

Healing Baguio City? Pine Trees, Tourism and Nostalgia in a Fabled Mountain City

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ABSTRACT

In early 2015, a People's Summit was convened by civil society groups to reflect on the state of the environment of Baguio City. Premised on the slogan, "The Baguio We Want," a People's Statement was drafted. It outlined the litany of woes besetting their beloved mountain city and made a clarion call for action. Tourism was identified and re-assessed as one of the key factors contributing to the environmental malaise of the city. This essay reviews historically some of the circumstances that have given rise to this current state-of-affairs, and situates how some of these durable forces have played out in Session Road, an iconic public space in Baguio City.

Keywords: Baguio City, people's summit, tourism, Session Road

Time was when Baguio City was a Shangri-La... One of the Americans who stayed in Baguio during the first decade of this century called Baguio the City of Eternal Spring. Baguio was not only naturally air-conditioned throughout the year, its flora and fauna were abundant, varied and pristine; its brooks, streams and rivers were crystal clear... Baguio was verdant, what with its lush vegetation. And with flowers a-blooming and scented pine trees towering everywhere, nature was at its best. The people of Baguio then felt very close to God and so akin with nature.

Reinaldo C Bautista, "Random Thoughts: The Baguio that Once Was. Collective Thoughts of Baguio Boys,"
Baguio Midland Courier, 12 July 1987.

Introduction

In December 2003, I made my maiden trip to Baguio City after participating in an international conference in Manila. When I indicated to the conference organizers my intentions of making the trip, they spoke glowingly about this fabled mountain city. A few

days later, in my first evening walkabout mainly along Session Road in Baguio City and with very little prior knowledge of its singular history and geography, I was immediately struck by two things: the city's cool—even cold—temperate weather and impressive Christmas street decorations. Nostalgically, I was transported back to the Scottish Highlands where I had completed postgraduate studies only a few years earlier. But there were also signs troubling this uncanny aura. My local host had complained bitterly about the dubious circumstances surrounding the recent establishment of a mega shopping mall chain—SM Baguio—on the historic site of Luneta Hill at the top of Session Road. Later, when we were waiting for the jeepney ride home near another mall—Abanao Square—situated close to the lower end of Session Road, I witnessed frantic street vendors being chased away by anti-peddling city hall officials into the semi-darkness.

Two years later, armed with research funding, I returned and spent about 3 months of fieldwork deciphering these palpable first impressions. My findings were shared in a mix of academic essays (Yeoh 2011; 2010) and ethnographic documentaries (Yeoh 2010; 2009; 2008). Inspired primarily by the scholarship of Henri Lefebvre (1990) and Michel de Certeau (1984), what occupied my ethnographic and analytical attention then was the production, consumption, and appropriation of “public space” as primarily played out in the subaltern figure of the ambulant street vendor in Baguio City.

In this essay, I focus my discussion on a key activity that has historically been integral to the economic fortunes of Baguio City but are re-assessed by local civil society groups to be detrimental to the environmental well-being of the city, viz., tourism. I review some of the circumstances that have given rise to this current state-of-affairs, and situate how some of these durable forces have played out in Session Road, an iconic public space in Baguio City.

“The People’s Summit”

In late February 2015, about 500 concerned citizens of Baguio City gathered for The People’s Summit. A civil society-led event, its key objective was “to express their love for Baguio, to vent their frustration over the current state of affairs in the city, to share their hopes for the future of Baguio, and to put forward their ideas on how to build a better Baguio—the Baguio We Want.”¹ The participants deliberated on what they felt had gone awry with the city they live and work in, and proposed remedial steps based on the following workshop clusters—community participation; governance and legislation; well-being and mobility; land-use and zoning; local businesses and tourism; heritage;

and environment. A summary of The People’s Statement was crafted and shared through mainstream and social media.

The People’s Statement is a clarion call for urgent and transformative action. Understandably, in the context of a one-day workshop, issues and concerns were briefly enumerated. A large share of these collective woes revolves around the interplay between the natural and urban built environment that belies the wish that: “We want Baguio to be truly a City of Pine Trees. Trees are part of Baguio’s heritage.”¹ The diminishing stock of verdant pine trees that was once iconic of pre-war Baguio City runs alongside an increasing population (currently in the region of 350,000) exploiting whatever available land in a locality largely marked by mountainous terrain and deep valleys. Moreover, because of lax enforcement, there has been a high incidence of violations of land and zoning laws.

