

Space as Political Text

Urban Coherence and Dissonance in the Politics of Beautifying Colombo

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Taking space and its transformations as a political text, this article looks into the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as well as the manner in which space is implicated in memory. It engages in this exploration by focusing on the process known as the “beautification” of Colombo implemented by the Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka as one of its most iconic political programmes.

In contemporary times, several influential theories on urban planning and architecture privilege “order” and “coherence” as crucial parameters for urban construction. This thinking is also seen in South Asia, at least in the dominant discourses of state-funded and privately-funded urban planning and housing initiatives, if not in the actual urban habitation practices and behaviours of people. In a sense, this brings to mind the uncompromising attitude of the modernist architect, Howard Roark, the protagonist of Ayn Rand’s novel, *The Fountainhead* (1943). As Stuart Sim has argued, for Roark and for others who think like him, their “constructions are absolute in their demand for recognition,” which do “away with individualised nooks and crannies, the idiosyncrasies of clutter, in the name of purity” (Sim 2001: 79). Purity, in this context, is a gloss for order and coherence.

This emphasis on order and coherence is not limited to the margins but is very much at the centre of powerful discourses at the level of both, the state and citizens. Many ordinary citizens in Delhi, Colombo, Kolkata, Dhaka, and other urban centres in the region, with whom I have informally conversed over the last seven years on issues concerning urban living, also take these assumptions for granted. In addition, there is remarkable coherence in the thinking of the state and large cross-sections of citizens when it comes to this aspect of urban habitation. In Colombo, such assumptions have reached almost a national consensus, particularly among many middle-class individuals. But, how are these ideals actually achieved on the ground and how do they then manifest in people’s subconscious? What, if any, casualties

would result from such an all-encompassing emphasis on enforcing order and seeming clarity upon built environments and in the uncharted terrains of our collective subconscious?

In the context of the questions outlined above, this article will unfold as follows. I will briefly explore these questions, with the post-war “beautification” of Colombo city and its suburban extensions as my points of departure. At the same time, such a reading necessarily requires a self-reflective theoretical and conceptual understanding of space and place, grounded squarely in the domains of culture and politics, and not merely in the clinical fields of design, planning, and visualised aesthetics.

More simply, what does order mean in specific local contexts? How do ordered and evidently coherent urban spaces acquire local meaning in the process of building and landscaping? And, what becomes invisible and silent? I am suggesting that any reasonable reading of urban space and its planning and building dynamics must necessarily traverse the messy realms of politics, culture, and social anxieties, and the dynamics these entail. That is, approaching urban design and habitation only through the disciplines of design and planning, instead of politics and culture, especially on the part of the state, architects and town planners, does not allow us to comprehend the nuanced politics of urban space. I am further insinuating that the messy, and often invisible, realms of politics and sociocultural anxieties must necessarily enter planning and design processes as well.

Post-2009 Urban Planning

A key aspect of the recent Sri Lankan urban renewal, since the end of the civil war in 2009, has been the efficiency of its implementation. For instance, the renovation and transformation of colonial heritage buildings in Colombo, such as the Old Dutch Hospital and the former Auditor General’s Office, and major landscaping programmes, such as the Diyatha Uyana wetland park development scheme in Sri Jayawardenepura

This article is based on the keynote address delivered at the third International Conference on Cities, People and Places (ICCPP 2015) on the theme, “Towards a New Urbanity: Places for Urban Coherence,” organised by the Department of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, in Colombo, Sri Lanka in October 2015.

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Kotte and the Independence Square rehabilitation project in Colombo, took place over a relatively short period of time (2011–14). The main reason for this success was the establishment of the Urban Development Authority—the apex state body responsible for urban development—under the purview of the Ministry of Defence in early 2010, and the military’s direct involvement in implementing many of these programmes, including the eviction of people from May 2010 onwards (CPA 2014: 8). These programmes were primarily, but not exclusively, clustered under the Urban Regeneration Project and the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project.

