Surviving "Car-diac Arrest": Towards Roads Where Many Modes Fit

By

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Abstract

The car dominates the imaginary of urban modernity. Such modernity links the car to living the good life, especially for the growing middle class. However, an environmentalist in my research laments that the unprecedented increase in car volume causes a "car-diac arrest" in our cities. A regime of congestion ensues as cars clog our cities' major arteries. This is the daily experience in Metro Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Although only 12% of the metropolis' population owns a car, millions of Filipinos suffer the collective loss of mobility. It has dangerous urban spaces characterised by intolerance to other modes of transport. Furthermore, as more cars are added to Manila's roads, state infrastructure projects and policies tend more to car-centric mobility. It compromises walkability, worsens air pollution, and takes many lives due to road traffic crashes each year. But transport reform advocates are taking action for Metro Manila to survive its "car-diac arrest." Through interviews with representatives of government transport agencies, the private sector, and civil society organisations, as well as through participant observation on these groups' activities and exploring around Metro Manila, I attempted to locate pockets of hope beyond the car-centric system. Through pushing for policy reforms, road-sharing initiatives, and partnerships with supportive allies in the government and other sectors of society (called "champions"), the research participants shared visions and engagements for a sustainable transport system. While they do not see themselves as "anti-car," they campaign for mobility to prioritise moving people and not just cars. Their ongoing initiatives push for the realisation of "dignified commuting" through a safe, efficient, and reliable public transport system and for active transport (i.e., walking and cycling) to thrive. Through the co-existence of these diverse modes of transport, they reimagine roads as spaces where many modes fit.

Introduction

The ubiquity of the car in today's world sets a complex relationship among the state's development agenda, the disconnected processes of achieving modernist dreams in urban space, and individual aspirations for the good life. In a 2014 speech to the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Spain, former Philippine President Benigno Aquino III (2010-2016) represented the worsening traffic situation in the Philippines as a sign of economic progress. According to Aquino, with the low down payment needed, purchasing a car becomes affordable, especially for the growing number of Filipinos in the business process outsourcing industry (The Manila Times 2014). However, his statement drew criticism from the public as millions of Filipinos endure the daily traffic congestion, especially in the Philippines' capital Metro Manila.

President Aquino's pronouncement speaks of the presence of competing modernities in both Metro Manila's urban landscape and the Filipinos' imaginary of the good life. On the one hand, there is a modernity embedded on a nationalist discourse on progress driven by the Filipino middle class (see O'Dell 2001). This modernity is celebratory of the car as an object of consumption for what Raymond Williams (2003) called "mobile privatisation"—being mobile and having a sense of privacy within the automobile time-space. It creates "techno-tales" that equate the car with freedom, individualism, and progressive technology (Mattioli et. al. 2020: 11).

At the same time, Aquino's speech renders the Philippines' path dependence towards following the West, such as the US and Europe and, later, East Asian countries (e.g., Japan and South Korea), which in the twentieth century directed planning and state resources to the "system of automobility" (see Urry, 2004). Such path dependence created discourses of Western superiority in infrastructure, technology, and knowledge production that highlight the role of experts or technocrats (Schwanen 2018). It enabled a car-centric system serving as the veridiction of how lives, dreams and possibilities, policies, infrastructure, and national cultures have come to shape the city and the project of nation-building (Nielsen & Wilhite 2015, Edensor 2004, Lico 2003). In this latter sense, the car contributed to the creation of a society reliant on oil with "petromodernity" where oil is the fundamental determinant of urban mobility (Conway 2020).

Such is the case in Metro Manila's streetscape, which is known for its daily traffic gridlock, a phenomenon called "carmageddon."[1] Many of its thoroughfares are in a state of halt as a regime of congestion ensues (see Sidel 2020, Gopakumar 2020). At a quick glance:

- Metro Manila is composed of 16 constituent cities and a municipality with a total population of almost 13 million people. However, only 12% of this

population owns cars yet 80% to 90% of its road networks are dedicated to car mobility (Siy 2020, Oposa 2017).

- In 2018, Metro Manila had 2.7 million out of the 11.5 million registered motorised vehicles in the Philippines (LTO in Enano and Subingsubing 2019). From 2010 to 2016, this metropolis accounts for 38.61% of the country's total car registration (Philippine Statistics Authority 2017 in Rith, et. al. 2020: 1). Overall, 80% of the motorised vehicles in Metro Manila are privately owned (Talampas 2016: 12).
- 70% of the person trips in Metro Manila are left without a choice but to rely to its fragmented public transport system (Integrated Transport Planning Ltd 2014:12).

A commissioned study by the ride sharing platform *Uber* in 2017 ranked Metro Manila as having the third-worst traffic situation in Southeast Asia, next to Bangkok and Jakarta, with commuters usually stuck in an average of 66 minutes daily (Rappler 2017). Also in 2017, the Philippines was ranked in the Driver Satisfaction Index of the traffic and navigation application *Waze* as the worst place to drive among the 39 countries included in the study (Camus 2017).

- Metro Manila's traffic congestion leads to an economic loss of Php 3.5 billion (USD 67 million) daily and might increase to Php 5.4 billion (USD 103 million) a day by 2035 (Japan International Cooperation Agency 2018).
- In 2019, an Asian Development Bank (ADB) study showed that Metro Manila is the most congested city out of the 278 cities in developing Asia (ADB 2019).

