

WHAT IF!



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Many of you may have wondered why such a strange topic - not as crystal clear as expected. Infrastructure, may be examined both at macro and micro levels and the concept of infrastructure can range from the built environment, the forests, water, air, etc and even to include simple every day objects like chairs, tables, things that we take for granted. They are all infrastructure for life at different planes. Inseparable, all interconnected and interrelated, so if we were to stray across the boards please bear with us.

Many, in the past have suggested appropriate solutions and support systems for a tropical lifestyle for Sri Lankans. Unfortunately, the powers that matter at most times are clothed in an inferiority complex and a mist of arrogance, oblivious to the need to listen and the opportunity slips us by. In our mad rush to imitate and climb onto the international band-wagon, which is but the globalization of western capital aptly termed the 'Americanization of the World' by Henry Kissinger, the poor in our countries are losing out as pressure mounts to concentrate on the more affluent and advantaged sectors in our societies to the detriment of the larger more important rural mass now being relegated to the eternal treadmill.

Unfortunately, Sri Lanka is on the threshold of being plummeted at breakneck speed into a new age, a new era, a new world, through the 'Regain Sri Lanka Policy' which will be totally private sector driven. The aspiration of the youth is high but the ability to achieve this goal in the short term will be short lived, due to the extensive destruction of the Environment that it will bring in its wake. How sustainable is sustainable development if the engine that drives it is based on profit alone? Added to an education system, which has been systematically and intentionally destroyed and shielded from producing the real people needed for the development of the country, together with low job opportunities, both unable to keep pace with the unnatural and over heated exposure to new technology. From the experiences of the developed world, in many cases the result of this unnatural bombardment and its ultimate outlet is violence and requires very serious

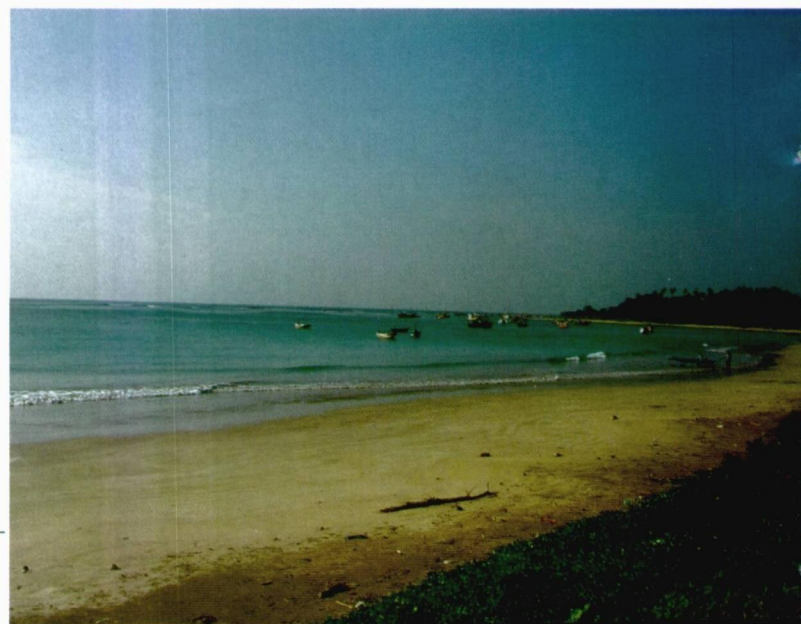
study and thought. Traditional Sri Lanka is lucky, except for a few, the average youth is non-violent, but it is too early in the process to conclude with any accuracy.

If Sri Lanka is to have any future, it needs a concerted mature approach to understand and formulate a sustainable balance not only between Development and Environment, but also between Physical Development and culture.

Not merely aping culture and living in the past, but developing a positive and strong understanding of the pursuit for a contemporary, identifiable life-style and architecture, one which is compatible with modern societal needs from where entry into the 21st century will be a natural evolution from the past.