In understanding these dynamics, the personal passions, idiosyncrasies, and limitations in the thinking of the former secretary of defence, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, cannot be underemphasised. Many of these programmes were his pet projects. In many ways, he was the uncompromising Howard Roark of Ayn Rand’s imagination, who declared: “I set my own standards. I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one” (Sim 2001: 79). The implications of these institutional rearrangements and personality politics for governance, democracy, and ethics are considerable; they remain, by and large, unexplored in Sri Lankan social sciences in general, and particularly in Sri Lankan sociology. Efficiency in implementing urban development projects notwithstanding, this process has led to the militarisation of urban governance at the cost of serious “democratic deficits” (CPA 2014: 11–12).¹

Rajapaksa’s central role in these circumstances cannot be adequately understood if one considers only the visible end result in built form, without taking into account the circumstances that have been made invisible, which now exist only in relatively dormant discourses away from these “beautified” urban spaces. These include forced evictions of people from some of the areas selected for “beautification,” class-based privileges in spatial allocation of the newly developed spaces, and so on. Such considerations often do not come up in popular discourses on urban renewal.

In fact, most hegemonic local discourses seem to suggest that in addition to the political actors and officials involved in these programmes, many ordinary citizens also greatly appreciate these transformations. Many see these as essential markers of “development” and as means to order, rationalise, and aesthetically develop their urban space. But, can this process be understood as simply having a linear trajectory of development, without contradictions? Were there no ruptures or contestations in the process? If there were, how did they then become invisible?

Politics of ‘Beautifying’ Colombo

The basic logic of this urban renewal has been outlined by the former secretary of defence in a number of public statements. According to him, it was a matter of developing “clean, green, people friendly cities” with a focus on “the development of public open spaces” (Rajapaksa 2013). Associated with this was the “demolition of walls around public buildings, playgrounds and other public areas, which had kept many of Colombo’s best architectural features hidden from public view for years” (Rajapaksa 2013). This developmental rhetoric focused on recreating Colombo as a slum-free, “world class,” “garden city,” and “a preferred destination for international business and tourism” (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2014: 8). In other words, there was a drive to create an urban utopia from which “problems” like poverty would be spatially expelled.

Finally, this phase of urban restructuring also focused on “the restoration and rehabilitation of some of the country’s old buildings” (Rajapaksa 2013), most of which date back to Dutch (1658–1796) and British colonial rule (1796–1948). Rajapaksa had specifically identified the Dutch Hospital in the Colombo Fort area and the Colombo Racecourse Grandstand, and its environs in Reid Avenue, Colombo 7, as examples of places that “have been renovated and transformed into public spaces housing high-end shopping and restaurant facilities” (Rajapaksa 2013). In this context, the definition of “high-end” is

crucial, and an issue I will revisit later. In this article, I will refer to the Dutch Hospital, Colombo Racecourse Grandstand, Arcade Independence Square, Diyatha Uyana, and Independence Square Park developments as clear examples of conscious urban restructuring. These are, of course, simply grounded references to larger theoretical implications in spatial politics.

How, in theoretical terms, do each of these specific sites make contextual sense as “places”? How does this meaning transform even as their physical appearance and local relevance are radically altered? Political actors, and unfortunately too many architects and planners working in unstable political conditions, view “places” as empty or inconsequential sites that must be transformed into “spaces” of consequence: by constructing iconic buildings, doing spectacular landscaping, or a combination of both. In other words, the transformations are about imposing order, coherence, and an authorised sense of taste and meaning in a specific location. I do not consider “place” in this lean, simple, ahistorical, and anti-discursive fashion. For me, a “place” is not simply a fixed geographic location, nor is it a simple abstracted cartographic pointer.

