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Urban Development in Sri
Lanka: Past Perspectives and
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Urban Development in Sri Lanka: Past Perspectives and Future Directions

Introduction

The period from early 2022 to the end of 2024 represents an extraordinary and tumultuous chapter in Sri Lanka's recent history, characterised by profound social, economic, and political upheavals. While the country has faced numerous challenges over recent decades, this timeframe is particularly significant due to the severity and immediacy of crises that have precipitated unprecedented shifts within Sri Lanka's societal fabric and economic framework (Nimal & Namboodiripad, 2022; Attanayake & Gamage 2024). This paper aims to provide a critical reflection and analysis of these developments from the perspective of an informed observer of Sri Lanka's recent urban built environment. The paper aims to facilitate meaningful dialogue, inform policy formulation, and inspire the emergence of proactive strategies to unlock the full potential of Sri Lanka's urban sector. Ultimately, this paper aims to address the complex and multifaceted challenges facing urban areas by advocating for sustainable development, inclusive growth, and urban justice for all citizens, underpinned by a robust and comprehensive urban planning framework.

The exploration of the evolution of urban planning and development in post-conflict Sri Lanka is at the core of this discussion, with particular attention to the often overlooked but critical role of political dynamics in shaping urban outcomes. Although the analysis does not centre explicitly on political processes, it underscores the deep interdependence between urban planning and political decision-making, recognising that political agendas, power structures, and governance frameworks significantly influence outcomes in areas such as housing, infrastructure, and sustainable urban development.

In Sri Lanka, the perception of urban development has long been shaped by political performance and populist showmanship. Major urban initiatives are frequently framed as visionary or transformative projects well before they are fully implemented or evaluated. This tendency contributes to a public narrative driven more by spectacle than by substantive policy delivery, masking the actual processes and long-term impacts of these interventions. Such practices have tangible consequences. They compromise planning transparency, hinder policy continuity across political cycles, and undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of urban development efforts. Recognising and critically engaging with these political undercurrents is essential for understanding past planning trajectories and for designing urban governance systems that are more accountable, inclusive, and resilient.

The analysis underscores how persistent governance failures and institutional neglect have systematically undermined urban justice in Sri Lanka, intensifying vulnerabilities long before the eruption of the armed conflicts. It traces the cumulative impact of a series of destabilising events over recent decades, revealing how recurrent episodes of political mismanagement and policy incoherence have compounded existing urban inequalities. The lack of sustained governmental attention and the absence of a coherent, long-term urban development strategy across successive administrations have left cities ill-equipped to respond to both structural challenges and emergent crises.

Recognising these interlinked deficiencies reinforces the urgent imperative for a transformative approach to urban governance—one that integrates resilience planning, sustainability principles, and social equity at its core. Such a paradigm shift is essential to revitalise Sri Lanka’s urban landscapes and ensure inclusive, just, and future-ready cities for all inhabitants.

During the period mentioned above, the country experienced the decline of a president who initially enjoyed broad public support but quickly found his position unsustainable amid an economic downturn that led to a volatile political deadlock. Despite having electoral legitimacy, his government faced severe challenges, culminating in an unprecedented popular uprising, aptly called ‘Aragalaya’ (‘Struggle’). Ultimately, the president and his government ended their term early, leaving governance in a delicate state. A new president was elected for the remainder of the term through a parliamentary vote in line with Sri Lanka's constitution, and a new government was formed. This development led to remarkable, unprecedented, and highly controversial actions and reactions in the political sphere. In late 2024, a new presidential election was held, and a new president was elected. This was followed by a parliamentary election that gave the new leader a two-thirds majority, significantly altering the country's political landscape. This historic period saw the dramatic removal of two presidents - one through protests and another by ballot - along with a notable decline in their support within parliament. It also marked the election of a president and a parliament with a majority exceeding two-thirds from a political party traditionally regarded as a minority party, signalling a significant shift in Sri Lanka’s political culture since independence in 1948 (Aamer, 2024; DeVotta, 2024; Alwis, 2024).

The analysis in the paper highlights the profound deterioration and decline inflicted on Sri Lanka's urban sectors by a series of pivotal events that have pushed the country onto a destructive trajectory, which began in the late 1950s but intensified from the early 1970s. This pattern continued even after the formal end of the ethnic conflict in May 2009, which was considered the most destructive of all. When the war with separatist groups abruptly concluded, the nation felt a collective sigh of relief. However, this breakthrough has not yet translated into effective post-conflict urban policy and urban development reform, nor into progressive actions that lead to urban recovery.



Figure 1: Military checkpoints during the Separatist war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and national forces. Source: Author



Figure 2: After the Central Bank suicide bombing in Colombo in 1996. Source: Ilankei Tamil Sangam, c2009

This paper aims to provide a grounded and objective analysis, devoid of political agendas, that prioritises the public good. It also calls for a critical reassessment of the urban planning and development strategies implemented over the past sixteen years, emphasising the urgent need for reforms that can realise the urban justice that people have been longing for many decades. Achieving this requires a collective commitment and deliberate humility from government officials, professionals in the urban planning and development sector, academia, the business community, and community stakeholders to rethink existing approaches, promote inclusivity, and adopt sustainable practices that can meaningfully improve the quality of urban life for all Sri Lankans. By examining the interplay between power, governance, and public sentiment, this study aims to illuminate the complexities involved and provide valuable insights into the factors shaping contemporary urban development in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's Urban Development – The Context

Once hailed as a model British colony, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) was widely regarded as one of the most prepared nations for self-governance at the time of its independence in 1948. With a well-established civil service, functional democratic institutions, and relatively high levels of social development, it emerged as a beacon of hope among nations ready for independent governance. International observers, including the World Bank, often cited Sri Lanka as a potential success story for post-colonial development, due to its strong foundations and early achievements (Jayasuriya, 2001).

By the 1950s and 1960s, Sri Lanka distinguished itself within the developing world through notable achievements in both economic and human development indicators. In 1960, the country's GDP per capita was approximately US\$141, surpassing Thailand (US\$96) and Indonesia (US\$51), and approaching South Korea's level (US\$156)- a remarkable position given their divergent developmental trajectories in subsequent decades (Kalegama, 2000; Maddison, 2001). These economic indicators were complemented by strong social metrics: adult literacy rates exceeded 80%, life expectancy reached nearly 67 years, and infant mortality had declined to 37 per 1,000 live births—figures which outperformed most Asian nations at the time (UNESCO, 1970; WHO, 1972).

It is essential to acknowledge, however, that these early gains were predominantly concentrated in urban centres such as Colombo, where colonial investments had established robust infrastructure and service delivery systems, highlighting an urban bias that would lead to social disparities in later years. Urban areas in Sri Lanka benefited from comparatively high levels of healthcare, sanitation, and educational access, providing the country's cities with a developmental advantage that few other countries in the region could match during that period. Nonetheless, this progress starkly contrasted with the persistent underdevelopment and hardships faced by rural populations, where service delivery and living standards remained markedly inadequate.

However, despite these promising foundations, the country's political leadership seemed to lack the vision, strategic direction, and determination needed to build upon these early achievements and achieve the level of progress attained by other countries in the region in subsequent decades. Instead, within a short period, Sri Lanka's trajectory began to diverge sharply from its initial promise, falling behind regional counterparts such as Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, and Thailand. The nation's development stagnated, becoming a poignant example of strategic failure—a tragic story of missed opportunities that raised international concern. Early signs of social and economic mismanagement appeared in the early 1970s, exposing underlying systemic issues that had long been overlooked. These problems, rooted in flawed policy decisions and governance challenges, persisted and worsened over time. Despite its initial promise and growth potential, successive governments struggled increasingly to respond effectively to escalating crises—an unfolding crisis that has been extensively documented in the scholarly literature (Arsaratnam, 1972; Jones, 2001; Sally, 2006; de Silva, 2024. Fernando, 2022).

