ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING & DESIGN INTERVENTIONS IN STRENGTHENING THE SENSE OF PLACE OF HISTORIC SITES IN KURUNEGALA, SRI LANKA

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Abstract: Urban planning or design interventions that alter the built environment or the current functions of the place in which they are implemented have the potential to change the meaning of those places, particularly for those who use them. This study addresses the growing knowledge gap regarding the role of planning and design interventions in strengthening the sense of place taking two planning and design interventions in historic sites in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka, as examples. A sample of 35 users were interviewed to get the average community perception, consisting of students, workers, nonemployees, and businessmen. Amongst the two projects, based on the research findings, Lake Round Development Project is recorded as the most frequently visited, closest, and the most memorable historic place in Kurunegala compared to *Rajapihilla* Park development. This leads to the conclusion that planning and design interventions have different abilities to either hide or emphasize place values, such as historic value, and affect the sense of place and overall urban image.

Keywords: Historic place, Kurunegala, planning & design, sense of place

1. Introduction

This study explores the role of urban planning & design interventions in creating Sense of Place (SOP) in historic places in the Kurunegala town center of Sri Lanka. Most people who visit the city are less aware of the historic sites and monuments with historic sense within the urban landscape of Kurunegala. These unnoticed cultural and historic places play a crucial role in creating SOP of the city and contribute to the quality of life of inhabitants.

The SOP generally describes the human connection to places, including place attachment and place meaning. Moreover, SOP is a subjective matter in the urban planning and design. Stewart, Williams & Susan (1998) define SOP is an umbrella concept that captures all the connections individuals shape with places such as, enthusiastic bonds including the solid felt meanings, recollections, values, and images and the mindfulness of the historical and social centrality of the place. Lewicka and Maria (2008) suggest that SOP pointed to another concept that relates to the place identity. Place identity can be described as the arrangement of features that guarantee the place's uniqueness and continuity in time. Place identity is considered as the assurance of the highlights of a place to self-conception on someone. According to Relph (1997), SOP is influenced by biased mental maps of the city that contain physical characteristics such as paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks.

In Kurunegala, there are several historic places scattered from Athugala to Kuruminigala with a semi-circular wall. For example, Athugalpura Clock Tower is a war memorial, even older than the ones built-in in the city of Colombo. Below this clocktower, there are four gates built facing the four directions, three of which are used to indicate the purpose of the clock tower and the names of soldiers who died in World War I. The year 1922 is marked in four directions above the rubble. This is a built in the memory of Northwestern and English soldiers who died fighting for the United Kingdom during World War I 1914-1918. This is confirmed by the passage inscribed on the clock tower in English, Sinhala, and Tamil.

Likewise, there are several historic and places and elements in Kurunegala town center. As mentioned above, they are less known and people's interaction with these places, both residents and visitors, seems to be at negligible level. This less awareness as well as non-utilization of these historic places has led to lower the SOP of Kurunegala town.

There has been several planning and design interventions associated with some of these historical sites in Kurunegala. However, it is not clear whether these planning and design interventions have considered the historical value of these hidden places into consideration, and whether these planning and design interventions have led to increase the SOP of these places incorporating the historic value of the place.

Focusing on the above problem, this study aims to question whether the current planning and design interventions in Kurunegala town support creating a sense of place. The objectives of the study are to explore the relationship between people, place, and planning & design interventions with the concept of sense of place and to explore whether the current planning & design interventions help to create a sense of place in the study area through exploring the changes in the feeling of sense of place amongst different user groups.

2. Methodology

2.1. CASE STUDY

Kurunegala Town had been used in the 16th and 17th Centuries by the Portuguese as a collecting center for Cinnamon and Pepper while Englishmen in the 17th and 18th Centuries used it as a main Administrative Center for Sathkorale. With the word 'Rajadhani', several famous places in Sri Lanka come to mind. Many areas such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Dambadeniya are at the top of the list. But among those, there was a word that has attracted a lot of attention in electronic, print, and social media throughout the past. That is the city of Kurunegala.