Places are given meaning by those who inhabit them, make use of them, or have been expelled or distanced from them. This meaning-making is based on multiple narratives, some of which are audible and others not. As Keith Basso (1996: 56) underscores, “places come to generate their own fields of meaning.” This is also what Margaret Rodman (1992: 652) meant when she argued that it would be possible to work out how people embody places by examining how places represent people. But, silence, or more accurately, the inaudibility of dissent, is also crucial to the process of meaning-making. However, this aspect is often disregarded in politically dominant discourses on space.

Given the problematic transformation of “place” into “space,” what can we understand about the ground reality in Colombo, as seen in the case of the Dutch Hospital, old Auditor General’s Office, and Racecourse Grandstand? These buildings

stand testament to two distinct eras of colonial rule and were dilapidated and poorly maintained structures until recently. Just like colonialism, the era during which these structures were established and glamourised, in a time now distant from collective memory, their stature as architectural structures with specific embedded histories has been erased from the consciousness of the local people in more recent times. The structures remained very much in their midst, as they had for centuries, but people were emotionally unattached to them.

As such, the resurrection and transformation of these structures was almost a rediscovery of colonialism's encounter with the locale now known as Colombo, which at the height of colonial power, was transformed into what Nihal Perera (2002) called a "white male city." That is, a city that was predicated upon the needs and imagination of colonial white males. It was later adequately "feminised," as an essential aspect of its colonial historical trajectory (Perera 2002). The prevailing dominant discourse on urban development also welcomes these resurrected visual intrusions, in their rear-ranged colonial glory, and gives them centrality in the city's built personality. But, if, as Basso and Rodman suggest, places "generate their own fields of meaning" (Basso 1996: 56), and it is possible to interpret "how people embody places by attempting to understand how places represent people" (Rodman 1992: 652), what stories do these buildings narrate in the wake of their resurrection and the colonial memories embedded in them?

By obsessively focusing on renovating and presenting elegant colonial heritage buildings to the public, what sense of history was the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development trying to bring into the present? This issue gets confusing but more intriguing when one considers the fact that the government spearheading this developmental drive was known for its populist, anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and anti-Western political rhetoric. Neither the government nor the thousands of people who later readily consumed these places appear to have

been motivated by a clear sense of history, beyond a superficial appreciation for the seeming elegance of the facades of these buildings.

Theoretically, I do not see these as historically grounded developments, but as hyperreal renditions of what is often considered flippantly as "development," with an overemphasis on selected and privileged signs. More specifically, I suggest that this was at least, in part, a matter of acquiring a perceived European field of signs in a non-European place, by way of a haphazard dash to disconnected moments from the colonial past. It was also an attempt to create an ill-understood European-like sensibility in a thoroughly local and South Asian context. This is consistent with how many political leaders in South Asia imagine the possible resurrection of urban space.

This developmental move harkens to a very similar Europeanised dream for Delhi once entertained by Jagmohan, India's former union minister for culture and tourism. He wanted to displace nearly 75,000 slum dwellers from the banks of the river Yamuna and create a 220-acre park complex and an extended "green belt" as a zone of leisure for the city's elite that would resemble "the South Bank of the Thames in London." This process has been referred to as the jazzing up of the Yamuna's banks (*Times of India* 2004). Again, the reference to a disconnected European sensibility, irrespective of local consequence, is readily apparent. In Delhi's case, while many influential state and private structures in the floodplains of the Yamuna remained intact, the poor were displaced as planned. But, the Yamuna is yet to recreate the atmosphere of the Thames' South Bank.

In Sri Lanka, there is also the matter of the unquestioning dependence on visualising a particular set of aesthetics—derived from colonial structures—and the highlighting of an acquired sense of "taste," as Pierre Bourdieu suggests (1987), without adequately understanding their historical or political sensibilities. These structures are remnants of a forgotten history that have been haphazardly placed, as mere ornamental features, in the city's bosom. This is not unlike how

people intersperse antique furniture and artefacts with modernist furniture in their homes, and perhaps with postmodern artwork on their walls, without much idea of their provenance. It seems that Colombo's evolving urbanscape, primarily initiated by the former secretary of defence, reflects the limitations of the country's elite classes' imagination of the world.