Baguio City’s long established status as a premier tourist destination in the country was re-assessed. The participants declared: “we want a city that is an educational hub and not merely a tourist destination.” Furthermore, while the city’s “unique heritage” is a cause of pride, the participants wanted a “stop to the commercialization of indigenous cultures in the name of heritage or cultural tourism.” The participants also lamented the deteriorating air quality and pedestrian safety due to the high volume of vehicular traffic on the city’s thoroughfares. In particular, the historic Session Road was singled out for corrective action: “we want Session Road to be a road for pedestrians, and Baguio City to be a walking city.” Participants advocated for “bicycle-friendly streets with electric jeepneys, less cars and a centralized depot for public transportation.” Participants saw a link between the city’s deteriorating environment and urban waste management. They proposed that:

In solid waste management, we must prioritize a healthy environment for us all. We want both Baguio residents and transients to be well-educated on the proper disposal, sorting, and segregation of garbage and waste, so that this awareness may be followed by behavioral change. Everybody is responsible for waste management.

The People’s Statement also stressed the importance that governance plays in addressing the aforementioned concerns. A recurring sentiment expressed in the cluster groups was that government leaders should be more accessible and accountable to Baguio City citizens. As elected officials, they should institutionalize public consultation, freedom of information, and other participatory processes to ensure that their legislative and policy decisions are in the interests of the

people of Baguio City. Conversely, The People's Statement also called for the people of Baguio City to become more active citizens. A vibrant community spirit, beginning at the local neighborhood (*barangay*) level, was deemed vital in fostering collective efforts for "much-needed transformation" of the city.

To be sure, similar kinds of visioning workshops on Baguio City had been organized in the past as recounted at the The People's Summit. Some were government-led, others by varied civil society groups like the Jaycees, Tebtebba, and the Cordillera Peoples Alliance. In 2009, during the celebration of the city's centennial year and with the theme, Baguio Dream Day, various city constituents, including youths, were asked to envision what Baguio should be beyond 2009. Their comments were consolidated into a Vision Manifesto. What distinguishes the two documents is the critical double-edged tone of the The People's Statement. On the one hand, it conveys the concerns of civil society groups and informed citizenry in response to the substantive material and intangible changes that have blighted this fabled mountain city in recent times. And, on the other, it functions as an instrument for mobilizing public opinion on the kinds of elected leaders needed to stop, if not reverse, this decay.

Much of what is considered woeful about present day Baguio City are the manifestations of a much deeper malaise developed over a wide historical arc and of certain pathways taken over others. Nevertheless, while some of the concerns raised have prescient precedents, there are also disaffections which would have appeared odd to denizens of old Baguio City as the following sections will retrace.

The Marketing of Baguio Past and Present

As intimated, the wounding of Baguio City is not of recent provenance. Seen over a *longue duree*, it was set in motion since the genesis and subsequent development of an American planned urban settlement more than a century ago. As is well reiterated in countless tourist brochures over the years, it was the sight of pine-clad mountains and the salubrious temperate-like climate that galvanized the American colonial administration into setting up a mimetic "Little America" hill station with a projected population of 25–30,000 in the tropics (Reed 1999). However, the underlying impetus for this effort belies closer inspection. Apart from mortalities due to combat, early colonial occupation of the Philippines saw significant numbers of American fatalities attributed to the local natives and their unsanitary practices that made them vectors of these dreaded diseases (McKenna 2017).

Moreover, a phrase, "Philippinitis", was coined to describe "a state of mental and physical torpor, with lack of interest in one's surroundings, ambition wanting, a general disinclination to mental and physical exertion, forgetfulness, and irritability" (McKenna 2017, 21). These different threats motivated the Philippine Commission to begin looking for a health resort in the mountains of northern Luzon as early as 1899 (McKenna 2017, 23). Access to a Spanish document (*The Blanco Report*) that had recommended the setting up of a sanitarium at La Trinidad provided the Philippine Commission a general idea for its possible location. Subsequently, the project of setting up an "American imperial pastoral," as Rebecca McKenna (2017) would characterise it, entangled the once bucolic locality inhabited by indigenous Ibaloy with the self-appointed civilizing mission and manifest destiny of an imperial America. Seen over a wider geographical and historical canvas, this was not, however, a unique nor novel venture. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several other European colonial administrations had already established small hill-stations in the highlands of colonial India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia in line with prevailing medical views of the intertwining relationship between climate, health, disease, and civilisation (e.g., Anderson 2007).