Sri Lanka's departure from its long-held image as a peaceful tropical paradise was first marked by the outbreak of ethnic violence in 1958—an event that revealed deep-rooted and unresolved tensions simmering beneath the surface of its post-independence society. The violence resulted in around 158 deaths and over 1,000 injuries according to official reports, while broader estimates suggest up to 1,500 fatalities. Since then, the country's social and political path has been heavily influenced by a series of internal conflicts and systemic crises, each leaving a lasting mark on national development and governance (Chattopadhyaya, 1994; DeVotta, 2024).

By the early 1970s, Sri Lanka's path towards prolonged conflict became increasingly apparent. The 1971-armed insurrection, which largely mobilised disenfranchised rural populations, demonstrated this discontent. Although quickly suppressed by the state, the rebellion revealed deep-rooted socioeconomic inequalities. In response, the government introduced a series of redistributive reforms—especially targeting land tenure and housing access—to address structural disparities in rural and peri-urban regions. However, by 1975, youth unemployment had risen to nearly 980,000, an increase of 166,000 since the 1971 census, highlighting broader issues in the labour market. During this period, approximately 69% of the unemployed resided in rural areas, and a notable 89% were aged 14–24 (Ranasinghe, 1978). While these figures pointed to growing social unrest, many observers viewed the rapid escalation of violence as an alarming but unforeseen rupture.

Looking back, the conflict of the early 1970s may seem like an unavoidable result of growing frustration; however, many domestic and international observers were caught off guard. This escalation didn't occur in isolation but was driven by a complex and lengthy interaction of political inertia, policy neglect, and systemic exclusion, especially impacting rural youth. While ethnic divisions also contributed, the core reasons lay in deeply rooted patterns of socioeconomic marginalisation. The main sources of frustration stemmed from the fact that a large portion of the rural population, particularly the younger generation, faced limited chances for upward mobility, underrepresentation in politics, and ongoing deprivation of essential public services.

These systemic conditions fostered a profound sense of alienation and disenfranchisement among some segments of the population. For many, political violence emerged as a desperate, albeit destructive, means of asserting their presence and demanding recognition within a system that had neglected mainly their needs. It was apparent that the shift towards militancy was not solely motivated by ideological factors but also reflected a governance model that failed to inclusively engage and empower its most vulnerable citizens. While rural-urban disparities were also a concern at one level, urban inequality, exacerbated by rapid urbanisation, contributed to social tensions at another level. At the time, urban growth was only beginning to accelerate, and even then, with over half of the urban population living in substandard accommodation, significant disparities within the urban sector were highlighted (Redwood & Wakely, 2012).

The subsequent cycles of violence that unfolded—both insurrectionary and separatist—were a broader reflection of the state’s failure to address ongoing inequalities and to create a cohesive national identity. What emerged was a legacy of exclusion, fragmentation, and contested legitimacy that continues to shape Sri Lanka’s political economy and urban development to this day.

The most protracted and transformative conflict, however, was the separatist war waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which spanned nearly three decades—from the late 1970s until 2009—and was primarily concentrated in the Northern and Eastern provinces. This conflict not only reshaped the country’s political and ethnic dynamics but also diverted public resources away from development priorities, particularly in urban infrastructure and social services, for many years. Although the separatist conflict was geographically centred in the North and East, its effects reverberated nationwide. Urban centres in the South, including Colombo, were frequently targeted by suicide bombings and coordinated attacks, contributing to a pervasive climate of insecurity ([Anandakugan, 2020](#)).

The cumulative impact of the conflict was considerable. Daily life was disrupted by militarisation, surveillance, and violence, resulting in large-scale internal displacement and emigration. Tens of thousands of Sri Lankans sought asylum in Western countries. Meanwhile, many others—including people from war-affected and economically marginalised communities—migrated to the Middle East in search of work. These population movements significantly altered urban demographics and the national labour market, complicating efforts at cohesive post-conflict urban development.

This wave of emigration led to critical shortages of skilled human capital, which is crucial for driving urban infrastructure development and attracting sustained economic investment. Between 1981 and 2001 alone, it is estimated that over 1.2 million Sri Lankans migrated abroad, many of them young, educated, and professionally trained—especially in fields such as engineering, medicine, and technical services (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001; ILO, 2018). This represented a significant brain drain, as over 70% of Sri Lankan emigrants during this period were under the age of 35, depriving the country of a vital demographic cohort necessary for urban productivity and innovation (World Bank, 2009; Jayasuriya et al., 2016).

Urban centres were especially affected by the loss of this young, dynamic population, which would have otherwise contributed to the vibrancy, labour supply, and tax base of urban centres. The departure of this segment also had a multiplier effect, slowing the development of new industries, weakening local government capacity, and reducing entrepreneurial activity in urban areas. This trend continued even after the war ended, and as of 2020, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka reported a persistent shortage of skilled labour in sectors such as construction, ICT, and transport, fields critical to sustainable urban development. The cumulative impact of conflict-driven migration has long-term effects on Sri Lanka's urban growth, affecting both its scale and quality. Beyond the immediate loss of labour, the disintegration of communities and the erosion of intergenerational links have weakened the basis for inclusive and adaptable urban development (Herath, 2021; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020).

A dramatic increase in the Sri Lankan migrant workforce in the Middle East was recorded by Ukwatte (2013), with numbers rising from approximately 16,656 in the mid-1980s to around 1.67 million by 2009. These figures indicate encouragement stemming from the limited opportunities in Sri Lanka, with reasons largely including escalating war conditions. Concurrently, there was a significant surge in international student mobility, which adversely affected the vibrancy of the local education sector due to declining standards in quality, reduced opportunities, and an increasingly challenging urban environment, particularly in Colombo experiencing a substantial increase during the height of the civil conflict, with numbers nearly doubling between 2004 and 2009, from approximately 7,603 to 13,065. Moreover, non-traditional migration destinations, such as Italy, became attractive through both legal and illegal pathways, as a channel to escape deteriorating urban living conditions at home (Jayasuriya et al, 2016).

Until the definitive defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, Sri Lankan urban centres were heavily fortified, with security infrastructure such as roadblocks, barricades, checkpoints, and the deployment of army and police units to man these points. Many buildings also had security personnel stationed at entrances as a routine security measure. Even after the conflict's conclusion, Colombo continues to maintain high levels of vigilance, and its susceptibility to potential terror attacks remains a serious concern. The city's public buildings and open spaces are among the most closely monitored and protected in South Asia, reflecting the ongoing security challenges that shape urban governance and development in Colombo (Dayaratne, 2010).

As the conflict unfolded, soldiers and armoured vehicles became a regular part of urban life, transforming the city into a militarised zone. These armed forces not only provided a sense of protection but also served as a constant reminder of societal tension and violence, as well as the nation's state of war. Residents found themselves navigating streets patrolled by soldiers in an atmosphere of unease, where the only semblance of normalcy was the stark reality of life under the shadow of conflict (Anandakugan, 2020).

Building approvals in Colombo decreased markedly during the separatist conflict, serving as a clear indicator of the instability and uncertainty that characterised Sri Lanka's urban sector during those years. According to data from the Colombo Municipal Council, there was approximately a 30% reduction in approved building permits between 1983 and 2009, which coincides with periods of heightened conflict and civil unrest (Colombo Municipal Council, 2010). This trend underscores the significant impact that political instability and security concerns have had on urban development activities. The disruption of construction and planning processes during this period reflects broader disruptions within the urban economy and governance structures.

