

# Worlding aspirations and resilient futures: Framings of risk and contemporary city-making in Metro Cebu, the Philippines

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**Abstract:** *In the Philippines, calls for creating ‘global’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘resilient’ cities are placing urban poor communities in increasingly precarious positions. These communities have long been the targets of urban development and ‘modernisation’ efforts; more recently the erasure of informal settlements from Philippine cities is being bolstered at the behest of climate change adaptation and disaster risk management (DRM) agendas. In Metro Cebu, flood management has been at the heart of DRM and broader urban development discussions, and is serving as justification for the demolition and displacement of informal settler communities in areas classed as ‘danger zones’. Using Kusno’s (2010) interpretation of the ‘exemplary centre’ as a point of departure, this paper interrogates the relationship between DRM, worlding aspirations (Roy and Ong, 2011) and market-oriented urbanisation in Cebu, and considers the socio-spatial implications of these intersecting processes for urban poor communities. Through analysing the contradictions inherent in framings of certain bodies and spaces as being ‘of risk’ or ‘at risk’ over others, I argue that the epistemologies of modernity, disaster risk and resilience endorsed and propagated by the state are facilitating processes of displacement and dispossession that serve elite commercial interests under the auspices of disaster resilience and pro-poor development.*

**Keywords:** *disaster risk reduction and management, Philippines, resilience, urban slums, worlding, urban development*

## Introduction

Like many cities in the world, Metro Cebu seeks to mark itself as a place of global significance. Such ‘worlding’ aspirations (Roy and Ong, 2011) are evident in the manifold big infrastructure and foreign investment projects which have been surfacing in the metropole since the late 1990s, and more recently in the narratives and imaginaries elicited through the Mega Cebu project, an initiative spearheaded in 2011 by big business to encourage public-private partnerships and improve collaboration on planning and infrastructure development across (and beyond) the 13 towns and municipalities that constitute Metro Cebu. As a country that is said to experience more natural hazards than any other (Bankoff, 2003) and which is especially vulnerable to the adverse impacts of global warming (Elliott, 2012), disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) and climate change adaptation (CCA) are

unsurprisingly key elements of the city’s development plans. In fact, the city-region of Cebu has come to be renowned both nationally and internationally as an *exemplary* model of DRRM best practice, having won the prestigious United Nations Sasakawa Award for Disaster Reduction in 2011, and earning itself the title of ‘Most Resilient Province’ in the 2017 national *Gawad KALASAG*<sup>1</sup> awards celebrating excellence in DRRM.

Premised around imaginaries of a desirable urban future which sit in opposition to an undesirable dystopic alternative rooted in present realities, I argue that these mutually reinforcing agendas of modernisation and DRRM represent an emerging form of governance in Metro Cebu that is shaping urban development and prompting a socio-spatial reorganisation of the city along socio-economic lines. In line with the theme of this special issue, I apply the concept of ‘exemplary centre’ (Geertz, 1980; Kusno, 2010) to situate my analysis of these city-making practices in

Cebu, and frame DRRM and worlding experiments as complementary systems of power which operate, and are legitimised, through a discourse regime that relies on pejorative moral categorisations of urban poor communities. My purpose here is not to suggest that it is unusual or surprising that these objectives are connected, but rather to draw attention to the *manner* in which they are connected and mobilised through a language of risk. Furthermore, contrary to the logic of sustainability and resilience seemingly underpinning these initiatives, I contend that the restructuring of urban space and consequent dispossession enabled through the combined forces of market-oriented development and disaster risk governance is reinforcing rather than redressing circumstances of vulnerability and insecurity among the urban poor. Collectively these discursive and material processes also obscure the role of the state, the private sector, and neoliberal urbanism more broadly in producing and exacerbating conditions of risk and vulnerability.

The first section positions urban development in Metro Cebu as a 'worlding experiment', and contextualises this framing via an examination of the urban imaginaries elicited through the Mega Cebu project. I proceed with an analysis of the ways in which visions of a resilient city and associated DRRM practices are entangled in modernising aspirations, and explore how these urban imaginaries are mobilised and solidified through a discourse regime premised around risk, vulnerability and related moral categorisations of urban poor communities. Through an ethnographic vignette, I also highlight the contradictions inherent in these framings, and the ways in which they serve neoliberal urbanism; processes that as many critical urban geographers argue (Harvey, 2012; Gotham and Greenberg, 2014; Gillespie, 2016), actively produce and perpetuate conditions of crisis and insecurity, fuelling urban fragmentation and socio-economic inequalities. The arguments extended in this paper are based on fieldwork conducted in Cebu City and Mandaue City in 2016 and 2017, which included focus group discussions (61 participants) and in-depth interviews (44 participants) with informal settlers living in areas classified as 'danger zones', as well as more than 20 interviews with employees from governmental and non-governmental organisations working in the fields of DRRM and social welfare.

## Urban imaginaries and logics of modernity

### *'Competitive, sustainable and liveable': Envisaging Mega Cebu 2050*

On the 1 April, 2011, urban development in Metro Cebu took a momentous turn with the birth of the Mega Cebu project. This mega-urbanisation plan started off as a conceptual venture, spear-headed by prominent business owners who felt a more integrated approach to urban planning and development was necessary to encourage future investment and harness the city's full potential as a global economic hub. Their vision of making Cebu a 'competitive, sustainable and liveable' city by 2050<sup>2</sup> through market-oriented development projects was rapidly endorsed by local and regional government heads, as well as allies in the private sector, culminating in the signing on 1 April of a Memorandum of Agreement, officiating the Metro Cebu Development and Coordinating Board (MCD CB) as the new authority on urban planning and development in the region, with the advancement of Mega Cebu as a principal mandate. The Mega Cebu masterplan that has since evolved has four strategic pillars (Competitiveness, Mobility, Liveability and Metropolitan Management), each of which is premised around major infrastructure projects coordinated by the MCD CB. Central to these plans is an appeal for a more collaborative approach to DRRM and CCA. This is one of 10 key areas of cooperation singled out alongside related matters including flood control, solid waste management and environmental management among other transboundary urbanisation issues identified as priority areas by the MCD CB.

