

A Pearl in Need of Polish

Manila's historic buildings still suffer from wounds inflicted during World War II

By Karl Wilson

Manila, Philippines, often described in the early 20th century as the “Pearl of the Orient” or “Paris of Asia,” never recovered after the heavy fighting toward the close of World War II. Almost 90% of the city was destroyed, including the historic 16th century walled city of Intramuros along with its magnificent Manila Cathedral and Fort Santiago. The only building that survived was the Church of San Agustin.

Strategically located on Manila Bay at the mouth of the Pasig River, Intramuros was the heart of the Spanish Empire's east–west trade with Mexico. But the site itself pre-dates the Spanish colonial period and goes back to the 13th century when it was a Muslim trading post.

Work on rebuilding the city started in 1966 but was slow and lacked funds. Restoration accelerated during the period of late President Ferdinand

Marcos when the cathedral, Fort Santiago, and the city's walls were rebuilt and fortified, but the enthusiasm has waned since then.

The 18th century Plaza Mayor de Manila no longer exists, but wandering around the city, you can still get a feel of what it must have been like. As with so many things in Manila, poor urban planning, lack of funds, and the absence of a determined commitment to restoration have meant that any work is undertaken at a snail's pace.

The empty shell of San Ignacio church today stands derelict along Arzobispado Street, stripped of its marble and brick. Inaugurated in 1889, the neo-Gothic church was one of the finest in its day.

The Aduana or customs house built in 1832 stands abandoned with trees growing from its walls. Renovated after the war, it was abandoned in 1979 and left derelict.

At the corner of Aduana and Cabildo Streets is the Ayuntamiento or Casas Consistoriales, which was once the seat of the Manila City Council during Spanish rule. The Ayuntamiento witnessed the change of colonial power at the end of the 19th century, follow-

ing the end of the American–Spanish War. The terms of capitulation of Manila was signed here by American officers led by General Wesley Merritt and Governor-General Fermín de Jaudenes.

During the early American period, the building was used as the offices of the American military governor until the change to a civil government in 1903. The session room was used by the First Philippine Assembly in 1907 and was a meeting place of the Philippine Legislature. The Bureau of Justice and the Philippine Supreme Court also held office here. Destroyed during the Battle for Manila in 1945, all that remains are the building's four walls.

Although Intramuros is a popular tourist attraction, the revenue it generates is not enough to continue restoration, and private investors are loath to invest in an area where many illegal settlers occupy prime real estate within the city's walls. According to the Asian Development Bank, between 1990 and 2005, the number of illegal settlers in Intramuros more than doubled from 7,512 to 16,116.

MANILA'S PAST RECAST

Within Manila's historic walled city of Intramuros, tourism thrives. Schools, museums, and churches abound, but much of the area awaits revival.



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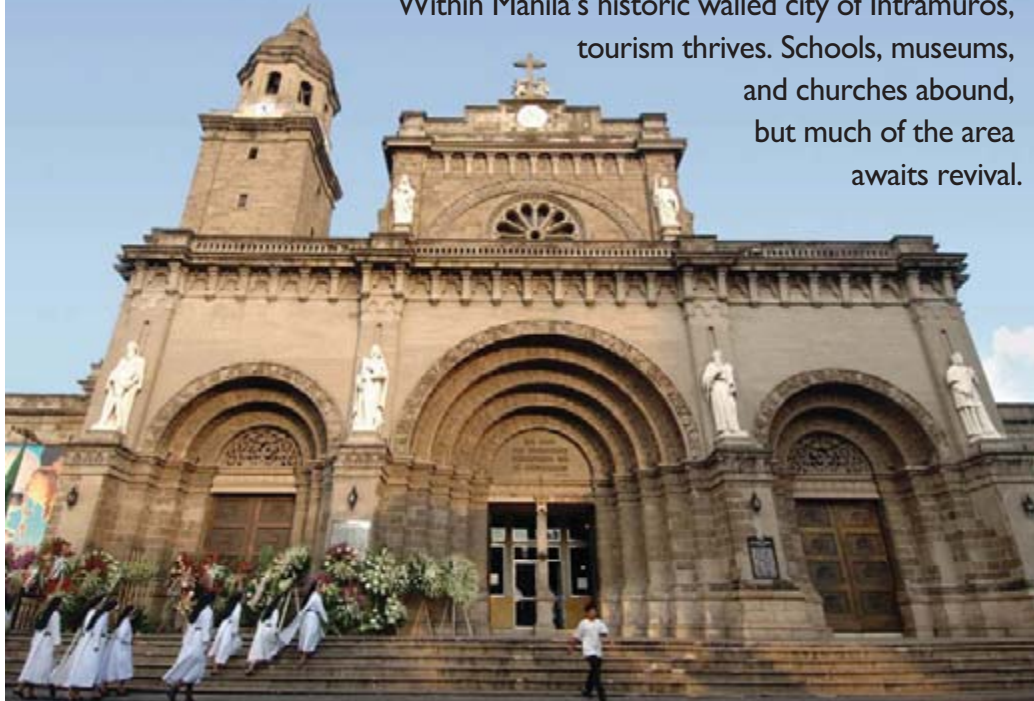
Detail, 1898 map of Manila

Inside the walls

Established in the 16th century, Intramuros—literally meaning “within the walls”—was the heart of the powerful center in East–West trade until its near-total destruction in World War II.

