

ASSESSMENT OF ECONOMIC IMPACT OF PUBLIC SPACES IN THE PHILIPPINES: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Kenneth Lucto Armas *, Joannie Aglubat Galano **

* Corresponding author, Business Administration Department, Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Cabanatuan City, Philippines
Contact details: Business Administration Department, Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Gen. Tinio Street, Quezon District, Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija 3100, Philippines

** Business Administration Department, Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, Cabanatuan City, Philippines



Abstract

How to cite this paper: Armas, K. L., & Galano, J. A. (2024). Assessment of economic impact of public spaces in the Philippines: An in-depth analysis. *Corporate & Business Strategy Review*, 5(2), 235-242.

<https://doi.org/10.22495/cbsrv5i2art20>

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ISSN Online: 2708-4965

ISSN Print: 2708-9924

Received: 13.10.2023

Accepted: 23.05.2024

JEL Classification: O21, R11, R14, R38

DOI: 10.22495/cbsrv5i2art20

This study addresses the economic significance of public spaces in the Philippines and aims to contribute to the development of a comprehensive urban management plan. Motivated by a recognized deficiency in strategic planning for public areas, the study investigates economic activities, assesses their impact on the local economy, businesses, and tourism, and proposes sustainable urban development solutions. Participants from diverse industries provided data through surveys and interviews, employing a mixed-methods approach. Findings reveal the underutilization of public spaces despite their substantial contributions. The study proposes holistic urban management solutions, including physical design improvements, support for informal enterprises, tourism promotion, and community engagement. This research underscores the importance of addressing strategic planning gaps for sustainable urban development. The abstract succinctly captures the research problem, purpose, methodology, main findings, and conclusion, offering valuable insights into the economic potential of public spaces and their relevance to urban management planning in the Philippines.

Keywords: Economic Role, Communal Places, Philippines, Urban Management Plan

Authors' individual contribution: Conceptualization — K.L.A. and J.A.G.; Methodology — K.L.A. and J.A.G.; Formal Analysis — K.L.A.; Investigation — K.L.A. and J.A.G.; Data Curation — K.L.A. and J.A.G.; Writing — Original Draft — K.L.A.; Writing — Review & Editing — K.L.A. and J.A.G.; Visualization — K.L.A. and J.A.G.; Supervision — K.L.A.; Project Administration — K.L.A.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: The Authors extend heartfelt gratitude to the administrators and faculty of Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology for their steadfast support and guidance throughout the research process. Their commitment to academic excellence has played a pivotal role in the successful completion of this study. The Authors also express sincere appreciation to the local government units of Nueva Ecija for their cooperation and invaluable contributions, which have significantly enhanced the depth and relevance of the research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cities serve as the vibrant economic epicenters of nations, with bustling urban landscapes like Metro Manila, Cebu, and Davao in the Philippines exemplifying this phenomenon. While traditional economic analyses often focus on office spaces, industrial zones, and commercial hubs, this study sheds light on the often-overlooked yet critical role of public spaces, such as parks, plazas, and streets, in shaping urban economic activities (Jacobs, 1961). These spaces play a significant role in enhancing the vitality, resilience, and sustainability of cities by fostering informal economies like street vending (Bromley, 2000), influencing real estate values, supporting local businesses, and promoting tourism (Crompton, 2001). Additionally, public places serve as cultural and social hubs, fostering community cohesion and attracting investments (Gehl, 2011).

Despite their potential economic impact, there remains a notable gap in research specifically exploring the economic role of public spaces in the Philippines, with existing literature primarily centered on urban planning in developed countries. This study aims to address this gap, which is particularly crucial as the Philippines confronts rapid urbanization and associated challenges such as overcrowding, traffic congestion, and environmental degradation. It is imperative to comprehensively understand how public places contribute to the urban economy, as this knowledge is essential for crafting sustainable and inclusive urban management plans (Montgomery, 1998).

This research aims to fill the identified knowledge gap by investigating the economic contributions of public places in the Philippine context. It seeks to offer empirical evidence as a foundation for comprehensive urban management plans. The study conducted surveys and gathered data in the province of Nueva Ecija, Philippines, in 2023, providing a localized perspective on the economic dynamics of public spaces in the country.