The protracted ethnic conflict and the 1989 disturbances resulted in significant loss of life and injuries caused by war-related violence and indiscriminate terror campaigns targeting urban centres, religious and community venues, and military installations within civilian domains. These acts of violence fostered an environment of widespread fear and instability within urban communities, leaving a lasting social and psychological legacy. It is estimated that around 100,000 people lost their lives, and approximately 800,000 individuals were displaced. The psychological trauma, though complex to quantify precisely, has exerted a persistent toll on the national consciousness, marked by cycles of tension, hope, and disillusionment that have shaped the country's social fabric over the decades (Chandraprema, 1991; Watkins, 2005; Thalpawila, 2016; Jayawardane, 2020).

During nearly three decades of separatist war, a noticeable feeling of stagnation pervaded the urban environment, where important repairs, construction, and routine maintenance were consistently neglected. This neglect affected even the most basic infrastructure in urban settings and led to a decline in the overall quality of life for residents.

Throughout the turbulent years of conflict, the constant threat of bombings and violence kept people in a state of ongoing anxiety, affecting their daily lives and significantly altering the city's social fabric. Communities that once bustled with vibrancy and interaction became fractured as uncertainty prompted individuals to stay within their homes, disrupting the natural rhythm of city life. Colombo endured the severe impacts of terrorist activities carried out by the LTTE for many years (Amarasuriya and Spencer, 2015; Herter, 2017).

The widespread uncertainty and fear resulting from the ongoing conflict have significantly hindered entrepreneurial ventures and dissuaded both local and foreign investments. The period from 1988 to 1990, marked by insurrection in the south, only intensified this fear. Businesses have faced considerable challenges while operating under the constant threat of violence, leading to closures and a critical shortage of job opportunities. The assassination and torture of numerous politicians from various political backgrounds, civic leaders, community activists, and journalists, along with bombings at public places such as Fort Railway Station, the Central Bank, the international airport, and the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relic), have instilled a pervasive sense of fear among the public. This atmosphere of fear has stunted economic growth, contributed to widespread unemployment, and left many households in precarious financial predicaments, the impact of which was visibly prominent in Colombo and other cities in the country (O'Sullivan, 2007; Pieris, 2014; 2016).

Given the volatile, seemingly desperate situation prevalent in the country, the vision for urban planning was compromised. The need for adequate and affordable housing, health facilities, urban infrastructure, and community resources was overshadowed by the immediate demands of war. Comprehensive and thoughtful urban interventions were replaced by reactive measures driven by security concerns, further delaying the potential for meaningful development and regeneration. Throughout the years of conflict in Sri Lanka, urban development efforts largely stalled, with only a few notable exceptions. The ongoing strife left numerous pressing urban issues neglected, resulting in a landscape where once-vibrant spaces, iconic buildings, and public promenades were obscured by army barricades and the harsh realities of poverty. The towns and cities were receiving an increasing number of people marginalised by society, reflecting the deep social scars inflicted by the conflict (UN Habitat, 2012; Weeraratne, 2019).

The country's urban planning system, practices, and profession suffered a direct blow during this period, resulting in a significant decline in the quality of planning interventions. Instead of fostering growth and renewal, the urban landscape became characterised by stagnation and decay. Urban streets that once buzzed with life and energy transformed into desolate areas filled with insecurity. The threat of sporadic suicide bombing campaigns instilled a pervasive sense of fear among the populace, severely impacting everyday life and undermining community spirit.

However, with the end of the decades-long conflict, a significant catalyst for transformation emerged, setting the stage for rapid redevelopment in Colombo, its suburbs, and numerous urban centres throughout the country. The cessation of hostilities in 2009 marked the beginning of a hopeful era, creating an opportunity for reimagining urban landscapes. Cities that had long suffered under the strain of conflict now found the potential for revitalisation, open to innovative approaches in town planning that prioritise sustainable urban development, leading to a better quality of life in the urban domain (Van Dort, 2016; Wijekoon et al., 2020; US Department of State, 2014).

The End of Hostilities in 2009 and a Missed Opportunity

The long-awaited opportunity for transformative urban planning and renewal arose in May 2009, with the end of hostilities. The overwhelming expectation of people was for the government to provide outstanding and visionary leadership for socio-economic revival. The moment sparked widespread hopes that the war-winning government would initiate a comprehensive development program to improve its citizens socio-economic conditions, which had been neglected for nearly three decades due to many reasons, including the separatist war. However, significant targeted efforts were required to address the legacy of neglect and to repair the physical and psychological scars. Addressing the country's various urban problems—such as revitalising public spaces, upgrading infrastructure, and fostering social cohesion—was crucial for rebuilding the social fabric of its cities. Many expected that the government would take this opportunity to implement meaningful changes to longstanding issues, including inadequate infrastructure and declining public services. The potential for revitalisation was vast, with various stakeholders—from government officials to community leaders who could have worked together to create a strong framework for urban renewal that would improve the quality of life, inclusivity, and shared prosperity.

Much of the hope following the restoration of peace set the stage for Mahinda Rajapaksa's re-election as president in 2010, generating significant optimism among the public about promised rapid development, including an urban development program aimed at attracting investments and revitalising the economy. A proposed strategy included expanding commercial and retail spaces, upgrading road and telecommunications infrastructure, and enhancing public amenities to foster a modern urban environment. Unfortunately, this momentum primarily translated into selective initiatives focused on constructing luxury hotels and high-end residential apartments, along with extensive highway projects aimed at improving connectivity. Many viewed these developments as motivated by political interests and personal financial gain rather than a comprehensive approach to urban growth. Programmes were launched to rebuild the devastated physical and social infrastructure, particularly in the North and the East. However, urban development required substantial catch-up beyond the war damage, necessitating a comprehensive, well-thought-out programme of planning, funding, and works.

In this context, then Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was appointed to lead urban development initiatives, often rhetorically framed as “city beautification.” This appointment was widely viewed as an attempt to leverage his wartime leadership to the field of urban aesthetics following the war's successful conclusion (Hensman, 2015; Jayawardane, 2012). City beautification focused on superficial aesthetic improvements, such as extensive paving, new jogging tracks, and minor urban design changes, which were quickly implemented and garnered significant public praise (Fernando, 2014). However, the urban planning profession, both in government service and outside, failed to ensure that such improvements were incorporated into long-term strategic planning and comprehensive urban development frameworks. Instead, visual appeal took preference over strategic systemic renewal. While visible and quick fixes were achieved, the limited scope and lack of cohesive planning prevented these efforts from meeting broader goals of sustainable urban renewal (Wijesinghe, 2013). Furthermore, Colombo's strategic role as a regional transshipment hub, transportation centre, tourism destination, and international gateway was not adequately incorporated into these redevelopment efforts, overlooking its historic economic and logistical importance (Perera, 2015).

Evidence of the adverse effects of changes in Colombo's built environment started to appear in rising Land Surface Temperatures (LST). LST maps of the Colombo Metropolitan Area (CMA) from 2007 to 2017 reveal a marked increase in temperatures compared to the previous decade, indicating that urbanisation has significantly impacted local microclimates and environmental conditions (Ranagalage et al. 2017; Wijesinghe et al. 2018). While this upward trend in LSTs cannot be solely attributed to government-led urban development initiatives, it is a likely result of a combination of factors, including, unplanned land use changes, increased impervious surfaces such as paved roads, concrete roofs, parking areas, which contributed to the development of thermal island effects (Dissanayake et al 2020). These changes have often led to environmental degradation, albeit unintentionally, due to the shortcomings of urban projects implemented during this period. Despite initial optimism, ongoing support for sustainable urban development has been insufficient, emphasising the need for a comprehensive evaluation of both the successes achieved and the challenges faced. Many development initiatives at this period involved extensive paving campaigns that transformed previously undeveloped or treeless areas—such as sidewalks, walkways, and parking lots—into uniform paved surfaces, often with unintended consequences on environmental quality, including LSTs (Fonseka et al. 2019).