The regime of congestion exposes Metro Manila's long-standing problems of an outdated and fragmented transport system and lack of consistent political will to sustain solutions to the growing population and climate change challenges (e.g., frequent typhoons and flooding) (Meerow 2017, Napalang & Regidor 2015, Shatkin 2005/2006, Rimmer 1986). These problems are embedded within the bureaucratic configurations of fragmented transport governance (ADB 2019, Napalang & Regidor 2015, Rimmer 1986) and the great influence that private real estate developers wield in determining land use in Metro Manila (Ortega 2020, Shatkin 2008). The overlapping functions and lack of coordination among national, metropolitan, and local transport agencies derail the planning of many projects to improve the public transport system. At the national level alone, there are already around 31 transport agencies that are involved in urban services delivery that undermine coordinated efforts (ADB 2014, Ang et. al. 2019 in ADB 2019: 87). This leaves the members of the public to find ways on their own with the car as the most desired option. The increase in car volume is a direct testimony

of the transport system's brokenness in Metro Manila, with infrastructure projects and transport being geared towards easing congestion and not on providing a sustainable and inclusive transport system.

Therefore, in this article, I argue that the dominance of cars, which largely (if not solely) configures (im)mobility in our cities needs to be fully acknowledged and confronted to resuscitate Metro Manila from "car-diac arrest." I borrowed this concept of "car-diac arrest" from the Filipino environment lawyer Antonio "Tony" Oposa, Jr. (2017) who lamented the chronic dying of this metropolis due to the problems created by the car-centric system. Oposa linked Metro Manila's "car-diac arrest" to the increase in car volume contributing to the worsening air pollution, the lack of prioritisation for active transport, and the increase in road traffic crashes and deaths. The "car-diac arrest" attests to the lack of accessibility between work, home, and leisure spaces, which induce demand for car travel.

Acknowledging and confronting the car-centric system helps foreground the growing number of works, which seek not only to theorise the automobile but to politicise it as well, especially in the context of the cities of the Global South (Sheller 2018, Cervero 2013, Böhm et. al. 2006, Featherstone 2005, Urry 2004, Vasconcellos 2001). In this sense, the research does not only contribute in problematising the immobile world (D'Andrea, Ciolfi, & Gray 2011: 155 in Gopakumar 2020: 108) but also seeks pockets of hope from the works of transport advocacy groups that attempt to resuscitate Metro Manila from the ontological uneasiness of its congested arteries. These efforts contribute to set mobility priorities towards moving people and not just cars (Oposa 2017; Inclusive Mobility Project 2015).

The paper is organised beginning with the story behind Manila's "car-diac arrest." Second, I situate the individual and cultural tendencies that associate the car with living a good life. Third, I engage with how the car and its flow has come to largely define the visions of modernity in the Philippines, especially through the state's policies and infrastructural development agenda. Lastly, I seek to lay down the paths by which Filipino transport advocacy groups show creative ways on surviving the "car-diac arrest" in Metro Manila, which in some ways are also inspired by examples of good practices from different cities around the world. These creative ways go beyond the usual prescription of having evidence-based policies but involve taking an active role in policy brokering to ensure the passage of laws, ordinances, and sustainability of programme and project implementation from the transport system's diverse constituents (see Lea 2020).

Through my interviews with representatives of transport reform advocacy groups in the Philippines and through participant observation in daily mobility in Manila from November 2018 to April 2019, I provide the possible pathways they take to resuscitate the metropolis from its "car-diac arrest." Table 1 lists these research participants who came from organisations in the following sectors:

(1) government transport agencies; (2) the private sector which are engaged in road construction, maintenance and operation of train lines and terminals, and manufacturing of the Filipino jeepney, and (3) civil society organisations that advocate for inclusive and sustainable transport. I also participated in selected activities (e.g., bicycle parade, meetings, forums, and workshops) of these organisations through the invitation of their members.

Civil Society Organisations	Government Agencies	Private Sector
Inclusive Mobility Network (IMN)	Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH)	Light Rail Manila Corporation (LRMC)
Mobility Coalition	Department of Transportation (DOTr) *-On road transport and infra-structure projects*	Megawide Corporation
Move Metro Manila	Department of Transportation (DOTr) *- On the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PU-VMP*	Metro Pacific Tollways Corporation (MPTC)
National Bicycle Organization (NBO)	Land Transportation Office (LTO)	Sarao Motors, Inc.
National Center for Commuter Safety and Protection, Inc. (NCCSPI)	Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA)	
Stop and Go Coalition	Pasig City Environment and Natural Resources (CENRO)	
The Firefly Brigade	Pasig City Transport Development and Management Office (CTDMO)	
Tiklop Society of the Philippines (TSP)	Public Private Partnership (PPP) Center	
TOTAL: **8**	**8**	**4**

Table 1: List of participant organisations in this research

The participants and their activities, advocacies, and projects became my guiding points on how to navigate around the pathways of policy reforms, road-sharing, and partnership with "champions" in the government and other sectors to push for the principle of "dignified commuting." Inspired by post-development scholarship and engagement, I pose the possibilities like the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico around the semantic constellation of "a world where many worlds fit"