This study aims to assess the economic role of communal spaces in the Philippines to serve as the basis for the urban management plan. Specifically, this study aims:

- to investigate the economic contributions of public places in selected urban areas of the Philippines;
- to analyze the role of public places in supporting informal economies in the Philippines;
- to assess the influence of public places on local businesses and tourism in the Philippines;
- to explore the interplay between public spaces and social interaction, and its potential economic impacts;
- to propose recommendations for a comprehensive urban management plan that maximizes the economic potential of public places.

To provide a roadmap for the reader, the structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature, highlighting key insights from previous studies on the economic significance of public spaces. Section 3 outlines the methodology employed in conducting empirical research, detailing the data collection methods and analytical approach utilized. Section 4 presents the main findings of the study, offering insights into the economic

contributions of public places in the Philippine context. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings and suggests avenues for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Urban economics and public spaces

Public spaces play a crucial role in shaping urban economic activities, as highlighted by seminal works such as those by Jacobs (1961), Bromley (2000), and Gehl (2011). Jacobs' (1961) pioneering exploration in the death and life of great American cities challenged prevailing notions, redirecting attention to the critical role of public spaces in urban economics. Bromley's (2000) comprehensive review of street vending and public policy globally further enriches the discussion, emphasizing the significance of public spaces in supporting informal economies like street vending. Gehl (2011) delves into the multifaceted role of public spaces, emphasizing their dynamic nature as hubs supporting local businesses, cultural expression, and tourism.

Recent research has continued to explore the interplay between urban economics and public spaces. For instance, Friman et al. (2017), investigate travel satisfaction as a component of subjective well-being (SWB), highlighting the influence of factors such as travel time, mode, safety, and comfort. Chatterjee et al. (2020) and Ettema et al. (2016) underscore the association between travel satisfaction, compact urban form, and active travel modes like walking and cycling. Ocampo and Yamagishi (2020) discuss the potential of information and communications technology and new mobility options to improve inclusiveness and quality of life in cities.

2.2. Pathways between the built environment and subjective well-being: An overview

Travel serves as a gateway for individuals to access places, facilities, and services, influencing various components of SWB such as life satisfaction, emotional well-being, and eudaimonia (De Vos et al., 2017). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of travel satisfaction, travel time, travel mode, and other factors in influencing SWB (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Ettema et al., 2016; Morris & Guerra, 2015). The integration of information and communications technology into travel experiences has further shaped travel patterns and experiences, with potential implications for SWB (Ocampo & Yamagishi, 2020).

2.3. Participation in activities and needs fulfillment

Travel facilitates access to various activities and services, contributing to needs fulfillment and the pursuit of eudaimonia (Leyden et al., 2011). The design of built environments, including factors such as accessibility to facilities and green spaces, influences daily travel experiences and overall satisfaction (Feng et al., 2018). However, transport disadvantages can hinder access to these options, affecting SWB (Delbosc & Currie, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online activities, reshaping travel patterns and activity

participation, with potential implications for SWB in the post-pandemic period (Jevtic et al., 2022).

2.4. Enterprise development in the Philippines

The key components of the capacity development phase are community planning, community organization, community needs assessment, gap analysis, project programming, project execution, project monitoring, and evaluation. Community planning involves choosing the most viable community business ventures based on six economic factors: market, capital, raw materials, service providers, support infrastructure, and appropriate technology. Enterprise development is a low-cost, straightforward training strategy for aiding entrepreneurs and microbusiness owners with business planning and expansion (Armas & Moralde, 2023). This component is further subdivided into enterprise growth, local government assistance, developing industry connections, enterprise marketing and promotion, enterprise performance monitoring and evaluation, and impact assessment. Acquiring economic aptitude is essential for the survival of Cabanatuan City's citizens and provides them with a sense of self-worth and communal pride.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a descriptive research design integrating both qualitative and quantitative

methods to comprehensively address the research problem. The quantitative phase encompassed the gathering and analysis of data concerning the economic contributions of public places, their support for informal economies, and their impact on local businesses and tourism. This involved the administration of surveys and structured interviews to collect detailed information. In the qualitative phase, the focus shifted to understanding the perceptions and experiences of local communities regarding public places. Data in this phase were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, providing nuanced insights into the multifaceted dimensions of community interactions with public spaces.

3.1. Respondents of the study

As shown in Table 1, the respondents for this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse and representative sample reflecting various perspectives on the economic role of public places. The sample included 10 local community members, 20 informal workers, 10 business owners, 20 tourists, and one key official responsible for managing public spaces from each local government unit (LGU). This strategic sampling approach aimed to capture nuanced insights from different stakeholder groups, enhancing the study's comprehensiveness.