This research explored two projects implemented within two historic sites in the Kurunegala town center. Kurunegala Town had been used in the 16th and 17th Centuries by the Portuguese as a collecting center for Cinnamon and Pepper, while Englishmen in the 17th and 18th Centuries used it as a main Administrative Center for Sathkorale. Currently, Kurunegala town consists of natural, historical, and cultural features that carry those historic features but has already lost its image as a historic town in Sri Lanka due to many reasons. Over the past decades, the town has been developing and recreating the image against the historic value that it had in the past. There are several development projects that are being implemented, such as the central expressway development, town square development project, housing development project, lake round development project, and Rajapihilla park redevelopment project, which have come to being as part of the above transformation. Among these, lake round and Rajapihilla park, which have great history compared to other project locations, were selected for the study.

Figure 1; selected project location in the town center

2.2. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

A comprehensive literature survey was conducted referring to journal papers, conference proceedings, reports, and documents from diverse online databases to further explore the concept of SOP and its applicability in this research. A qualitative research approach will be employed to achieve the research aim. As for the research methods, semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys, documentary reviews, and observations were used to collect data.

First, several documents, reports, and books were reviewed to understand the concepts and theories related to the SOP. In addition, survey methods, and analysis methods were identified under the literature review. As the second step, the questionnaires were developed, and the survey was conducted to identify the impact of planning and design interventions to create the SOP through community perceptions. The questionnaires were given to diverse users of Lake Round and Rajapihilla Park, such as students, workers, shop owners, and nonemployees in neighboring communities.

The first part of the questionnaire was used to identify the historic places in Kurunegala town based on the knowledge of participants of the survey. The second part was used to assess the relationship between the impact of

the projects and the SOP. A sample of 35 participants were interviewed and it was made of students, workers, shop owners, and nonemployees, who are regular users of two places.

To identify the physical changes due to the projects, photographs were collected from the Urban Council and field observations. Then conducted unstructured interviews to get information about previous and after the condition of planning and design interventions according to the views of user groups.

3. Data Analysis & Results

3.1. FINDINGS

Most people visited Athugala and the lake round area for a better place experience. However, as people stated, the area is highly polluted due to human activities. They also expressed their unpleasure towards not economizing the historic value of the place. Compared to lake round, in Rajapihilla park area, people were chit-chatting, gathering, boat riding, relaxing, exercising, memorizing, feeling the place environment, and having food, and so forth. The environment seemed good to handle the moods emotions and feelings of people.

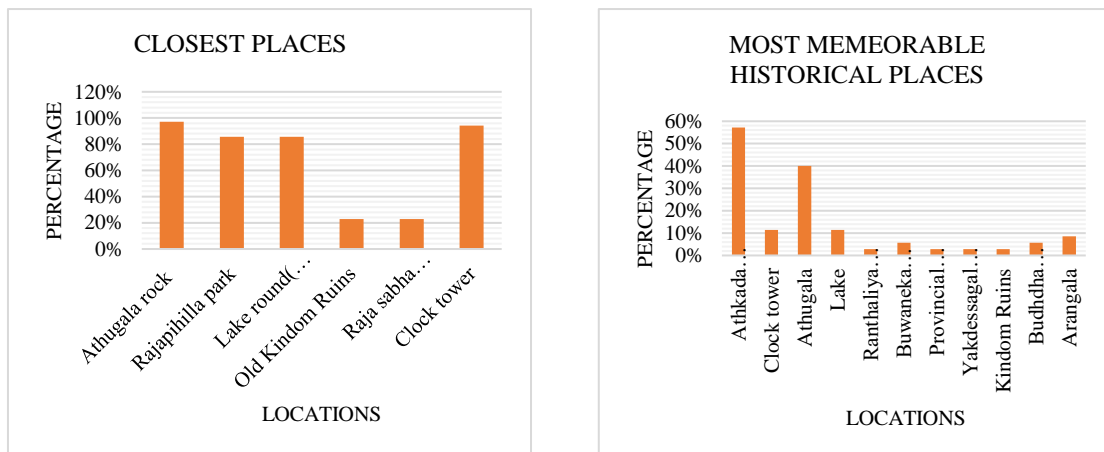Figure 2: frequently visited areas & most memorable places (Source: By Author)

Figure 3: Closest places & most memorable historical places, (Source: By Author)

According to a sample survey conducted in the field in the town center, the majority of participants frequent Lake round, Athugala rock, Rajapihilla Park, and shops and offices to spend their leisure time. The Athugala, Lake round, Athkada viharaya, Clock tower, bus stand, and Rajapihilla park are the most memorable places in the town center, respectively.