(Escobar 2015: 460). Thus, the frontiers of mobility push us to imagine ways to survive "car-diac arrest" and work towards realising *roads where many modes fit.*

Metro Manila's "Car-diac Arrest"

Metro Manila's "cardiac arrest" is illustrated by Oposa through the following story:

> There was a kid who was walking to school when he was almost side swept by a car. He promised himself that one day, he will own his own car. He grew up to become a rich and successful businessman. One day, he suddenly collapsed and he was diagnosed of 'lifestyle' diseases and the doctor recommended him to walk every day but when he tried, he could not even find a single sidewalk and the streets are full with vehicles and he cannot even go out because of pollution (Oposa 2017: 181).

This simple story tells a tragic cycle that as people are drawn into cars, they develop "lifestyle' diseases" due to the lack of physical activity. It also presents the contradiction that the same object that almost harmed the child is also the desired source of power as the car serves as a cultural signifier of class distinction (Wells & Xenias 2015). Furthermore, the story presents dangers of an individual desire to overcome poverty and inequality but contributes to a collective loss to society. As Featherstone (2005: 2) argues, an increase in the number of cars creates the "compound effects" of "congestion, pollution, environment and quality of life along with the massive numbers of road deaths and injuries."

Through the exclusive environment that the car creates – being airconditioned in a tropical country, the luxury of space in a congested metropolis, the negation of noise and smoke emissions – it offers a "comfort regime" (Nielsen & Wilhite 2015: 374). As Murphy and Hogan (2012: 12) describe the value of the car in Manila:

> Anyone who can afford it drives an automobile to avoid having to walk around the streets. The private car is probably more prized than even the private residence. Immaculately maintained and mostly new, Filipino cars on the road act like mobile bubbles of sanctuary from unpalatable public space. In the car, drivers and passengers escape the discordance of the streets behind the almost hermetic seal of the bubble. The search takes at least two forms by car and by phone. In both forms these are private solutions to public problems, and indeed driven by the absence of the public altogether.

With the increase in both car volume, *walkability*, *air quality*, and *road safety* are side-lined. First, *walkability* is compromised as the demand for parking leads to encroachment on any available space. Footpaths are mostly occupied by parked cars. There is the widespread street fencing, especially by business establishments that use pedestrian space to serve as parking for their customers. This takeover of footpaths is a common experience along Katipunan Avenue in Quezon City, Metro Manila, as shown in Figure 1. Katipunan Avenue is a busy road for students with three tertiary education institutions around the area.

Fig. 1. A common sight along Katipunan Avenue, Quezon City with a sports utility vehicle parked along its footpath, forcing people to walk on the road instead

As in Oposa's story above, even when people realise the importance of walking for their health, doing so is almost an impossibility in Metro Manila. With the lack of safe spaces for pedestrians, coupled with the increasing urban heat, people are repelled from walking. Even if the destinations are relatively "walkable", they would rather ride tricycles and pedicabs to solve their last mile travel needs. This is why the Philippines is known as a "tricycle country" since many people rely on this vehicle for their daily transport (Talampas 2016: 125).

The second major issue associated with the increase in car consumption is *air pollution*, which is considered a silent killer and causes detriment to the economy. The National Emissions Inventory by source done in 2015 showed that mobile

sources account for 88% of the air pollution around Metro Manila (DENR-EMB n.d: 6). Also in 2015, there were 13.78 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions from the road passenger transport sector within the metropolis, which will increase up to 27.90 million tonnes in 2040 if nothing is done (Ahanchian & Biona 2014 in Rith, et. al. 2020: 1). These CO_2 emissions are part of the wider problem on fossil fuels used in motor vehicles that propel the high carbon mobility regime. According to Greenpeace Southeast Asia, in 2018, there were as many as 27 000 premature deaths in the Philippines due to fossil fuel air pollution (Farrow et. al. 2020: 14). It also costs the Philippine economy to lose as much as 1.9% of its gross domestic product (GDP) (Farrow et. al. 2020: 16).

The third issue is *road safety* as in road traffic crashes continuously rise. Figure 2 shows the increasing death rate of people due to road traffic crashes from 2007 to 2016 in the Philippines. Following global trends, the frequent victims of road traffic crashes are from the group aged 20 to 24 years followed by those in the 25 to 29 age bracket (Department of Transportation 2017). However, road traffic crashes in the Philippines are usually attributed as the fault of ill-maintained vehicles, undisciplined pedestrians, and rowdy cyclists. Government transport agencies, police investigators, hospitals, and the media are usually not taking into consideration the "toxic transport design" (Allan & Taylor Reich 2021) which lead to crashes and fatalities (Vera Files 2018).
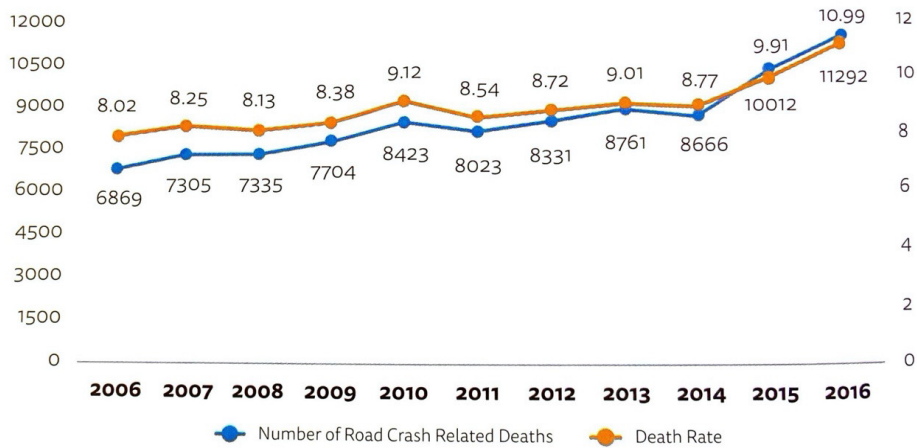