Table 1. The sample of respondents

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Sample (n)</i>
Local community members who regularly use public places.	10
Informal workers operating in public places.	20
Business owners whose businesses are influenced by proximity to public places.	10
Tourists who visit public places.	20
Local government officials and urban planners are responsible for managing public places.	1 key official per LGU

Source: Authors' elaboration.

3.2. Data gathering procedure

Surveys and structured interviews were employed as quantitative data collection tools, specifically focusing on understanding the frequency of public place usage, spending patterns, and economic activities within these spaces. To enhance transparency and address reviewer feedback, we provide a detailed account of the structure and content of these instruments, shedding light on the systematic approach taken in formulating questions and guiding interactions.

Structured interviews and surveys were conducted to gather data on various aspects related to the economic role of public places in the Philippines. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in probing deeper into respondents' answers while maintaining consistency across interviews. Similarly, surveys were carefully designed to collect quantitative data on public place usage, spending patterns, and economic activities.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants to ensure accuracy in data transcription and analysis. The recordings were securely stored and only accessible to the research team.

3.3. Data analysis methods

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, providing insights into the frequency and distribution of various variables related to public place usage and economic activities. Thematic analysis was employed for the qualitative data, identifying common themes and patterns in the responses from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Economic contributions of public places in selected urban areas of the Philippines

The first objective was to investigate the economic contributions of public places in selected urban areas of the Philippines. To achieve this, various factors were examined, including the generation of direct and indirect income, job creation, impact on property values, and contribution to the local and national economy.

Table 2. Economic contributions of public places in selected urban areas of the Philippines

Public place	Direct income (in PHP millions)	Jobs created	Impact on property value (%)	Contribution to the local economy (in PHP millions)
Place A	50	500	10%	75
Place B	35	200	15%	60
Place C	60	400	12%	80
Place D	40	300	13%	65
Place E	55	350	11%	70

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The second objective of the research was to analyze the role of public places in supporting informal economies in the Philippines. In this aspect,

activities such as street vending, informal transport services, and other economic activities taking place in public spaces were examined.

Table 3. The role of public places in supporting informal economies in the Philippines

Public place	Street vendors	Informal transport services	Other informal activities
Place A	150	50	Street performances, repair services
Place B	100	30	Food stalls, repair services
Place C	130	40	Art sales, street performances
Place D	120	35	Food stalls, artisanal crafts
Place E	140	45	Repair services, artisanal crafts

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.2. Assess the influence of public places on local businesses and tourism in the Philippines

The third research objective was to assess the influence of public places on local businesses

and tourism in the Philippines. For this purpose, the effects of public places on local commerce, tourism attractions, and overall city attractiveness were analyzed.

Table 4. Impact of selected public places on local businesses and tourism

Public place	Number of local businesses	Tourism visits (per year)	Effect on city attractiveness
Place A	75	20,000	Increased by 15%
Place B	50	15,000	Increased by 12%
Place C	65	18,000	Increased by 13%
Place D	55	16,000	Increased by 10%
Place E	70	19,000	Increased by 14%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

4.3. The local community's perception of the economic role of public places

The fourth objective of the research was to understand the local community's perception of the economic role of public places. This aspect was evaluated through factors like perceived economic

benefit, the importance of public places for the local economy, and the community's support for further development and preservation of public places.

Table 5 represents the community's perception of the economic role of selected public places in the urban areas of the Philippines:

Table 5. Community perception of the economic role of selected public places

Public place	Perceived economic benefit (%)	Importance for local economy (Scale 1-5)	Support for development and preservation (%)
Place A	75%	4.5	85%
Place B	65%	4.2	80%
Place C	70%	4.3	82%
Place D	68%	4.1	81%
Place E	72%	4.4	83%

Source: Authors' elaboration.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Economic contributions of public places in selected urban areas of the Philippines

Table 2 shows the economic contributions of five public places in terms of direct income, job creation, impact on property values, and overall economic contribution. Place C yields the most direct income (PHP 60 million) and contributes the most to the local economy (PHP 80 million), suggesting a strong

engagement with the community. Despite generating the least direct income and jobs, Place B significantly impacts property values (15% increase), indicating its potential cultural significance or desirable location. Overall, the value of public places to local economies is not solely defined by direct income or jobs created, but also by their influence on property values and broader economic impact.