To justify the high infrastructural costs in building the 40.23 kilometers long Benguet Road (later renamed Kennon Road) from the lowlands to reach the town site, early influential boosters like the high ranking colonial administrator William Cameron Forbes promoted real estate development of the pasture lands dispossessed from several Ibaloy clans through executive fiat (Reed 1999, 122f). These early land auctions attracted wealthy Filipino lowlanders, foreigners as well as several Roman Catholic religious orders in constructing their summer homes and retreat centers. However, they were not the only one keen on the fledging chartered city. Among others, many Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Ilokano and Pangasinense workers of the Benguet Road had decided to stay on to seek their fortunes in this new frontier (e.g., Aftab 2004; Cheng and Bersamira 1997; Reed 1999). From the early 1930s, Baguio City experienced a population and commercial boom because of the discovery of rich gold lodes in the nearby Benguet mines. Large numbers from the highland hinterland and lowlands flocked to the city in search of work and fortune. By then the growing reputation of the city was also drawing in tourists from other Southeast Asian colonies. In a span of three decades, Baguio City had morphed from an elitist summer resort, to a thriving cosmopolitan, business and socially stratified city, not too dissimilar to the ethnoscape of Manila (Finin 2005, 68f). More to the point, rather than representing a typical Igorot settlement, the political hierarchy

and commercial elites of Baguio City comprised mainly lowlanders and a small expatriate European, American, Japanese and Chinese community.

The Second World War disrupted this trend for some years before its partial recovery. With much of the central business district devastated by Allied Forces carpet bombing during the war and the city finances in disarray, the city leaders decided to reposition Baguio City as a university town in addition to re-establishing its pre-war status as the premier tourist destination in the Philippines. A tourist promotion bureau—subsequently called The Baguio Visitors and Convention Bureau—was created by acting mayor Virginia de Guia for this purpose. Town hall lectures, public concerts, picnics at Wright’s Park and the Asin hot springs, art exhibits, and visitor dances were some of the many activities planned to draw back tourists to the mountain city. In an editorial entitled “Tourist Trade,” the *Baguio Midland Courier* (*Midland*) described this initiative in the following manner (“Editorial: Tourist Trade”, *Baguio Midland Courier*, 26 February, 1950).

For the first time in the history of Baguio, an organized effort locally is being exerted to cash in on tourist patronage of this highland city’s chief capital assets, its beauty, climate, historic fastnesses, and invitation to the picturesque scenery and people of its hinterland....Let us develop tourist consciousness. Let us bring the world to us. Let us be more hospitable. Let us not overcharge during the vacation season. Let us make tourism a year round trade, year after year, long as our eternal spring and the evergreen of our pines. Let us get into it, by golly.

Among others, developing a “tourist consciousness” and “being hospitable” led to the construction of more hotels, bars, nightclubs, restaurants, movie houses, and souvenir shops to capitalize on tourist revenue. Pines Hotel, “one of Baguio’s pride institution of pre-war days,” got burned down during the carpet bombing of the city by the Americans, and was later reopened at Luneta Hill at the top of Session Road from its original site near Burnham Park. Estimated to cost some 1.2 million pesos, the decision was reached because “of the growing importance of Baguio as a conference city where delegates from abroad are among the visitors” according to a *Midland* article published on 18 January 1948 entitled “Million Peso Hotel Planned.” On January 25 of the same year, a columnist of the *Midland* applauded this move and suggested that the “government will also take care of the pre-war rest houses at various points on the wonderland of the Cordilleras. With the Pines Hotel in Baguio and the rest houses along mountain trails back, we can sigh that the tourist trade in this country is ready to swing in full.”

An early post-war tourist marketing activity was the hosting of the Baguio Carnival of 1949 despite the initial doubts of the City Mayor, reported in *Midland* on 5 December 1948, on whether Baguio City’s still recovering infrastructure was ready for such an event. Earlier versions of these carnivals had been regularly held since the early days of Baguio City. Perhaps the most celebrated in the pre-war era was the 1923 Baguio Carnival. Organized by the Baguio Civic League for the purpose of “awakening the people civic consciousness and the desire to help Baguio prosper” (*Memoirs of Baguio* 1960, 121), the 1923 Baguio Carnival also included an Exposition:

To demonstrate the natural resources, the local industries and the activities of the people of the Mountain Province and the contiguous Ilocano provinces from whence came, in a great measure, the culture and examples which developed the industries of the mountain people....It will be an Exposition demonstrating also, the home life of those sturdy mountaineers, their typical villages, their sports, their contests of war and peace, all will be brought together for your information and your admiration. They are friendly and kindly, these highlanders, and they cordially invite you to visit them. (ibid.)