Fig.2. Number of road deaths and death rate per 100,000
Source: Philippine Statistics Authority 2017 (as cited in Department of Transportation 2017: 20)

But despite the health, environmental, and road safety problems associated with increased car ownership and use, state policies and people's preferences have not shifted in the Philippines. This is why the "car-diac arrest" has escalated into a

crisis where all kinds of travellers bear with a daily suffering, albeit in different forms and degrees. Talampas (2016) compares this suffering to the Roman Catholic belief on the via crucis or the way of the cross. Being a predominantly Roman Catholic country, the Philippines deals with traffic congestion as if it is the perpetual cross that Filipinos must bear.

The Car and the Good Life

Automobility is the dominant culture that "that sustains major discourses of what constitutes the good life." (Urry 2004: 25) Furthermore, Urry (2004: 26) claims that it is "the major item of individual consumption" next to housing that signifies value, such as career success and freedom. The car is generally accepted as indicative of a huge accomplishment regardless of culture, race, nationality, and class (Zhang 2019, Urry 2004). It is the quintessential object of aspiration that defines upward socio-economic mobility.

In the Philippines, findings from the 2015 NEDA study called *Ambisyon Natin 2040* (Our Ambition 2020) supported the above claims as majority of Filipinos associate car ownership to living a good life. The car is at the pedestal of a collective and long-term vision and aspiration of Filipinos for themselves and the country in the next 25 years (2015-2040). As shown in Figure 3, it is associated by 77% of the study participants to "a simple and comfortable life" compared to 23% who prefer a good public transport system (NEDA 2016). As a visioning exercise, NEDA is explicit that this will guide the "long-term process" of development planning, thus demanding the continuity of "good policies and programs" to guide at least four government administrations (each has a six-year-term of office) (NEDA 2016: 1).
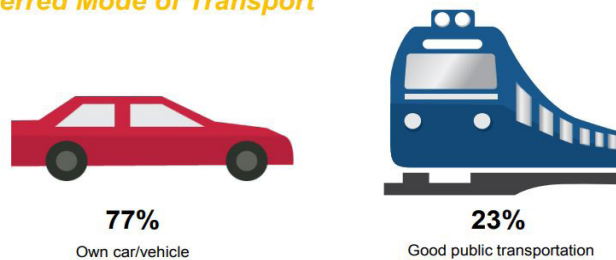

Fig. 3. *Ambisyon Natin 2040* on the Filipino preferred mode of transport
Source: NEDA 2016

These findings do not come as a surprise since the Filipino socialisation to cars usually starts at a young age although not so many Filipinos really own a car. Parents shower gifts like "diecast Ferrari and Lamborghini toy cars and bump

cars" especially to their male children. (Talampas 2016: 129). This is reinforced at school, as examples of curriculum show from the Philippines' shift to a new K-12 education system in 2013. As the representative of a civil society organisation Inclusive Mobility Network (IMN) shared with me, "The framing of the K-12 is focused on road safety. The K-12 curriculum here is very car-centric" (IMN Personal Communication, 19 November 2018).

With such an early inculcation of the car into the experience of play and standardised education, the car as a symbol of upward socio-economic status becomes embedded in Filipino daily lives. Talampas enumerated these mundane activities and events, which include the "increase in showrooms and outlets, the booming car sales may also be the result of a variety of other influences such as privately organised car shows, vintage car exhibits, media coverage and exposure, more accessory dealers, and other forms of private entrepreneurship." (2016: 129). Places like Banawe Street in Quezon City, for example, is even famous for its offers of an entire chain of car products and services, notwithstanding being known as where stolen car parts are sold.

With the increase in the volume of cars comes the demand for infrastructure. Global competitiveness rankings cite the Philippines' outdated and insufficient road infrastructure as a major impediment to economic growth (Diokno 2018). According to the 2019 Global Competitiveness Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Philippines ranked 96th out of 141 countries in terms of overall infrastructure (WEF 2019: 462). The country is ranked 88th out of 141 countries in the subcategory of the quality of road infrastructure (WEF 2019: 463). In actual terms, only 31% is paved out of the total 210 463 km road network in the Philippines in 2018 (DPWH in Forbes 2018: 6).

