

103 (4) - 26

ROLE OF OPEN SPACE IN CITIES: RENEWAL OF THE GALLE FACE GREEN

Mrs. Hester Basnayaka

The multifaceted importance of urban open space

Open spaces in cities, whether public or private have a huge variety of functions and uses, all of them crucial and often complementary. Not only the very existence of such spaces, but also their distribution, sizes, edges and content play critical roles, especially the vegetation which grows so easily in them compared to indoor situations. The functions of "public open space" are the most vital as they cater for the majority of urban dwellers, but it is difficult to pinpoint which types of urban public open spaces are more important than others. It is perhaps more relevant to recognize the need for all types as well as their multi-functional nature and to embrace multi-purpose design as far as possible in planning them, particularly in the Sri Lankan context where urban land is at a premium: we have long felt the need for orderly urban development with more compact built areas and emphasis on communal (public) and shared open spaces rather than private open spaces. Some people think that parks should only meet our need for tranquil sylvan surrounds to rest and relax in, pretty shrubberies, colourful flowers and the like; but this is not enough. Today, depending on their positions in the spatial hierarchy of urban parks, they should satisfy demands for a wide range of leisure and sports activities, both formal and informal, while providing food and drink outlets at various levels, public conveniences and even special security arrangements. They must also, albeit carefully and judiciously, integrate related commerce including informal sector sweet vendors, recreation and refreshment businesses and even advertising, at least to help finance their very existence and upkeep.



Enlivening the urban scene and ensuring healthy urban environment are both vital for a genuine urban renaissance. A city with little or no open spaces cannot be healthy and even if it contains much vigour and vivacity indoors, these cannot be freely seen and therefore cannot contribute to a lively and interesting townscape. Open space, being intrinsically 'exposed' to the general view, although in varying degrees, plays a major positive role in animating the scene.

Enlivenment of the urban landscape by public open spaces

Certain types of public spaces obviously enliven the city more than others by providing for a wider range of users and activities including interacting crowds; and by enabling an atmosphere of brightness, gaiety, festivity and continual change to prevail. These are mainly urban squares and esplanades, but major city and town parks can similarly

"come alive", if designed to accommodate such variety. Stadiums, too, host many types of activities which engender such vitality; but the barriers round them generally cut them off visually from their surroundings, diminishing their contribution. Open spaces reserved for high speed travel, though essential, contribute very little to this "enlivenment", as mere speed cannot be equated with the manifestation of "life", which is desirable in this context – essentially human presence and activities, but without conflict. Seaside esplanades are perhaps the most enlivening of all by virtue of that particular fascination bestowed by the ever-changing sea and sky, one a mirror of the other, but both harmonious "actors" as well as vital elements of these massive "stage-sets" for real life! "Esplanade" is defined as a level space used as a public promenade (paved walk) often by the sea, and as a space around or in front of a fortress, but invariably these spaces are called upon to (and can) provide for a much greater range of pursuits, Conserving or creating a

sense of place and identity, introducing colour, light, brightness, interest and sometimes excitement; all these attract the human players needed on this stage. Visual attributes such as panoramas, views, vistas, foci, landmarks, attractive buildings landscape details, interesting skylines, a pleasing balance of masses and spaces, balance of built form with greenery – and of course, the existence of viewpoints where necessary – are equally important. The presence of corridors of “Serial Vision” culminating in special features/spaces is an additional asset. One must not underestimate the visual importance of greenery – as a balance or setting for buildings, as a ‘moat’ round historic buildings or conservation areas, as visual barriers, as a harmonizing element between structures, as enhancement of facades, as part of the characteristic ‘structure’ of a space, as focus, as decoration, as view frames and indeed as a material with almost infinite potential. Neither must we forget the beneficial sense of place conferred by touch, e.g. distinctive pleasing feel, textures and temperatures and also by pleasing sounds, smells and tastes. Of course, assurance of functional necessities and supportive conveniences is also of paramount importance: otherwise such spaces will degenerate and eventually host mostly or only negative and undesirable activities, such as vandalism, mugging, drug-dealing, gang warfare and prostitution.

