

AN URBAN RENAISSANCE ? PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALS IN ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING

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Introduction

We in Sri Lanka look forward to a cessation of violence, a return to law and order, and, to a period of sustained peace. In such favourable circumstances especially with a new influx of foreign investment, it is reasonable to expect a surge of urban construction activity. There may well be a short period of prosperity. The end result may not necessarily be an urban renaissance. Increased urbanization, could bring about a further growth of shanties, increased traffic congestion and pollution. The consequent diseconomies of continued uncontrolled urban growth could create in the medium term, some withdrawals of investments and even a flight of capital. If we are to foster a sustainable urban renaissance there are some basic problems that will need to be addressed. This paper discusses some of these basic problems in which it is felt that Architects and Urban Planners have special mitigatory roles to play.

The Urbanization Problem

Urbanization and attendant problems in the Third World are recognized as being among the major challenges that will confront mankind in the Twenty First Century. This particular phenomenon and problems such as the lack of shelter for a great mass of humanity, will be felt more in the Continent of Asia. It is expected that half the world's population will be urban by the year 2020 and that Asia alone will contain more than 50% of that population. The official prediction is that during the 30 year period 1990-2020, 1.5 billion people (i.e. one and a half times the population of China today) will be added to the urban centres of Asia.

It may not be relevant here for us to examine how and why Sri Lanka has hitherto averted the massive problems of urbanization. The issue is whether we will continue to be immune to it. A major change has been predicted. The change may already have begun, namely, migration from Dry Zone agriculture into urban areas. The Census, usually held every 10 years and scheduled for 1991, had to be abandoned due to chaos in the country at that time. With no statistics available since 1981 till very recently, it is difficult to quantify and comprehend the current status of rural-urban migration.

In addition to the 'internal' forces influencing migration, there are also very powerful 'external' forces which are becoming manifest. The impact of "globalization" on rural-urban migration in Sri Lanka will indeed be profound. It would therefore be most unwise if we were to assume that Sri Lanka will continue to be immune to this problem. **It must be expected that this country too will be exposed to the same harsh process of high rural-urban migration and have to grapple with the same kinds of urbanization problems as in the other Asian countries.**

It is not intended here to delve deeply into how we may cope with the many attendant problems of rapid urbanization. However it should be recognized that urbanization can hardly be tackled at the local or regional levels. It has to be seen as a serious national problem. **A major problem for Urban Planners is the need to convince the political decision-makers that a national policy will be required if the many related problems are to be adequately addressed.**

Such a policy will surely have to emphasize the need for many small and medium-sized urban centres through which more people will have ready access to urban-based social infrastructure.

An Attitudinal Problem

Many Sri Lankans share an attitude of antipathy towards urban places. The origins of this attitude may be to do with the fact that Colombo and many of the provincial capitals were in the past the enclaves of the successive Colonial oppressors. These urban places were alien to the indigenous population. **Most Sri Lankans even of today have rural roots. Their connections to Colombo or some of the provincial urban places are relatively recent. Furthermore the struggle for Independence and the nationalistic movement had a strong pro-rural and anti-urban flavour. Rural development and the national interest were seen those days as one and the same**². Most Sri Lankan Planners and Architects like most other Sri Lankan professionals share the same attitudes.

Before Independence and even before the Donoughmore era, there was already the influence of Patrick Geddes. He did a plan for Colombo in 1919 and talked about the possibility of Colombo becoming the "Garden City of the East"³. He was very much an integral part of the movement in Britain which concerned itself with "Garden Cities and Satellite Garden Suburbs". This was a movement rooted in the work of Ebenezer Howard and first came to be known almost a 100 years ago. Although the movement became very influential

in many parts of the world, it stemmed essentially from a British reaction against urban squalor that had resulted from the industrial Revolution. It was also a fundamental part of an Utopian school of thought. The well known Architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner was of the view that "... In fact the whole conception of the garden city and the garden suburbs are an escape from the city itself..."⁴. This movement was essentially anti-urban. Such views have influenced many Sri Lankans including Urban Planners.

The rural image sought for isolated resort hotels is a small piece of "Paradise" as suggested in an interesting recent paper⁵. We have of course to understand that the Garden City as an urban context and Paradise as a rural context do not exist in reality. They exist only in the ideal world image in the Architect's mind; in his version of 'Utopia'. This is not surprising because the whole concept of Garden Cities and Satellite Garden Suburbs of Ebenezer Howard, a hundred years ago, was in fact a utopian vision.

