

Spaces of BLISS. BLISS Market project and/at the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of the community arts project BLISS Market and the involvement of the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum in such an endeavour. Fostering a multidisciplinary orientation, the project gathered artists, educators, and students to engage with the community's spaces and reassert its presence as a place for exchange. It utilized pockets of the actual site and transferred the exhibition to the Vargas Museum as a form of documentation and as indication of work-in-progress. This study considers the impact of hosting the project within a university museum's four walls.

Setting the scene: UP BLISS

Under the aegis of the dictatorial regime in the 1970s, the Ministry of Human Settlements introduced a shelter program that would fulfill basic housing needs. The housing project called the *Bagong Lipunan* (New Society) Improvement of Sites and Services (BLISS) was envisioned as a self-sustaining program that would help foster the development of its residents while serving as a model urban community. Former First Lady Imelda Marcos, who led the ministry in 1979, planned for the settlement to house 50 to 100 families in a two-and-a-half hectare area (Lico 2008). Despite the instability of the times, its offerings were promising for both low and middle-income families alike. The residents were to receive subsidies, livelihood opportunities and services, and the formation of a close-knit community was facilitated by inviting members to participate in group activities promoted by duly registered community associations. The physical dwellings were standard building types comprised of several floors, each building consisting of 16 to 32 units, with communal areas such as basketball and tennis courts, a multi-purpose hall, and a market. Whether out of sheer necessity, or a personal volition to socialize, residents congregated in these spaces and a community spirit somehow flourished.

Decades later, government support faltered, and the exemplar of urban housing fell into neglect. One existing BLISS site, situated at the University of the Philippines (UP) campus in Quezon City, north of the capital Manila, is a case in point. J. Pacena, an artist and former resident who grew up in UP

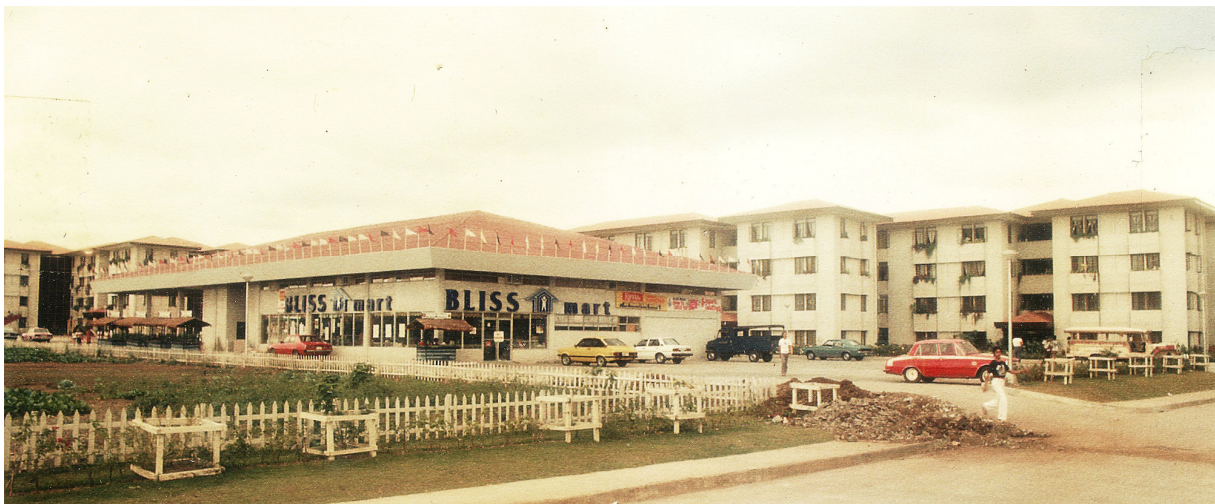


Fig. 1 - BLISS Market – Photo: Rod Dumas © J. Pacena

BLISS has observed that the community, once vibrant and active, had eventually lost its sense of gathering. Residents began to struggle with everyday realities, experiencing insecurity as the threat of being displaced heightens every year. They also face a growing divide between a nearby community where a number of informal settlers have set up base. In 2007, BLISS Market, a small but central structure was demolished, leaving behind traces where interaction and the exchange of goods once took place (fig. 1).