At a cursory level, the 1923 Baguio Carnival and Exposition appears to replicate in miniature the assimilationist and spectacular ethos of the 1904 St. Louis World Exhibition held in metropolitan America two decades earlier. In the latter, the Philippine exhibit comprised different constructions with Filipinos in costumes depicting various aspects of Tagalog, Visayan, Moro and Igorot social life. The Igorot village, in particular, was popular among the visitors, generating a substantial share of the admission revenues apparently because of the spectacle of “Igorot nudity and scripted dog-eating” (Kramer 2006, 266). This, in turn, drew concerns from the organizers and Filipino nationalists alike who felt that “the savages have been attracting more attention than the educated Filipinos who wear clothes” (ibid.). Four years later, a ban was imposed on the public exhibition of Philippines tribal peoples without legislative consent.

By comparison, metropolitan Filipino mestizos and lowlanders appear to be the main target of tourist marketing for the 1923 Baguio Carnival and Exposition. Held at Burnham Park, the highlight was not dissimilar to lowland beauty contests—the crowning of the Carnival Queen.³ To be sure, socio-cultural contacts between these two broad ethnic groupings were not unheard of. Centuries of barter trading relations between highlander Igorot and neighboring Ilokano lowlanders had fostered pragmatic working relationships. However, under Spanish rule, some of the new policies put in place had

fomented “deep divisions between the lowlanders and highlanders” (Barclay 2003, 234) as the Spanish conquistadores labored, with not much success, to subdue the Igorot and gain unfettered access to gold resources believed lodged in the Cordillera mountains. Although the modality of rule was different, this trajectory also persisted under American tutelage. Individuals like Dean Worcester had advocated for a separate system of government for the Igorot ostensibly to protect the virtues of the “pagan noble savage” from the Hispanized and Christianized lowlanders (Finin 2005, 37f). Direct rule was not only paternalistic in tone but premised on a racialized cast of cultural difference through a bifurcation of the Philippines Islands’ population into ‘Christian’ and ‘non-Christian’ peoples. At the heart of this racial formation, according to Paul Kramer, was an “imperial indigenism” keen in retaining American rule in order to guarantee internal stability (Kramer 2006, 366f). Direct rule was pursued through a mix of firm constabulary pacification of head-hunting tribes engaged in occasional inter-tribal warfare alongside other quotidian disciplinary activities like the routinization of new administrative grids informed by scientific ethnological categories, positivist geography, and the promotion of free public education (Finin 2005, 41f).

In the same vein, the American administrators also sponsored regular *cañao* feasts bringing together dozens of villages for activities that reproduced the ethos of New England county fairs—there were tug-of-war, greased-pole climbing and sack-race competitions “as a means of re-channeling energies that in times past were devoted to head-taking” (ibid., 276). Moreover, in these events, elders were encouraged to lead their villages in the playing of *gangsá*, chanting, and other activities that were in the past not allowed outside of socio-religious contexts. By the time the Second World War broke out, several decades of direct rule in the Mountain Province had fomented a nascent pan-Igorot consciousness of a distinctive ethno-region especially among educated members of these diverse ‘tribes’ of the Cordillera. In the cosmopolitan context of urban centers like Baguio City and La Trinidad, individual members of these ‘tribes’ had ample opportunities to intermingle beyond the social cohesiveness of village life should they so choose.⁴ After the war, the expanded number of administrative posts and elective positions now available in the newly independent Republic helped to buttress further highlanders’ solidarity vis-à-vis lowlanders as they competed for opportunities (ibid., 174). During the martial law era of the Marcos administration, trans-tribal solidarities were further broadened and deepened, particularly among indigenous peoples activist groups based in Manila and Baguio City, as they fought to defend their land

and natural resources. Since the end of martial law and the production of emergent democratic spaces in its wake, this trajectory has evolved, not least in periodic debates on the (de)merits of Cordillera Regional Autonomy and the rightful place of the Igorot in the Filipino national landscape.