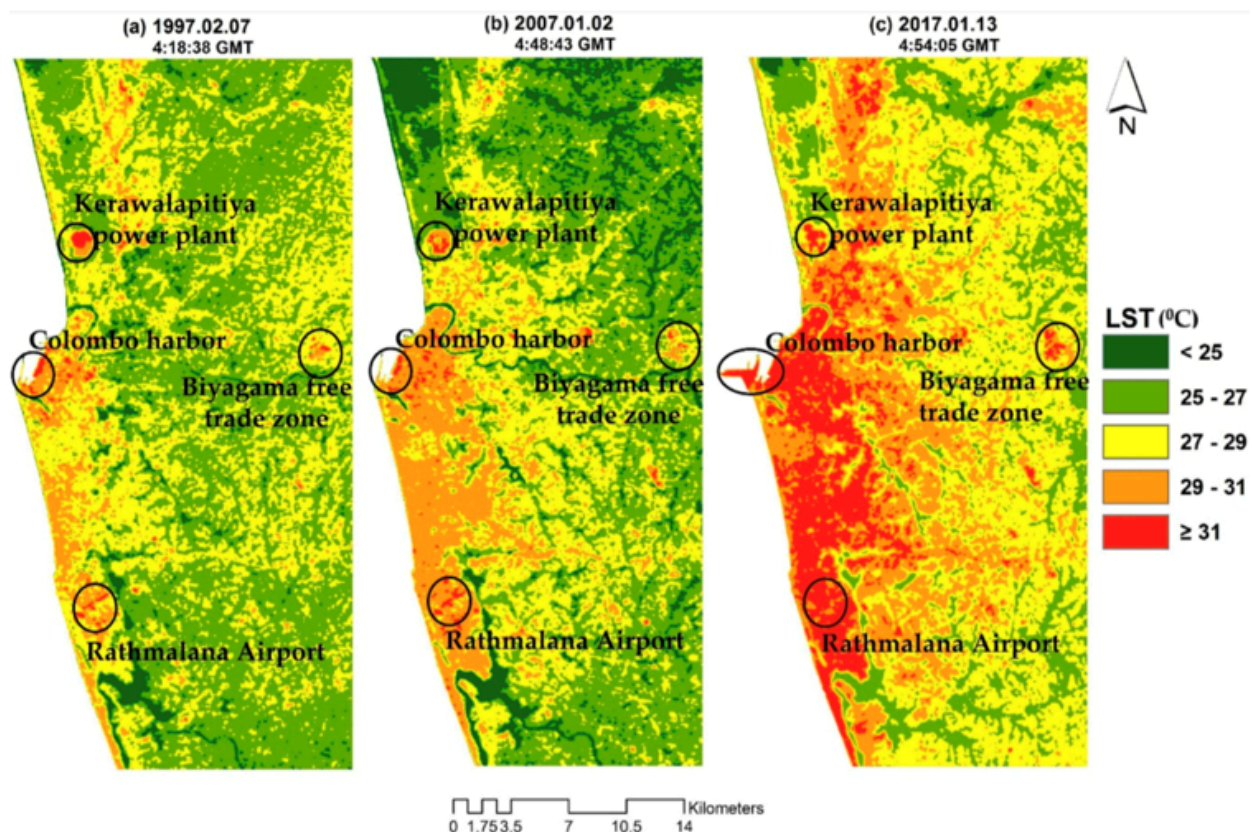


Figure 3: Land surface temperature (LST) maps of the CMA in (a) 1997; (b) 2007; and (c) 2017. Source: Ranagalage et al. 2017

In addition, the Urban Regeneration Programme, a crucial element of the post-war urban renewal efforts to revitalise the city, focused on redeveloping informal settlements and low-income neighbourhoods, often labelled as "eyesores." The objective was to replace these areas with modern, well-planned urban settlements. Central to this approach was the systematic relocation of residents through evictions, which were part of broader strategies to move large populations of low-income residents from crowded urban settlements. The plan targeted clearing about 1,000 acres of underutilised and informal land in central Colombo to make way for commercial development and high-value real estate projects. This programme remains a foundational aspect of the Sri Lankan Urban Development Authority's ongoing urban planning and redevelopment efforts to date. While designed to modernise infrastructure and enhance the city's visual appeal, these initiatives also raised significant concerns regarding social equity, economic sustainability, and environmental impacts (Wickremasinghe, 2010; de Vos, 2021; Perera and Spencer, 2023; Lugoda, 2021; Anwar, 2022).

The government's urban redevelopment initiatives at the time were clearly driven by genuine intent, and the appointment of Mr. Rajapakse to lead the urban redevelopment effort was with the expectation that a strong administrative approach could deliver tangible results. However, it didn't meet expectations, including the urban regeneration program aimed at freeing inner-city sites occupied by urban settlements. Sadly, the chance for transformative urban renewal was missed, largely due to misguided and incomplete development narratives—visions that, while ambitious, lacked the necessary expertise and nuanced understanding of sustainable planning principles.

In the post-war period, this failure was compounded by the rise of opportunism that prioritised individual interests over the broader goals of national development. Furthermore, many urban landscapes and built environments, designated for revitalisation efforts, fell into disrepair and neglect over time. This decline highlights systemic issues such as the absence or inadequacy of comprehensive maintenance management plans. The lack of a holistic, integrated approach to urban development—one that considers the needs of the entire population—was a significant factor hindering progress. Instead, key stakeholders often concentrated on advancing their agendas, which obstructed the effective revitalisation and sustainable growth of Colombo's urban fabric.

This situation underscores the importance of coordinated planning and governance in achieving long-term urban resilience and equitable development (UN-Habitat, 2015; Colombo Urban Development Plan, 2018).

The urban development landscape soon revealed inconsistencies and raised concerns about the viability of the fragmented approach undertaken. Projects such as the new international airport in Hambantota and the construction of extensive highways, conference centres, and office buildings in less accessible areas raised questions. Most infrastructure was financed through overseas loans, further straining the country's financial resources. Consequently, the burden of these debts has pushed Sri Lanka toward economic instability, jeopardising many of the gains achieved since independence in 1948 (Fuglerud, 2017; Wijesinha, 2022).

Good Governance and ‘Aragalaya’

In 2015, President Mahinda Rajapaksa's attempt to secure a third term in office was unsuccessful, resulting in a presidential election that ushered in a new government committed to implementing reforms aimed at addressing the longstanding socioeconomic hardships faced by the Sri Lankan population (International Crisis Group, 2018). This political transition underscored Rajapaksa's limited success in leveraging redevelopment initiatives and fostering national economic growth during his tenure (De Mel & Abeywickrama, 2014). The new administration, termed “Yahapalanaya,” meaning “good governance,” sought to differentiate itself from the previous regime by emphasising transparency and reform (Ferguson, 2016). In contrast, Rajapaksa's government had gained criticism for allegations of widespread corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and failure to effectively tackle the country's economic and social challenges (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Despite its initial promise, the Yahapalanaya government soon faced significant challenges that threatened its stability and effectiveness. It encountered a constitutional crisis that raised questions about the legitimacy of its authority. This issue was compounded by a dysfunctional executive branch that struggled to implement policies and govern effectively. Additionally, the nation was shaken by a devastating terror attack on Easter Sunday in 2019, the origins of which remained unclear, causing widespread fear and uncertainty (PSC, 2019).