From its inception through to the present day, efforts to engage the public in the vision of Mega Cebu have been rooted in a conceptual architecture premised around the power of believing in a better tomorrow and the potential to surpass challenges of the present through unity, hard work and perseverance. These narratives are exemplified in the cover statement of the 2015 Mega Cebu Annual Report:

It is no secret that Mega Cebu started with a dream. That dream embraces the strong desire for a liveable and sustainable Cebu, one that can be considered our legacy for the future generations. When we continue to exert effort, focus and work hard, imagine the ripples and

waves we can contribute to the quality of life. Then we can be certain that a liveable and sustainable Cebu is truly possible.<sup>3</sup>

The opening message of the report by Chairman of the MCDGB, Governor Davide, follows a similar line:

We envision Cebu to be among the greatest places in the world. Defining the future of Metro Cebu ... require[s] the active participation and benevolence of the people ... We realize that cohesive partnership between the public and private sectors is the only way to create a competitive and sustainable Mega Cebu. ... There is still a lot to be done and the challenges are many but with our collaborative work, we are confident that we are on our way to achieve our dreams. One day, these steps will lead us to where we want Cebu to be – a progressive and happy place to live.

A vision fortified by projections of a more 'liveable' and 'sustainable' city, Mega Cebu seeks to position the metropole as an 'exemplary centre' of Philippine modernity and resilience; a term coined by Geertz (1980: 13) and later adopted by Kusno (2010: 90) in reference to 'the spectacle of order and development' embodied through city-making practices in Jakarta. The above excerpts also reveal the worlding aspirations inherent to the vision of Mega Cebu, promoted as a progressive project with the potential to make Cebu a city of global significance. Here, worlding can be seen to constitute an assemblage of undefined performative practices that collectively strive to establish Cebu as an 'exemplary centre' within the global economy, wherein both the processes of 'worlding' and the evocation of the 'exemplary centre' rely on reproductions of the city as a spectacle.

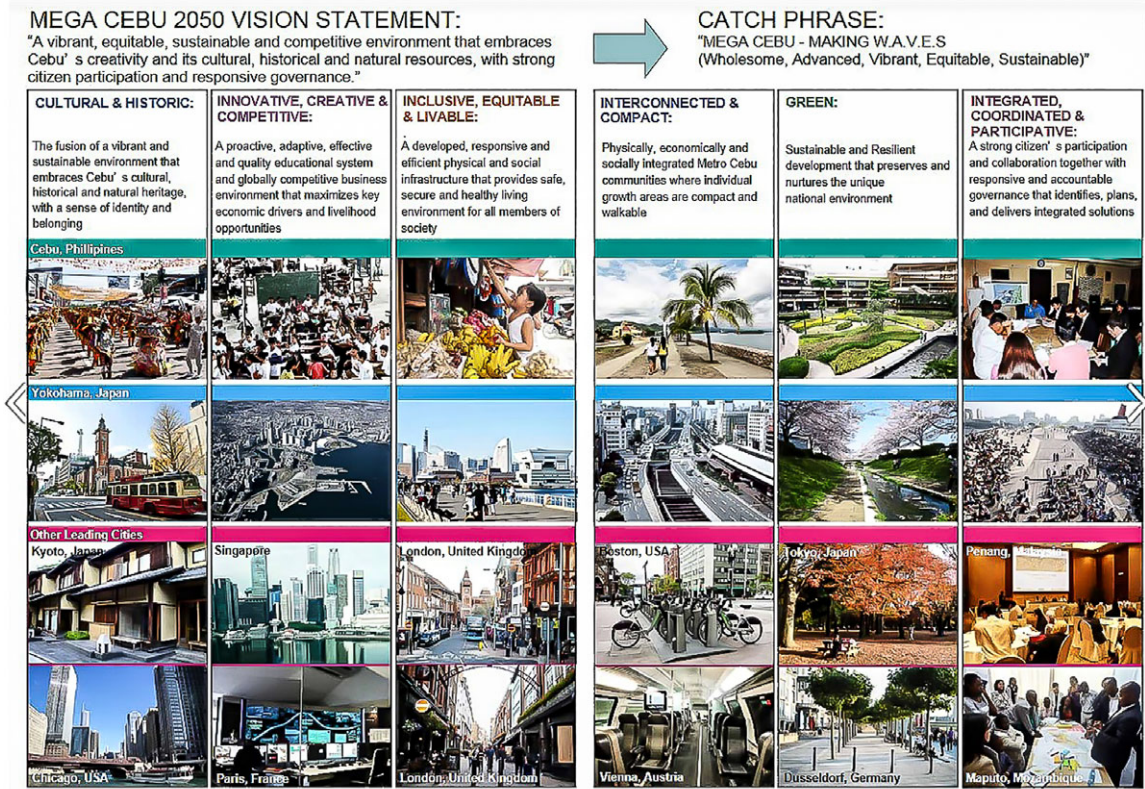
In a 2013 publication entitled 'Mega Cebu Vision 2050' summarising the 'sustainable development vision' for the metropole, the visionary 'attributes' of this Cebu of the future are exemplified by a short descriptive text accompanied by pictures of the city next to images intended to showcase these desirable attributes in Yokohama, Japan, alongside other so called 'leading cities' including Kyoto, Singapore, London, Boston and Paris among others (see Fig. 1). This display reflects efforts to conjure what Ghertner (2011: 281) has termed 'a

world-class aesthetic', which he argues 'takes shape through the dissemination of a compelling vision of the future ... and the cultivation of a popular desire for such a future' normatively presented around a 'clean, comfortable and "nuisance-free"' imaginary (Ghertner, 2015: 184). Similar to Kusno (2010), Ghertner (2011: 280, see also 2015) describes how this 'world-class' spectacle enables 'an aesthetic mode of governing' that facilitates and legitimises plans for 'world-class' city-making (see also Tran, 2019, this issue, on aesthetic ordering through beautification in Hanoi).