If it is to succeed, the transition needs a systematic and coordinated programme, which will encompass a total vision for the future of Sri Lanka. A vision that will bring about and reinforce a traditional quality of life, where Man and the Environment live in a symbiotic relationship through the promotion of health, education and appropriate Urban and Rural Development in Sri Lanka. A life style that Sri Lankans of the future could be proud of, which continues to uphold the glorious principles of the past while progressing into the 21st century, walking tall.

Though many of us think in an alien framework and mind, we are primarily Asian. It is this Asian-ness that has sustained human life form on this island for



thousands of years. Over the years this life form learnt to respect nature, the environment and the belief systems, the sun, the moon and the monsoons. The climatic changes were studied, and life and architecture were adapted to suit it. Therefore what is understood, as culture is a mixture of all of these ideas made sustainable. Even during the colonial occupation of this country, the religious leaders of that period took it upon themselves to ensure that the cultural matrix was nurtured, protected and preserved for posterity.

Something happened a decade before and after independence. The number of players and their individual aspirations increased, bringing about conflicts. The whole system was politicized for very narrow gains. It is not that there was no politics in the ancient past, there was, there have been instances where kings became destructive, but religion was a part of life, deep rooted and able to resist fragmentation, it was strong and bold enough to hold the cultural matrix in place. It was able to repair the cracks and bring it back in line. We have to hope that this is still possible.

In the rare event of this not being possible, it will be left to the political leadership to protect and preserve this cultural matrix. However, if they fail, it will be lost forever, never to return. This is all hypothetical; let us hope there is a will and a need to protect and preserve this very beautiful and ancient culture.

Let us face it even though we work on computers and talk in foreign tongues, we are totally rural in our outlook. No sooner we get home we change into a sarong, put our feet up and relax, imagining that the concrete wall opposite is a paddy field. This is the rural ness in us. We Sri Lankans have never been urban animals and I personally hope we never will be. If we need to be, let us hope it will be a truly Asian urbanism that will prevail. It is this Asian quality of life, the close relationship of life with nature, the relationship of the internal to the external, the natural flow of space from one to another, together with a careful study and respect for climate that our physical development must help preserve and protect. All our Development effort should focus on the maintenance and enhancing of this quality, by the creation of appropriate spaces for living, learning, working, recreation and even for dying. The concept of a quality Asian space is quite exciting.

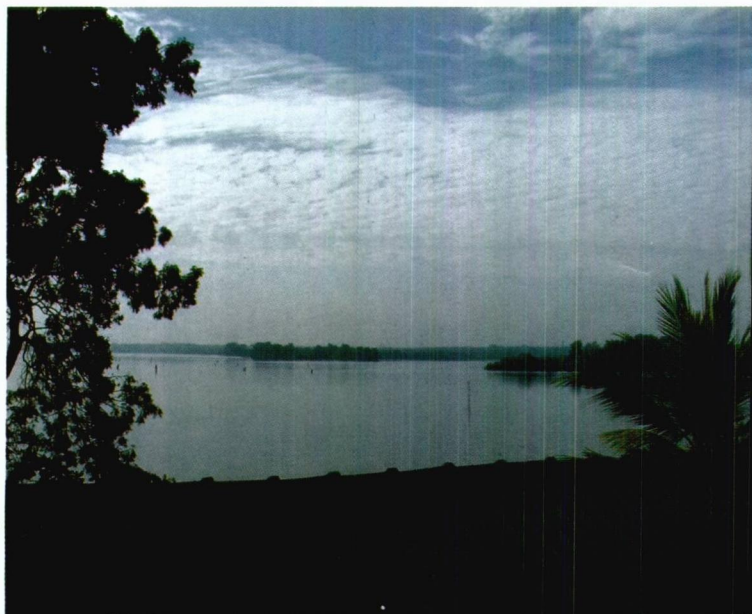
When the West refers to an Asian Space, the connotations are that of a recent visual image, the common preconceived imagery by a tourist of the Sri Lankan environment that showed only the occasional smile, but concentrated more on the squalor and the worst in Asia. The bad in the west is even worse, but it is hidden away and only the bad in Asia is portrayed. It is all part of the media psychology, a hype to build up to supremacy. We should not have an inferiority complex about it.