The signs of decline became evident over time but were not addressed with the necessary diligence and consistency. By 2022, these unresolved and new issues intensified, resulting in a critical situation that demanded urgent intervention. Unfortunately, the response was characterised by poor decision-making, forcing Sri Lanka to confront a rapid and dramatic economic collapse, culminating in the government's official declaration of bankruptcy. This crisis represented a failure of monetary policy and governance, highlighting the deep-seated structural issues that had been ignored for far too long. The narrative of Sri Lanka serves as a cautionary tale about the complexities of nation-building, the importance of sustainable governance, and the dire consequences of neglecting economic foundations in the pursuit of growth and economic independence (Ratnasabapathy, 2019; Abeygoonawardane, 2019; Kalegama, 2023).

These major challenges ultimately hindered the government's ability to carry out its reform plans, resulting in its exit after just one term. At the end of the Yahapalanaya government, Sri Lanka saw the rise of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa to the presidency. He is another member of the Rajapaksa family, well known for his role in successfully ending the civil war and for his effective management of urban reconstruction efforts following the conflict. His return to power highlighted the fragility of the Sri Lankan electorate, which can sometimes become unsure when dealing with the complexities of political decision-making. This situation highlights the importance of careful consideration in shaping the country's political landscape and addresses the complex challenges of governance in Sri Lanka (Edirisuriya, 2017).

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's election to the presidency was driven, in part, by widespread public dissatisfaction with the preceding "Yahapalana" government, which was perceived by many as ineffective in addressing economic and security concerns (De Silva & Perera, 2019). Consistent with common political strategies in South Asia, his campaign strategically exploited existing religious and ethnic tensions, fuelling fears and suspicion among different communities. This approach significantly influenced public perception and played a pivotal role in mobilising voter support that ultimately secured his electoral victory (Kothari, 2020). Such tactics underscore the enduring influence of identity-based politics in shaping electoral outcomes within the region (Kirinde, 2018; Fernando, 2019; Ramachandran, 2021).

Despite winning decisive victories in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's presidency was marred by a series of serious issues, including poor management of public resources, corruption allegations, and dwindling foreign reserves (Jayasinghe, 2021). These problems led to an unprecedented economic breakdown, leaving Sri Lanka bankrupt reflecting the longstanding themes of financial mismanagement and systemic failure. This is an event rarely occurs anywhere in the world, let alone in the region (Kargbo, 2023). The shortage of essential goods and sudden foreign exchange restrictions were key factors driving the widespread 'Aragalaya' protests, which ultimately resulted in Rajapaksa's resignation (Reid, 2022). The new government, led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, remained heavily dependent on the entrenched political elite that had maintained the previous regime of Gotabhaya Rajapakse signalling a continuation of existing political patterns amid the ongoing crisis (Arudpragasam, 2022).

Following the 'Aragalaya', a substantial shift started to influence public awareness, one that the traditional political establishment underestimated and misjudged. This change resulted in the election of a new president in 2024, representing the coalition called Jathika Jana Balavegaya (National People's Power, NPP), led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). This development was widely expected, as other political parties failed to distinguish themselves from a long-standing tradition that ultimately led to economic ruin and collapse. Although the new president didn't pass the 50% threshold in the presidential election and had to go to a second round as per the constitution, winning a historic majority in the parliamentary elections showed that the public has well and truly grown tired of conventional politics. This is a sign that the political landscape has experienced a fundamental shift, with little chance of returning to the usual complacency of the electorate. This change forces the entrenched oligarchy, which has long held sway over Sri Lankan politics, to give up its power and vacate its positions permanently. This dynasty, characterised by multiple families, extensive networks of loyalists, and a history of cronyism, has historically profited from its influence, leaving a significant portion of the population feeling disempowered and marginalised (Razak, 2023; DeVotta, 2025).

City, Urban Governance, and Urban Justice – The Restorative Journey

Given these realities, to achieve urban justice, the need for a comprehensive approach to urban planning and development is becoming increasingly clear. Within a framework of national urban transformation, emphasis must shift towards prioritising community well-being in urban areas through good urban governance that resonate with sustainability in the built environment. Such changes should have the capability to create an environment where the needs and aspirations of all citizens are recognised and fulfilled, paving the way for a brighter, more equitable urban future for Sri Lanka.

In a restorative journey, cities and urban locations can often emerge as symbols of hope and progress, possessing the capacity to serve as catalysts for positive change and revitalisation. However, the terminology commonly used to describe urban improvement initiatives—often referred to as “city beautification”—has proven misleading and inadequate. This phrase, prevalent during times of transformation, tends to suggest superficial enhancements that neglect the more profound, systemic changes needed to develop vibrant and resilient urban environments. Such a limited perspective overlooks the significant efforts required by city authorities to address the underlying issues affecting urban life.

Ironically, even sixteen years after the end of the conflict, cities across Sri Lanka continue to suffer the repercussions of neglect, much of which can be traced back to changes caused by the war. Colombo Fort serves as a prominent example, with numerous areas still in disrepair. Issues such as inadequate waste collection, the deterioration and lack of maintenance of significant heritage buildings, and sidewalks obstructed by hazards and debris contribute to an ongoing decline. The condition of Colombo Fort is particularly tragic, highlighting a neglect that urgently needs to be addressed. The scars within the Fort area, marked by the removal of landmarks such as the old Register General’s Office, the Bristol Building, the incomplete skeleton of the Ritz Carlton hotel project with Tranceworks House in the backyard, and the dilapidated structures on Sir Baron Jayatilake Mawatha and York Street, illustrate the failures in our urban development initiatives under the Urban Development Authority and the watchful eye of the Colombo Municipal Council. A bit further in Pettah, the old Town Hall, a magnificent building that once commanded attention, is now being allowed to deteriorate, just like the other structures mentioned, including the De Zoysa Building on Justice Akbar Mawatha in Slave Island, which has succumbed to neglect under the indifference of politicians and professionals responsible for their upkeep.

Figure 1: Baron Jayatilake Mawatha in Fort – Deteriorating Fast



Resting Cattle on a Pedestrian Footpath



Neglected to self-destruct



Re-purposed General Post Office

Figure 2: Deteriorating parts including artifacts of Old Colombo Town Hall - Pettah



Despite the abundance of rhetoric in election manifestos and government reports promising to transform the neglected city into a modern, world-class urban centre, these assurances largely failed to yield actionable results. The gap between vision and reality became increasingly evident as plans and commitments remained confined to the pages of documents, with little to show for their implementation. Reports from various agencies and organisations, such as the Department of National Planning (2010), Kotalawala (2011), Rajapakse (2012), highlighted the disconnect between policy goals and actual developments on the ground.

Figure 3: Deterioration is visible in many Forms



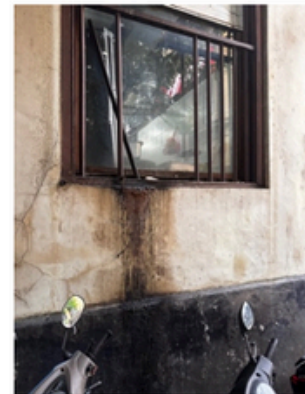
The Fort,
Colombo 1



Sanitary Workers



Slave Island,
Colombo 2



Dutch Hospital
Building, The Fort,
Colombo 1

Figure 4: Post war York Street, The Fort, Colombo 1 with Iconic Colonial Architecture in 2009 and 2025



2009



2025

Source: Author

This disconnect has had lasting implications for the urban landscape and the quality of life of its citizens. Rather than experiencing the promised improvements in infrastructure, public services, and community engagement, most residents have faced challenges such as inadequate facilities, overcrowded neighbourhoods, and insufficient investment in essential services. The failure to fulfil these commitments has fostered a sense of disenchantment among the populace, as hopes for a better future were undermined by inaction and the pursuit of narrow interests.

