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# Decongesting COVID's jamitons with urban planning in the Philippines

Stop the growth! A critique of Ragene Palma's [opinion](#).



[Car Park](#) by [James Gilleard](#)

Because of the pandemic, the word “COVID-19” fills up every introduction sentence in multiple essays. Take this one, for example. The phenomenon is similar to cars getting stuck in traffic. However, for this analogy, it is not just Epifanio de los Santos Avenue being filled to the brim with ear-splitting honking, every country in the world is affected by the said virus. And just like our stuffy road problems, this wildfire of a dilemma can be resolved or at least mitigated by proper planning.

Enter Ragene Andrea L. Palma, an urbanist. As somebody who specializes in city planning, she has argued how the government has dealt with the densely populated situation badly in [her article](#). She explained how, in urban planning, movement and space are the most basic elements. Exclaiming how the lockdowns imposed by the government are not effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19 because it has failed to grasp the said basic concepts. The relationship of movement and city planning is defined by [Wunderlich](#) in his study, *Walking and Rhythmicity: Sensing Urban Space* as: “...it is while moving (walking) that we sensorially and reflectively interact with the urban environment, firming up our relationship with urban places.”

## From an urban planner's point of view

Palma introduced her stance by starting with how the quarantine has caused Filipinos to flock to the nearest transportation networks, looking for a way in fear of being stranded, which, to some, especially OFWs,

could translate to being jobless. Not only that, but because Filipinos are now concentrated in one spot, the effects of intended lockdown backfired. Instead of preventing the spread, more people were now infected than ever. It does not take an epidemiologist to foresee the multitude of infections caused by the travelling Filipinos. Everyone they meet on the way and on their destinations will now be placed at a high risk of getting a personal visit with death itself in the form of COVID-19. Making travel, in Palma's words, "purely privilege".



Filipinos hoping to leave Manila before it is placed on lockdown flock at a bus station on March 13, 2020 in Quezon city, Metro Manila, Philippines. Photo by Ezra Acayan/Getty.

Aside from what I deem to be her strongest point, the urbanist used a few more points to support her claims:

There are urban-rural and global economic linkages. Following the government's moves to "regulate" transportation, this sort of action could lead to an undesired domino of events as Palma emphasizes. Industries like the trade, business, and tourism faltering will harshly reflect in our country's gross domestic product (GDP). Moreover, because of their said regulation, that means there would be less and fewer jobs available. The urbanist gave numbers, exclaiming about the seemingly unfelt pressure since 11 million jobs are at stake. Another problem is the city's design. According to her, the said design does not mitigate crowding and therefore plays a big role in this pandemic. She ends, however, with a heart-filling announcement. Palma shines the creative class (knowledge-based professionals) with her words as her spotlight. Told us a story of how engineers got together to put up a sanitation tent, how spatial analysts designed a case monitoring



platform. Shaming the hoarding middle class with news of chemists mixing ethyl alcohol and distributing it for free. Exemplifying the power of bayanihan amidst trying times.

As a data-driven innovator myself, I generally agree with the opinions displayed by Ragene—especially on how she pointed out the absence of the consideration of the essential elements of urban planning foremost. Targeting the root of the problem will not only fix the problem at hand, it will resolve future problems and problems you didn't know exist as well. For one to improve as an innovator, being critical is a skill needing continuous sharpening. With that, I shall move forward with a few of my points and takeaways from Palma's written article.

## Privilege, privilege, privilege!



Homeless woman. Photo from Agence France-Presse.



Dependents lining up for “ayuda” or basic needs from the government.

The *Stay at Home* campaign truly is a privilege. It is anti-poor. Italian

novelist Francesca Melandri recounts [her quarantine experiences](#), “I deem myself unbelievably lucky, and am fully conscious of my privilege: not only do I live in a pleasant home, with an outdoor space which gives me sunlight and respite, but most of all I haven’t really changed my daily routine in any significant ways.” Unlike the majority who live in a *no work, no pay* livelihood, Melandri’s activities didn’t really change. Only her workspace did. Compare this to the sight seen by priest Flaviano Villanueva where [dozens of homeless people lined up on the street outside the Kalinga \(Care\) Center](#), waiting for the doors to open. They allegedly stood 1.5 metres apart, in line with the government’s guidance for the enhanced lockdown. But the head of the barangay, or village council, who had not been happy having the centre there, ordered it shut and drove the homeless away. The village councilor defended himself by saying how they were just following [IATF Resolution No. 80](#): no mass gatherings.

## Can we blame instinct?

However, one of two points where I find we differ is in Palma’s attempts to humiliate the hoarding middle class. One major headline in the early phases of covid is the hoarding of toilet paper. Toilet paper and other basic needs. Though it has shown the large marginal offset between the rich and the poor, the erratic behavior will, whether we like it or not, be here to stay. Discussing this objectively, I would like to first define hoarding. The Cambridge online dictionary defines [hoarding](#) as: “the act of collecting large amounts of something and keeping it for yourself, often in a secret place”. The Science (ISTS) Singapore also [explains](#) how hoarding is brought upon by our survival instinct: “Imagine the time when humans needed to gather food and store it for tough times like cold winters or famines. By hoarding food, we feel secure knowing that we have all our essentials for an uncertain future.” The phenomenon is further explained by ISTS, likening the survival instinct scenario to the current pandemic situation. People are observably anxious and stressed because of the mystery shrouding the pandemic. This stress is further intensified by the closing of borders, restricting essentials from being shipped inside the country. According to Steven Taylor, a clinical psychologist in an [interview](#) with Discover Magazine, people experience ‘anticipatory anxiety’ and give in to these fears. Mostly because we want to be safe rather than sorry. To further elaborate my point, I will now use the classic empathy-as-an-argument: think about it, if you were to see your loved ones suffering slowly and silently because of the lack of

food caused by brutal effects of COVID-19 fallout, what would you have done?

## Bayanihan: A Love Story



Bayanihan by [The Mixed Culture](#).

Bayanihan is a core essence of the Filipino culture. It is helping out one's neighbor as a community, and doing a task together, thus lessening the workload and making the job easier. It is also called the 'community spirit'. Ragene wrote countless deeds done by the creative class. Perhaps in good faith that her readers will leave the article feeling better about the situation. However, the glorification of the exploitation done by those who fail to be accountable for the suffering today should be halted. It is rather pessimistic. However, we shouldn't glorify Bayanihan to the point where we solely depend on giveaways for survivability. As [wethepublic](#) writer Gelo Lasin places it, Filipinos deciding to do something about their situation when no one else will is the opposite of 'resilience'. It is simply the time where Filipinos endure and accept things for the way they are. This is dangerous. Allow me to introduce a crazy hypothetical: in the long run, an idea may be born out of this situation. A notion where the people deem the government unnecessary moving our country forward. A loss of hierarchy would damage the country immeasurably. A [Facebook post](#) from West Visayas State University encapsulates the message citizens were trying to say all long, "Resiliency should not be a reminder that 'there is more to life than suffering,' but a wake up call for the government to strive hard and shape up"



# Planting the right seeds



“REFUSE TO GLORIFY RESILIENCY, DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY” by West Visayas State University

The pandemic continues to ruthlessly create problems for us. However, we must not hack and slash at every dilemma we see. Which leads me back to my point again: dig out the roots before it sprouts into a tall, sturdy tree. The government today must understand this. Though easier said than done, we need a meticulous cultivator, not a good-physique-only warrior. These truly are times when the pen is mightier than the sword.

By [Carl Kho](#) on [June 17, 2021](#).

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