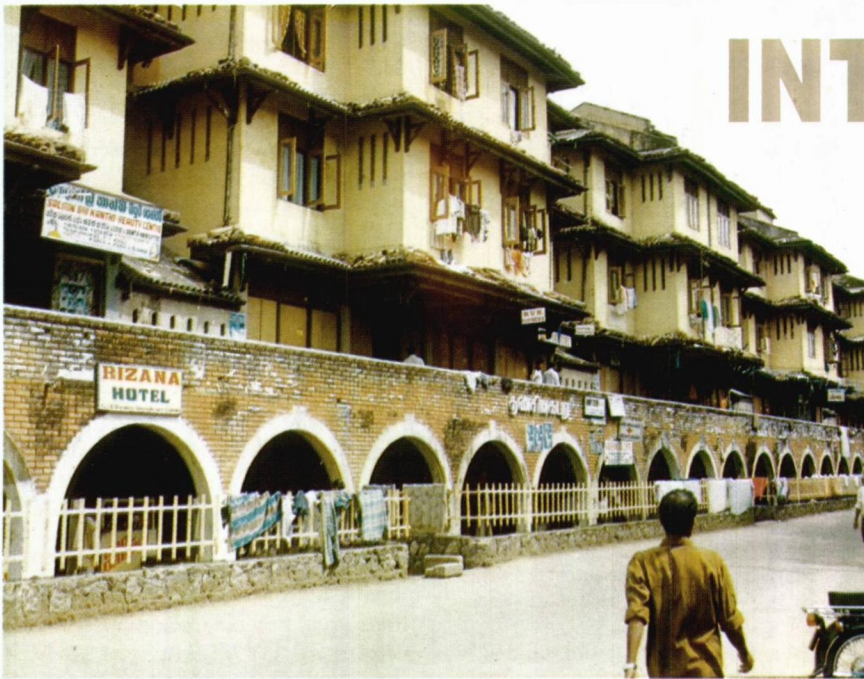


# CONSERVATION IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT: A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS?

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*New Developments that respect 'minor history' character of the locality of its people*

The term Conservation is inappropriately interpreted or used, at least in the development of urban areas. It is looked at times, as mere romantic attachment to history; an effort to drag the present to fifty or more years back. In short, as an impediment to progressive development towards urban megapolices of the 21st century. Preserving a historic building here and there is considered an insignificant effort to satisfy the history lovers, which would not greatly intervene with the overall development process.

Some other misconceptions evolved through conservation practice have also been added to this. Fitting into the patterns of existing street elevation is another mistaken approach in building design in historic urban contexts. It is widely adopted in urban conservation programmes as well. Unfortunately, this surface preservation method has devalued the real potentials in conservation to a certain extent, by

allowing it to be narrowly considered as a superficial approach, and thus, less significant in the development process. On the other hand, it is believed that conservation is necessary only for the rehabilitation of historic decayed urban fabrics and not for recently emerged urban areas. These modern urban settlements are considered representations of modern aspirations, and centres for growth towards metropolices of future. Conservation is thought as an irrelevant term in such contexts. Further it is again seen as a mere consolidation activity of decayed buildings or urban fabric which is devoid of potential for economic growth, except at times, connected to moderate levels of tourism.

This phobia on conservation as hindrance to development needs to be reviewed and redefined. Urban conservation is firstly not about dead and deserted historic settlements to be excavated and consolidated. Rather it is about 'living' settlements, about life and

its sustenance. Perhaps 'revitalisation' would be a better term, hence, it is infusion of vigour into the urban life, its activities, image and structures. Two important characteristics related to life must then be addressed – change and growth. Conservation must accommodate them. Secondly urban life means people and their social life. Conservation should look after the physical, social, economic and psychological needs of people in the area concerned. Conservation without people or not for people would not survive. Thirdly, development is seen primarily as economic growth and its ambitious, sky-reaching physical manifestations, which in turn refers largely to quantitative attributes of development. But conservation, its philosophy, principles and practice, are essentially woven around the qualitative attribute of development. Can conservation therefore further be a hindrance to development?

It is clear that no conventional attitude of development should be applied in dealing with conservation in urban areas. It adds a new dimension to development. The crux of the matter here is 'continuity vs. Compatibility' and the maintenance of balance between the two. Historical connotations of the place, – not only buildings, but memories, meanings, symbols and activities as well, must be continued but they should be compatible with the contemporary aspirations. Similarly growth and change must be continued but be compatible with what is preserved or selected to continue. Past must respect the future and future must accommodate

the past. Which means maintaining a balance; being in a constant dialogue, a conversation in order to identify the potentials, problems and limitations, thus, to bring harmony between the two. (Observe that the term 'conservation' contains the world 'conservation' within it.) Conservation therefore brings alternative meaning for both promotion and control of development. It generates a set of better values and a basis for regulatory measures that leads to qualitative development.

Urban conservation acknowledges concepts of sustainable development, eco-sensitive development and even, place making. All these approaches concern on the equation of the balance between the ideological issue – compatibility vs. continuity, in the development process. Sustainable development means the wise use of resources available in fulfilling the contemporary needs, but the manner by which the resources are handled, used or managed must be compatible to the extent that it should facilitate continuance and preservation of resources for the future generations. Traditional land use patterns at macro level discloses the wise use of land during the bygone era that, the dry zone was extensively used and turned into a fertile environ for urban settlements while the wet zone was largely conserved for constant supply of natural resources. This indicates the incompatibility of present land use and suggests new trends for urban settlement development for better use of resources available, but neglected. Rehabilitation of historic buildings is also a wise sustainable act commonly practised in urban conservation programmes.