Absence of Transparency and Accountability

Moreover, the lack of a transparent and accountable framework for urban development significantly hinders meaningful progress in the urban sector. Frequently, community members have been excluded from decision-making processes, effectively denying them the opportunity to influence the shaping of their environments (Ruwanpura & De Alwis, 2012; Perera & Spencer, 2023). This exclusion has fostered feelings of disenfranchisement and disconnection, leading to frustration among residents who perceive their needs, concerns, and aspirations as being overlooked (Perera, 2015). The repercussions of such non-inclusivity extend beyond individual grievances, contributing to the widening of social divides within urban areas (Gunawardena & Perera, 2018). When planning initiatives fail to incorporate community input, they risk reinforcing existing inequalities and marginalising vulnerable groups, resulting in an urban landscape that reflects a limited set of priorities rather than the full spectrum of the population's needs (Geekiyanage et al. 2023).

This deficit in participatory governance undermines the crucial sense of collective ownership and responsibility essential for effective urban renewal. Active community involvement in decision-making fosters pride and stewardship over local environments, thereby promoting cooperation and collaboration among residents (Wijesinghe & Illangasekera, 2019). Conversely, when urban development occurs in isolation—outside the influence or participation of local communities—the process diminishes local agency and engagement, often leading to projects that lack community support and fail to address the residents’ actual needs or desires (Samarasinghe & Abeywickrama, 2017).

Establishing frameworks that prioritise transparency, inclusivity, and accountability is essential for effectively driving urban revitalisation. Engaging communities in meaningful dialogue and involving them in the planning and implementation processes can foster a more equitable approach to urban development. By valuing the voices of all stakeholders, cities can foster an environment that reflects the diversity of their populations and promotes a shared commitment to creating vibrant, resilient urban spaces that enhance the quality of life for everyone.

Urban Planning in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka’s current urban planning system governs land use through a structured spatial framework set out in gazetted development plans. These plans, publicly accessible via the Urban Development Authority (UDA) website, are backed by regulatory provisions that empower planning authorities to implement them. However, the actual effectiveness of this system in fostering urban prosperity remains questionable. Many urban centres across the country continue to exhibit signs of disorder, symptomatic of planning missteps made under the guise of development.

There is an urgent need to critically assess not only the institutional structures, regulatory processes, and accountability systems that determine the quality of implementation prowess, but also the intrinsic quality and capacity of the available plans to support sustainable urban growth. The question is not whether plans exist, since some plans do exist and are endorsed by responsible state institutions, but whether these existing plans are contextually relevant, socially inclusive, and capable of addressing the complex dynamics of an increasingly digital, modernising, and rapidly urbanising society.

Moreover, the foundational model of urban planning in Sri Lanka has colonial origins, often reflecting imposed standards that may not align with local socio-economic realities. This raises a more profound concern: can the planning system genuinely evolve to support transformation and equity, or does it continue to enforce outdated norms that limit confidence in its ability to shape a better urban future?

At the same time, it is essential not to overlook the profound influence of tradition and culture in shaping Sri Lanka's urban environments. These elements contribute to the distinctive character of our cities, offering a unique experience for both residents and visitors. This urban identity is deeply rooted in the country's historical fabric—evident in the ancient cities as well as in the layered evolution of Colombo.

While the integration of progressive technologies and modern infrastructure is both inevitable and necessary, planners must recognise that our urban landscapes are not blank canvases. These spaces are already inhabited by communities, enriched by biodiversity, and defined by a built environment that has evolved—both intentionally and inadvertently—over generations. The result is a complex urban tapestry that reflects accumulated choices, values, and adaptations. Rather than disregarding this, planners must learn from it. The real challenge—and opportunity—lies in translating these lessons into thoughtful, context-sensitive strategies for future development.

Sri Lanka now stands at a pivotal juncture, presenting urban planning professionals with a rare opportunity to redefine the country's urban futures. This calls for a shift towards forward-looking, inclusive, and adaptable planning models that go beyond conventional practices. By integrating cultural heritage with contemporary urban needs, planners can foster dynamic, equitable, and resilient cities. This transformation requires a commitment to collaboration, meaningful community engagement, and the adoption of flexible approaches that are responsive to the evolving challenges of modern urbanisation.

The significance of the events that unfolded in mid-July 2022 in Sri Lanka must not be underestimated, even in the context of urban planning and the broader trajectory of urban development. These events, which reflected deep societal discontent, economic distress, and institutional fragility, underscore the urgent need to reimagine urban spaces as platforms for social resilience, economic inclusivity, and participatory governance.

Urban planning must respond proactively to the societal dynamics revealed during this period. This involves not only acknowledging the root causes of public unrest but also embedding their lessons into the spatial, social, and economic design of our cities. Building urban environments that promote community cohesion, environmental sustainability, and equitable access to opportunities requires a transformative shift in both vision and practice. The post-2022 landscape demands a planning ethos that is more transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of citizens.

While Sri Lanka may not yet have a fully developed framework for envisioning its urban future through comprehensive, evidence-based planning, the foundational components for sustainable urbanism are already in place. These include a wealth of insights from local experiences, academic research, community initiatives, and the knowledge of seasoned practitioners. However, what is lacking is an integrated system that consolidates these diverse streams of expertise into actionable strategies.

To shape a more effective urban future, Sri Lanka must confront a critical question: why have planning outcomes remained largely inadequate, despite over three decades of investment in professional training, the creation of institutional frameworks such as the Urban Development Authority (UDA), and the development of numerous planning tools and strategies? Addressing this disconnect requires the establishment of a planning system that genuinely bridges the gap between theory and practice—one that integrates academic insight, the practical wisdom of experienced professionals, and the creative problem-solving of a new generation of urban innovators, who can talk about real urban planning in a way that matters to the people and their wellbeing.

Equally important is the recognition that Sri Lanka's urban context is fundamentally different from global models often cited for inspiration, such as Singapore or New York. Sri Lankan cities are shaped by a unique blend of historical depth, cultural richness, and social dynamics that are deeply rooted in place. This identity is not superficial; it defines how communities live, interact, and perceive urban space. Effective planning must therefore reflect and preserve this distinct character, rather than impose external blueprints that fail to resonate with local realities. Sri Lanka possesses a remarkable legacy of urban design and architectural ingenuity—one that offers ample inspiration for shaping its future cities. Rather than merely celebrating this heritage in abstract terms, we must actively learn from it.

The ancient city of Sigiriya, with its visionary integration of architecture, landscape, and defensive strategy, remains a marvel that challenged the imagination of even the most advanced civilisations of its time. Anuradhapura, with its sophisticated planning, hydraulic engineering, and harmonious balance between spiritual, social, and economic life, stands as a model of sustainable urbanism rarely seen elsewhere. Even the lesser-known historical cities such as Kotte and Kelaniya reflect refined knowledge of spatial organisation, cultural symbolism, and environmental integration, much of which is richly recorded in local chronicles and literature.

This deep heritage should not be viewed as a relic of the past, but as a foundation upon which to build the quintessential Sri Lankan city of the future—authentic, inclusive, and rooted in place. Whether embellishing Colombo Fort, planning a modern port city or developing Sri Jayewardenepura as a capital of civic pride, we must shift from mimicking foreign models to embracing Sri Lanka's legacy. The wisdom embedded in our historical cities provides more than enough guidance for today's planners, architects, and policymakers. It is time we drew from this well of knowledge to shape a distinctly Sri Lankan urban identity, rather than relying on imported blueprints or foreign expertise that often fail to grasp the nuances of our context.