In reference to situated experimentations in 'the art of being global', Ong (2011: 4) frames '[s]uch discursive and non-discursive activities' as 'spatializing practices that drive the flow of distinctive urban codes that gives the region a buoyant sense of being on the cusp of an urban revolution.' These practices, she argues, are often mobilised through a neoliberal logic defined as 'a set of maximizing rationalities that articulates particular assemblages of governing'. Such technologies of governance 'can be taken up by a government or any other institution to recast problems as non-ideological and non-political issues that need technical solutions to maximize intended outcomes' (Ong, 2011). As depicted in the ensuing analysis, in Metro Cebu the application of these complementary rationales in conjunction with urban risk considerations is facilitating the operationalisation of market-oriented ideals of efficiency, growth and privatisation while simultaneously reinforcing the stigmatisation and exclusion of those seen to be hindering the making of Cebu into a 'world-class' city, namely the urban poor.

### *Neoliberal urbanism and Mega Cebu*

Urbanisation in Metro Cebu has, in its recent history, been profoundly shaped by neoliberal processes and logics, gaining particular momentum during the post-Marcos years of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s, when devolution of power from the central state to local governments was rapidly pursued and promoted as a transition away from authoritarianism towards democratisation (though the *actual* materialisation of this purported outcome remains widely debated (see Shatkin, 2000; Yilmaz and Venugopal, 2013)). In Metro Cebu,



**Figure 1.** The Mega Cebu 2050 vision: A leading global city. Source: [https://issuu.com/megacebu/docs/en\\_cebupamphlet\\_v12.1final\\_0319lowr](https://issuu.com/megacebu/docs/en_cebupamphlet_v12.1final_0319lowr) (2013: 4–5; retrieved 16 January 2018)

decentralisation and liberalisation were bolstered by its status as a highly urbanised autonomous city falling outside provincial jurisdiction, prompting a surge in foreign investments and fuelling economic growth in a period that become known colloquially as 'the Ceboom' (Ortega, 2012: 50). Political decentralisation and investment-fuelled growth continue to characterise urban governance and development in the metropole, with the Mactan Export Processing Zone, the Singapore-style IT Business Park and the more recent commercial and real estate developments of South Reclamation Properties standing as material evidence of the city's market-oriented development paradigm. In this light, the urban trajectories embraced by Mega Cebu can be seen as a continuation rather than break in the logic that has informed city-making in the metropole for some time now (Ortega, 2012).

Indications of the neoliberal bias underpinning Mega Cebu have been apparent since the launch of the MCDCB in 2011. While the

MCDCB claims to have representation from local government, the private sector and civil society, engagement of the latter has been limited at best. The MCDCB is led by the Cebu Provincial Governor and co-chaired by the Cebu City Mayor at the time, Mike Rama (who throughout his two terms in office was unreservedly neoliberal and pro-business (Bersales, 2013)), alongside the Ramon Aboitiz Foundation (RAFI), the paradoxical double representative of the private sector and civil society. As the philanthropic arm of business conglomerate Aboitiz Equity Ventures, owned and operated by the Aboitiz clan who are one of the most prominent and powerful families in the Philippines (and key masterminds of Mega Cebu), the extent to which RAFI constitutes an impartial and 'representative' voice advocating for the interests of wider civil society in Cebu is questionable. The predisposition of the MCDCB to advancing the interests of the city's business elites by prioritising private-sector growth is further solidified by the number of local

government heads constituting much of the remainder of the board, many of whom (as is the case with politicians across the Philippines) are themselves from families of wealthy, powerful business moguls. This administrative arrangement lends itself to elite capture (Yilmaz and Venugopal, 2013), with decentralisation in this context serving the personal interests of the upper-class and narrowing rather than expanding opportunities for the urban poor to participate directly in local politics (Hutchison, 2007).

As additional evidence of Mega Cebu's market-oriented doctrine, the MCDCCB commissioned Roadmap Study for Sustainable Urban Development identifies macroeconomic policies as the key to achieving sustainable growth (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: ES-2). This is followed by a statement that Mega Cebu's vision of 'liveability' will be attained through the 'cooperation and self-regulation of the citizens and the private sector as waste generators' and through 'public-private cooperation for sustainable business development' (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: ES-4), omitting the specifics as to how this partnership is envisaged or any mention of local government accountabilities in public service provision. Emphasis is also given to the role of technological innovation in meeting urban development objectives such as the protection of public health and the environment, which will allegedly be 'ensured by establishing the solid waste management system underpinned by environmentally-sound methods and technology' (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015). Among other 'technical solutions' championed by Mega Cebu as the path to sustainability and resilience, are a mass transit network incorporating a Bus Rapid Transit system and Urban Railway Network, road widening and bridge construction, new dams, water supply and wastewater treatment facilities, and investments in 'smart city' technologies and research, all of which notably offer huge revenue prospects for potential investors and private-sector contractors.