Consuming Public Spaces

But, what about the actual process of consuming these spaces, given that they were identified by the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development as "public spaces," and earmarked for "housing high-end shopping and restaurant facilities"? (Rajapaksa 2013) The Arcade website explains this official emphasis on the economic and class stature of these developments with reference to itself, which is equally applicable to all the other resurrected colonial buildings:

Arcade—Independence Square has been created to fulfil a unique requirement. That is to create "one space" where entertainment, shopping, leisure and dining can all be offered to please the requirements of an entire family. The portfolio of brands that are present at the Arcade become a crowd puller for they are the most coveted global brands available. Furthermore, the many different restaurants, theatres and the entertainment opportunities laid out create a wonderful hang-out for the people. (Arcade Independence Square 2014)

The references to "one space," "entire family," and "hang-out for the people" do not reflect the typical Sri Lankan family; not even a typical middle-class one. Clearly, the Arcade, Racecourse Grandstand, and Dutch Hospital are not strictly "public" spaces, even though the public certainly does have legal access to them. Many students from the University of Colombo do not visit the Arcade or Racecourse Grandstand, which are, after all, located within a walking distance from the campus. Many of the students I spoke to stated that they were satisfied with cursory visits to take a few pictures of themselves posing in front of the fancy storefronts to post on social media, or just with careless glances while on their morning and evening walks to and from their hostels

or homes. People in these public spaces are not free from the pressure to over-consume, or the potential social anxiety of appearing poor in loudly proclaimed affluent spaces.

So, these structures are essentially class and status enclaves, from which many people are left out, by virtue of an inherent atmosphere of exclusivity and the associated social discomfort. In a sense, in these postcolonial times, these resurrected spaces recreate the exclusivist behaviour that was openly exercised in many of these same places at the height of colonialism. Now, however, the methods and objects of exclusion have changed. Today, this exclusion is engineered by locals against other locals. It is not facilitated by law and political decree as in the colonial past, but by factors such as affordability, pricing and an enhanced sense of social discomfort inherent in these spaces. It is ironic that a regime that has spoken so much about winning a war and guaranteeing a sense of freedom to abstract subjects called “people” never thought to designate any of these buildings as truly “public;” for example, an affordable theatre, a museum focused on Colombo’s evolution, a public gallery, a library, or a reading centre to name a few possibilities.

It is also not inconceivable for affordable restaurants, which would act as “true crowd pullers” (Arcade Independence Square 2014), to be placed alongside more expensive ones. Every time I visit Paris, London, Uppsala, Amsterdam, Tokyo, or Delhi, I cannot help but notice the dynamic role that affordable eateries and non-intimidating public spaces located close to universities play in the generation of discourse. As we well know, considerable thinking and debate that led to significant ideas that we now embrace and take for granted were initially discussed over coffee or tea in similar, non-intimidating public spaces and restaurants. Unfortunately, these possibilities were not considered when large scale and ostensibly public developments were undertaken in the vicinity of an established and long-standing national university such as the University of Colombo. I lament the fact that the obviously skilled architects—who

went from Colombo to Paris to study the processes of renovating heritage buildings and who returned to undertake their aesthetically wonderful work—have failed to learn the broader and more nuanced social implications of public buildings from Paris or anywhere else. If, as Sally Ness (2005) has observed, places are “lived, event-defined, multi-locational happenings,” then these places can only be understood as elegant but exclusive zones, from which the ordinary has been expelled. How that absence was engineered is one of the discourses that has been rendered invisible.

