Spanish meant “within the walls” as inscribed by King Philip II of Spain.² Spain's colonization of the Philippines lasted for more than three hundred years. Therefore, a lot of Philippine culture is rooted in the influence of Spain such as the catholic religion, observance of feasts, food, and language. After the Spaniards left the Philippines, Intramuros continued to be a fortress for the government, a business district, and a destination of choice for urban living. It was during this time that the United States of America took over governing the Philippines as a colony. The local Filipinos were not always happy with the Americans and certain groups demanded de-colonization. These activities were seen as threats by the American governing body, thus Intramuros once again served to be the protective barrier against insurgents. Years later, the Second World War came into the picture and once again Intramuros was a fortress, only this time against the Japanese army who later on occupied some parts of the walled city. Intramuros then housed command centers, prison cells, a garrison, torture chambers, and armories. At the end of World War II, axis forces had practically destroyed all of Manila. However, one area withstood the bombings and all the violent battle — Intramuros. Portions of the walls were destroyed but they did not fully crumble as in the other parts of the city. The government, business buildings, and some churches in Intramuros were fully destroyed. Some areas were spared such as a portion of the church and convent of the Augustinian Priests.

In 2015, Intramuros functioned as a modern-day city within the capital city of Manila. It still housed important government institutions like the Bureau of Immigration, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Commission of Elections, the National Press Club of the Philippines, civic and religious organizations, universities, and educational institutions and residences. There were also a number of hotels, restaurants, and event venues. The stories that could be told while walking through the streets of Intramuros could be considered a capsule of the history of the Philippines. True to the idiomatic expression, “if only these walls could talk,” then everyone visiting the place would know and hear the history and significance of Intramuros to modern-day Philippines. The buildings and remnants of the glamorous walled city remained conversation pieces and interesting sights for history, art, architecture, tourism, and even archeological learners. The cityscape of Intramuros proved to be a worthy backdrop for travel and vacation photos that had been easily shared through the worldwide web and of course through social media. However, Estrella felt detached from this idea, as he continuously asked himself and other colleagues the question, “Is there something more to Intramuros than just a place of learning about old things?”

Travel and Tourism Beyond the Walls

In 2010, the Philippines welcomed a new presidential administration. As commonly experienced in a change of governance, institutional changes and legislative adjustments took place. An important legislative occurrence that affected the tourism industry was the implementation of the Tourism Act of 2009. This law declared a national policy for tourism as an engine for investment, employment, growth, and national development, wherein the Department of Tourism (DOT) strongly acted as the primary planning, programming, coordinating, implementing, and regulatory government agency in the development and promotion of the Philippine tourism industry at the national and international levels.³ The DOT worked in coordination with attached agencies to which the IA was part of. Intramuros was included in the top places that the Department of Tourism promoted for domestic and foreign tourists because the modern day Intramuros was a testament of Philippine history and culture that functioned as an important district for trade, commerce, tourism, education, society, and culture. Some areas within the walls maintained an atmosphere of an authentic colonial city, while others had problem areas like congested traffic, unsightly buildings and facilities, and a non-tourist friendly environment. The governance in Intramuros was considered to be special in the sense that the Presidential Decree Numbers 1616 and 1748 required that the overall management of Intramuros be administered by the IA, a special body of the executive branch of government.⁴

From the concept of destination management, the IA was considered the destination management organization or the DMO. In other places in the Philippines, the DMO was usually the local government for tourism destinations at the city or municipal levels. It could also be a management and marketing firm in the case of private properties and tourism developments. As the name implies, the DMO was tasked with executing management functions to attain the tourism priorities and objectives of a certain destination. In addition to this, many were conduits between tourism suppliers (local firms) and outside buyers (typically meeting planners, tour companies, and individual tourists) and policy advocates.⁵ Since IA was a government organization, its employee composition, leadership, policy direction, funding, and support services were affected by government procedures.

In 2012, DOT reported that Metro Manila received a grand total of 2,442,662 tourists. This made Metro Manila or the National Capital Region second only to Camarines Sur's at 2,491,159⁶ (see **Table 1**).

Table 1

Tourist Volume in Major Philippine Destinations from January to December 2012

Rank	Destinations	Foreign	Domestic	TOTAL
1	Camarines Sur	485,550	2,005,609	2,491,159
2	Metro Manila	1,513,402	929,260	2,442,662
3	Cebu	1,008,288	1,222,035	2,230,323
4	Zambales	62,552	1,240,797	1,303,349
5	Boracay Island	515,380	690,872	1,206,252
6	Davao del Sur	92,503	1,016,771	1,109,274
7	Negros Occ.	109,027	904,595	1,013,622
8	Palawan	189,200	638,896	828,096
9	Benguet	43,901	729,810	773,711
10	Laguna	24,458	608,408	632,866
11	Iloilo	29,899	577,250	607,149
12	Misamis Oriental	45,179	548,799	593,978
13	Pampanga	279,850	288,339	568,189
14	Albay	170,421	353,411	523,832
	TOTAL	4,569,610	11,754,852	16,324,462
	GRAND TOTAL	5,271,173	18,587,233	23,858,406

Source: Department of Tourism

Among the locations listed in the top tourism destinations of the Philippines, there were three city centers or gateway cities that had the capacity to handle a large volume of domestic and international flights. These were Manila, Cebu, and Davao located in the major island groups of the Philippines Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanano respectively. Luzon offered varied attractions like mountains, caves, rivers, beaches, etc. In Visayas and Mindanao tourism areas could also be characterized as nature-based attractions. A province in Southern Luzon that could be reached with approximately a 10-hour drive or a 12-hour bus trip, Camarines Sur was serviced by a domestic airport located in the second class provincial capital, Naga City.