A group of civil society organisations representing urban poor interests and keen to contribute to Mega Cebu came together in 2015 out of concern for the absence of their voices on key

coordinating bodies, though the extent to which their suggestions have been heeded remain to be seen. Since May 2016, which saw the ousting of Mike Rama by his rival Tomas Osmeña, the mega-urbanisation project has met a wall of resistance from the new Mayor of Cebu City who, shortly after being elected, stated that Cebu City would no longer be participating in the flagship project of his predecessor (Felicitas, 2016) and refused the offer of the governor to head the MCDCCB (Demecillo, 2016). While the future of the MCDCCB and their 30-year masterplan for the city appears uncertain at this point in time, the urban imaginary evoked by Mega Cebu has been deeply etched in the psyche of many Cebuanos and continues to shape the trajectory of urban development in the city. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the subsequent analysis of how risk is represented and addressed within the masterplan, Mega Cebu remains an insightful case for illuminating the ways in which DRRM and CCA are being tied to worlding ambitions to justify the removal of slums and their inhabitants from the city.

### **Disaster risk management: A 'crisis of modern futurity'**

#### *The politics of mapping risk*

As mentioned above, DRRM is intrinsic to Mega Cebu's masterplan for building a globally competitive, 'sustainable and resilient' city-region. In the previously referenced Roadmap Study for Sustainable Urban Development, a hazard analysis of the proposed mega-zone mapped hazardous areas on the basis of their slope, metres below sea-level and history of flooding and landslides. It concluded that 76% of land in the study area was 'considered hazardous and not suitable for urban development', approximately 1.6% of which was in a currently urbanised area, with 10.9% (11 948 ha) of the land surveyed being neither hazardous nor urbanised, making it suitable for future urbanisation (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: 7). Preceding this section is a diagram outlining the disaster risk assessment procedure, which broadened the scope of hazards to include fires, earthquakes and social vulnerability. The inclusion of the latter category in



particular suggests an attentiveness to the subjective and socially constructed nature of disasters (Wisner *et al.*, 2004). However, few if any concrete plans are subsequently offered for addressing issues of social vulnerability or the associated socio-spatial distribution of disasters in the city. Rather, technocratic solutions continue to dominate, with flood mitigation through water drainage infrastructure garnering much of the focus (suggesting that the numerous critiques highlighting the limitations of approaches premised around environmentally-deterministic definitions of disasters have been ignored) (Wisner *et al.*, 2004; see also Cardona, 2003; Israel and Sachs, 2013).

According to the MCDDB, 35 217 informal settler families (ISFs) were living in Metro Cebu in 2015 (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: 4). This statement, followed by a table summarising 'Poverty Incidence in Cebu Province, Region VII and the Philippines', is in fact the only section of the Roadmap Study specifically allotted to 'Poverty and Informal Settler Families', despite their centrality to many of the proposed development projects. One such project entails a spatial reorganisation of the city through an urban cluster system premised around the strict enforcement of land-use and zoning regulations, 'the designation of city limits on hilly slopes so as to form less hazardous urban spaces free from landslides and floods', and the creation of a Green Loop establishing an urban boundary which 'should promote more attractive urban functions' therein, though it fails to elaborate on what it considers more versus less attractive (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: ES-3, 24). These efforts to 'promote functional, safe and environmentally friendly urban areas' (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: ES-3) are presented as desirable and beneficial for all of Cebu's residents. However, in reality, they are likely to have a profound implication on the lives, livelihoods and mobility of the urban poor, as Tilley *et al.* (2019, this issue) discuss in the context of Jakarta. In fact, as I reveal below, a closer analysis of the framing of urban poor communities in the discourse regime underpinning Mega Cebu thwarts its self-acclamations of inclusion and resilience, exposing dynamics of dispossession bolstered by the mobilisation of a

revanchist discourse that stigmatises the urban poor through ascriptions of disaster risk to legitimate their exclusion from the city.

### *Framings of urban risk and technologies of governance*

Central to the discourse and imaginaries produced and propagated by Mega Cebu is the potential for the city to 'progress' towards a more desirable future. This idea rests on an understanding of the present condition as something which is undesirable or 'backwards' when pitted against modern, worlding standards. The challenges of rapid urbanisation and population growth in the wake of the city's topographic and geographic constraints, and the need to govern in anticipation of the unknown impacts of climate change and extreme weather events, are all central to this discursive regime. These ideas are strategically deployed to project a particular vision of the city's current state and its potentially dystopic future so as to elicit popular support for the proposed solutions. Here, subjective notions of risk and resilience become deeply entangled in the epistemology of modernity being propagated and its associated technologies of governance.

Extending from Foucauldian appraisals of the power-knowledge nexus in the production of discursive and material realities, a growing number of scholars have been interrogating the ways in which climate change (Grove, 2014; Paprocki, 2018), sustainability (Escobar, 1995, 1996; Kusno, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2014), risk (O'Malley, 2004, 2008; Zeiderman, 2012, 2013, 2016) and resilience (Joseph, 2013; Daouk, 2014; Welsh, 2014) discourse are mobilised in support of political objectives and logics of governance. As discussed by Zeiderman (2016: 3), risk is a characteristic feature of Foucauldian appraisals of 'modern society' and seen to be at the heart of the transition to liberalism. 'For autonomous responsible individuals' to be empowered to make rational choices in accordance with liberal political and economic principles, 'they had to envision their future as containing dangers that could potentially be avoided'. This 'calculative rationality' became central to the logic underpinning modern governance (Zeiderman, 2016). Zeiderman goes on to describe how the ensuing 'prosperity gained