Since the “beautification” of Colombo also heavily emphasises the idea of landscape, I will dwell briefly on the related politics. According to the former secretary of defence, a Green Growth Programme was identified to “protect the marshy areas in the metro region, enhance its biodiversity parks, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve the eco-friendly nature of the city” (Rajapaksa 2013). By itself, the idea is commendable. The Beira Lake project, Nawala Wetland Park, Diyatha Uyana, and Independence Square developments can be generally understood as being a part of this scheme.

Idea of ‘Landscape’

In this context, I do not consider the idea of “landscape” to simply refer to natural formations that evoke a certain aesthetic pleasure, even though this is the most popular meaning of the word. My understanding of landscape focuses on “reconstruction, deconstruction, and all other constructions of place” which lead to the “material transformation and pictorial encoding of a location” (Ness 2005: 120). As such, none of the sites in Colombo

and beyond that have extensively used landscaping can be considered “natural” spaces. Instead, as is quite evident in the case of Diyatha Uyana, they are open spaces in which the essence of nature and natural embellishments have been introduced, expanded, or enhanced. In these kinds of situations, the word “landscaping,” rather than “landscape,” highlights this change and transformation. The landscaping of a place inherently presupposes a degree of transformation or displacement, as is obvious at the Sri Lankan sites I have referred to.

The general area of Independence Square has long been an open, public, and leisure space. The recent developments creatively expanded this public area by introducing parks and walkways, while keeping the Independence Square the central locus; they also allowed for breathing space in a somewhat congested part of Colombo. The newly developed square was also a more welcoming and open public space, where even students from Colombo University, who were averse to the Arcade and the Grandstand, could easily “hang out.” But, of course, they still could not bring their own food; the usually invisible militarised regimentation of these places becomes evident when guards inform people that the open consumption of food as well as the public expression of desire and affection is prohibited.

The transformation of Diyatha Uyana is embedded in a more complex set of politics that are no longer visible nor part of the dominant discourse. The area that eventually became Diyatha Uyana was initially part of a sparsely inhabited wetland, which was later transformed into a golf course and resort exclusively

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for the rich. After the state took over the property in 2008, in accordance with a Supreme Court decision, the buildings of the resort continued to function as before. However, the rolling expanse of the golf course was transformed into a lush green park and was opened to the public in 2012. There were natural waterways in the vicinity that fed into the park, along with rest areas, walkways, a more inviting restaurant, and a weekend market. The opening up of a once exclusive piece of land to the public was an important political decision. The transformation of the place through landscaping, and the unrestricted public access to the newly developed space, have been greatly appreciated by citizens.

However, during this process of transformation, an important element of the earlier landscape was dismantled and erased. This is, the “Shrine of the Innocents,” an elegant but minimalist monument designed by the artist and archaeologist, Jagath Weerasinghe, in memory of the victims of political violence of the late 1980s. The state built the monument and opened it to the public in December

1999.² According to the original plan for the monument, which was never implemented, it was supposed to be located in the outlying wetlands, which were to be developed and made into a park quite similar to what Diyatha Uyana has now become.

