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# Editorial

## Cultural Features and Ceremonies Associated with Ancient Built Environment

Built environment takes pride of place in this number of Vidurava. The two articles on built environment in this journal tend to showcase two contrasting scenes in town and country planning as reflected in what may appear to be the characteristic landscape architecture in ancient times on the one hand, and the high technology built space architecture in modern town and country planning, on the other hand.

There is no doubt that environmental variables of ancient times have been subjected to substantial and adverse pressures over the last several centuries, necessitating progressively advanced technologies and strategies to meet the challenges affecting the natural as well as the built environment. Thus for example, the consequences of climate change, air and water pollution, garbage disposal, drainage, hygiene and sanitation, depletion of natural resources, enhanced efforts in infrastructure development including providing roads, highways, bridges and other facilities, as well as management and control of natural and man-made hazards, all of which need intense focusing in modern built environment and town planning.

Reflecting on Sri Lanka's ancient built environment, what seems to be a characteristic feature is the design and planning uniformity observed in the core physical infrastructure within each of the relevant Royal cities of ancient Sri Lanka, constructed with durable building materials. However, unfortunately, due to the use of perishable construction material in the ordinary dwelling places, there seems to be no traces of what could have been the characteristics features of the residential units of the common man in ancient times.

According to Prof. Lionel Benthara, formerly of the University of Visual and Performing Arts, who had done an extensive study on low country ceremonies and rituals associated with architectural contributions to the construction of dwelling houses in ancient times, a variety of rituals that were associated with every aspect of the rural built environment had been in existence. Apparently most of the ancient Sinhala and Pali chronicles are known to have given detailed accounts on how building sites were initially selected using astrological considerations and asterisms (*ñekath*), and consequently the stepwise development of the design, structural features, as well as the type of building materials that should be used.

The creation of a dwelling house that conforms to provide physical and mental satisfaction was a primary requirement. Consequently the choice of a stable and physically uniform site was the main consideration, for which local expertise was sought. Herein too astrological consultations as well as asterisms played a crucial role. In addition, wherever necessary, traditional performances of dance, drumming, and recitation of ritualistic songs (*shanthi-karma*) to expel evil spirits (*bbuthayo*), or alternately the reciting of incantations (*yathika* or *kannalavu yathika*) to seek the blessings of tutelary deities were all part and parcel of the architectural considerations in domestic home construction. These rituals, based on strong and positive beliefs, are known to have had an overall sense of satisfaction among common folk in ancient Sri Lanka.

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