Many had argued that there was an obvious reason why the capital region was no longer the most preferred destination. The majority of international flights had a lay-over in Manila and the city was still the financial center of the country. Tourism officers had questioned whether Manila was indeed suffering a loss of its share of tourism income or the tourists' spending was simply distributed elsewhere. In the case of Intramuros, the question was really whether or not there was a decrease in tourism income when in fact there was a continuous influx of day-visitors or excursionists like educational tour groups that came in bus loads. Furthermore, there were only a limited number of establishments for accommodations. As an industry response, there were recent propositions from business establishments to build hotels and other facilities to cater the needs of both day visitors and tourists. These propositions were both welcomed and dismissed by different groups who were concerned for the future of Intramuros. In a recent meeting, the head of the DOT wanted to see improvement in the tourism performance of Intramuros. Estrella thought that it was only proper to know what the Department could do to help him and his team.

Why Make the Old Horse Work?

Intramuros had witnessed many historical events that if in fact if its walls could talk, they would scream for the need to conserve. This was a common argument that Estrella heard especially from experts

in the field of heritage conservation. The plea to conserve and protect the area was not just a battle cry of academicians, history, and heritage experts. Philippine laws actually mandated the preservation and conservation of important artifacts and historical destinations. The San Agustin Church in Intramuros had been inscribed as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It was part of a serial nomination for the Baroque Churches of the Philippines (constructed between the 16th and 18th Centuries).⁷ Among the propositions of conservation experts presented to Estrella was that Intramuros permanently become a heritage destination and a zone that no longer allowed construction of new structures except when needed and for the best interest of conservation. In relation to this, natural calamities and disasters are occurrences that are difficult to anticipate. Therefore, risk reduction by way of limiting new entrants and development was the best option proposed by experts. The rationale behind this was that the structural integrity of the physical place was already at risk and new structures would only increase the risk of possible destruction. This could be understood with the analogy that if an old horse was forced to continue working, then more risks would be expected. Experts agreed that Intramuros should have the much needed break from over development. Should this proposal be approved, the IA expected a drop in investments within Intramuros.

A Wall for the People

A city has its own subdivisions where an area can be dedicated for offices, an area for organizations, cultural groups, businesses, residences, and open spaces. The same applied to Intramuros, only this time there were several areas for residents and there was a further classification between legal, illegal, and informal residents or settlers. There had been much discussion on this issue but in the end, IA was always faced with the challenge of dealing with the informal settlers. Another issue that added complexity to the situation was the lack of proper urban planning. This meant that there was no clear distinction as to the properties that were to be used for businesses, residences, and even for mixed-use land development. Therefore, a walk through the streets of Intramuros revealed buildings for commercial use, then the next few structures would be for housing, or both for commercial and housing purposes. In Estrella's experience, there had been good and bad outcomes from dealing with the informal settlers. He found out that most of the people residing in the unsightly areas were migrants from different provinces and would only need temporary accommodation or houses while they performed their jobs in Manila during weekdays. Most of them were hard-working people who found it difficult to move out and find a better place which they could actually own. There were also those who worked at the establishments within Intramuros and other nearby offices and organizations. They had opted to stay in shanties and smaller houses informally rented out by secondary or tertiary landlords. It was also brought to the attention of Estrella that some of the transport service providers such as the *padyak* or *trisikel* (bicycles or motorcycles with an attached cab for passengers) drivers resided in Intramuros and they were able to provide transportation services to the people who worked, visited, and had official duties and businesses in Intramuros. At some point, the drivers of the *padyak* and *trisikel* had also offered tours to prospective tourists. Just like in any city with a surge of people, Intramuros also experienced problems with safety and security. Some of its stakeholders had pointed to the informal settlers as the problem. As expected, the community or the settlers would deny this and in fact they had their own brigade to protect themselves and Intramuros, as they claimed it as their home. The fact remained that the areas where informal settlers squatted were privately owned lands. Therefore, the government could not enforce evacuation from those areas. It could merely work on negotiating the possible resettlement of the informal settlers. In a recent social engagement, Estrella learned of a new concept in tourism that

involved the community. He was introduced to the concept of *slum tourism*, wherein visitors or tourists were invited to the slums with the objective of learning from the way of life of people who resided in that area.⁸ This concept had been practiced in other countries and had gained popularity in other parts of Manila. In slum tourism, the informal settlers had the opportunity to show the “reality” to people who would like to have a real experience of living below their means. At the same time the tourists would be able to help the communities or the informal settlers with a monetary contribution. It appeared that this tour concept had benefited a lot of communities.

The Step to Take

As the administrator, Estrella definitely had a lot on his plate. Administering Intramuros was not like managing a hotel or resort where the type of hospitality service could be differentiated by the way the services are provided and ultimately by the mission and vision of the organization. More and more, he realized that there were communities, businesses, cultures, and intangible elements that should be considered if he were to execute decisions about Intramuros. If indeed there was a chance for Intramuros to competitively thrive in the tourism industry as a destination, there was an obvious need to review the tourism message communicated. Estrella knew that the IA had to examine what its resources and capabilities were, the environment it had been moving in, and the possibilities that could abound for Intramuros. On the other hand, he also thought about keeping things as they were, for after all, the government leadership depended mainly on the incumbent and things could change with a new administration. Be that as it may, managing Intramuros continued to be a challenge that the IA needed to respond to. Estrella wondered if indeed there was only one good step to take or if several options could be pursued. The bottom line, however, was that something needed to be done with the way people saw and experienced Intramuros.

Endnotes

- 1 Intramuros Administration, 2009. Accessed 17 Aug. 2015. <www.intramuros.ph>.
- 2 Intramuros Administration. "Intramuros Brochure and Map." Manila: Republic of the Philippines. 2012. Print.
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