Galle Face Green: sea side esplanade and much more

Galle Face Green has played a multifarious role typical of seaside esplanades. To understand the principles behind the design for its renewal and the plan for its future management, omitting certain past activities, it is essential to go briefly into its history besides looking at it's



Daily “awakening” of the Green with exercise seekers from many walks of life using the paved promenades, against the exciting “CBD” backdrop

recent past and it's present functions and constraints. It metamorphosed from natural sandbar and marsh to enemy troops assembly ground (Portuguese and Dutch periods) to military esplanade (early British Period). Around 1821 the esplanade was “filled with earth and levelled” to make Sri Lanka's first racecourse which turned out to be “a nasty course” – “hard in dry weather and sometimes very heavy going in wet”. It was also used for cricket, promenading and riding up and down on horse-back or in horse-drawn carriages. There was a definite trend towards informal relaxation and recreation; in 1853 Governor Ward constructed the sea-front walk and dedicated it “for the use of ladies and children of Colombo”. But as the population of the city grew, so did the crowds who visited the Green more and more often to play informal games, ride, fly kites, exercise, jog, picnic or simply gaze at the sea, indulge in people-watching and “take the air”, although its size gradually decreased to a mere 15 acres along the sea front. It became increasingly difficult to maintain the sloping grass surface owing to the excessive trampling and even vehicular traffic it had to withstand – yet all the time its unique magnetism as the only formal seaside public open space in

Colombo increased, resulting in its surface being even more degraded!

Renewing the Green

It was recognized that the historic and recreational value of the Green as its open grass multipurpose esplanade was extremely important – it was therefore essential to retain a simple, formal, dignified, open green character and yet also to facilitate a bright and cheerful ambience. This was not only for historical reasons but also to ensure for future generations, the Green's particular experience of openness to the sky and the sea as well as the possibility of kite-flying, exercising, picnicking, informal games and events such as open-air displays and shows. There was some debate on the comparative wisdom of a predominantly sandy or paved surface in view of the acknowledged difficulty of maintaining healthy grass swards under the site's particular urban circumstances. Some argued that it would be futile to try to continue the urban “grassed common” image which was a relict of our British Colonial past, unsuited to our climate. The consensus was that the image and name should not be altered without making a concerted and serious attempt at rejuvenation. It

was also realised that all parts of the site had to cater for as many habitual uses as possible, leaving out the intolerably damaging and conflicting ones like cricket, football, dancing on the grass and army tattoos. Because of funding restrictions, the use of economical materials, details and finishes as far as possible was a basic policy.

Basic technical requirements were:

- Terracing to create as large an expanse of grass as possible with a minimal slope downwards towards the sea, making the grass surface less susceptible to erosion by trampling and rain.
- Minimum necessary slope for storm water run-off while maximizing infiltration.
- Balancing cutting and filling so that the upper terrace and lower terrace accommodated existing under ground storm water drains and manholes while conserving views of the breaking waves for pedestrians and vehicle passengers travelling along the main road.
- Measures to prevent entry of vehicles onto the grass while permitting unhindered pedestrian access.
- Hard-wearing grass cover using species tolerant of harsh seaside conditions.
- Simple attractive facilities for the public (including hard-wearing paved areas, street furniture and public toilets).