Such a poor state of the country's road infrastructure is a major reason why President Rodrigo Duterte (2016-present) emphasised in his 10-point agenda the need to accelerate the country's annual infrastructure spending through his administration's Build, Build, Build Program (DOTr 2017: 24). Transport projects (roads, bridges, and flyovers) constitute the lion's share of Duterte's infrastructure investment targets (64.20% of the USD 160 to 180 billion target) (NEDA 2018: 171). Duterte's former budget chief and current Philippine central bank governor, Benjamin Diokno (2017), expressed strong support for the "urgent need for a massive infrastructure upgrade" in Metro Manila. Through better quality and expanded networks of roads and expressways, the state promises to ease the flow of traffic, mainly for car users.

However, as I shall discuss later, transport reform advocates view these car-centric infrastructure as a form of social injustice. A representative of the civil society organisation Move Metro Manila lamented that the very act of road widening and flyover construction deliberately induces car consumption (Personal

Communication, 22 November 2018). Car-centric mobility reinforces uneven development as the public subsidises the infrastructure and policies that only benefits a small elite and middle-class population (Freund & Martin 2000: 57).

Car-Centric Modernity in Metro Manila

As an indicator of upward social mobility and as a distinguishing element in promising individual freedom and comfort, the system of automobility makes a powerful mark in shaping competing modernities as discussed in the introduction. As Böhm et al claims, "[a]utomobility is one of the principal socio-technical institutions through which modernity is organized." (2006: 3). Many nations attempted to ensure distinct car cultures as automobility becomes a source of national pride (see Edensor 2004, O'Dell 2001). With this encapsulating role, the "system of automobility" created a "system of domination" in social life (Urry 2004).

This is initially exemplified in the transformation of American cities, which was the model for planning cities that constitute Metro Manila (e.g., Quezon City). According to Norton, the motordom movement in the US used the "rhetoric of modernity" (2008: 6) in its fight against the roads' diverse constituents—pedestrians, streetcars, etc.—during the early decades of the twentieth century. Norton argues that roads have to be "socially reconstructed" as an exclusive entitlement to motorists through battles in the "legislatures. courtrooms, newspapers' editorial pages, engineering offices, school classrooms, and the street themselves" (Norton 2008: 7). Through waging campaigns in these different but interconnected arenas, roads become what Gopakumar (2020: 148) calls a "unidimensional" space, signifying "solely as a conduit for automobiles" and leaving the other forms of mobility as merely "incidental or secondary." These campaigns created new regimes of power, establishing truths on the deviance of certain subjects (including the invention of *jaywalking*) (Norton 2008, Böhm et al 2006: 8-9). People became hardly tolerated in the roads as they "slow" the flow of traffic and are a distraction to the speed-obsessed assemblage of the car-driver. Through the disciplining of space associated with modernity (McGee 2002: 649), the car made the roads as a "commons" obsolete (Illich 1982). Instead of roads being a public good, a community space where there is no need for overregulating people's presence and behaviour, they became killer highways obsessed with speed (see Tranter & Tolley 2020).

But all these changes did not happen instantly in Metro Manila. The cacophony of traffic congestion, enterprising activities (especially from the informal sector), public transport barkers calling for passengers, and the omnipresence of horns created a distinct ambiance of city life. Manila remains vibrant in a sense of being perpetually uneasy, still trying to find its breath even amidst the chronic blockages

in its arteries. The resistance of the streetscape to the monopolising tendencies of the car to have a frictionless flow has been the case since the American colonisers (1899-1946) introduced automobility to the Philippines in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Automobility spelled a radical difference from the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule (1521-1898) when transport options were hardly existent. Pante (2014: 49) argues that the introduction of the car to the Philippine colony was part of the transfer of the motorisation technology from the West to the East and constituted a "distinctively colonial notions of modernity." American colonisers initially viewed the Filipino "natives" as unfit to operate the car technology and so became a justification for "colonial tutelage" (Pante 2014: 50). Simultaneously happening was the vilification of the "traditional" horse-drawn carriage (*calesa*) and the wagon (*carromata*). Even popular media of the time depicted the natives who drove these animal-powered vehicles (called *cocheros*) as "greedy, scheming, uncivilized, and belonging to the same class as criminals" (Pante 2014: 52). In contrast car owners were the elites who hired chauffeurs, creating a new line of preferred work in the colony.

After the American recognition of the Philippines' independence in 1946, the country joined many newly independent nations in venturing into the car manufacturing industry. It aspired to produce its own cars as a passport to industrialisation. According to Ofreneo (2016: 49), the car industry in the country took roots in the early 1950s "after the government adopted an import-substituting industrial (ISI) policy by banning the importation of finished industrial products, including the completely built-up (CBU) units." But due to its failed attempts, the scene in the country moved from the sphere of production towards the consumption of imported cars.

With the unprecedented increase in car volume, traffic management became a vital issue across the country's national, metropolitan, and local transport agencies. Many Filipino politicians think of the traffic problem as simply motorised vehicles not moving and believe the solution is merely to speed them up (see Tranter & Tolley 2020). Even media reports on daily traffic news focus on snapshots of the traffic situation especially during rush hours, as well as sensationalising road rage and traffic crashes. There is the persistent lack of political will to tackle land-use planning, evidence-based policies, and ensuring the continuity of projects that would improve both public and active transport. Instead, politicians are usually obsessed with building legacy projects that derail long term infrastructural investments on a mass transit system.