We should seek what is best and strive toward the creation of the Ultimate Asian Landscape. Not a European clone, but one that suits us as human beings, one we can naturally fit into. An environment that responds to the requirements of climate, space, spirituality and life. A meditative Built Environment without tension reflecting the traditional value systems, extending into a cool and shaded, friendly city. A city where our future generations will be happy to live. Our living spaces and environments should not reduce us to nervous wrecks but instead, they should act as batteries that will recharge us for the next day.

It has been argued by this Author elsewhere, that the Architecture of Sri Lanka is not an Architecture of buildings, but an Architecture of levels and volumes, an infinite space, where at times even trees form the canopy. It is only the respect for this free flowing space that will blend Man with the Environment.

In the West the concept of development brought about by the harsh climate has always been man against nature. Man's conquest of nature, whilst the Asian psyche, especially in the tropics, has always relied on a blend and a healthy respect for Natural Laws. We should re-examine this concept. We should all strive to get back to our roots and retrace our paths, where did we come from and where are we going?

The question that may be asked is, are we all to be moulded as in the West? Can entities based on analytical thinking alone be happy in our societies? The West needs Asia to remain subservient to provide cheap labour, the producers of goods for the West, mostly subsidised to enable the West to maintain the ever increasing standard of life. Recent studies in Holland have shown that they would have to drop or reduce their living standards by as much as 80% if they were to equate it to that of the Developing World. While the Developed World gets richer, we get poorer and in the future this will be exacerbated. The choice is in our grasp. It is ours to take.



In the distant past, an equitable social welfare system, which included an excellent health, and education system in the whole of the country, led to the stabilization of the Urban-Rural population. Today, its systematic and willful breakdown has led to a slow but systematic growth in the urban population and to utter chaos in the rural sector.

It is projected that the Urban-Rural ratio will change from a 22% Urban to 65% in 2030. This forced 'Donor' driven migration is totally unsustainable. We have to re-examine and stop this projected trend to ensure that this little island country of ours will not be totally destroyed by uncontrolled urbanization brought about by an unjustified move to a 'Mega City' concept at the expense of the rural masses. The systematic introduction of adequate mitigatory measures to stem urban migration and the provision of better and more fulfilling inputs at rural level is essential and advisable.

It is thirty years too late, however, even at this late stage, it is essential to evolve a land use plan at macro level for the whole country and in greater detail for every urban centre, charged with a vision of

waste minimization and recycling should be improved using new management and recycling technology to reduce the amount of landfill required. All this is the social responsibility of people and the government. The privatization of water has been a failure in most parts of the world, as only profit was extracted and no reinvestment in the infrastructure took place.

The diminishing water resources, due to unplanned urbanization and unplanned economic activity destroying the precious source, should be examined and re-examined and solutions sought ensuring long-term availability of water in both quality and quantity.

Steps should also be taken to protect and conserve all environmentally valuable and sensitive natural resources and areas, hillsides and mountains, the river basins, water bodies, mangrove eco-systems and other wetlands, paddy lands, marshes, areas covered by plantations, those of high scenic value, etc. to ensure environmental and ecological harmony. Effective management, the reinforcement of existing laws and introducing new laws if necessary, to protect, conserve, and prevent the overexploitation of such resources, could do this.



Scenic beauty of Sri Lanka

promoting sustainable development. The lack of these maps and plans lead to all sorts of abuse especially at a political level. We have been made to understand that such a plan has been prepared but it needs public exposure first in draft, prior to the final plan being prepared.