Planning, therefore, must not attempt to replicate external models uncritically, but rather cultivate an approach that is authentically Sri Lankan—sensitive to local context while open to innovation. By integrating local knowledge, cultural heritage, and inclusive community perspectives with modern planning tools, the country can chart a more grounded and sustainable urban future. Such a system would foster adaptive, resilient, and people-centred urban development, capable of withstanding future shocks, enhancing social cohesion, and driving long-term economic and environmental progress.

Urban Planning Profession in Sri Lanka

The urban development planning profession in Sri Lanka often grapples with underappreciation and a significant degree of public scepticism regarding the effectiveness of planning initiatives and their outcomes. This scepticism is fuelled by a complex interplay of factors that obstruct the profession's advancement and erode public trust. Key contributors to these challenges include a lack of transparency in planning processes, inadequate public engagement, and a historical absence of accountability for planning outcomes. Furthermore, the disconnect between planners and the communities they serve can amplify feelings of disenfranchisement among the public.

To foster meaningful progress and enhance the credibility of the urban planning profession, it is essential to identify and address these underlying issues. Encouraging greater collaboration between planners and community stakeholders, improving communication about planning processes, and actively involving the public in decision-making can help restore confidence in the profession. Furthermore, implementing robust evaluations of planning initiatives will not only demonstrate accountability but also enable continuous improvement in urban development practices. By tackling these root causes, Sri Lanka can create a more effective and respected urban planning framework that meets the needs of its citizens.

The visible anomalies in urban areas—such as abandoned construction sites, chronic traffic congestion, deteriorating air quality, unsightly billboards that detract from urban aesthetics, and an overall lack of comprehensive urban planning—contribute to an atmosphere of doubt among citizens. Many individuals question the efficacy of the country's town planning system, casting a shadow over the entire profession. This scepticism is often exacerbated by the proliferation of unregulated development and chaos that permeate urban environments. Despite these challenges, it should be emphasised that Sri Lanka possesses a well-established town planning profession, underscored by a dedicated professional institute and a network of committed members. The Institute of Town Planners Sri Lanka (ITPSL), established in 1982 and incorporated in 1986, serves as the professional body for planners in the country. Members who achieve corporate status are awarded the esteemed "Chartered Town Planner." Most of these planners actively contribute to state planning bodies, while others engage in the private sector or community-based initiatives, bringing diverse perspectives to the field.

Reputable institutions such as the University of Moratuwa play a vital role in shaping the future of urban development in Sri Lanka by training and nurturing the next generation of urban planners through its well-established undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Town and Country Planning. However, urban planning is inherently interdisciplinary, and many other academic fields—such as sociology, economics, environmental science, public policy, and geography—contribute valuable perspectives and expertise, even if they do not lead to formal recognition as professional town planners. These complementary disciplines should be acknowledged and integrated within the broader urban planning ecosystem, particularly in non-physical planning domains such as social planning, policy design, and environmental governance.

Developing an educational framework that encourages such interdisciplinary collaboration will produce well-rounded professionals equipped to navigate the multifaceted challenges of urbanisation in Sri Lanka.

Urban planning should not be viewed as a rigid, prescriptive practice—a ‘straitjacket’ of technical rules and regulations. Increasingly, global best practice recognises the importance of breaking down silos and promoting the integration of diverse knowledge systems, practical experience, and stakeholder perspectives. Embracing this approach can enrich the planning profession and enhance its relevance in addressing complex urban realities.

Given these long-term established institutional and intellectual strengths, it is timely to initiate a national dialogue on the future of urban planning in Sri Lanka. Engaging the public in meaningful discussions about the goals of urban development and the importance of sustainable, inclusive practices is essential for rebuilding trust in the planning process. Greater transparency and communication around planning decisions can reduce public scepticism and foster a more collaborative and participatory approach to shaping the urban future. Moreover, the transparency is required within the profession itself to the members of their own profession, remove secrecy and deliberate supremacy and the feeling of above the community they plan for but the needs for the profession to be accountable to the people as well, as the caretaker of urban planning to facilitate plans for “the people and by the people”.

Foreign Expertise in Shaping Colombo’s Urban Landscape

The origins of urban planning in Sri Lanka are deeply intertwined with colonial legacies and shaped significantly by foreign expertise, particularly during the British period. The early development of Colombo was strongly influenced by prominent British planners, most notably Patrick Geddes, who laid the groundwork for urban development through his progressive planning philosophy. He was followed by influential figures such as Patrick Abercrombie and Clifford Holliday, whose contributions further advanced planning efforts in the capital. Abercrombie worked in collaboration with Oliver Weerasinghe, Sri Lanka’s first Government Town Planner and a pivotal figure in translating imported planning models into the local context (Steinberg, 1982). At the time, urban planning in Sri Lanka was still in its formative stages, and the country had minimal institutional capacity or local expertise in the field. As a result, the involvement of these international experts reflected both the British Empire’s strategic interest in Colombo and the prevailing belief in technocratic planning as a tool of modernisation.

Even after independence, foreign expertise continued to play a central role in shaping Colombo's urban trajectory. Notably, the 1978 Colombo Master Plan, developed under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), engaged a team of international planners to guide the city's spatial and infrastructural development. The legacy of these early interventions—both colonial and post-colonial—remains embedded in the fabric of Colombo's urban form and continues to influence planning discourses in Sri Lanka today.

Between 2022 and 2024, President Ranil Wickremesinghe's administration marked a pivotal turn in Sri Lanka's urban planning agenda by commissioning Surbana Jurong, a leading Singaporean urban development firm, to design master plans for towns and cities across the country. This decision has sparked considerable debate within professional and academic planning circles, particularly regarding the degree of influence that foreign consultants may exert over the country's urban future (Newswire, 2017; Sri Lanka Mirror, 2023).

Critics have voiced concern over the marginalisation of local expertise, reflecting a broader tension between global consultancy models and the capacity of domestic professionals. Yet, it is essential to contextualise this move within Sri Lanka's historical reliance on international planning expertise, dating back to the colonial era and more recently to prior engagements with Singaporean consultants, which began in 2003. These collaborations have long been viewed as mechanisms to transfer knowledge and enhance technical capacity, rather than simply outsourcing decision-making.

Moving forward, the challenge lies in forging a partnership model that meaningfully integrates local knowledge and priorities with global best practices. For Sri Lanka—and for many developing nations that look to Singapore as a model—urban planning must adapt to local realities rather than replicate foreign templates. As Wickremesinghe aptly remarked, “Singapore is Singapore, and Colombo must be Colombo” (Wickremesinghe, 2011). Replicating Singapore's success requires not imitation, but context-sensitive innovation rooted in Sri Lanka's own social, economic, and environmental landscape.

Challenges for Urban Planning in Sri Lanka

Achieving a sustainable and inclusive urban transformation in Sri Lanka necessitates a fundamental rethinking of how development initiatives are conceptualised, designed, and implemented. Urban interventions must not only promote economic resilience but also align with the lived realities, needs, and aspirations of local communities. This calls for a comprehensive and integrated planning approach—one that effectively harmonises physical infrastructure development with environmental sustainability and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Striking this balance is crucial to fostering urban environments that are economically dynamic, socially inclusive, and environmentally responsible. However, realising such a vision remains a significant challenge within Sri Lanka's prevailing planning paradigm. Fragmented institutional structures, inadequate participatory mechanisms, and limited accountability continue to hinder the planning system's capacity to deliver equitable and liveable urban outcomes (Wijewardena, 2005; Wickremaratne, 2008).