Eco-sensitive development too means the maintenance of balance between the man-made and natural environments. The man-made environment should be compatible with the natural environment and both should respect each others' right to continue and survive. The appropriate reuse of the old urban fabric, adaptation of specific local concepts, traditions and materials, in the design and construction of new urban quarters and being responsive to local climate, social, cultural and economic contexts are important in urban development programmes. Another significant aspect

of eco-sensitive development is the concern on human ecology – the psychological interrelation between the man and his environment. This refers to the importance of conserving the intrinsic qualities, characteristics, memories and symbols of the particular environment.

This throws some light on another dimension of urban ecosphere, – the 'regional spirits' evolved through long associations with history and socio-economic and political forces behind. Two good examples are the Southern part of the country and Kandy. These regions represent two different but equally important 'spirits' – a particular identity, in the culture and history of Sri Lanka and a contrasting dynamism in socio-economic and political realms. Their architecture and urban fabric are the concrete evidences for the manifestations of the individual identities. Recognising, preserving and allowing to continue these regional spirits is vital for the effective regional development and decentralisation of economic and political power and integrated national development. This thesis must be extended into the other parts of the country as well.

Moreover, one may find different sub-regions within these larger regions, each predominantly populated with one ethnic group, with their unique architectural and urban heritage. They share the history of the larger region, contributed to it and have generated unique identities for themselves within the particular regional spirit shared. Being sensitive to that sort of vividness of these regional varieties of identities would give secured feeling of being sustained for growth and a footing for that. It brings harmony among people

and between them and their environment. Questioning the validity of these identities and neglecting or destroying them may confuse the natural process of growth and change. They must therefore be allowed to continue. They will naturally change, if necessary, in order to be in compliance with needs that may emerge within the community itself. Such levels of eco-sensitivity may make conservation an evoker of interethnic relations that would relieve the struggle of Nation building process.

The same aspect brings us back to the concept of place. The contemporary practices have made our urban environment devoid of existential attributes such as character, meanings and identity. The consequence of this process of 'loss of place' – monotonous, inexpressive and inhumane urbanscapes, cries for the need of approaches like conservation to guide the contemporary trends in development. Conservation harmonises itself with the intrinsic elements, patterns, qualities, process and people of the locality.

Infusing life into the historic core of an urban area can be manipulated to re-energize the life of peripheral areas of the locality. This potential is very much important in revitalisation programmes because it will support the sustenance of life of the preserved core. Here, the historic core should become a socialising centre, a gathering place for the celebration of community life for the periphery and the suburbs. At the same time, the core can be a 'link' between different zones of the locality – modern commercial zone, administrative zone, transport terminal and inner residential regions. The



*Unique, old corner-shop – House at Weligama Junction, gives identity people of the region*

historic core thus becomes the hub of the social and cultural interaction. It will then never be dead. This integrative value of the core provides the role that these historic buildings and sites should play in the contemporary society. It also provides the basis for selection of areas and buildings to be conserved, the types of new uses for them, the level of tranquilisation required within the preserved core, and areas to be allocated for future growth. Seasonal cultural events peculiar to these areas also add vigour to this new role.

Preservation of both macro and micro aspects of the past of the historic centre is equally important here. Macro level of history means the important historic events and monuments related to them. These become the major references for the outsiders and suburb dwellers. The micro level of history related to the everyday experiences of the dwellers of the historic core itself. For the upliftment of life, their minor associations and interactions with the area must also be studied and preserved. The people of the core would not generate a feel for the environ and would become objects or exhibits for the visitors.

In this context, revitalising historic urban settlements in Sri Lanka would not propose greater difficulties. One reason for this would be that our living historic urban quarters are not of great scale as in other parts of the world. Secondly, most of these areas are considerably intact and have not been severely destroyed or grown. Some areas are, of course, being changed and modernised, but they can be regenerated. The development activities taking place are road widening programmes than indepth involvements. Nevertheless the threat of loosing these areas is rapidly increasing. Most of these towns are results of ribbon developments and transport routes which play significant role for their existence. Detoured roads, at some places such as Ambalnagoda and Weligama, have contributed lot to preserving the historic core and allowing new centres – especially commercial and administrative, to grow around them.

Although these towns were not designed for modern locomotives, the total tranquilisation of the core seems to be an unnecessary step in our context. The transport terminal located just outside the historic core of the town has made it a link between the inner residential region (village) and the transport routes (the outside world). This can be seen as an extension of the traditional notion of 'Kada Mandiya' – a catalyst for social interaction of the village. Many towns are also centres for some seasonal cultural events and they can be incorporated into the revitalisation activity. Even the urban form and architecture of these towns, in most cases, have emerged out of these events. Development schemes must be therefore redrawn taking these conservation issues into consideration.

Conservation contains enormous potential for development. It can guide the impact of urbanisation – explosion of population, technology and economy, and secure the wise use of resources available. It also protect the heritage – both natural and man-made, and the social integrity. It is a dynamic process concerned on life and change. It should not be looked with a static eye which would not capture its extent. It offers a wider perspective.



*Conserved historic Cores as  
Socialising Centres*