

Good city is like a well-oiled machine

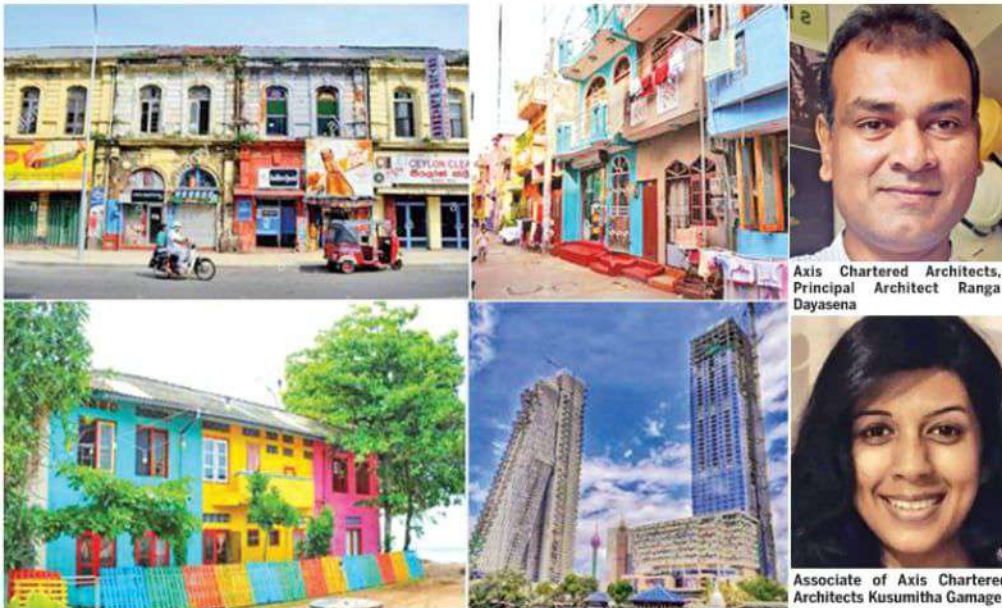
Parallel development crucial

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If our future development goals are set out from the optimal potential of the existing facilities, we can look at more realistic, relaxed, phased-out, and sustainable development goals as opposed to exponential goals that heavily burden the country's economy. Archworld spoke to Axis Chartered Architects, Principal Architect Ranga Dayasena & Associate of Axis Chartered Architects Kusumitha Gamage on the revitalization that needs to precede development.



Dayasena and Gamage do not merely talk about problems. When they talk about the problems in the City, they also propose a solution and a plan.

A city is analogous to a machine with multiple elements, they point out. For a city to function like a well-oiled machine the growth and development of the city should ideally focus on the parallel development of all its elements. These elements are interconnected in a way that one facility can influence the growth or downfall of other facilities. The elements of a city consist of its physical fabric (buildings, public spaces, streets, landscape and infrastructure), traffic, people and socio-economic factors.

"Like many developing nations, Sri Lankan urban development mainly focuses on the provision and expansion of facilities. While replacing aging facilities are also considered, rejuvenating and optimizing existing and obsolete facilities is largely ignored. However, the existing urban elements in the country are generally under-optimized. As future development projections are based on these existing services that are not being tuned into their optimum potential, the goals set out are exponential," they point out.

Dayasena and Gamage believe that with intelligent thinking and a systematic approach, the problems we face can be tackled without much difficulty.

Sustainable development goals

If our future development goals are set out from the optimal potential of the existing facilities, we can look at more realistic, relaxed, phased-out, and sustainable development goals as opposed to exponential goals that heavily burden the country's economy. Simple solutions can have a surprisingly considerable effect on complex issues identified in the urban context. Such grassroots solutions can be implemented immediately and aid long-term goals, investments by buying time for necessary developments. This can be explained through a few simple examples.

We know that the traffic problem is decidedly unhealthy for us and the environment we live in. It creates a lot of stress and it pollutes the environment. However as mentioned before Dayasena and Gamage do not merely outline the problems. They present practical solutions.

Today, the methods of expanding public transportation and pedestrianizing of the city are pondered upon as an approach to reducing automobile traffic. Traffic congestion adversely impacts quality of life and economic productivity in a city by increasing the time taken to commute, increasing fuel consumption and emitting pollutants harmful to human health. Improvements and expansions made to public transportation can increase the

number of people using public vehicles, thereby effectively reducing the number of private vehicles on the road. Lesser number of vehicles lead to lesser congestion. This is a very straightforward equation to understand however, it's a costly and a time-consuming solution.

Providing solutions

They point out that we need to take a little trip back in time to the '80's. The problem can be solved through human behavior. A more immediate grassroots level solution for the same problem will be reducing congestion by optimizing the traffic control system. Studies have shown that at intersections with nearly equal traffic flows, yielding to right-of-way considerably reduces traffic, reduces collisions and reduces operational cost. While this concept was practised in Sri Lanka during the 80's, at present the traffic lights take priority over the right-of-way at intersections. Right-of-way concept (which states that, right-of-way should be given to the vehicle that arrives at an intersection first or when two vehicles arrive at an intersection at the same time, the vehicle at the right should have the right-of-way) is rarely practiced or known by majority of drivers' island-wide.