A critical responsibility lies with the planning community and the broader profession. Planners must acknowledge that the power to address many of these systemic deficiencies rests within their domain. They possess the tools and expertise to navigate institutional constraints, interpret complex socio-spatial dynamics, and shape urban futures. Yet, there is an urgent need for self-reflection and adaptation. Without reform, the profession risks becoming disconnected from the communities it aims to serve. There is a growing perception—among policymakers, civil society, and the general public—that urban planning is often ineffective or irrelevant. The planning process is increasingly viewed not as an enabler, but as a bureaucratic hurdle that hinders development and fails to address pressing local concerns. This loss of credibility is compounded by recurring issues, including inadequate implementation, poor plan quality, and the limited capacity or willingness of planning authorities to adopt change.

To restore its legitimacy and effectiveness, the planning profession must confront these challenges head-on. This includes reassessing institutional practices, embracing more inclusive and participatory methodologies, and critically evaluating past failures in both plan formulation and execution. Only by doing so can the discipline reclaim its relevance and contribute meaningfully to shaping urban spaces that are just, responsive, and resilient (Samaraweera, 2012; Sirimanne, 2013; Kannangara, 2013; Rodrigo, 2013; Bastian, 2013).

To remain relevant and influential, urban planners in Sri Lanka must continuously enhance their competencies across all levels of practice. Establishing themselves as capable and responsive professionals requires not only technical proficiency but also the ability to engage constructively with criticism, propose contextually grounded solutions to evolving urban challenges, and clearly communicate the value of planning expertise. Furthermore, planners must take an active role in shaping policy agendas that advance sustainable development, spatial equity, and social justice.

Forming collaborative relationships with government officials, politicians, and community members is essential for fostering a shared vision of innovative urban growth that effectively meets the population's needs. Planners can participate in open dialogues to ensure diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making, paving the way for more inclusive and meaningful urban development. Professional institutes should adopt greater transparency and break down traditional hierarchical silos that often hinder collaboration. By promoting horizontal, shared decision-making approaches, these institutions can cultivate a culture of cooperation and mutual support, leading to more effective planning solutions. This transformation will enhance the credibility of the planning profession and foster a more dynamic and responsive urban landscape that addresses the challenges of contemporary Sri Lankan cities.

Moreover, the planning profession benefits from adopting an adaptive mindset and remaining attuned to the evolving challenges of urbanisation, climate change, and technological advancements. By doing so, planners can transform their roles from being seen as mere regulators to becoming proactive facilitators of change. This shift in perspective will enhance their relevance and effectiveness, enabling them to champion the necessary reforms that address contemporary issues. While the planning community faces significant challenges, the responsibility truly lies with them to rise to the occasion. By tackling these challenges head-on, rebuilding their credibility, and fostering collaboration, they can revitalise their profession and play a pivotal role in shaping vibrant and sustainable urban environments for the future.

Sri Lanka's planning framework, professional standards, and operational practices require urgent and comprehensive review to ensure they address the complexities of contemporary urban challenges.

This reassessment must include crucial dialogues that explore several fundamental questions: How effectively does the planning profession navigate the dynamic and multifaceted landscape of modern society? Are innovative strategies being developed to confront the significant challenges that pervade the field of urban planning? Furthermore, it is essential to evaluate how well the profession prioritises public understanding and engagement in planning processes. An informed and engaged public is vital for the success of any planning initiative, as community acceptance and participation can greatly enhance the effectiveness of proposed solutions. Therefore, planners must partake in outreach efforts that not only inform the public about ongoing projects but also actively seek their input and feedback.

Conclusion

Following the recent local government elections, there is renewed optimism that Sri Lanka's urban development agenda, particularly in Colombo, the wider Colombo Metropolitan Region, and regional cities, may finally move towards a more strategic, coordinated, and inclusive approach. For decades, the lack of such direction has led to fragmented planning, increasing disparities, and worsening development challenges across both urban and regional areas.

In this changing environment, the government's expressed aim to bring planning and decision-making closer to local levels represents a potentially transformative step. The proposed establishment of Community Development Committees at the Grama Niladhari Division level aims to institutionalise participatory planning by connecting community-led initiatives with Regional and District Coordination Committees, Provincial Councils, and key Ministries. At the top, the National Policy Council on "Praja Shakthi", chaired by the President and comprising nine Cabinet Ministers, provides the policy framework for multi-level coordination. Although still in the early stages, this effort could set the foundation for a broader planning transformation one that develops into a place-based planning model that integrates local knowledge, community empowerment, and national development priorities.

This renewed focus offers an opportunity to move beyond outdated and fragmented methods like traditional Urban Regeneration strategies, which often repackage past ideas without considering today's realities. Instead, what is needed is a context-aware and integrative approach to urban governance—one that recognises the diversity of local conditions while aligning with broader national development objectives. Through such alignment, Sri Lanka can start to develop urban environments that are fair, inclusive, and resilient, capable of responding to both current and future challenges.

As a developing nation, Sri Lanka continues to face the consequences of decades of neglect of its urban centres—a neglect driven by socio-economic and political instability. These weaknesses surfaced during the recent financial crisis and the peaceful civic uprising that followed, revealing systemic flaws in governance and stark inequalities in urban and regional planning. Despite the visibility of urgent urban issues—such as affordable housing, waste management, governance, and sustainability—they remain inadequately addressed. Political inertia, bureaucratic fragmentation, and rhetorical posturing have long overshadowed real reform. Against this backdrop, a key question arises: how can Sri Lanka’s existing planning framework develop to meet the needs of a digitally connected, rapidly growing society seeking a truly “beautiful and prosperous” nation?

The solution lies in a transformative redefinition of planning itself. Traditional approaches must be reconsidered and redesigned to address the complexities of a modern urban environment characterised by digital integration, climate vulnerability, and socio-spatial disparity. Urban planning needs to become flexible and forward-looking, based on evidence and community insights, while also protecting the cultural and environmental heritage that forms Sri Lanka’s identity.

Realising this vision will require a broad coalition of actors—government, academia, professional institutions, and civil society. Citizen participation must be embedded not as a procedural formality but as a central mechanism for shaping decisions that reflect lived realities. Likewise, investment in digital technologies and innovative urban systems will be essential to enhance resilience, transparency, and efficiency across governance structures.

Looking ahead, Sri Lanka’s urban planning must shift from a reactive stance to a proactive, foresighted approach—one that anticipates global and local shifts rather than merely reacting to crises. A comprehensive, flexible, and inclusive planning framework can enable cities to foster sustainable growth while enhancing the quality of life for all citizens.

Ending the cycle of passivity among stakeholders is imperative. A new planning culture must emerge—one that is visionary, critical, and engaged, where professionals, academics, and practitioners act as informed interlocutors for policymakers. Through such engagement, the planning discourse can move beyond rhetoric toward genuine institutional reform and innovation.

Ultimately, Sri Lanka's urban development planning requires a comprehensive re-evaluation of its purpose and practice: assessing whether planning still serves the public good, whether its principles remain relevant, and whether the profession itself is equipped to meet contemporary challenges. Urban planning must once again be anchored in the ideals of public welfare, accountability, and justice.

In sum, Sri Lanka stands at a pivotal juncture. The country's ability to realise its urban potential will depend not only on political commitment and institutional reform but also on the revitalisation of the planning profession and its ethical foundations. The path forward lies in embracing participatory, place-based, and future-oriented planning—rooted in spatial justice, inclusivity, and sustainability. Although the challenges ahead are complex, they present an unparalleled opportunity to reimagine urban governance and shape cities that are both equitable and generative—cities that serve today's citizens while laying a resilient foundation for future generations.

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