In stark contrast to this Utopian dream of the Garden City, the reality that has emerged in Sri Lanka is 'ribbon development' and 'suburbia', a seemingly endless suburbanization of low density sprawl stretching in different directions from Colombo to Galle, to Negombo, to Kurunegala and to Kandy. And, 'Paradise' as a rural context was never really meant for average Sri Lankans. It was and still is meant to attract foreign tourists, to enjoy comparatively cheap group package tours. The Resort Hotel as conceived in Sri Lanka, however superficially beautiful, is an architectural symbol of subservient dependence and not of national independence. And, as we run out of appropriate sites with the paradise image, we shall have no choice but to move more and more into eco-sensitive locations in land reserves where buildings, however beautifully designed, should be strictly prohibited



Rural images sought for isolated resort Hotels: creating secluded paradise



- Legend**
- Concentrated Development Zone
 - Port Related Activity Zone
 - Mixed Commercial Zone
 - Commercial Zone
 - Tourism & Allied Zone
 - Special Primary Residential Zone
 - Special Controlled Zone
 - Mixed Residential Zone
 - General Residential Zone
 - Administrative Zone
 - Security Zone
 - Environmental Conservation Zone
 - Recreational Zone
 - Water Body

Good urban architecture can hardly be achieved without sound urban planning

by Planning imperatives. Resort hotels that flout the ban are already becoming a reality, a likely area of conflict between Planners and Architects if the prevalent trends continue.

Low-density sub-urban sprawl also leads to high transport costs, traffic congestion and environmental pollution. Furthermore 'Garden Cities' and 'Satellite Garden Suburbs' were concepts for a specific place and time very remote from our requirements today in Sri Lanka. **We may indeed need "Green Cities" but not necessarily "Garden Cities" in the Howardian mould.** The counter movement to 'Garden Cities' came a little later in the early 20th century. It strove to cope with the real problems of urban development and industrialization. Better Urban Planning and the celebration of urban life, which is the essence of 'urbanism' seem to have originated not in Britain but in continental Europe ⁶. Even in Britain today, many Planners have moved away from the Howardian approach.

The ability to dream is no doubt important. Having and articulating 'visions' for the future are a necessary part of planning. But it is important to recognize and understand reality and to anticipate some likely features of future reality. There are forces that will impact upon our lives in the near future. Some of them will be so powerful that we shall not be able to ignore them. As already discussed, globalization, urbanization and their combined influence will be of very serious importance whether we like them or not. **A vision of a predominantly rural Sri Lanka continuing into the future indefinitely, must be understood as a romantic and unattainable dream. Such dreams bound up as parts of an anti-urban cultural attitude should disappear from the mind-set of Planners and Architects who intend to foster an urban renaissance.** This is not to say that we must oppose rural development. There is what has been called a "rural-urban dichotomy". We need both 'rural' as well as 'urban' development. There exists a strong inter-dependence between them.

The problem of Collaboration

It is counter-productive for Urban Planners to work in isolation from Architects, and, vice versa. **Good urban Architecture can hardly be achieved without a context of sound Urban Planning, and, vice versa.** If a 'National' School located within a prime residential neighbourhood is allowed to expand, that would be an example of bad Planning. In such a situation, good Architecture alone cannot prevent a continuing conflict between the school and its incompatible context. That conflict would eventually diminish the functioning of the school, the quality of the neighbourhood and the immediate urban environment. It should be apparent that Architecture cannot flourish in a badly planned context. Consider the reverse situation. An example is the redevelopment of the former Echelon Barracks area in Colombo Fort. Despite the excellent urban planning effort, the result, has been a faceless and anonymous urban environment. The Galadari Hotel may be the only exception. **Good Planning alone cannot compensate for mediocre Architecture especially when the Architecture is imported from abroad.** The case for close collaboration between our Planners and those among our Architects who have an abiding commitment to developing an urban environment which is economically viable and socially relevant to the Sri Lankan populace, cannot be over-emphasized.

The Problem of Precedents

Regardless of our ancient urban heritage, the current reality is the absence of a pro-urban culture and examples of well-planned and well-designed urban built spaces. **The lack of good precedents is indeed a problem for our Urban Planners. They will have no choice but to look beyond our shores not only for good examples but also for the acquisition of a new 'urbanism'. It should be a culture that celebrates urban life.** Cities and urban places need not be treated merely as necessary evils, as most Sri Lankans tend to do. We have had great cities in the pre-colonial past, which were not enclaves of foreign

exploiters. Cities should also be seen as the places where man confronts man in healthy exchange and competition, where the seats of learning and culture are located, where the great works of philosophy, literature and science are discussed, shaped and created. Throughout the settled history of man, civilization have depended upon cities.

Our Architects too share a similar problem. There is a lack of indigenous precedent. The most prominent urban building projects in Colombo were conceived by foreign Architects. The generally bland quality of the resultant urban built environment in the context of the redevelopment of the Echelon Barracks site, has already been remarked upon. These major urban buildings and built spaces are certainly not the best examples for Sri Lankan Architects to follow. Nor can we look to the anti-urban Architectural dreams of 'Paradise' for the answers. **There are medium-scale urban projects which have been very successfully designed by some of our Architects. Perhaps we should identify and examine these works. They may indeed contain the seeds of an urban Architecture that is relevant to the future of Sri Lanka.**

End Notes

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