Random rubble masonry with economical details and finishes was the dominant choice for hard material. Evoking overtones of historic seaside fortresses, a buttress-effect retaining wall with rhythmic variations in alignment, adds interest along the upper terrace edge, while the lower edge has a contrasting treatment – a virtually continuous flight of steps. Both emphasize the length of the Green and the impression of vastness

by seeming to disappear into a distant haze. The stepped and vertical level changes restrict entry of vehicles while supporting the terraces. The public toilets cum maintenance post is built in similar vein and affords a pleasant multipurpose platform atop it and a "Speakers' Corner". Wide flights of durable concrete steps punctuate the upper retaining wall at regular intervals and provide plentiful access down to the wide lower grassed terrace. The lower-edge steps provide almost unbroken access between the Green and the paved seaside promenade. Designated areas for temporary stages are slightly raised and are sand-surfaced permitting stage/shelter construction or use as simple low platforms for a wide range of events and activities, both recreational themselves or recreation-related such as food courts/festivals and exhibitions. The expanse of grass on the lower terrace is intentionally unbroken as an illusion of unending grass in at least one direction, is a critical element of the Green's atmosphere.

Broad concrete paved paths connect the roadside pavement with the steps down from the upper terrace, as the most hard-wearing surface possible, is a must here. A narrow strip just below the upper terrace was also paved in order to accommodate regularly placed seats without wearing away the grass – the strip opens out below each flight of steps from the upper terrace to provide a wide base from which to strike out in all different directions across the open Green. The lowest level tarmac promenade immediately adjoining the seaside retaining wall was neatened and retained as it is needed for official, security, maintenance service and emergency vehicle access, besides mobile stalls (carts) and pony rides, while catering primarily for pedestrians & wheel chairs. The former gravel promenade has also been simply concrete paved to take the hardest possible wear, accommodating a maximum of 42

small Kiosks in spaces demarcated in the paving pattern itself, with its kerb-line highlighted by a row of concrete and wooden seats facing the sea, optimally spaced lamp-posts, tough, though attractive litterbins and sturdy concrete plant troughs holding natural flowering beach creepers. Flagpoles to carry colourful flags or banners on either side of the largest stage area towards the centre of the Green add gaiety and a ceremonial touch. Tree-planting is kept to the eastern side adjoining Galle Face Centre Road so as not to hamper the "openness", the panorama and colourful kites which are so much a part of the Green's inherent atmosphere: a row of stately Palmyrah Palms enhances the simple formal character. Moderately high floodlight standards light up the Green from the eastern edge without being too glaring and bright – starry skies can still be appreciated from the Green on clear nights.

The Green's Future and the need for more seaside "esplanades" in Colombo

As explained above, grass damaging and space consuming games like cricket are prohibited at the Green (though not without regret considering Colombo's dire lack of public spaces for informal games/sports by the public) in the wider interests of the user population whose over-riding quest here is space without conflict or disturbance for walking, running, exercising, picnicking, paddling, kite-flying, informal meeting, mere relaxing, people watching and the like, not least sea-watching, all the while breathing in the refreshing sea air and experiencing that exhilarating exposure to the ever changing skies and ocean which only very broad beaches, seaside cliffs or these wide seaside esplanades can provide. Food and drinks vendors consider themselves rightful users, too, and



Hard-wearing grass sward affords a pleasant surface for morning drill while the total openness behind (to the west) enhances the impression of vastness

within limits, they are genuinely needed by the public just as informal open air entertainment of various sorts including informal and even impromptu shows/concerts, displays, competitions and exhibitions which really enhance people's enjoyment of the place. All these are indeed the Green's functions today but they still have to be carefully managed in order to avoid exceeding its 'carrying capacity'. The weekend and holiday overcrowding and frequent damage experienced already coupled with the Greens inability to shelter and cope with mid-day visitors, also demonstrate, only too clearly, the urgency of creating additional such spaces along Colombo's Seafront, sandy or paved and with plenty of shady trees, to complement the Green while drawing some of the excessive crowds away from it and affording similar opportunities for others from the City of Colombo and it's hinterland suburbs.



Terracing to facilitate maintenance of grass surface enables crowds to use it regularly, and wide flights of tough concrete steps afford easy access



Unhampered openness enables the Green's traditional kite-flying to add gaiety as always