Drawing on the market as a symbol of the past and as an evocation of activity, J. Pacena initiated a community-based project by engaging artists, architects, educators, performers, filmmakers, and students, among other creative practitioners to react to quotidian spaces – specifically in the spaces of



Fig. 2 - Robobliss, Murals by Rai Cruz at the Areas of UP BLISS © J. Pacena

BLISS. There are 29 artists and groups who participated in this project. The artists who were mostly outsiders, were oriented to the community through visits and constant interaction with the residents. The immersion of artists was facilitated by J. Pacena and assisted by the Senior Citizens group who are insiders of the community. The art production workshops initiated by the Philippine Association of Printmakers and a shadow play collective for instance, invited the participation of children, teenagers, and adults alike to learn new creative techniques and to draw inspiration from their experience of home or community. Some artists responded to the site by creating murals that arrest attention as in Rai Cruz's *Robobliss*, segments of a creature with robot-like features interspersed at the various areas of UP BLISS (fig. 2). A team of architects, on the other hand, proposed plans on the improvement of place, one that will reconfigure communal spaces like the multi-purpose hall, make them more inviting and to entice people to gather. Poetry that touches on the social and economic nuances of everyday life, written in the vernacular can be seen posted as banners in the buildings of UP

BLISS. A series of activities like the bazaar held at the ruins of the defunct BLISS Market; film showings initiated by an alternative group of filmmakers who focus on the plight of marginalized sectors in urban communities; and concerts provide opportunities for the community to interact face-to-face, to familiarize themselves to one another, and to enliven the place. Perhaps, these string of activities were imagined to revive the impact and intensity of camaraderie facilitated by social gatherings in UP BLISS decades ago.

Commencing in early 2012, the project endeavored to revitalize the community's sense of place and revive the UP BLISS neighborhood as a place for exchange. *BLISS Market: Exchange in time, space of transience* occupied pockets of the actual site and transferred the exhibition to the Vargas Museum as a form of documentation and as an indication of a work-in-progress.

In this essay, I attempt to shed light on the implications of the project with respect to the Vargas Museum in terms of (1) its notions of the community and the public it addresses. It also tries to (2) speculate on how museums might revolutionize our understanding of art or artistic practice, and how it can challenge commonly held views on what constitutes the exhibitionary or the museal. This is a modest effort to trace connections between a particular kind of public art and shifting museum-based practices; to describe their encounter and point out disparities. These points of reflection spill over to the mandate of the Vargas as a university museum and its aspiration to sustain a contemporary art program.

The Vargas Museum and its contemporary art programs

The Vargas is the main museum of the University of the Philippines and the largest in Quezon City. Its permanent exhibition is centralized on the collection of Jorge B. Vargas, a politician who donated art, memorabilia, archives, and library to his alma mater in 1978. The benefactor was the Philippines' first Executive Secretary and the Mayor of Manila during the Commonwealth period in 1935 and the Japanese-sponsored republic in 1942. The art collection spans the works of Filipino artists from the late 19th century to the 1960s and maps significant points in Philippine art history. The modern art collection is exhibited alongside works of contemporary art to link past and present expressions. The other venues of the museum are committed to temporary exhibitions of contemporary art; programs are being developed in such a way that the permanent collection, including the archives, engages in dialogue with each other. Like many public museums, the Vargas is an object-based institution that relies on the physicality of material to generate research and facilitate knowledge production. These materials of history and heritage enable the museum to abide by its mandate in preservation, research, interpretation, and education. As part of an academic institution, its objects serve as a teaching collection while the museum also functions as laboratory for students, faculty, and researchers especially in art studies, among a host of other disciplines. The museum's programs seek to address the university community, beyond what Vargas had envisioned. Through its contemporary art and education programs, the Vargas likewise endeavors to respond to the broader public aside from artists and experts. It facilitates opportunities for experimental practices and presents new possibilities for curation. The conceptual framework for *Bliss Market* evolved from a curatorial workshop attended by the artist, along with emerging and senior practitioners at the Vargas Museum in 2009.