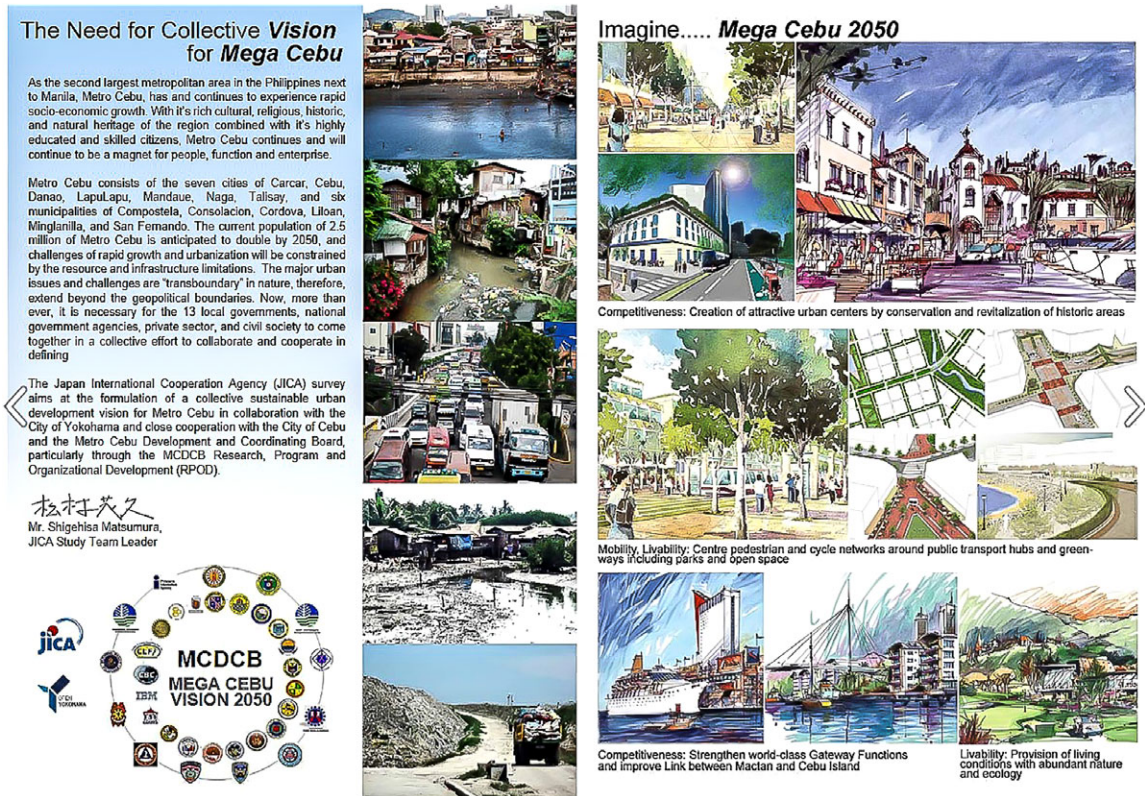
through unequal and exploitative relations of power and exchange enabled modern cities both to manage risk and to project a definitive vision of the global future' (Zeiderman, 2016: 4–5). Referencing the work of Rosenberg and Harding (2005: 4), who speak of a 'crisis of modern futurity', Zeiderman (2016) identifies the 'imperative to govern the present in anticipation of future harm' as a central tenet of this 'crisis', and one which he argues 'is actively reconfiguring the politics of cities' around the world, including in Colombia where his research is focused.

In the context of Mega Cebu, I argue that a 'crisis of modern futurity' is being promulgated through the deliberate use of discourse and imagery to conjure a sense of risk in the present. These dynamics are clearly illustrated in the same Mega Cebu Vision 2050 publication discussed above, where dystopic images of informal settlements, congested streets and an overflowing landfill are pitted against utopic watercolour images, prompting the reader to 'imagine Mega Cebu 2050'; a Cebu, it would seem, without poverty, traffic, garbage and their associated (negative) externalities (see Fig. 2). These pictorial depictions of the Cebu of today as chaotic, polluted, overpopulated and inherently risky, situate urban poor communities at the heart of many of these problems, or at the very least, as emblematic of them, 'equating slum-related nuisances with slums themselves' (Ghertner, 2008, 2011: 287). Informal settlements are the focal point of three of five photos, insinuating their vulnerability-cum-culpability in terms of flooding, coastline and environmental degradation and broader issues of disaster management, invariably earmarking the urban poor as subjects both 'of' and 'at' risk.

In a similar vein, the MCDCEB's Roadmap Study for Sustainable Urban Development explicitly identifies the city's notorious drainage issues as a problem emanating from 'the presence of informal settlements and irresponsible private property owners along the riverbanks, disposing an enormous amount of garbage that obstructs the flow of natural and man-made waterways' (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: 12). This framing again insinuates that urban poor communities are to blame for these problems afflicting the city, neglecting to acknowledge the role of inadequate drainage infrastructure,

sporadic and fragmented solid waste collection and the siloed approach to urban planning in producing and exacerbating flood risk. The report also identifies a concern among local government officials 'for rapid population increase and informal settlements, economic development and the environment' (ALMEC Corporation Oriental Consultants Global Co., 2015: 12) – another moralistic statement, this time framing the poor as sexually irresponsible and insinuating their blame for rapid population growth (and its associated pressures) in the city. Related to this, Ortega (2012: 43) identifies a distinct set of seemingly paradoxical demographic processes connected with the programme of urban development proposed by Mega Cebu, which he argues rests on the removal of slum residents but simultaneous attraction of migrant labourers to the city. Extending from his observation, the bodies of the poor, which as discussed are construed inadvertently as deviant and undesirable, become dispensable, while bodies of (a certain class of) migrants are conversely framed as desirable and deserving of a place in Mega Cebu owing to their perceived contribution to valued labour markets and economic growth in the city.