Running alongside the socio-political re-calibration of Igorot-ness is a residual exoticism in the popular imagination of Baguio City and its hinterland, the Cordilleras. In part, this stems from the durability of tourist place marketing strategies that deploy tropes originating from early American initiatives even if the intentions of entrepreneurial native organizers might be to educate lowland and foreign visitors on the uniqueness of Igorot society and culture. For instance, in late 1966 a Fiesta Montanosa was organized for the summer months. An editorial in *Midland* entitled “Fiesta Montañosa” published on 4 December 1966 characterized the event in the following terms:

While the city of Baguio is administratively independent of the provinces in the Cordillera region, she is nevertheless the portal to all the mountainous hinterland....To add color and attraction to the fair, artistic exhibits of the culture of the region, even in the lively manifestation of the people’s recreational bent are to be displayed. And so the name, Fiesta Montanosa has been given to the fair...The region itself, the nation as a whole, and the world at large must open their eyes to the riches and the wonders of the Cordilleras.

More than a decade later, under the prompting of the Ministry of Tourism and with support from agencies like the Hyatt Hotel chain and the Association of Tour Operators in the Philippines (ATOP), the city organized a Baguio Grand *Cañao* in Burnham Park. As reported in *Midland* on 6 January 1980, at the second Baguio Grand *Cañao* in 1979, First Lady and Minister of Human Settlements Imelda Marcos called for the formation of a Baguio *Cañao* Foundation to oversee the annual staging of the *cañao* and other cultural events. After the EDSA Revolution, there was another attempt along these lines but it was called the Highland Festival instead. These activities were not without any incident. Susan Russell, for instance, has argued how the 1978 Baguio Grand *Cañao* brought to the fore inter-ethnic tensions and dilemmas between Ibaloi and Kankana-ey on issues of tribal representation for ethnically mixed barangays and the appropriate performances of rituals to host for public consumption (Russell 1989). For different reasons, university student activist groups also held protests against these staged events and contended that these public spectacles were “trivializing” and “commercializing” Cordilleran culture (Carling, interview, 5 November 2009).

In the context of a tourist-dominated streetscape, even native ambulant street vendors were not exempt from having to play their part in performing Igorot-ness. To be sure, official opinions on the presence of street vendors in public spaces have vacillated in the past. Whilst some considered street vendors (or hawkers) as “eyesores” and “distractions in an orderly set-up,” others saw them as potential tourist draws in their own right (Guerrero 1975, 153). At one point, City Hall had required Igorot hawkers peddling in Burnham Park to don their traditional costumes (Guerrero 1975, 101). Currently, the donning of traditional costumes in public spaces in Baguio City is most prominent during the annual *Panagbenga* Festival. Conceived five years after the 1990 earthquake, the festival was meant to revive tourist arrivals to the city and lift the social morale of its denizens.

Over the years, the Panagbenga Festival has discernibly grown to be more organizationally elaborate, extensively covered in national media, and consistently drawing in large droves of tourists to the city during this period. However, in comparison to the festivals of old, there is a key discernible difference. The performativity of Igorot-ness in terms of ceremonial rituals appears to be de-centered in favor of less contentious ingredients like temperate-type flowers and the zestful participation of school children and college teenagers in street parades and performances. Nevertheless, emblems of Cordilleran material culture continue to be capitalized through performers in traditional costumes, the playing of *gangsa* in stylized street dances, and the sale of portable native imageries and artifacts as tourist souvenirs. Except for these distinguishing features, the format and repertoire of the street performances and subsidiary related festival activities share much with the commercially driven tenor of most lowland large town fiestas elsewhere in the Philippines.

The representations of Igorotness in the Philippines have not been confined to tourist brochures and choreographed events like carnivals and festivals. Mass media communications in the form of movies and television have played their role in the popularization and perpetuation of residual archetypes and stereotypes in the Filipino social imaginary (e.g., Cimatu 2009; Zapata 2007). However, at least in the past two decades, these fictional perceptions of the Igorot and of other indigenous peoples in the Philippines have been modulated in tandem with the gains of the global indigenous people movements in asserting their human rights against the intrusive and exploitative agencies of commercial and state institutions. Moreover, the urgency of climate change has motivated a re-assessment of the traditional beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples, perceived to be more ecologically sustainable than modern-day scientific knowledge in

addressing these challenges. In short, through the work of indigenous people civil society groups and non-governmental organizations, and further facilitated by the communicative power of new social media, earlier exotic and passive imageries of the mute Igorot are now joined by the *persona* of the modern, articulate and assertive Igorot in traditional costume.