Apart from that, these iconic structures and sites that people identified as memorable places, such as Athkada viharaya, Athugala clock tower, and lake round as community perspective, have historic significance. Finally, the proposed sights and monuments are ranked according to their perceived proximity to people, with the highest-ranked destinations being Athugala rock, Clock tower, Rajapihilla park, Lake round (Ranthaliya), and old kingdom ruins. The Kurunegala town is developing under the new development plan 2021 – 2030. To do this research lake

round development project and Rajapihilla park redevelopment projects were taken. The market square development project, and the Housing complex development project within the town area can be taken as ongoing projects.

3.2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

3.2.1. Project 01: Lake Round Development Project

Figure 4; Garbage dumping location,
(Source; Urban council, Kurunegala)

Figure 5; Past Condition of the lake side area,
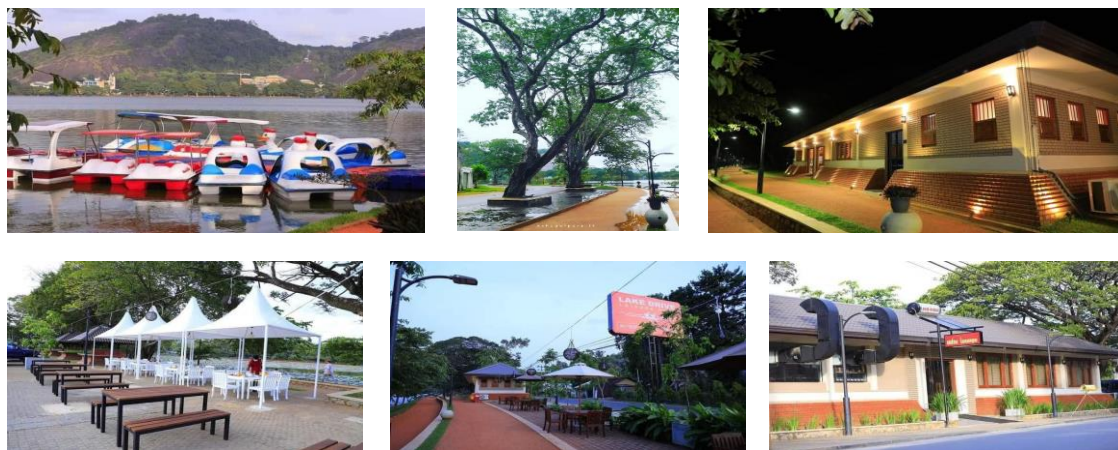(Source; Urban council, Kurunegala)

Figure 6: Present condition of the Lake side area, Source: By Author)

Table 1 below refers to the community's perception regarding the selected site locations within the city center. The perception survey reflects the different place meanings from them. One of the students said that "There were more relaxation conditions due to the calm environment and improved attraction by the recent development". They are more likely to have positive feedback for this lakeside area. Nonemployees said that they were visiting to spend their free time here and said that "It's a quiet environment, Athugala Buddha Statue and Lake are seen in the distance" and someone said that they "can exercise by looking around".

Table 1: Community perception summary of the Lake Round Development Project, (Source: By Author)

Respondent	Respondent Number	Place meanings	Meaning categories	Beliefs about the project site (Before interventions)	Beliefs about the project site (After interventions)	Attitude towards planning intervention People's current project satisfaction
Students	01	More relaxation conditions due to the calm environment	Attachment	At that time there was a bad smell as well there were garbage sites around here. most of the couples are around there are	Now the condition was slightly changed, and the environment is very good for both children and adults to visit and stay here	4