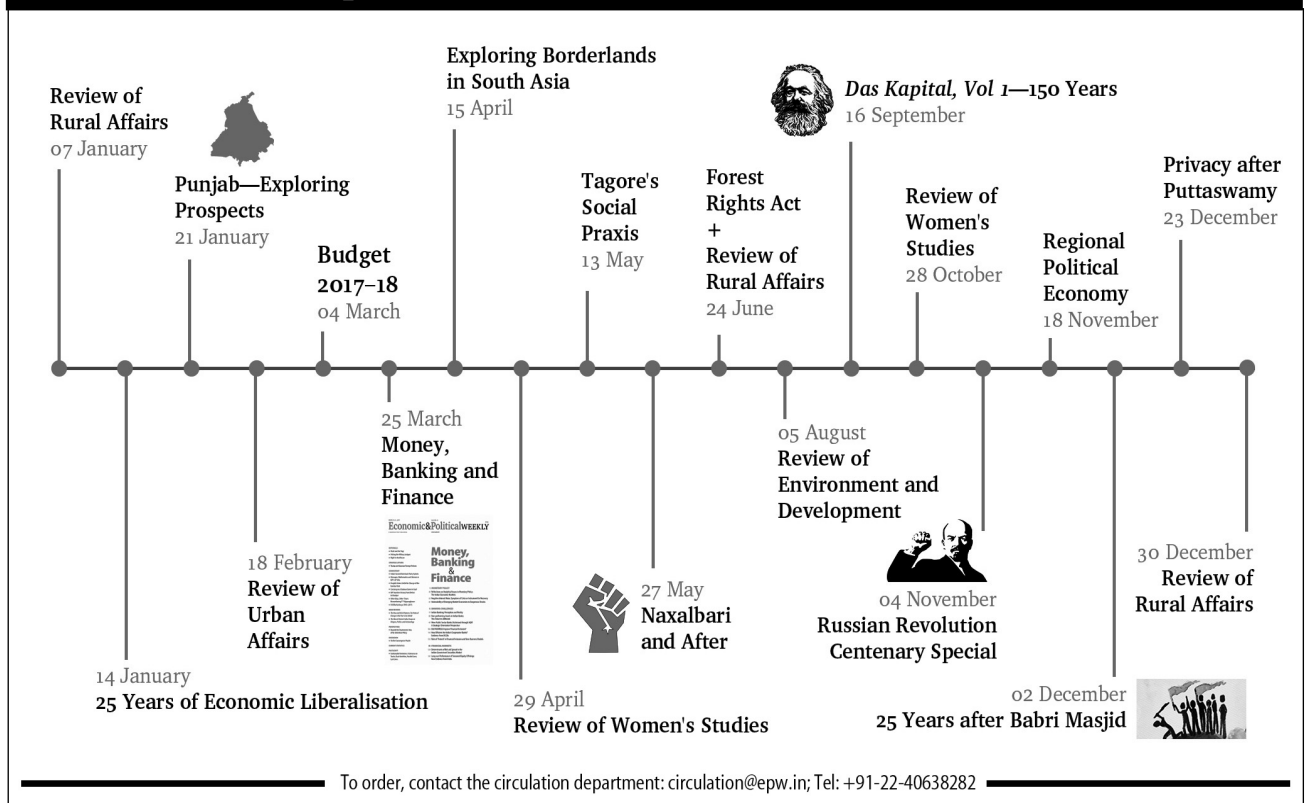
Due to the non-implementation of this overall plan and the lack of attention given to the upkeep of the monument, it was neglected, and became generally invisible to the public. Despite its relative invisibility, however, the monument remained an important marker of the country’s recent political history. During the implementation of the Diyatha Uyana park programme, it was entirely feasible to incorporate the monument in the landscape, while still leaving adequate space to accommodate other facilities and structures that have since been constructed. The refurbished monument would not only have been an elegant component of Diyatha Uyana, but would have held significant reference to Sri Lanka’s recent political turmoil.

Here, the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development made a clear political

decision to dismantle a post-independence local political monument and erase its memory in the resurrected and transformed site with its newly introduced practices of leisure. Intriguingly, it was the same agency that simultaneously took great care to resurrect colonial heritage buildings for their monumental value. In other words, the landscaping of Diyatha Uyana has led to a dissociation from the pre-existing sense of place, as Sally Ness suggests (2005: 120).

The displacement that landscaping causes is not, however, simply restricted to the transformation of the place itself. It entails a transformation in the experiences of the people associated with this place, in tune with the material transformations occurring around them, and the scenic or differentially defined ordering of the place (Ness 2005: 120). As people flock to Diyatha Uyana for their morning or evening walks, or to eat, relax, or buy potted plants on the weekends, the painful memory of a not-so-distant past, which the same place once tried to commemorate, has disappeared like the morning mist. A specific new, and seemingly happier

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history devoid of contradictions has been written and imposed on the land. It appears that this rewritten history, which is alienated from an uncomfortable collective conscience, has been embraced by most people in and around the space.