Public engagement: The artist, museum, and community

As a scholar of museum studies Elizabeth Crooke (2011) has pointed out, the terms 'community' and creating an 'inclusive community' have become in vogue in art and museum sectors. This relates to the recognition of the transformative function of art or the commonly held view that it can serve as a catalyst for social change. Both locations adopted by the *Bliss Market* project draw its potency and contingency from communities. At the heart of the project is a compelling drive from the artist, an insider, to flesh out and address social concerns shared by the residents. The project was undertaken as a matter of urgency, and its nature was intended to yield unconventional forms or outcomes. The initial stages of the project, marked by immersion and research at the actual spaces of BLISS, were followed by art intervention activities that involved the following actors: the artist-curator who also serves as a context-producer, participating artists, key members of the community such as the UP BLISS Senior Citizen Achievers Chapter, residents, and visitors. The project was intended to be ephemeral, process-based, collaborative or supportive in approach. It had the ambition of giving its residents a wake-up call by disrupting mundane habits and by re-creating the experience of spaces anew. It attempted to address public issues especially those that had to do with the residence as place and as a living, evolving space. The project placed emphasis on dialogue and fostering partnerships,

while the creative, tangible, and permanent components have become almost secondary. Given the number of artists and stakeholders involved in the project, the role of the artist became decentralized. Rather, it has become multifarious in scope as one role overlaps with the other. In the case of *BLISS Market*, the artist may have functioned also as a social worker, an activist, an organizer, a facilitator, a confidante, an events manager, and so forth. As to whether the goals of the project in transforming the UP BLISS residents into a responsive, engaging community have been met is another point of inquiry that deserve a lengthier discussion.

The concept of a museum as a unit that belongs to a wider constellation of institutions and public life, is inextricably linked with its communities. As many museum theorists have observed, museums continue to develop programs that open themselves to a wider variety of audiences. As such, narratives and interpretation draw from multiple voices rather than from a single, authoritative standpoint. This gesture demonstrates the democratizing tendency of the museum and its ability to revise itself in response to the needs of contemporary social life. While the Vargas Museum's immediate public is the university community, there have been efforts to extend its reach, as exemplified by contemporary art exhibitions like *BLISS Market*. The Vargas Museum, however, does not merely serve as a vessel that hosts the exhibit as a matter of routine programming, but plays an active role in shaping or influencing curatorial practices. The physical transfer of the project reveals several transformations. Firstly, the transposition of traces (objects, experience, or knowledge) from the community settlement to the museum imply the transfer from one ideological space to another, and hence a different manner of beholding. BLISS housing is based on a design and grand narrative perpetuated by the Ministry of Settlements which impacts on the community's ways of living in much the same way that the museum, as a framing device, influences the way objects and artworks are interpreted. Secondly, narratives of private, individual lives become part of a public display, and integrated as history as a consequence of the museum's value-imbuing tendency. Finally, the museum is inclined to convert to material form, the processes, performance, events, and other intangibles through methods of archiving and display. This is manifested in video footage, papers compiled methodically, artworks produced in workshops, and photographs lined in the museum's perimeter to evoke a semblance of a walk-through. These examples strongly indicate the museum's adherence to object-based practices.

When the *BLISS Market* exhibit at the Vargas Museum was formally opened, members of the community attended the exhibition opening. The exhibition drew residents away from their comfort zone and into the museum, where their efforts were shown, their identities revealed, and their sense of belonging to the BLISS community was portrayed. While there is a tendency for the museum to downplay certain issues, the exhibition testified to its potential to empower ordinary people and signal the significance of the commonplace. Rod Dumas, a resident of BLISS and a hobbyist who had a penchant for taking photographs of his neighborhood left his collection of prints to J. Pacena. These images chart the changes in BLISS from the 1970s until Dumas's recent passing. The prints, lined up as an installation in the ground floor of the museum recognized the humble efforts of an assiduous chronicler who captured memories of place.

Future possibilities: Participatory projects initiated by university museums

At a time when the lines between art and everyday life are becoming indistinguishable, institutions that signify power over culture and meanings still remain. I end this essay with the following questions as a springboard for further discussion: What happens when a time-based, participative work, which aims to resist the ideology of the market or an institution, becomes embraced by either one? Is it in the nature of university museums to afford a degree of open-mindedness or experimentation in its projects? Where will experimentation take university museums and how will it affect current and more

conventional modes of practice? These queries invite us to reflect on the path to which university museums may tread in the future.

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