In all urban areas, transport infrastructure and related services should be provided, in keeping with the requirements of the present and future needs of the country. In areas where services cannot be provided efficiently or without causing serious environmental or social impacts, the Development should be controlled or curtailed. The present trend towards the privatization of transport, health and education in Sri Lanka will ensure that the gap between the haves and have-nots will be widened, bringing about dissatisfaction in the rural sector and even revolution

The provision of proper infrastructure dealing with water supply, sanitation and sewerage, surface drainage, flood control, solid waste management,

Accepting the inevitable, that there will be no people to pluck tea in the near future, the steeper hill slopes will be neglected. *What if*, they were forested to ensure continuous rainfall that will replenish the ground water reserves? The forest cover would be back to 30%. This cover is still insufficient as it is said that real sustainability is based on 40% cover. In 1977, the island had a cover of 44% and today it has been willfully and systematically reduced to 18%. If the present trend continues Sri Lanka will not have any forests by 2025 and our wildlife would have disappeared. The greatest shame is that this island is still regarded as a hotspot.





The present filling of wetlands or low lying lands should be discouraged, as it is better to increase the efficiency and the density in the urban areas than destroy these productive lands. We should always bear in mind that

land is in short supply and is not a renewable resource. The plans and guidelines for infrastructure support, settlement planning and transportation requirements in the Urban Development plan should take into account the current and future needs of the different areas. The location of all future Industrial Zones and Industrial Townships should be incorporated into the National Urban Development Plan and this only after proper and complete investigations and environment studies have been concluded. A phasing off and relocation of all existing factories into the proposed industrial zones should be a pre requisite of the Development Plan. The zones could then be controlled for all services, other infrastructure development, pollution controls, etc.

However, we should not forget the future of Sri Lanka is not in industry alone, if you produce you must have an assured market. Our domestic market is small and insignificant, while international markets can be controlled and closed at will. Therefore, our future lies in the systematic development of the rural sector. A country should be able to feed its population. This should be a prime consideration. Fertilizer and insecticide less production methods must be evolved. Technologies must be evolved whereby 'natural means control the pests' and productivity is enhanced with natural fertilizers instead of resorting to harmful chemicals. Traditional cultural knowledge had the answers and today we with our western education think we know more.

garbage dump



Unfortunately, the 'colonial economy' that we have always practiced and followed since independence, relegates the engines of change, the rural population to oblivion, this must change. All political parties ride on the backs of the rural sector to power, but soon forget them in the aftermath and shower all the benefits on a few entrepreneurs in Colombo. At the next election with lies and deceit the real Sri Lankan population, the rural population is coerced to standby their ungrateful leaders again. *What if*, there was a see think in economic thinking, the cheating of the rural population will stop and they will have their rightful place in the sun.

The unplanned nature of development is displayed in the ribbons of speculative building now made permanent along our roads. Not only does it add to the visual pollution, but residential and other commercial activity abutting the roads make it dangerous to both the user of the road and the building. *What if*, all development along the roads, including the bus stations, service facilities and transport nodes were removed and created off the main roads, thus permitting the traffic arteries to function smoothly and reduce congestion on the roadsides. There will be a reduction in fuel consumption, less wear and tear on the roads and on vehicles bringing about a reduction in foreign exchange and the traffic would move faster making driving on the roads less tense.

A highway is not a 'ribbon in the moonlight' as stated by a famous poet. We never had an overall vision for a system of highways to serve the country. The Colonial roads radiating out to bring the plantation goods to the port of Colombo for export were over the years only widened, destroying good examples of 19th Century entrepreneurial towns but, *what if*, had we developed a road system to serve modern Sri Lanka starting with one road connecting the North with the South, Jaffna and Hambantota, we would not have the conflict we face today. This author has fond memories of riding a bike to Jaffna to do his measured drawing of the Jaffna Fort in 1964. Many of you were not born at the time.



paddy field



In the tracing and development of highways, a careful study should be made of the natural features, like rocks, scenic views, large clumps of trees, etc and these should be sensitively incorporated as an integral part of the design, at no time should they be removed. Many of the upcountry roads are elephant tracks that carefully negotiated the natural features, later converted to roads during the development of the plantations. If one takes the time to visit any of the ancient monasteries, one will find manmade walls gently flowing into and off rocks, all in perfect harmony. This was man showing, displaying his respect for nature. Is it that we are incapable of this sensitivity today? What if, our roads are carefully designed into the landscape with bridges clearing sensitive areas, instead of destroying hillsides, forest and its biodiversity to provide the earth required for filling the land? We are informed that the Matara highway has certain areas with 80 ft of filling, a frightening thought in times of intensive rain and flood.