Such trends and discourses are not unique to Cebu but reflect a pattern that can be observed across the country and beyond (see Tilley *et al.*, 2019, this issue). In her insightful investigation of disaster-induced evictions in Pasig City of Metro Manila, Alvarez (2018) notes similar flood-focused preoccupations, not only in terms of the municipality's flagship mega infrastructure projects, but also in the haphazard delineation of risk and danger zones to target urban poor communities living near or along waterways and legitimise their eviction from these spaces. She traces the origins of the term 'danger zone' to the 1992 Urban Development and Housing Act, which associates these areas with territories of poverty and urban marginality, stating that 'eviction or demolition as a practice shall be discouraged', except under circumstances where people are found to be 'occupy [ing] danger areas such as *esteros* [creeks or tributaries], railroad tracks, garbage dumps, river banks, shorelines, waterways, and other public places such as sidewalks, roads, parks, and playgrounds' (Alvarez, 2018: 116–17). This list was expanded in the 'Operational Guidelines in the Transfer of Informal Settler Families from Danger Areas in the National Capital



**Figure 2.** The urban imaginary of Mega Cebu as depicted in a Mega Cebu flyer. Source: [https://issuu.com/megacebu/docs/en\\_cebupamphlet\\_v12.1final\\_0319lowr](https://issuu.com/megacebu/docs/en_cebupamphlet_v12.1final_0319lowr) (2013:2–3, retrieved 16 January 2018)

Region' published in 2014, to include areas under transmission lines, on fault lines, or prone to soil erosion 'and other similar areas not suitable for housing'. Oddly, despite the prolific adoption of the term 'danger zone' within DRRM, sector-specific legislation and related texts have neglected to move beyond a list of examples to offer a more substantive definition. Consequently, Alvarez (2018: 118) argues that:

When used particularly in the context of flood disasters, 'danger zones' are based on a specific use of space, rather than flood susceptibility. Ignoring official flood hazard maps while defining danger zones according to a law on eviction and demolition, did not only retroactively authorize the widespread pockets of evictions in waterway communities ... [but] it also legitimated the state's eviction drive under the ISF Housing Program. The acts of legally defining the danger zone, and of demarcating the areas which are danger zones, were collapsed into a matter of slum eviction by default.

Building on Ghertner's notion of 'worlding aesthetics', she contends that this 'territorialisation of disaster risk' to slums in Manila is being produced through an aesthetic governmentality premised around the stigmatisation of these communities that frames them as dangerous. In the context of flood risk, this 'aestheticisation of risk' operates by ascribing labels of disaster risk to informal settlements based on the aesthetic of material and environmental endangerment associated with their close proximity to waterways and the fragility of housing structures (Alvarez, 2018: 40, 137).

#### *Dispossession through disaster risk displacement*

Though not specifically outlined in the proposed Mega Cebu development plans, the clearance of informal settlements from waterways and coastlines has become a core feature of the material embodiment of DRRM policy in the metropole. Demolitions of this nature have



been ongoing for some time, promoted as a necessary initiative to protect vulnerable communities from exposure to hydro-meteorological hazards while simultaneously removing the structures seen to be inhibiting water flow and causing creeks to flood.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the Cebu City government began a major programme of flood management under the Rama administration, entitled the Reduction of Danger Zones project, focusing on the five major rivers in the city, led by an implementing body aptly named the Prevention, Restoration, Order, Beautification and Enhancement Office. The Mahiga Creek, spanning Cebu City and Mandaue City, was one of the first to be surveyed and subject to a series of major works aimed at preventing the 'overflowing of the river and likewise to avoid illegal settlers in the area' (Demecillo, 2016).

Over the course of my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017, 357 of the 714 families residing on the Mandaue City side of the creek had their homes forcefully demolished by the Housing and Urban Development Office (HUDO) with plans in place to evict the remaining households in 2018. A programme of work is also underway to rehabilitate the Butuanon River, considered one of the most polluted rivers in the country, which will require clearing the 753 ISFs estimated to be living within its 3-metre easement area, and proposes building parks, walking paths, a commercial strip and mid-rise housing nearby (Mendoza, 2017). Concurrent with Alvarez's observations in Manila, all of the 3912 ISFs identified by HUDO as 'living along danger zones' in Mandaue City have been classified as such on the basis of their proximity to waterways, with no mention of those living in landslide, earthquake or fire prone areas. Several government officials working in various departments across the metropole described these communities at risk of demolition as 'illegal squatters', voicing particular disdain for migrants 'with homes in the province', and those considered 'professional squatters', referring to recipients of government relocation or social housing support who continue to reside in a danger zone (and are thus seen to be taking advantage of the system).

As anyone who resides in the Central Visayan capital can attest, there is an obvious and urgent need for greater investment and more coherent planning around drainage and flood

management. As such, my intention in this paper is not to criticise DRRM efforts in the city or the ambition of Mega Cebu to facilitate more collaborative urban planning around these (and other) issues. Rather, I am offering some critical reflections on the socio-spatial implications of these mass infrastructure projects that necessitate the (often forced) displacement of thousands of the city's most vulnerable residents, and the moralistic and stigmatising undertones that inadvertently mark affected communities as the cause of not only their vulnerability, but of the city's susceptibility to flooding. Offering added validation to the anti-slum rhetoric, this packaging of DRRM buttressed by worlding aspirations also conveniently obscures the culpability of the state and private commercial and property developers in these processes. The ethnographic vignette provided below illustrates the dynamics of DRRM, development and dispossession operating in Metro Cebu, and the paradoxical delineation of risk onto urban poor bodies and spaces while neglecting the wider forces and actors implicated in 'disaster risk creation' (Lewis and Kelman, 2012).