Session Road: The Show Window of Baguio City

Notwithstanding the spectacular magnetism of Panagbenga, the primary draw of Baguio City remains its ‘air-conditioned’ weather all year round. In particular, during the vacation periods of Christmas and Holy Week, the city population swells considerably with arrivals using the opportunity to experience a brief reprieve from lowland heat. They also bring in their wake disruptions to the normal spatio-temporal rhythms of the city—among others, heavy traffic jams along the city roads, packed pedestrian sidewalks, extraordinary amounts of street litter, and water shortages to households. Except for the businesses who benefit financially from the influx of cash-laden tourists, few local residents relish these occasions and indeed regard them as a bane to their normal routines. As a disgruntled Baguio Boy said to me:

Does tourism matter to me? It matters to me when tourists come to Baguio and lord all over the place. I go to the city market and vendors don’t serve me quickly, and I am supposed to be their regular customer! I go to my regular restaurant and I have to wait for a long time just to be served! (Dacawi, interview, 3 September 2011)

Perhaps, the key public space in Baguio City that singularly indexes the developmental changes of the city as a whole and is simultaneously a lived communal space is Session Road. As one of the earliest public streets to be laid out in the city, it is a cipher of not only a mutating assemblage and palimpsest of visible material artifacts like trees, buildings, street lamps, traffic lights, signposts, power cables and so forth but also of equally cogent invisible vectors like planning laws, city ordinances, political agendas, and nostalgic memories. The earliest archival photographs of Session Road reveal this spinal thoroughfare to be an un-tarred track leading down from Luneta Hill and ending at the junction with present day Magsaysay Avenue (formerly La Trinidad Road) where the Stone Market was sited. Early pioneers to the city first constructed pine wood buildings on the less hilly northern side of Session Road before the push for the ownership

of private property incrementally displaced and filled up what used to be an 'empty' terrain of cattle grazing grounds. These early pine timber buildings were not more than two-stories high and had mixed usage. While the lower floors were utilized for conducting business, the upper floors provided residential accommodation for the owners and workers. Over time, especially after the Second World War, these buildings rose higher, were constructed in brick and concrete, and became increasingly confined for commercial purposes with the owners choosing to live elsewhere in the city.

Individual memories of Session Road and the surrounding locality are framed by the changing materiality and representations of this space. It is striking that two of my oldest interviewees—Cecile Afable and Leonora Paraa San Agustin—born in the first decade of the twentieth century recalled Session Road less as a busy commercial thoroughfare but more as an organic extension of a children's playground comprising hilly grassland, stands of pine tree forests, and numerous creeks. They could describe in great detail the trails and routes that they used to take in walking between home, school and the cathedral, and the places they would frequent to look for fishes, berries, flowers and so forth. For them, this is the golden time of Baguio City (San Agustin, interview, 30 July 2011; Afable, interview, 9 September 2011).⁵

In the 1950s, Cecile Afable could still characterize the comparatively more built-up Baguio "to be a small place" despite being a well-known chartered city. As she wrote in *Midland* on 28 May 1950, "it is just going up and down Session Road and around the Burnham Park so that we know everybody and so it makes our lives so personalized." In another article published 2 November 2008 and in anthropomorphic terms, Leonora San Agustin similarly likened Session Road to be the "heartbeat" of the city. Even for the younger generation of city residents born in the 1960s and 1970s, the familial sociality and ambiance of Session Road appeared to be still salient. For Mary Carling, for instance, the Session Road of her childhood and teenage years resembled "the living room of the city." Here, it is likely that one will meet a relative, friend or an acquaintance while promenading up and down the road.⁶ In more recent times, the comparative impersonality of contemporary Session Road only heightens what was before as suggested on 6 September 2009 by Gaby Keith, a columnist of *Midland*:

I still get teary-eyed remembering those times when walking down Session Road, one sees a lot of familiar faces, wave to, and even chat with numerous acquaintances. Those time where one can walk at a leisurely pace and not feel like sardines being pushed to

and fro by a sea of humanity. In Baguio circa 2009, I feel like I've been transported to another city where most people are strangers to me. I feel lost, in other words. That's progress, I guess. Welcome to living in a teeming melting pot of various cultures whose true-blue originals, the Ibalays, are slowly vanishing and quietly being forgotten or pushed to the outskirts.