Although institutions such as schools returned after the war, the government did little to restore the area, and the poor and displaced found Intramuros a prime spot for make-do housing. Despite several government relocation efforts, most residents continue to be illegal settlers—some 16,000 at the most recent official count, compared to about 3,000 legal residents.

Government agencies began restoring the ancient fortifications in the 1960s. Now the walls are almost complete, and the fortifications are popular tourist draws.



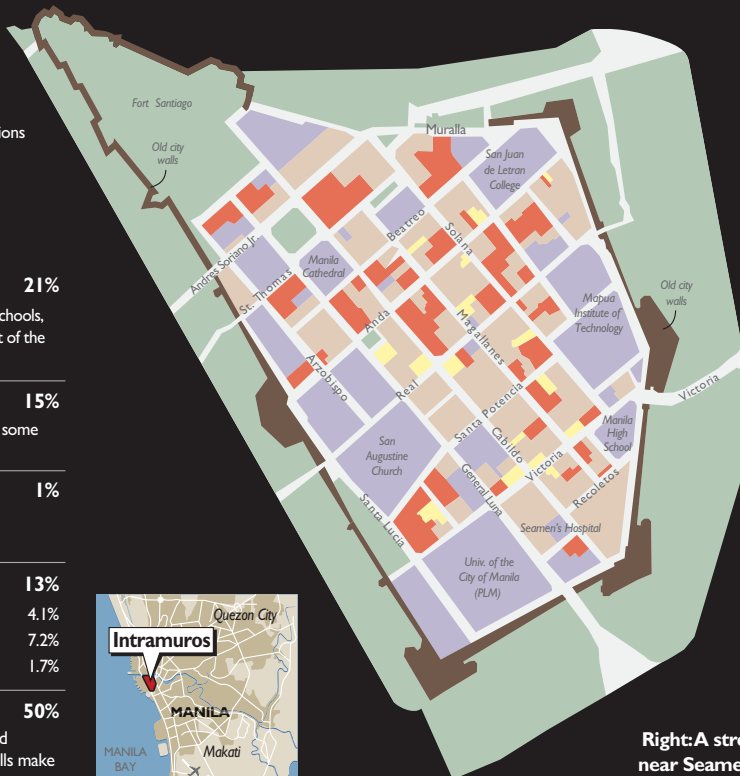
Above: Manila Cathedral is one of the architectural anchors of historic Intramuros.

AFP

Land use in Intramuros

Parks, walls, a golf course, and institutions occupy about 70% of the land. Of the 30% remaining for businesses and homes, nearly half is vacant or underutilized.

- Institutional 21%**
Churches, government buildings, schools, and other institutions occupy most of the blocks near the walls.
- Commercial, mixed-use 15%**
Businesses dominate central lots; some serve as residences as well.
- Residential only 1%**
About 1% of land is used solely for housing.
- Unused, underused 13%**
 - Parking or vacant 4.1%
 - Abandoned structures 7.2%
 - Illegal settlers 1.7%
- Parks, walls, golf course 50%**
The grounds of Fort Santiago and a golf course along the outer walls make up most of the park area in Intramuros.



AFP



US National Archives

World War II left Intramuros mostly ruins and rubble.

Other large-scale restoration has focused on institutions such as schools, government offices, and churches.

Still, experts say the large population of illegal settlers continues to be the most formidable obstacle to attracting high-value investment.



Right: A street near Seamen's Hospital

Design: Mark Blackwell

Source: Revitalization of Historic Inner-City Areas in Asia, by Florian Steinberg

Just a short walk from Intramuros, a few buildings from Manila's past, such as the National Museum, Post Office Building, and Manila Metropolitan Theatre which is now abandoned, still stand. A short taxi ride away is Escolta, once an exclusive shopping district in Southeast Asia. During the final years of the Spanish era, Escolta Street had the reputation for being the best of the trade centers in Binondo, the Chinese merchant district in the capital.

No attempt has been made to try to restore this corner of the city. In the years following World War II, Manila grew at breakneck speed but paid scant attention to urban planning. Gated communities were established around the former airfield that is now Makati City, leaving places like Escolta to slowly die. ●



WHEN THE DUST SETTLES Volunteers clean up Manila's historic walled city of Intramuros in the Philippines. Although Intramuros is a popular tourist attraction, the revenue it generates is not enough to continue restoration, and private investors are loath to invest in an area where many illegal settlers occupy prime real estate within the city's walls.



16TH CENTURY CHURCH Binondo Church in Manila is one of the oldest churches in the Philippines. It was founded by the Dominicans in 1596 to serve converts from the Chinese community to Christianity. Binondo is the Chinese merchant district in the capital.