### Poverty, privilege and the production of risk

The case of Sitio Aroma, a privately owned informal settlement some 350 metres from the Mahiga Creek, housing just over 400 families in Barangay Subangdako<sup>5</sup> of Mandaue City, highlights the insidious ways in which private commercial enterprises are implicated in the production of risk and insecurity in urban poor communities. Roger Sulad, one of the original residents of Sitio Aroma and president of the Sitio Aroma Homeowner Association (SAHA), talks me through the changes he has observed over the years, since he and his family first settled in the area in the late 1980s. At that time, there were only 15 to 20 *barong barong* (makeshift houses) in the *sitio* and much of the surrounding land was submerged by water, providing a fertile environment for *kangkong* (water spinach) which grew in abundance and provided an immediate source of food and livelihood for the families living there. Over the years, this centrally located settlement attracted more and more people searching for work in the

city. As the small dry oasis became increasingly congested, newer arrivals began building out into the swamps, using bamboo stilts to support their homes and bridges above the water.

Any trace of *kangkong* and stilt houses are now long gone. Families that had been living in the wetlands adjacent to Sitio Aroma were relocated in the 1990s when the Aboitiz family, who own the surrounding lot, decided to reclaim the area in preparation for future commercial development. In 2015, they entered into a joint venture with the Ayalas, another of the country's wealthiest and most powerful business families, to construct several high-rise condominiums and commercial outlets. With the disappearing of the natural wetland as the lot was filled in, Roger recounts how Sitio Aroma, no longer sitting on higher ground, became the catchment site of water and runoff from the surrounding area.

There are many big changes to our area since this development has started. The water that is coming from their development area is now rushing towards our area, and since there is nowhere for the water to pass, it is staying in the area, like in our basketball courts. Previously the water would flow out, but because of this development it is much worse.

Roger and other residents also told me how they routinely pool their resources to buy concrete and stones in an effort to elevate their settlement, but with seemingly limited effect, as evident in the pervasive puddles of stagnant, murky water collecting in public walkways and the communal basketball court, despite the absence of rain for several days.

SAHA raised the issue of water coming in from the Aboitiz/Ayala land during a public scoping meeting held to notify the community of the development, and were told that a culvert would be constructed to channel the water off-site and away from Sitio Aroma. Residents asked for the culvert to be connected to their *sitio* to facilitate the drainage of water from the area, given the extent to which this development has worsened local flooding. However, they were told 'no' in no uncertain terms. This represents a rather disappointing response from two of the richest families in the Philippines, and is

especially surprising given the mission statements of their respective corporate foundations and their endorsement of Mega Cebu. The Ayala Foundation, for example, purports to aspire to understand 'community realities ... acting as catalyst for inclusion to bridge community and business aspirations, and building and nurturing partnerships ... to achieve impact, scale, and sustainability for everyone involved'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, RAFI claims to have interests in 'corporate social responsibility interventions especially in communities where Aboitiz companies operate' with a particular interest in projects concerning environment, health and well-being, and disaster preparedness and response.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, almost two years after this scoping meeting, the culvert is still awaiting construction. Moreover, flooding is not the only type of disaster affecting residents. The *sitio* has also experienced its share of fires; the first in 1994, the second in 2003 and a third in 2010, the latter two destroying all of the structures in the area, although mercifully there were no casualties. However, in the event of another fire, residents fear that their 'nil casualty' track record may not hold up. Shortly after the public scoping meeting, in October 2015, a high fence of metal sheeting was erected around the Aboitiz/Ayala lot to 'protect their property', effectively boxing in Sitio Aroma from the north and east, and leaving residents with only a single very narrow path from which to enter or exit the settlement. Residents raised their concerns about their restricted mobility in times of emergency and asked the developers for a 1.5 metre right-of-way path to be allotted between their structures and the wall. Their request was refused, forcing residents along the periphery of the settlement to dismantle parts of their homes to create the narrow passageway – a measurable improvement on their situation, although still too small to offer a real sense of assurance to the community.

Ongoing concerns raised by Sitio Aroma resulted in two fire exits and eventually a third being built into the fence; however, the fences are chain locked from the back and the keys allegedly held by a security guard to the construction site. This means that in the event of another fire, residents will need to make their way along the narrow path (assuming it is not part of the affected area), outside the settlement, to notify a security

guard (whose name and contact details have yet to be provided) who will then need to find the keys and go to each gate to unlock the bolts from the Aboitiz/Ayala side. Unsurprisingly, Roger tells me that he and his neighbours are 'still not comfortable with what they did, making fire exits in the wall, because ... it will be very difficult for us if ever there is an emergency, to find this person who has the key in order to be able to open up the fire exits'. Surely this defeats the benefits of emergency exit provisions for when time is likely to be of the essence?

