



The Ephemeral City

An old city's new ambitions.



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Manila was one of the most heavily-devastated cities at the conclusion of World War II. An estimated 100,000 civilians died during the Battle of Manila. It was a city of bones: skeletons of both humans and structures.



The destruction of Manila during World War II. Taken by an unknown photographer. Illustration 341 in Medical Dept., U.S. Army: Surgery in World War II: Activities of Surgical Consultants, Vol. II, Office of the Surgeon general, Dept. of the Army, Washington, D.C., 1964.

Fast-forward to 2018. Manila is a booming, exciting but overcrowded city that is part of a sprawling metropolitan area. The signs of past wars can only be found in cold, sterile museums. Out on the streets, the city's ancient battle scars have been covered up by architectural makeup: glorious skyscrapers, revitalized riverfronts, and trendy night markets decorated with beautiful murals. However, there are old problems in the National Capital Region that never seem to die. Pollution is still ubiquitous and citizens are amused (or bemused) by the creative ways real estate developers bypass zoning laws.

The last presidential election was a groundbreaking event in Philippine politics and Mr. Duterte made sure that the country would stay thumbtacked in the global media's newsroom. Once Duterte stepped into Malacañang, political analysts asked whether the tough guy from Davao--whose campaign seemed one-dimensional, focusing largely on crime reduction--would be able to steer the national economy and address infrastructure problems.

Duterte's answer? A [\\$180-billion spending budget](#) to launch future infrastructure projects. The newest development campaign that is exciting both investors and Luzon residents is New Clark City.



Marketed as a "city of the future," the massive-scale urban project, located 120 kilometers from Manila, is scheduled to complete its first phase in 2022. News articles and press releases about the development initiative is peppered with buzzwords like "green," "sustainable" and "smart city."

However, the most emphasized feature of New Clark City is that it is far from Manila. A railway project by the Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Corporation for Transport & Urban Development will connect Manila and New Clark City, which would make them twin cities. The dynamic would be akin to New York City and Jersey City/Newark in which residents from either city can commute to the other for work and entertainment, thus boosting both cities' economies.

President Duterte has been vocal about his disdain for Manila's elites and the capital's centralized political structure since his campaign days. Last December, Duterte even stated that "Manila, I think, in about 25 years, will be a dead city [...] It will start to decay and there is no way that we can rehab the place."

New Clark City is in the province of Tarlac, about two hours from Manila, so it is not surprising why he is optimistic about the project. Duterte stated that New Clark City will be a "very important destination" for foreign investors.

Despite being labeled as Manila's new twin, New Clark City, if successful, could overshadow its big sister in a few decades. So much for rehab through co-existence; New Clark City wouldn't want to be conjoined with a "dead city."

Is this the future of the ancient city of Manila, where the vibrant Kingdom of Tondo once stood proudly?

In a few years, we will see if New Clark City can truly be a supporting twin as advertised by President Duterte and developers, or if Manila will be left in the dust once again. No one can predict the outcome, especially in an always-metamorphosing country like the Philippines, but I will place my bet on this: the city that rose from the ashes of war like a phoenix could be up for another reincarnation.