Traditionally, all urban areas were well organized and properly laid out. The creation of large parks, *Udyanaya's* at the periphery, created the required transition between the urban and rural lands. The '*thisbamba*' in the *Puranagamas* or traditional villages, was a tree covered area devoid of under cover and was reserved for the tethering of cattle and all other special festivities related to village life. This space served as the buffer between the village and the jungle. *What if*, all our peripheral lands or buffers surrounding all our villages and towns were parks. This wetlands and marshes would be preserved.

All future Development plans should consider large parklands and recreational spaces as an important and integral part of the urban space. Trees and landscaping should be made a major feature in this Asian concept. Here, special project budget allocations will become mandatory. Landscaping will help create a continuity and connectivity in the urban Environment. The city should have a series of interconnected public spaces, a shaded movement

pattern on to which the rest of the city could be hinged. Trees add volumes to a city, a three dimensional quality that softens the edges.

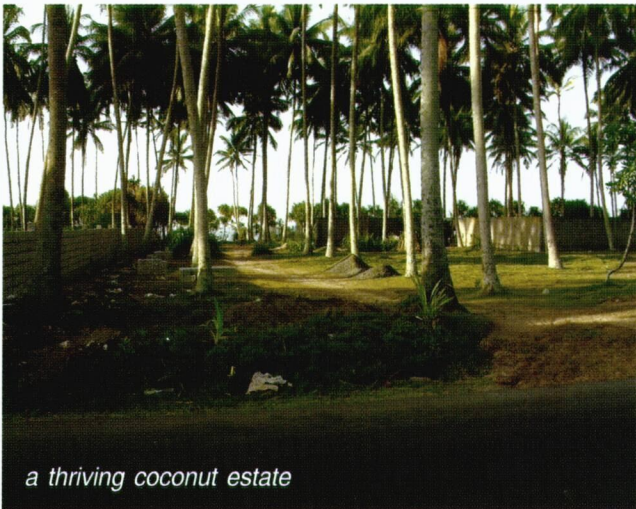
All street lines set backs and reservations should be formulated considering existing and future planting patterns thus permitting trees to reach proper natural proportions and spread to their final glory. Existing trees on the roadside should be protected using wider set back and building lines, and new trees should be planted.

A small country like Sri Lanka has an over proliferation of ugly advertising hoardings. Is it that the quality of the product is so bad that the producers have to shout from the rooftops to get attention? The visual aggression created by the advertising hoardings often destroys the calm and serenity required at a junction or a busy intersection. They destroy landscapes and places of scenic beauty by the stark colours and unrelated funfare. *What if*, No hoarding or billboards, including the use of artificial advertising or the defacing of natural features like rocks, were permitted on the roadsides. Instead the advertisers were permitted to spend an equivalent sum of money to plant trees and landscape the roadside. Their national efforts should be acknowledged by the discreet placement of a board commending their efforts. Tree lined streets will return the roads to the pedestrian and advertising will become a more responsible socially acceptable phenomenon.