Although regular flooding and fear of fire are sources of considerable concern, residents in Sitio Aroma are currently preoccupied with an even more worrying threat, that of demolition and eviction. The owners of the lot, Tanchan, another of Cebu's prominent business families, have recently issued inhabitants with a letter notifying them of their intentions to develop the land, and asking them to vacate their lots - and this is not the first time for Sitio Aroma either. The Tanchans, who for years remained unknown to residents who assumed the land was untitled or state-owned, have twice before made contact, both times in the immediate aftermath of a fire, first in 2003, and then again in 2010. Both then and now, residents acknowledge Tanchan as the rightful owner of the land, but have requested a relocation site or adequate financial compensation if they are to vacate the area. In 2003, and 2010, negotiations stalled and Tanchan disappeared from the scene, stating they could not afford to purchase a relocation site. They then resurfaced in October 2016 coinciding with the Aboitiz/Ayala developments, offering to pay structure owners 15 000 pesos (equivalent to USD 300) to vacate the area. This amount is nowhere near enough for residents to have any chance of purchasing another plot of land in the city, and while some have agreed to accept the offer and vacate by the end of March 2018, SAHA members maintain that they would prefer a group relocation site. In lieu of that, they have asked that the compensation be increased by 35 000 pesos (the total being equivalent to USD 1000) to give them a more realistic chance of being able to buy their own lot. However, at the time of my discussion with Roger, Tanchan had rejected their counter-proposal leaving the negotiations in a state of deadlock.

In light of this, SAHA raised Sitio Aroma's plight with Mandaue City's Mayor's Office and met with HUDO to ask for the city's help in negotiating the provision of a relocation site with the owners. They remain hopeful of a solution to their current condition, which Roger defines as a 'human disaster':

I say ... a human disaster because it is as if our *sitio* is being struck by an earthquake or a storm where we would be forced to leave our houses and our settlement against our will ... We don't have any problem with leaving the land right now. It is just that we want a relocation site to transfer to. If they ... give us financial compensation [of 15,000 pesos], it will actually just be resulting in another problem. The problem when it comes to informal settlers or squatters will still remain. Because ... people will just have to choose anywhere, probably another danger zone along the river, in the three metre easement. People will be pushed to those areas because that is the only area that they can afford.

Sitio Aroma's story blatantly showcases the double standards inherent to common ascriptions of blame and accountability in disaster risk creation. Furthermore, it speaks to the highly nuanced and subjective nature of DRRM, a process that is not neutral, but rather, is deeply implicated in socio-economic, environmental and spatial politics of power and privilege. For Sitio Aroma's residents, disaster risk and the threat of demolition and displacement are both produced and exacerbated by corporate actors exercising their power through the marketisation of urban space predicated around worlding imaginaries and modernising aesthetics that exclude and stigmatise the urban poor.

## Conclusion

This paper located Metro Cebu as an 'exemplary centre' of Philippine modernism and resilience predicated on the conjuring of popular imaginations towards particular visions of desirable and dystopic futures. I have considered the ways in which DRRM and worlding aspirations are feeding into a 'spectacle of order and development' (Kusno, 2010: 90) while simultaneously enabling the socio-spatial reorganisation of the city along socio-economic lines, identifying risk as a central feature

of the discursive and material imaginaries endorsed and propagated by the Mega Cebu vision of sustainability and resilience. Specifically, I have argued that these city-making processes hinge on the mobilisation of a revanchist discourse that stigmatises the urban poor through ascriptions of disaster risk (Alvarez, 2018) and deviant behaviour to justify their exclusion and displacement from the city. Lastly, I have revealed the contradictory nature of these framings, and highlighted the often ignored role of powerful private sector developers and neo-liberal urbanism in producing and exacerbating conditions of disaster risk in the city.

In countries such as the Philippines, where climate change and disaster risk reflect everyday rather than exceptional encounters for many, DRRM and resilience-building are likely to become increasingly prominent features of urban governance systems, if not technologies of governance themselves. The findings of this paper reinforce the power and knowledge hierarchies that exist within these seemingly rational and objective interventions, and the social justice implications of sustainability and resilience-building ideals premised around neoliberal models of urban transformation. They also encourage us to look beyond the spectacle and aesthetic imaginaries produced through worlding practices, to consider the socio-spatial, material and political implications of these processes for diverse groups in the city, and how risk is entangled in associated dynamics of dispossession and the production of urban space.

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## Notes

- 1 Gawad Kalasag is a national excellence framework, developed and mandated by the National Disaster Coordinating Council with the intention of protecting or shielding (*kalasag* being the Filipino term for 'shield') high risk communities from hazards by encouraging participation of various stakeholders in designing and implementing Disaster Risk Management (DRRM) programme (see [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/10875\\_gawadkalasagguidelines20081.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/10875_gawadkalasagguidelines20081.pdf))
- 2 Retrieved 16 January 2018, from Website: [https://issuu.com/megacebu/docs/en-cebupamphlet\\_v12.1final\\_0319\\_lowr](https://issuu.com/megacebu/docs/en-cebupamphlet_v12.1final_0319_lowr)
- 3 Retrieved 16 January 2018, from Website: [https://issuu.com/ramonaboitzfoundationinc/docs/mcdcp\\_ar\\_v4](https://issuu.com/ramonaboitzfoundationinc/docs/mcdcp_ar_v4) (pp. 1–2)
- 4 Retrieved 16 January 2018, from Website: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/450875/cebu-city-project-tackles-old-problem-of-danger-zones-flooding-10000-settlers>
- 5 *Barangay* is the Philippine term for village, district or ward. A *barangay* is the smallest administrative division in the Philippines and may be further subdivided into smaller units of governance called *puroks*, zones, or *sitios*. A *purok* is a sub-village or sub-*barangay* political classification, typically applied to groups of households living near the centre of an urban *barangay*. *Sitios* and zones are similar to *puroks* but are traditionally located in rural areas or on the periphery of *barangays*. These sub-*barangay* territorial demarcations can provide public functions under the guidance of local government officials but do not have independent administrative powers or responsibilities in their own right.
- 6 Retrieved 16 January 2018, from Website: <http://www.ayalafoundation.org/vision-mission-values/>
- 7 Retrieved 16 January 2018, from Website: <http://aboitzfoundation.org/about-us>

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