					their behavior is not good	
	02	Calm and beautiful environment	Biodiversity	-	it is beautiful	5
	03	Beautiful and calm	Beauty	-	-	4
	04	Calm nature in the previous year but not now, now only the shops	Attachment	Yes, very calm, and quiet, no rush	Yes, not a calm place, but love the development, now the place is generalized to people, and anyone can go and see no fears	3
	05	View	Beauty	Good, Freedom	Feel good	3
	06	It free natural vibe & beautiful background	Biodiversity	There are difficulties in space spending time	There are facilities like restaurants, and walking path and also spend time with feel free	4
	07	Good	Attachment	A messy environment	Neat	3
	08	The beauty of nature and neatness	Beauty	-	The design of the Walking Lane	5
	09	Improve attraction through the recent development	Convertibility	Lack of attractiveness	Very attractiveness	4
	10	Peaceful environment	Attachment	-	it is a good project	4
	11	This is the best place to spend leisure time and beautiful surroundings and a walking path	Biodiversity	-	Now it has been built in such a way as to attract people.	4
	12	Feeling free	Attachment	-	I like to be here because of freedom, better than staying home	4
Workers	01	For spend leisure in the environment and mental relaxation	Biodiversity	It felt like an environment not conducive to leisure time and a paradise for lovers but also a free and peaceful environment. "	That a more beautiful environment has been created than before	4
	02	It is a pleasant and calm place.	Beauty	-	It's a great place to spend some free time with people of all ages.	4
	03	Spend time with my friends	Attraction	-	Good	5
	04	Surrounding	Biodiversity	Earlier it was not nice at all	Yes ... beautiful surrounding	5
	05	Beautiful scenery	Biodiversity	A quiet place "	I felt it was the result of valuable ideas.	2
	06	Mental relaxation for my problems	Attachment	No, pretty here before	Now there is a place for children to come and sit	5
	07	Beautiful place to visit	Beauty		Beautiful	5
	08	Calm feeling	Attachment	-		4
	09	To spend free time	Attachment	-	Development is very good now	4
	10	To be free	Attachment	-	Better than before	
	11	There is also a quiet	Functionality	-	The way it was before is good and now it has	

			children's park			been concreted and lost its natural quality	
Nonemployee	01	A great place to relax and unwind.	Attachment	-	-	5
	02	Most of the time it's a great place to hang out with friends. "	Functionality	-	That it is a fun and commercial environment	4
	03	A beautiful place	Beauty	There were natural resources ... trees, stones ... but now it has been put in order and its beauty has been enhanced ... it is a great pleasure ...	Yes, it's more beautiful now than it used to be	4
	04	A beautiful place ... a place that should be developed without harming nature ...	Beauty	-	Today more people come to enjoy its beauty than there are people who behave indecently ... especially school-age children ... if we pay special attention to that, this project will be even more successful.	5
	05	It's a quiet environment Athugala Buddha Statue and Lake are seen in the distance	Attachment	-	very good	5
	06	Happy & Beautiful	Beauty	-	-	4
	07	You can exercise by looking around	Functionality	-	-	3
	08	It has become crowded. There are too many Muslims	Risk	-	-	4
	09	Beautifully Developed	Beauty	-	-	2
Businessman	01	There is more development now than ever before	Beauty	-	There is development around the lake but there is no benefit to the people around	3
	02	To relax	Attachment	-	In the past these were possible but now it is not so you can rest	3
	03	Calm environment	Attachment	-	good	4

Considering the the project development, they said that the place is a messy area that has less attractiveness, and they were not satisfied with the earlier condition here. People said "At that time there was the bad smell as well there was a garbage site around here. most of the couples are around there their behavior is not good" and one of the nonemployees said that "It felt like an environment not conducive to leisure time and a paradise for lovers but also a free and peaceful environment. "Considering the ideas of planning intervention most of them were very satisfied with this project rather than before.