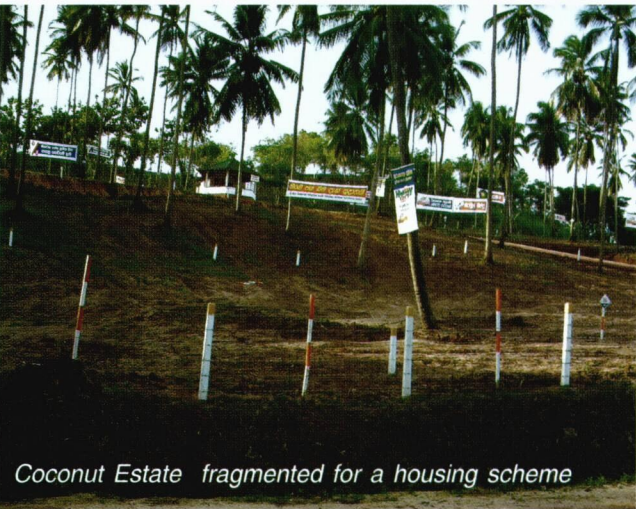
All future spatial planning should examine spaces as volumes, as three-dimensional models, not as flat two-dimensional sheets of paper. The study of volumes will help understand the subtle relationships with the immediate environment, natural and other sensitive features, etc. *What if*, there should then be made available for all future Developers? This will reduce the usual conflict areas faced by the Developers and make-task of the regulators easier. We should be designing prototypes, which will provide the basis for all future



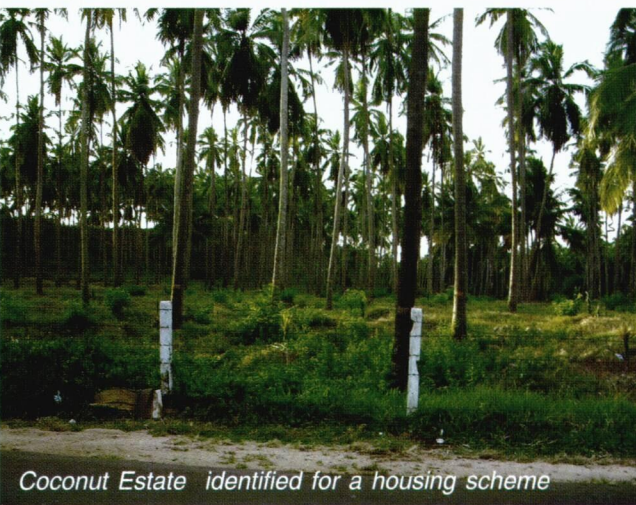
mangrove swamps



a thriving coconut estate



Coconut Estate fragmented for a housing scheme



Coconut Estate identified for a housing scheme

and subsequent development. Buildings should be seen in the context of their collective urban environment and the larger city. Buildings should not be designed as individuals but as part of the entire urban fabric.

The buildings should reflect the tropics, the heat of the sun and be site specific. The use of plants around, on and in the buildings should be encouraged. *What if*, all buildings had arcades, and the towns and cities shaded tree lined streets, water features, reduced paved areas to control heat and glare, visual continuity of landscaped areas, see-through surprises, all as part of an exciting Tropical Asian City.

The real Tropical Asian City and Environment is not a dream, it is a vision an achievable vision. A vision within our grasp, with proper coordination, it could easily become a reality and that, within our own lifetime. *What if*, Colombo was considered as special and not as a clone of Singapore, an artificial urban Disneyland for shopping, but as a Sri Lankan City, a city in a country with a large rural population, a population that cannot and should not be forgotten.

The importance of the mangrove swamps cannot be over stressed. It is essential for Natural Water drainage, pollution and flood control, as the breeding ground for a myriad of fish species, etc. Unfortunately, the mangrove swamps in the Chilaw and Puttalam region have been completely destroyed by uncontrolled and badly managed prawn farming. *What if*, the mangrove swamps were first carefully studied and only less sensitive areas exposed to exploitation. The majority of the swamp would have remained an important lung for the city and the coastal zone habitat and an exceptional fisheries breeding ground.

The dumping of mixed refuse in landfills adjoining the waterways and paddy fields is bad practice. Toxic materials entering the water table will affect the natural drainage and pollute the eco-system. *What if*, we left the paddy lands as they were and used a more advanced methodology for the properly managed disposal of refuse? Simple, localized, easily implemented separating and recycling methods are also available and should be encouraged. Here mutual responsibility should be the key.