In sum, for old-timers and long-time residents of Baguio City then, the Session Road of before resembled a lived communal public space *par excellence*, a quality they lament to be fast fading notwithstanding the large flows of pedestrians because of the concentration and diversity of fashionable commercial establishments along this thoroughfare. Except for the weather, large chunks of the landscape of Baguio City are unrecognizable to them.

Because of its centrality in the cityscape, Session Road is also the space where 'progress' is conspicuously and variedly inscribed; in most cases by city mayors with dissimilar visions of what this might entail. In the mid-1950s, Mayor Alfonso Tabora (January 1954–December 1959) decided to give Baguio City "a touch of Paris" after his European tour. He ordered that Session Road be divided with a row of trees and according to a columnist in the *Midland* (1966), "they were beautiful to see." However, the next mayor, Mayor Bienvenido R. Yandoc (January 1960–February 1960) had them moved elsewhere and replaced with mercury street lamps. Similar moves to 'beautify' the city included the promulgation of a city ordinance to criminalize residents who hang their laundry out of windows to dry on the upper floors of buildings along Session Road. In the 1970s, when First Lady Imelda Marcos helmed the city beautification drive, the historic Stone Market at the lower end of Session Road, earlier gutted by a fire, was replaced by a multi-story modernist Maharlika Livelihood building. In the mid-1990s, Mayor Mauricio Domogan ordered a concrete pine tree to be erected at the top of Session Road. Although this structure was much maligned by many city residents, it remained in place for more than a decade before Mayor Reinaldo A. Bautista Jr. (September 2006–June 2010) allowed it to be replaced with a historic memorabilia comprising eight rocks and boulders in 2010. The installation symbolized the eight individuals who convened in 1904 and set the course for the birth of Baguio City as a Summer Capital of the Philippines.

Other denizens too have sought to appropriate the public spaces of Session Road for a diversity of reasons, making this linear space also a battle zone of wits and ideologies. When not marching down Session Road, it has become customary for university student activists and other cause-oriented groups to organize short noise barrage

rallies in front of the Skyworld *ukay-ukay* stores.⁷ Not only is there an assured audience in terms of passing pedestrians, the broad sidewalk does not hamper the free flow of pedestrian traffic and hence invite quick police reprisals. Ambulant street vendors, by comparison, face a more challenging prospect on a daily basis. Because of the existence of an ordinance forbidding street peddling, they have to play a constant cat-and-mouse game with city enforcement officials to avoid their wares being confiscated. As was explained to me by a senior city official, punitive actions along the entire stretch of Session Road are particularly unrelenting because this thoroughfare is considered the “show window of the city” (Yeoh 2011). A number of street vendors felt, however, that it is big businesses like SM Baguio which influences the actions of City Hall in executing unforgiving demolition exercises against them, and undermining their efforts in earning an honest living for their families. Small and medium-scale businesses along Session Road are also known to be ambivalent about SM Baguio. But unlike street vendors, they do not have to face punitive actions from the city authorities.

In a few cases, City Hall has crafted and enforced ordinances in sync with the advocacy of local environmental groups rather than the contrasting claims of stakeholders like commercial businesses and transport associations. A case in point was the decision to ban exhaust-belching jeepneys from coursing through Session Road as they used to for several decades. Proposals to fully pedestrianize Session Road permanently have been less successful, primarily because of strong objections from the commercial establishments sited along this thoroughfare. While temporary gestures of a fully pedestrianized Session Road by City Hall have periodically existed—the five-day Session Road in Bloom during the Panagbenga Festival is the prime example—their proponents argue that the interests of commercial establishments along Session Road have more precedence than that of the health concerns of ordinary citizens. A contrarian example exists in addressing the same underlying issue of poor air quality along Session Road (and beyond). In 7 December 2003, *Midland* reported of a presentation by a Manila-based company in proposing a 24-hour mass transit network via an electric trolley bus system to reduce air pollution through emissions. In response, a city councilor was reported to have said that while the concept was “beautiful and appealing,” the proponent or City Hall needed to come with an alternative to address the concerns of thousands of jeepney owners who would be displaced by this project. As no follow up was further reported on the matter, it can be surmised that this episode, as in so many others over the years, show up the intractability of steadfastly

tackling issues surrounding the quality of urban life in Baguio City. At its core are the contestations over inherited social imaginaries, hegemonic developmental pathways, vacillating political will, and the competing economic interests of a diverse range of social actors and institutions.