People's rating for this development also refers the project satisfaction and below Figure 5 shows the percentage of satisfaction. Most of them visited here for having fun, feeling nature, and spending their leisure time without

disturbances. According to the Shamai, there are four-level of senses of place. These levels are described as Not having a sense of place, knowing of the place, Belonging to the place, and Attachment to Place.
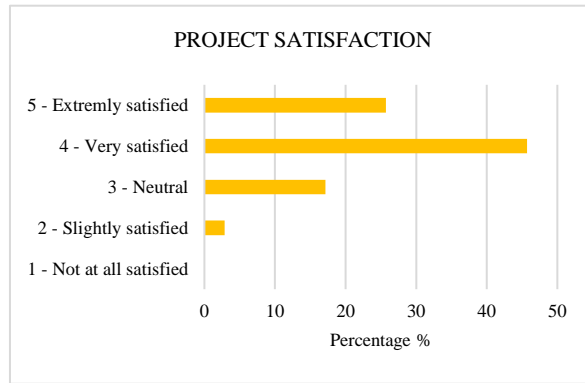

Figure 7 Project Satisfaction, (Source: By Author)

3.2.2. Project 02: Rajapihilla Park Redevelopment Project (ongoing)

Figure 8: Rajapihilla park before starting the development project
(Source: UDA, Northwestern Province office)

Figure 9: Proposed project elements, (Source: Internet)

Table 2: Community perception summary in Rajapihilla park project, (Source: By Author)

Respondent	Respondent number	Place meanings	Meaning categories	Beliefs about the project site (Before interventions)	Beliefs about the project site (After interventions)	Attitude toward planning intervention (People's current project satisfaction)

Workers	01	This place was the gathering area for people who come to get some services and wait for something. and there were some archaeological monuments and historic structures were there	Functionality	I feel like the good environment quality attracts me here to stay awhile.	As I am aware of this area the developers are demolishing some valuable structures as well this planning attempt is good, but the latest condition was good	3
	02	Calm environment	Attachment	It was a beautiful and user-friendly place	No idea	4
	03	Being able to spend time freely	Attachment	Aa good place	The way it was before is good	3
	04	I've never been there; the nature of this park makes me avoid this place. (Couples behaviour)	Risk	Very dull, dark, and not a welcoming place	I think it should be appreciated	4
	05	Nature beauty	Beauty	Freedom	Bad idea	5
	06	There is a good environment for spending time	Biodiversity	-	-	4
	07	Trees and Freedom	Biodiversity	feeling free	Good	1
	08	Eye-catching beauty	Beauty	Calming place	Not bad	4
	09	Calm environment	Attachment	A quiet environment in the centre of the city	a sad	1
Students	10	Peaceful environment	Attachment	better place to spend your free time	not a good one	4
	11	-	-	I have never been there before construction.	I think it is a good planning intervention because It is very hot in Kurunegala during the day. People from far can use it to relax and wind.	3
Workers	01	To be free	Attachment	There is no special attraction or feeling.	It seems that a more beautiful, attractive, and fun environment will be created after the completion of the development project in the future.	1
	02	-	-	I don't have any idea about that.	It is a better idea	1
	03	-	-	-	No idea	3
	04	It was nice	Attachment	Earlier the area was not clean at all, and it can be developed to a great level	It is not nice at all	3
	05	Excessive exposure to vegetation	Biodiversity	That can be further embellished	beautiful	2

	06	It was not a pretty place before and there was garbage everywhere	Risk	I do not like to be here, there is no place to sit and eat	-	3
Nonemployee	01	-	-	A beautiful park	I do not understand that. I did not go after the reforms	3
	02	Beautiful place	Beauty	A place that used to be a mess ... a place that was not properly maintained ... now it's nice to see it beautiful	Very happy ... about beautifying places like this and giving them to the public in a proper order without destroying them	5
	03	Being able to be free	Attachment	A beautiful environment	A good plan	1
	01	It is more developed and beautiful now than before	Functionality	-	-	-
	05	Unlike before, the tank itself has improved. Not as lonely as before but very crowded now	Attraction	The city is crowded, and it is difficult to do our work but we come at a loss and continue our work	-	-
Businessman	01	It used to be a beautiful jungle but now it is in good condition	Biodiversity	-	-	-
	02	A place where people used to come and go	Functionality	It used to be good	If that project is developed, it will be good for the people to come and sit down and go right	-
	03	Rajapihilla Park used to be nice when we were in school	Beauty	Not impressed with the project	-	-