As Metro Manila becomes a captive of the regime of congestion, questions about how to be liberated from this "literal 'iron cage' of modernity" (Urry 2004: 28) prove to be vital in working out solutions. With this embeddedness of the car

in the definition and view of modernity, finding the solutions and who will ignite them for cities to be free from this "iron cage" become a difficult dilemma. Will modernity also answer for the problems that its signifiers created? As Escobar (2018: 19) asks:

> Will there still be "modern solutions to modern problems"? Or has modernity's ability to even imagine the questions that need to be asked to effectively face the contemporary ecological and social crisis been so fatally compromised, given its investment in maintaining the worlds that created it, as to make it historically necessary to look elsewhere, in other-than-modern world-making possibilities?

I shall proceed then in the next section to how transport reform advocates find creative ways to survive the "car-diac arrest" of cities. It presents examples of broad and specific paths to tackle the problem of congestion through citizen's led initiatives. Instead of looking for answers within the system of automobility, I seek to explore alternatives where collaboration of the diverse constituents of the transport system creates hopeful possibilities for car-filled cities.

Surviving "Car-Diac Arrest"

With the enormous problems associated with the worsening congestion, questions around the hopeful possibilities for Metro Manila entail deep political, economic, ecological, and existential transformations. People usually ask, where to begin? And where can they turn to for practical and inclusive solutions to address the "car-diac arrest" of Metro Manila when political leaders are usually engulfed in rent-seeking interests (McCoy 1994), rampant corruption (Cruz, et. al. 2018) and are Janus-faced to genuine reforms (Swyngedouw 2005)?

Many of the individuals who became participants in this research narrated how they sought means to do something by forming and joining volunteer organisations that advocate a shift from a car-centric system towards inclusive mobility. The principle is straightforward: the goal of mobility is moving people and not just cars (Oposa 2017, Inclusive Mobility Project 2015). They highlight the use of creativity in wielding the power of existing legal mechanisms, using design thinking, and mobilising as many people and organisations possible. They look for interdependent "tipping points", which can shift the balance towards a more democratic use of urban space (Urry 2004: 33, Gladwell 2000; Sheller & Urry 2000). Three of these probable interrelated tipping points used by these organisations are the pathways of policy reforms, road-sharing, and forming partnerships with like-minded individuals and organisations (or what they call "champions").

Brokering Policy Reforms

Policy reforms are a major arena for contesting the car-centric system in the Philippines. However, many policies make matters worse rather than contribute to improving the situation. One of the most familiar policies is the MMDA-administered Unified Vehicular Volume Reduction Program (UVVRP) or popularly known as the number coding scheme (NCS). Implemented since the mid-1990s, it was supposed to be a short-term measure for traffic demand management in Metro Manila due to the construction of transport infrastructure projects at the time of its implementation (Regidor 2013: 66). The program bans vehicles, both public and private, that end in designated numbers from plying around Manila's roads during specific hours once a week. The goal of the MMDA is to reduce daily car volume by 20%. However, there is no concrete proof that it contributed to the reduction of cars (Gueta & Gueta 2013, Regidor 2013) as car owners can easily purchase another car to avoid the NCS.

This policy also sows confusion as constituent cities of Metro Manila have varying implementing rules. But despite the clamour from different sectors like public utility vehicles, it remains a local and metropolitan policy, proud of achievements on arbitrary fines to violators and its superficial understanding of why traffic congestion persists. In this sense, the "policy ecology" (Lea, 2020: 11) of mitigating traffic congestion rests on traffic agencies merely having the sense of doing something rather than taking an organised effort to tackle the issues of accessibility, comfort, and safety, among others. The NCS is part of the normalisation of analysis paralysis and that no matter how mounting evidence of failures are, government transport agencies are oblivious of their ineffective policies.

Therefore, there is a need for brokering policies that are evidence-based, coherent, and straightforward. For example, the engagement of the Mobility Coalition in revising the comprehensive and inclusive policy framework demonstrated that facts are not the magic bullet solutions to convince government decision-makers. As a network of individuals and organisations that engage in policy reforms through working with local government units (e.g., Pasig City) and national agencies (e.g., NEDA, Department of Transportation or DOTr, MMDA), the Mobility Coalition works through brokering policy reforms. Policy documents are translated into edible pieces that can be easily understood by their government partners. As Tess Lea (2020: 18) emphasised "skillful policy brokerage and detailed acts of project translation can enable different policy schemes to work."

Representatives from the Mobility Coalition contributed to improve the "very weak" provisions on inclusive and sustainable mobility of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of the National Transport Policy (NTP). As a Mobility Coalition representative shared to me:

I think it would be a pity if they passed this version because it's very weak. There's lots of like gaps and, and it's very traditional-oriented. It didn't talk about too much about sustainable mobility, so I said, "Why don't we, as a coalition, write to NEDA and ask them to conduct a stakeholder consultation before they finalise this?" Because they were rushing to pass it already, so the group, a group of us got together, including those guys from Komyut [Filipino direct translation of "commute"]. They said, "Oh alright. Why don't we send a letter to NEDA signed by all our different organisations and then, ask for a chance to have stakeholders' consultation?" So we did that. We basically drafted a letter, put together all our letterheads, and then, we called ourselves a Mobility Coalition (Mobility Coalition Representative Personal Communication, 14 January 2019).