The direct income generated by these public places was significant, ranging from PHP 35 million to PHP 60 million per year. This confirms

the argument made by Nakamura and Abe (2016) that public spaces often serve as economic hubs in urban settings, providing a platform for a variety of commercial activities.

The public places also made a significant contribution to job creation. Consistent with Bromley's (2000) assertion that public spaces often sustain informal economies that are crucial for job creation, the public places in this study created between 200 and 500 jobs.

Moreover, the public places were found to positively impact nearby property values, confirming Crompton's (2001) study suggesting that parks and public spaces can lead to property value appreciation in their vicinity.

Finally, the contribution of these public places to the local economy was considerable. According to Nakamura and Abe (2016), public spaces have a multiplier effect on the local economy, as they attract visitors who spend money in the local area, thus stimulating economic activity.

In summary, the results suggest that public places in urban areas of the Philippines contribute significantly to the economy in terms of direct income, job creation, increasing property value, and stimulating local economic activity. Therefore, public places should be considered as crucial elements in urban economic development and urban planning strategies (Gehl, 2011).

5.2. Assessment of the influence of public places on local businesses and tourism in the Philippines

Table 3 illustrates the role of selected public places in supporting informal economies in urban areas of the Philippines. Public places were found to provide a venue for a significant number of street vendors. This is consistent with Bromley's (2000) assertion that public spaces are the lifelines of street vendors, who make up a substantial portion of the informal economy. In line with Bromley's findings, public places in this study were seen to house between 100 to 150 street vendors.

Furthermore, the study confirmed that public places are hubs for informal transport services. These places hosted between 30 to 50 informal transport services, including pedicabs and tricycles. These findings reinforce observations Joassart-Marcelli (2020) that public places often serve as informal transit hubs in developing countries, where formal public transportation is inadequate or lacking.

Finally, other informal economic activities such as street performances, food stalls, repair services, art sales, and artisanal crafts were observed in these public places. This aligns with the work of Nakamura and Abe (2016), who argued that public spaces provide opportunities for diverse economic activities that can contribute to local economies.

In summary, these results underscore the role of public places in supporting the informal economy. Such spaces can provide livelihood opportunities for many Filipinos, suggesting that urban planning and policy-making must recognize and integrate these activities into broader economic and development strategies (Bromley, 2000).

5.3. Assessment of the influence of public places on local businesses and tourism in the Philippines

As can be seen in Table 4, each of the public places investigated was surrounded by a significant number of local businesses, ranging from 50 to 75. This aligns with the findings of Nakamura and Abe (2016) who argued that public spaces often stimulate commercial activities in their vicinity.

These public places also attracted substantial tourism visits per year, ranging from 15,000 to 20,000 visits. This supports the assertion made by Brueckner et al. (1999) that public places often serve as significant tourist attractions. They offer a variety of cultural, recreational, and aesthetic experiences that can draw domestic and international visitors.

Furthermore, these public places contributed to increasing the city's attractiveness. Cities with well-maintained and vibrant public places are often more appealing to residents, tourists, and investors (Gehl, 2011). The attractiveness of the cities in this study increased by 10% to 15% due to the presence of public places.

In summary, the results of this study confirm that public places can significantly influence local businesses and tourism. Therefore, urban planning and policy-making should consider these spaces as important drivers for local economic growth and urban attractiveness (Gehl, 2011).

5.4. The local community's perception of the economic role of public places

It can be observed in Table 5 that community members at each public place perceived a significant economic benefit from these spaces, with percentages ranging from 65% to 75%. This aligns with the work of Low et al. (2005), who found that communities often perceive public spaces as beneficial to local economies due to the variety of economic activities they host.

Further, local communities rated the importance of public places for their local economy highly, with scores ranging from 4.1 to 4.5 on a 5-point scale. This reflects a deep understanding of the crucial role these public spaces play in the economy, which is consistent with the findings of Francis et al. (2012).

Moreover, a high percentage of community members, ranging from 80% to 85%, supported further development and preservation of these public places. This finding demonstrates a community's recognition of the value of public spaces, not only as economic assets but also as crucial components of their living environment (Mehta, 2014).

In summary, the research results indicate that local communities recognize and appreciate the economic role of public places. As such, policy-making and urban planning must take into account these perceptions and attitudes to effectively preserve, manage, and develop public places (Gehl, 2011).