Concluding Comments

Before concluding, I will refer to one other silence that the overall discourse on Colombo's beautification has brought about. A considerable number of people in areas such as Dematagoda, Slave Island, and so on have been displaced as a result of the city beautification and the associated construction projects. Many of these people have not received adequate compensation. According to publicly available official estimates, the number of families to be relocated or displaced, if the entire range of urban renewal programmes are implemented, vary from 70,000 to 1,35,000 (CPA 2014: 8).

A conservative calculation (assuming the average household size is 4.2) of the actual number of people to be relocated ranges from 2,80,000 to 5,00,000 (CPA 2014: 8). A relocation of people of this magnitude in an urban space in Sri Lanka has not been recorded in recent history. Further, the complexities and challenges of this kind of displacement have not been accounted for, insofar as publicly available planning documents indicate. It also does not seem to concern many people who wholeheartedly support the city beautification process, without considering the collateral damage.

So, what does all this mean in the context of this article's assumptions? I have attempted to read "space as political text." Within this, notions of "urban coherence and order" can easily manifest only if certain contestations are made invisible or inaudible. I have tried to draw attention to some of these invisible and inaudible issues. This becomes possible not in architecture or actualised city plans, but in the domain of self-reflective social and political discourse. However, this discourse is not given adequate space due to serious lapses in critical architecture, city planning, and sociology in South Asia, and particularly in Sri Lanka. It also does not help that

many local professionals work in unstable political conditions, where professional training and one's personal conscience is made subservient to the realities of political and physical survival.

Stuart Jeffries, in a recent article on the radical present-day transformation of early 20th-century Marseille, talks about how the city's once-famed personality, messiness, smells, and even ugliness that had inspired philosopher Walter Benjamin, have been replaced by a "sandblasted, primed and cultureified" version (Jeffries 2015). It seems that what happened in Colombo after 2009 is also a kind of gentrification, with a heavy emphasis on the needs and tastes of the city's affluent population. In that process, less affluent segments of the population were distanced from key public spaces by virtue of an institutionalised sense of exclusivity. In this context, Fernando and Efrogmson describe the newly emergent public spaces in Colombo as "excessively engineered and overly designed" and "inviting only a certain income group" (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2014: 16).

At the moment, my reading is that Sri Lankan scholarship on urban space by and large overemphasises technical and design considerations. Instead of this reductionist approach, this scholarship needs to incorporate a more nuanced reading of evolving politics, mediated by a robust understanding of architecture and urban planning. At the same time, it needs to be tempered with a self-conscious engagement with social theory and an in-depth understanding of contextual history. Whether or not to create such a body of scholarship is a decision that contemporary scholars must make. Only the future will show us the intellectual cartographies these scholars and professionals will opt for; the paths they take and those that they consciously avoid; the roads they fear; the opportunities lost; and maybe even the efforts of those going against the tide.

If we opt *not* to read space as political text that is contingent upon evolving politics and nurtured by powerful political actors, our understanding of space, politics, and culture in the city will remain critically impoverished.

NOTES

- 1 When these ideas were initially presented at the third International Conference on Cities, People and Places (2015), there was considerable animosity among architects and urban planners in the audience. The main complaint was that issues of human rights should not be discussed in this context, because an important goal—the beautification of Colombo—was to be achieved efficiently. To do this, certain sacrifices had to be made. This sentiment is common in Colombo, across class and ethno-cultural boundaries.
- 2 A detailed analysis of the politics of this monument and its final disappearance is available in Chapter III (Remembering Death and Mourning the Loss of Innocence) of my book, *Violence and the Burden of Memory: Remembrance and Erasure in Sinhala Consciousness* (Perera 2016).

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