NEDA conducted the stakeholder consultation with Mobility Coalition representatives to improve the provisions on inclusive and sustainable mobility. Eventually, the Coalition's suggestions were approved and the IRR was finalised. Mobility Coalition further moved towards the national policy arena in 2019 by finding sponsors from both houses of the Philippine Congress to legislate the *Magna Carta for Commuters* – Senate Bill (SB) 775 in the Senate and the House Bill (HB) No. 3125 in the House of Representatives. One main aspect of the proposed law is to establish an Office of Commuter Affairs[2] under the DOTr to ensure "dignified commuting" through a safe, efficient, and comfortable travel and prioritisation of public and active transport in the Philippines.

Road-sharing

The Share the Road Movement in the Philippines sparked the citizens' led *Bayanihan sa Daan* (Collective Heroism in the Road). Oposa convened the said movement with fellow lawyers and partners from the government, private sector, academia, civil society organisations, and individual volunteers. It demands a 50-50 share in road space between motorised vehicles and non-motorised transport (Walkability Asia 2014). From a misguided high demand for road widening, road-sharing radically moves towards a road diet (Oposa 2017: 191).

Oposa (2017: 203) posed the question of what roads are for and for whom they are built as the guiding posts of the movement. He challenged the powerful interests of "car manufacturers and dealers, the oil industry, road builders, corrupt politicians and political leaders who are stuck in the belief that the ultimate good is to build more roads and that economic progress is symbolized by owning a car" (Oposa 2017: 203). His criticism is directed towards shifting the benchmark for politicians' track record who see roads as the "'concrete' achievement" in establishing their political legacies (Oposa 2017: 190). Instead, the *Bayanihan sa*

Daan movement inspired local governments to implement road sharing, such as the car-free Sundays along F. Ortigas Road in Pasig City.[3]

The road-sharing movement works through engaging both top-bottom and bottom-up approaches to achieving change (Walkability Asia 2014). It shows that the power to tip the balance from the car-centric system towards inclusive mobility lies in collaborative work between grassroots organisations and proactive government leaders. I shall go back to this discussion on partnership in the next sub-section. The crucial point for road-sharing is its demonstrated effects. It must capture public attention to be able to change the mind-set of people that the car is a fundamental indicator of living a good life (Oposa 2017, Gopakumar 2020: 216). Here, the shift in infrastructure priorities is a key factor in creating a culture of mutual tolerance among different road users. This is why part of the shift towards road-sharing is about thinking of mobility culture not as static category but as a dynamic and malleable set of beliefs and practices. As the head of the Pasig City Transport and Development Office (CTDMO) said:

> I think it's really important to recognise that…when people say something as a cultural issue, they use that as an excuse to not change it because in their mind, it is like culture cannot be changed anymore. That's just the case. So I think I find it very lazy when other commentators say that it is just because of culture. Because what they're really saying is that we can't change this anymore because it's part of some inherited qualities of Filipinos (Pasig CTDMO Personal Communication, 22 February 2019).

The philosophy behind road-sharing is an exercise on reclaiming the "commons" in our cities (Nikolaeva et.al 2019, Illich 1982). It instills the use of roads as a collective project of the transport system's diverse constituents without antagonizing the car itself. As the IMN representative said:

> That's the concept of the *Bayanihan sa Daan*. Let's share the road. We are not being greedy, we are not saying that we dislike cars. No. What we are saying is let's share and if possible to also look at the aspect that since we all use the road, it may be possible to share the road (IMN Personal Communication, 19 November 2018).

As it is realised in actual contexts, we can view road-sharing as a barometer that indicates how democracy works and become a blanket of existential security for most people who rely on active and public transport. As Burgess noted on the early ecological approach of the Chicago School, mobility may be the "best index

of the state of metabolism of the city" as it serves as the "pulse of the community." (1925: 59 in Sheller & Urry 2000: 740). Instead of remaining within the system of automobility with its persistent inclination towards big transport infrastructure and demand for road widening, it provides a concrete solution towards creatively designing our roads so that many modes can fit.

Partnership With "Champions"

Transport reform advocates forge partnerships with "sympathetic" government officials and a wide range of individuals and organisations. These supportive people in positions of power and who are at the forefront of reforms are the so-called "champions" of inclusive mobility. They are the ambassadors who represent the principles and the proactive engagement with the proposed changes in transport policies, shift in infrastructure priorities, and people's mind-set. These "champions" may range from national level politicians like senators to village-level (*barangay)* officials. They may also be the allies who are already doing what is being advocated.