5.5. Proposed recommendations for a comprehensive urban management plan that maximizes the economic potential of public places

The sixth objective of the research was to propose recommendations for a comprehensive urban management plan that maximizes the economic

potential of public places. This was built on the findings of the previous objectives, which highlighted the economic contributions of public places, their role in supporting informal economies, their influence on local businesses and tourism, and the perceptions of the local community.

Table 6. Proposed recommendations and their expected impact

<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Strategies/Activities</i>	<i>Expected output/Impact</i>	<i>Responsible persons/Agencies</i>
Enhance the physical design and amenities of public places	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conduct regular maintenance and improvement activities. 2. Install or upgrade amenities (benches, toilets, kiosks, etc.). 3. Improve accessibility for people with disabilities. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enhanced visitor experience. 2. Increased patronage of local businesses. 3. Higher property values. 	Local government units (LGUs), Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), Local community organizations
Provide support and regulations for informal economies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement fair and supportive policies for informal workers. 2. Provide skills training and capacity building. 3. Formalize sectors of the informal economy where beneficial. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improved economic conditions for informal workers. 2. Local economic stimulation. 3. Increased business formalization. 	Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), LGUs, Informal economy associations
Promote public places as tourism hotspots	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop and implement tourism promotion strategies. 2. Partner with local businesses for tourism packages. 3. Install informational signage and maps. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increased tourism visits. 2. Local economic growth. 3. Job creation. 	Department of Tourism (DOT), LGUs, Local business organizations
Foster community engagement in public place management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish community-based management committees. 2. Conduct regular community consultations. 3. Implement community volunteer programs for maintenance and preservation. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthened community perception. 2. Preserved and well-maintained public places. 3. Economic sustainability. 	LGUs, Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), Local community organizations

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 6 shows the final research objective of the study which is to propose recommendations for a comprehensive urban management plan aimed at maximizing the economic potential of public places. The recommendations and corresponding strategies and activities were crafted based on the key findings and insights gained from the previous research objectives. These were then integrated with the expected outputs or impacts and responsible persons or agencies to form a comprehensive and actionable plan.

The first recommendation is to enhance the physical design and amenities of public places. Activities such as conducting regular maintenance, upgrading amenities, and improving accessibility would be instrumental in achieving this. The LGUs, in partnership with the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) and local community organizations, have the mandate to ensure public spaces are inviting and accessible. Improved public spaces would result in an enhanced visitor experience, increased patronage of local businesses, and potentially higher property values in surrounding areas (Gehl, 2011).

The second recommendation is to provide support and regulations for informal economies. By implementing supportive policies, providing skills training, and promoting beneficial formalization, we can create more favorable conditions for informal workers. The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), LGUs, and informal economy associations would be key actors in this regard. These actions would contribute to local economic stimulation and increased business formalization (Bromley, 2000).

Promoting public places as tourism hotspots is the third recommendation. This could be achieved through the development of tourism promotion strategies, partnering with local businesses for tourism packages, and installing informational signage and maps. The Department of Tourism (DOT), LGUs, and local business organizations would be instrumental in these activities. The expected outcome would be increased tourism visits, local economic growth, and job creation (Brueckner et al., 1999).

Lastly, fostering community engagement in public place management is recommended. This could be realized through the establishment of community-based management committees, regular community consultations, and community volunteer programs. LGUs, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), and local community organizations would play significant roles in these efforts. This strategy is expected to lead to a strengthened community perception, preserved and well-maintained public places, and economic sustainability (Francis et al., 2012).

6. CONCLUSION

This research not only highlights the substantial but underutilized economic potential of public places in the Philippines but also underscores their critical role in supporting local economies, informal sectors, businesses, and tourism. Despite their undeniable significance, these spaces grapple with challenges such as inadequate amenities and insufficient support mechanisms. The findings go beyond

emphasizing the challenges, presenting a compelling opportunity for local governments to capitalize on these economic benefits through the strategic implementation of comprehensive urban management plans. These plans, outlined in this study, advocate for holistic improvements encompassing the physical design of public spaces, structured support for informal economies, proactive tourism promotion, and increased community involvement in public place management. As a crucial addition to the conclusion, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of

this study, providing a nuanced perspective on the research outcomes, and proposing potential avenues for future research. This comprehensive approach ensures a more balanced understanding of the research findings and guides further investigations in the dynamic realm of public place economics and urban development. By actively engaging in such endeavors, cities can unlock the full potential of public spaces, thereby contributing significantly to urban revitalization and fostering sustainable urban development.

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