Unfortunately, manual traffic control by traffic Police can also disturb equal flow, thereby contributing to congestion. For example the traffic congestion at the Nugegoda 'Bo Tree junction' is very high during the days that the traffic is manually controlled by a traffic police officer. On the contrary the congestion reduces when the traffic lights are on 'blinking amber' indicating free flowing traffic, even though the right of way concept is not practiced to its optimum. Therefore, it may be a timely approach to re-introduce the right of way concept to traffic law in the country to reduce traffic congestion.

"Yielding to right-of-way eliminates the need for any mechanical and manual traffic control systems. Hence the role of traffic police personnel can be that of an observer rather than a controller. Public awareness of such concepts should be raised through media campaigns. What is also important is implementing a penalty for those who do not yield to the right-of-way to ensure that the public abide by it. When the traffic control system is revised with simple rules leading to less congestion, the more elaborate solutions to reduce vehicular traffic can be implemented at a slower phase along with these grassroots solutions that can be implemented immediately with almost no expenditure,"

Malls and other recreational facilities

Another very popular trend that is invading the city of Colombo at a rapid phase in terms of city aesthetics, is the development of large scale malls and other recreational facilities that seemingly aim at improving the presence of public spaces and overall aesthetics of the city.

The main problem with this approach once again is how they neglect to consider the optimization of existing fabric and more grassroots solutions available. More attention should be drawn to improving the existing aesthetics and recreational presence of the city. What Dayasena and Gamage recommend is identifying the weaknesses of the existing fabric and devising possible solutions to refurbish it, which will create more sustainable developments.

They point out that ignorance to the present fabric can have a complete inverse effect from what these new developments stand to achieve. Elements of the urban-scape should act as a part of a whole rather than individual part. Developments of projects with complete inconsideration in its context can create a 'visual mosaic' of the streets. According to research, the visual state of being 'collage' and disorder makes people become fragmented thinkers. This is a very real danger.

"Distorted image signals can alter the real experiences of people's urban life. Unknowingly, the recognition of the city's geographical, historical and cultural depth is weakened; the cultural space is dissevered and overturned. The legibility of the city is lost. This 'lost legibility' which is due to the new developments and the haphazard developments that have been happening for years can be reinstalled by following the traditional constituent principles of design, which are - symmetry, proportions, and sequence."

Haphazard use of color

What Dayasena and Gamage point out next has been a gut feeling for some of us. Another weakness in the current urban city aesthetics is the haphazard use of color and oversaturation of visual information. As no color codes are guiding the use of color in building exteriors and outdoor arrangements in Sri Lanka, each person uses colors depending on their personal aesthetic preference (commonly referred to as 'personal taste'). These Preferences vary. Hence these colors create varying impacts on city dwellers.

We know our mindset influences our lives and the quality of life. People can feel refreshed as well as restless because of different colors. Hence, it's important to develop an 'urban color-scape' to produce an environment, aesthetically pleasing to all. What's recommended in this scenario is to develop guidelines for urban color-scape based on the principles of urban color-scape planning. This will create order. Then the city won't seem so cluttered.

"This confusing or disordered state can be seen in the present-day urban settings where an overflowing excess of visual information is invading the limited visual space of streetscapes. Such excess information can generate a sense of pressure on our vision. The bright and noisy urban visual background interfered with people's biological rhythms; affect the general health levels of people. Various kinds of information are polluting our vision and invading our visual space, thus causing the loss of valuable information, affecting the effective delivery of visual information. This causes the fatigue of attention, leading to excessive consumption of attentiveness, and making people unable to extract useful information out of a complicated environment. These ill effects can be reduced by displaying name boards, commercial promotions and advertisements having restrictions in terms of proportions, heights and general placements," they clarify.

They speak an absolute truth when they say that occupants of a city are a main element of a city, and the mental health of these occupants' acts as a yardstick that can gauge the successful development of the city. Overall, while aesthetic preferences are believed to be personal, researchers have found many archetypes and common factors that govern visual preference. These research findings can be used to set out legislation that will standardize the urban street aesthetics and outdoor beautification to create a visual image of a city that's preferred by all while promoting better mental health for city occupants.

The new giants appearing in the city fabric have no connection to the organically built identity of the city. The new malls and recreational facilities can be in any city in the world, there is nothing in them that pronounce it's in Colombo, they argue.

"There are suburbs in Colombo such as Panchikawatta that have managed to retain an organically built identity to an extent with likes of the landmarks (sculptures out of discarded vehicle spare parts in roundabouts) that communicate what the city is developed around. Similarly, the nodes of town centers can be developed using elements of historical, social and economic backgrounds of a particular city thus creating a unique visual identity,"

Conserving city's historical fabric

Dayasena and Gamage emphasize that while reintroducing the lost identity of the city, attention should be paid to rediscovering and conserving the neglected historical fabric of the city. Remains of the kingdom of Kotte lie lost and forgotten among and below a haphazardly developed concrete jungle in Colombo suburbs. What is left of the Kotte kingdom are segments of the 'Kabook block' rampart, segments of the moat, the secret escape tunnel, 'Veherakanda' stupas and 'Kottegal Ambalama'. Similar to how the colonial historical fabric of the city was revitalized; an integrated development approach that links this historical fabric with recreation will raise public awareness of this under documented last kingdom of the nation and develop a unique recreational experience rich with geographical, historical, and cultural depth.

"These grassroots developments should be implemented alongside the mega-developments that can be slow-paced. These revitalizations will buy much needed time for our economy to recover from the ill effects of the pandemic prior to investing in new developments. More importantly, the aforementioned developments will be more widespread, catering to a larger group as opposed to being concentrated on a particular context and a smaller population like most mega-development projects,' they conclude.