It is notable that civil society organisations which engage with government officials emphasise that they are not critics or enemies. They present themselves as friends, who are allies of the government transport agencies for them to better understand their mandates and what can be done to address transport problems. They are for the formation of multi-stakeholder coalitions, which can represent the multi-modal aspects of urban transport. As the representative of IMN stressed:

> So we are not your enemies. The point here is multi-modal wherein [motorised] vehicles are not just being given [priority]. You need to have constituency-building. You need to have supporters. You are not the only one who will take action. That is why we form various multi-stakeholder coalition building (IMN Personal Communication, 19 November 2018)

The representative of the cycling group Tiklop Society of the Philippines (TSP) also emphasised the importance of openness among transport reform advocates to embrace the advocacies of other organisations. The synergy in finding mutually supportive organisations can be a catalysing force to mobilise as many stakeholders as possible. As he shared with me "…you have to embrace not just your advocacy. You also have to embrace advocacies of others because you are synergistic…" (TSP Representative Personal Communication, 13 February 2019).

However, coalitions must be careful also in choosing their partners. They have to be strategic to ensure that their actions and campaigns succeed. This is a pivotal point that led to the formation of the group Mobility Coalition as mentioned

on the subsection on policy reforms.[4] Its experience in revising the NTP IRR with NEDA became a critical point for doing collaborative work and be open to trying different means to achieve their desired ends. The Mobility Coalition representative refers to the strategic openness to people of authority whom the Coalition perceives to be open to tackling the transport crisis and who have a relatively good relationship with the Duterte administration. He gave Senator Emmanuel "Manny" Pacquiao, a world-renowned boxing icon-turned-legislator, as an example of being a possible ally.

To extend the conversation surrounding partnerships, the representative of another cycling organisation, The Firefly Brigade, emphasised the importance of being flexible in both diversifying partners and at the same time having no partners at all. As he said:

> That's why we've diversified our relationship with government, seeing that the road to solve the environment is not exactly just through the Environment Agency [Department of Environment and Natural Resources or DENR] but it can be through the local government. It can be through the DILG [Department of the Interior and Local Government]. It can be through the DOTr. It can be through Malacañang [the Presidential Palace]. It can be through none. (The Firefly Brigade Representative Personal Communication, 06 December 2018).

Partnership with "champions" breathe greater possibilities that transport reforms will be realised. The creativity in how campaigns and reforms manifest into the daily lives of Filipinos plays a big role in inviting as many people and organisations as possible to take action. The "champions" may be the enablers of short-, medium-, and long-term goals for an inclusive world. With "everybody" affected by the worsening congestion in Metro Manila, the diverse constituents of its urban transport system can find areas for collaboration to turn the traffic chaos into opportunities.

Conclusion

With the enormous problems associated with an increasing volume of cars and a reduced quality of life due to worsening congestion, the "car-diac arrest" of Metro Manila's cities becomes a fundamental individual and collective concern. But despite the acknowledgement of the diverse constituents of its urban transport system of this problem, the glamour of the car remains to be a powerful signifier of living the good life. It also sits comfortably in the competing modernities through the persistent prioritisation of car-centric infrastructure projects and policies.

Therefore, this article sought hopeful possibilities to deal with car-centric mobility through weaving along the embeddedness of the "system of automobility" within political, economic, ecological, and existential issues. I engaged with transport reform advocates, many of which formed civil society organisations, which are taking action to find ways for Manila to survive its "car-diac arrest." They dissect through their various specialisations (e.g., cycling, design thinking, environmental protection, legal mechanisms, etc.) ways to shift the way roads are used and imagined in the Philippines. But fundamentally, they question the long-standing deprivation of millions of Filipinos of a safe, efficient, and reliable transport system. The discourse of mobility is now being directed to enabling conditions for "dignified commuting", where mobility caters to moving people and not just cars.

Through engaging with citizens-led policy reforms, road-sharing projects, and building partnerships with people and organisations who champion the cause of inclusive mobility, the transport advocates made it clear that they are not anti-car. Instead, they are campaigning and taking action towards the "commoning" of the streetscape of Manila. According to Nikolaeva et. al (2018: 348), commoning "transforms spaces of governance and practices of mobility and challenge the dominant narratives on the meaning of mobility in society." It engages with the creation of roads where many modes may fit.

In the end, I share the call of Gopakumar "to displace automobility around the world by reordering the mobility regime, relandscaping the city and its infrastructures, and reclaiming streets as spaces of diverse inhabitation." (2020: 206). Mobility, after all is a fundamental aspect that can tell how a society values its people and the planet. How collective efforts attempt to re-imagine and redirect the use of urban space have great impacts on people's well-being, the community's welfare, and our planetary futures.

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1 "Carmageddon" is a portmanteau of "car" and the "Armageddon", which is the biblical place of the last battle between good and evil.

2 An Office for Commuter Affairs under the DOTr was established during the beginning of the term of President Duterte's Transport Secretary, Arthur Tugade. Secretary Tugade appointed the former president of the National Center for Commuter Safety and Protection, Inc (NCCSPI), Elvira Medina as Assistant Secretary to head this office in 2017. However, funding and institutional support to this office were hardly available. Medina left eventually without any replacement.

3 My forthcoming book chapter publication with the *Advances in 21st Century Human Settlement Series* of Springer engages in detail Pasig City's implementation of road-sharing at F. Ortigas Road (formerly Emerald Avenue) and the plans for making Pearl Drive walkable. Both these roads are located at Pasig City's Ortigas central business district.

4 The Mobility Coalition changed its name into Move As One Coalition during the Covid-19 lockdown in the Philippines, which started in March 2020.

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