The unplanned and haphazard destruction of fertile coconut land affects the base industry and is a strain on the infrastructure resources; It leads to soil erosion and drastically reduces the tree cover. *What if*, cannot all this take place in properly planned integrated townships, so that the coconut lands remained intact?



The bed platforms for 'Ulpotha'.



Meemure



Why do road traces follow the line of the best trees?



We continue to destroy the best sites with hideous touristic accidents. Should the best sites be handed over to the tourism industry? This aspect requires serious thought, especially with the recent increased destruction of pristine sites. *What if*, the best sites are protected, conserved and retained for the enjoyment of all, and the development areas are confined to integrated tourist developments with proper planning, infrastructure and management. We continue to encroach into pristine lands, even the Knuckles range. This virgin land is being blocked out for hotels, an absolute travesty. *What if*, we should leave pristine sites alone and only enjoy them as we drive through and build hotels only in areas that are less destructive to the sensitive Environment. In 1978, this author made a suggestion that the tourism industry should have a ceiling in the relationship of rooms to land availability. 5 acres supporting a maximum of 50 rooms and 10 acres — 100 rooms, etc. everybody including the Minister in charge laughed. *What if*, we had accepted the suggestion, instead of building rooms or 1000 persons paying \$10, we would have had 10 persons paying \$1000 for our rooms and today we would have been as a country, proud owners of garden hotels. After all Sri Lanka is a tropical island. In 2004, we are rushing to make the same mistake again.

Tourism is an illusion, and is a fickle industry. In 1982, in a paper to this institute, this author suggested that all hotels along the coastline should be constructed in temporary material like mud. Again he was the laughing stock, but *what if*, we had heeded that advice, the hotels could have been constantly changed and may have even evolved into the state of the art hotels or if the industry failed they could be recycled into the ground without much financial loss. Today the investment is so enormous that it is forced to work with further investments. The bed platforms originally designed by this author for 'Ulpotha', cost a pittance and the guests are charged US\$100.00 per night. Interestingly, the cost of a platform was recovered in a month and the project has been in operation for about 5 years.

Meemure about 20kms down in the Knuckles valley has just been presented with electricity. A line has been drawn at enormous cost, cutting down some of the oldest Mee trees that gave the village its name. *What if*, instead of a wire that destroyed a part of history, solar devices powered and provided electricity to the village. It would have cost much less and been more eco-friendly. But someone found it necessary to gain access to the trees, they are quite valuable, some are said to be 15-20' in diameter.

Our haphazard distribution of land leaves much to be desired. We take it from everybody even the animals, the elephants, we build across their traditional routes



This particular building with colonnade, upper floor and balcony to the road was documented over a period of 110 years



Due to the demolition many buildings have lost their verandahs and entrances and have no meaning

and blame them if they come back to visit. If they walk in their own forest, we kill them. Sri Lanka loses three elephants a week. *What if*, we allow them to remain the way they are, be their magnificent selves and design our living pattern differently? *What if*, we are compassionate enough to leave the National Parks and Reserves for the animals as originally intended and not encroach into them with our four-wheel vehicles. The animals would have a refuge to hide in, to get away from us. Today we have disrespected their privacy and converted their living rooms into our playgrounds without even requesting permission. *What if*, we keep all development outside the parks and parks for the animals only.

We have destroyed all the entrepreneurial townships down the west coast in our zeal to widen the roads for more vehicles. The traffic now travels faster through these small towns making it dangerous for all crossing the street. *What if*, we created bypasses and preserved these quaint unique buildings. Due to the demolition many buildings have lost their verandahs and entrances and have no meaning, today they have people stepping out of their living rooms or kitchens on to the street.