Conclusion

On 2 June 1990, an opinion piece in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* provided an incisive diagnosis of what might have gone awry in the City of Pines. Edwin P. Daiway declares:

The city stands as a classic example of how greed (in the guise of development) and poverty combine to ruin a previously well-maintained environment that has given the city its charm and made it irresistible to residents and visitors alike. Gone is the quaint small-town ambience when a stroll down the well-swept Session Road and up Abanao Street toward the City Hall was a refreshing experience. Gone, too, is the scent of pine needles broken up by the afternoon rains or the pungent tang of backyard fires that brought tears to my eyes. What now exists is a crowded and dirty city, where space and water have become precious commodities. Buildings of all sizes and shapes huddle together in the city proper. The air is no longer fresh, replaced by the noxious fumes of heavy traffic.

Ramon Dacawi (interview, 2011), a veritable Baguio Boy, perhaps summed it up more succinctly when he observed: “Everybody wants a piece of Baguio!” Till today, despite its battered aura, the fabled mountain city continues to be a demographic magnet for drawing in a diverse range of peoples for a variety of reasons. They, in turn, have inflicted their ecological footprints on the city. A purely economic calculus might narrowly prize more a segment of this human traffic who are seen as bringing in significant revenues to the city—tourists, conference delegates, university students, foreign students learning English, owners of summer vacation homes, and so forth. Conversely, this logic would undervalue others deemed to be depleting the city’s valuable natural resources without substantially increasing the city coffers. If we follow Henri Lefebvre’s insights, this differentiation arises because as modern cities are sites *par excellence* of capitalist forces and processes, they are inherently socially and spatially stratified landscapes (Lefebvre 1990). But this scenario does not necessarily preclude dialectical claims to a right to the city. As elsewhere, cities also produce local visionaries who heroically plot out the contours of an as-yet invisible city deemed to be more socially just and welcoming

of differences despite its current distorted form.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it could be argued that one such attempt were made by American individuals like William Cameron Forbes, Dean Worcester, Daniel Burnham and their subsequent interlocutors. But, given its elitist and imperial moorings, this venture was bound to fragment, if not unravel, under the pluralistic forces of a complex postcolonial nation-building setting. More than a century later, The People's Summit of 2015 represents yet another concerted civil society effort—the Baguio Re-greening Movement is another—to democratize the visioning and fleshing out of a city's social life beyond the interests of a narrow spectrum of its denizens. The range of topics covered The People's Statement suggest that its many authors are not unaware of the scope and depth of the challenges that lie ahead in re-approximating the fabled Baguio City of old, real and imagined. Most salient, it would seem, is the pivotal role of a vigilant and ethical citizenry suturing together the 'Baguio Spirit' of fair play and the love for Baguio as a special place to live with the strengthening of transparent, democratic and participatory processes for the brave new world ahead.

NOTES

1. For example, see <http://cordilleraconservationtrust.ph/baguio-peoples-summit/>. A few months later, the People's Statement was formally launched in a follow-up event called, "Pushing for the Baguio We Want" at the University of the Philippines Baguio. See: <http://www.upb.edu.ph/index.php/pushing-baguio>.
2. All quotations are taken from the finalised report that came out from "The Baguio We Want: The People's Summit".
3. Significantly, the chosen Carnival Queen was Martina Salming, a young Ibaloy woman who was a member of the elite *baknang* clan. Her escort was Dr. Hillary Klapp, a member of the Bontoc ethnic group who had just qualified as a medical doctor.
4. The early American administration had transposed their tribal categories of natives in North America onto the Igorots in the Philippines (Finin 2005, 28f).
5. For a collection of memories on Baguio, see Subido 2009.
6. Conversely, another urban legend of Baguio City is that Session Road should be avoided if one was in a hurry to go somewhere as one would invariably have to make conversation with relatives and friends met along the way. Moreover, a litmus test in the

past to distinguish between locals and non-locals promenading on Session Road would be when the Angelus is announced by the church bells of the nearby Baguio Cathedral—locals would freeze in their tracks (Dacawi, interview on 3 September 2011).

7. Skyworld was the name of the hotel destroyed during the 1990 earthquake. The site is now used to sell second-hand clothing and shoes (*ukay-ukay*).

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