This particular building with colonnade, upper floor and balcony to the road was documented over a period of 110 years; H.W.Cave first photographed it in 1894. This author did so in 1960 and every time it changed since. It lost half its facade in the late 1970's and the other half in 2003. We are poorer because we have today lost a complete architectural heritage related to a trading culture.

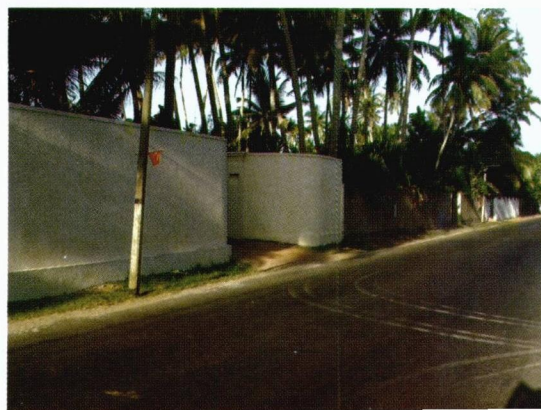
Why do road traces for urban roads and highways follow the line of the best trees even when other possibilities for avoiding them are available? Roads need to be designed. They should cease to be linear Developments, this illustration from a paper to the SLIA in 1982 made these suggestions. But being

tropical they need to be planted with shade trees to enable the pedestrian passage to be easier and pleasant. *What if*, all our towns and cities be landscaped with green trees, with street furniture, proper garbage disposal, etc?

The countryside is pock marked with chenas. The forest department has done some replanting using teak, eucalyptus and pine in the hill country, the later two are the least suitable. *What if*, we took a cue from Mr. Dambawinne, a forest officer from Kurunegala who decided to experiment with a mixed or analogue forest in an abandoned chena north of the town? This forest is about 75- 90 years and looks great, albeit highly stressed. *What if*, all our abandoned chenas along the roads were replanted? These roads would be extremely pleasant to travel on. But beware the choppers and destroyers from the Sri Lanka Telecom and the Ceylon Electricity Board. *What if*, the cables were taken underground at least through sensitive areas like the Kadugannawa pass? On enquiry we were told that they were not interested in all this. They had been asked to chop all the branches in the way and they were doing just that.

With the removal of all taxes on the sale of land, foreigners are buying up all the land on the south west coast. They build walls to enclose their possessions creating their privacy. It is interesting to note that there is no word for 'privacy' in the Sinhala language. This attitude towards boundaries reminds me of the old maps belonging to the Dutch and Portuguese period. Where a red line was drawn to indicate the controlled areas from the native ones. The wall constructed today is even worse. These high wall fortresses along the road create exclusive enclaves, completely closing and sealing off the seaside of the road, disallowing traditional access to the beach. The English flag now flutters from the Bastian of Count de Mauny's island in the Bay of Weligama.

high wall fortresses





Count de Mauny's island, Weligama



deforested and abandoned chena cultivation



Yes, *what if*, no lands along the coast were alienated then all could enjoy the simple things in life like the view of the sea, the clumps of pandanus, a fishing boat in the sea, the stilt fisherman and views of the bay, etc. It is the birthright of people of Sri Lanka to enjoy these simple things in life and no one, local or foreign has the right to take it away.

We would like to conclude with a quotation,

“*Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion.*

Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave, eats a bread it does not harvest and drinks a wine that flows not from its own winepress.

Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero, and that deems the glittering conqueror bountiful.

Pity the nation that despises a passion in its dream yet submits in its awakening.

Pity the nation that raises not its voice save when it walks in a funeral, boasts not except among its ruins and will rebel not save when its neck is laid between the sword and the block.

Pity the nation whose statesman is a fox, whose philosopher is a juggler and whose art is the art of patching and mimicking.

Pity the nation that welcomes its new ruler with trumpeting and farewells him with hootings, only to welcome another with trumpeting again.

Pity the nation whose sages are dumb with years and whose strong men are yet in the cradle.

Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment deeming itself a nation. ▲”

(Khalil Gibran — “The Garden of the Prophet”).