People's rating for this development also refers the project satisfaction and below Figure 8 show the percentage of satisfaction. According to the Shamai, there are four-level of senses of place. These levels are described as Not having a sense of place, knowing of the place, Belonging to the place, and Attachment to Place. Studying the field observation and survey data, concluded ideas were different for this planning intervention. And comparatively these two site locations some of the respondents did not have clear ideas about this project. Because they have not usually visited there before or starting after this project. About the place, the meaning of this site majority of respondents described this as a calm and environmentally rich area. Their perceptions of the place were more positive rather being negative. They frequently mention this area as an "excessive exposure to the vegetation" and another respondent said that "It used to be a beautiful jungle but now it is in good condition"

Only one respondent described this place from a negative perspective, and he disagreed with this redevelopment project. He thoroughly mentions that "Rajapihilla Park used to be nice when we were in school". The community stated that, before this development happened it was not a pleasant environment. Most of them mentioned that the project area is "very dull, dark and not a welcoming place" and "a place that used to be a mess, a place that was not properly maintained, now it's nice to see it beautiful". And the total of 8 respondents directly accepts this project and they are welcoming this project as a good planning intervention. Survey participants were asked whether they had been aware of planning and design intervention (19 individuals, 54%) in their neighborhood. Most of them knew the current planning attempts and had aware of new urban features built-in physically. Although not all the participants agreed with the new urban planning interventions, they conceptualized the matters relating to these site locations below Figure 8 showing the project satisfaction regarding the community perception.

Figure 10: Project Satisfaction, (Source: By Author)

The findings of the study were categorized into a few topics based on observations and interviews with Rajapihilla park users, Lake round development project neighbors, and park visitors. Biodiversity, appeal, functionality, attachment, risk, and beauty are examples of such topics. These are the meanings of places in terms of community perceptions of beliefs and ideas.
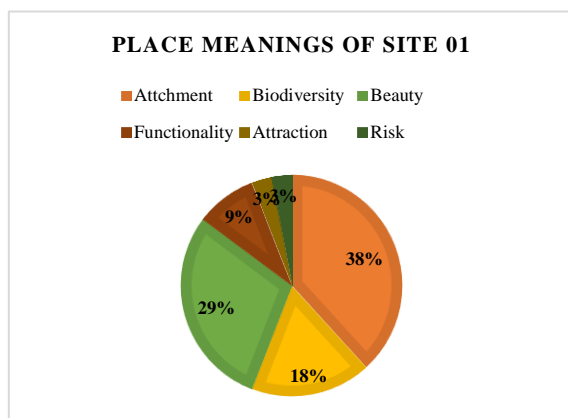

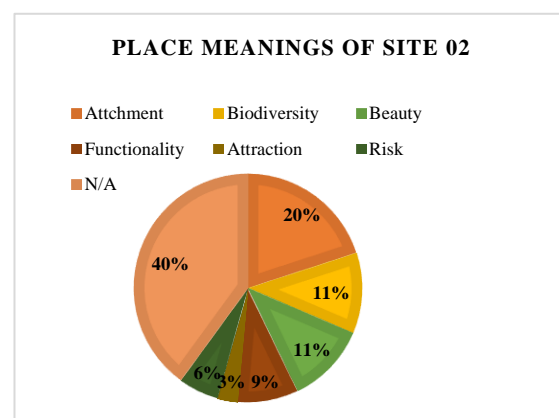Figure 11: Place meanings of Lake round project, (Source: By Author)

Figure 12: Place meanings of Rajapihilla park project, (Source: By Author)

4. Conclusions

Based on the above research we can conclude that the rising need for planning and design projects for restoration, refurbishment, and re-use of various aspects of historical monuments has been fueled by the recent worldwide interest in conservation areas. The extent of the project's expansion, on the other hand, is frightening, raising concerns for the preservation of these places' uniqueness. Sense of place is a location-based theory that determines a person's feelings for a place based on their experiences and recollections throughout time. According to the study's recommendations, physical planners should be concerned about the sense of place in the town when implementing planning and design projects. Planners and designers must consider the community's impression of the place and the meaning they have within their neighborhood and provide the satisfaction they want to get out of their experience. If that is taken place in the urban environment, then it leads to the creation or maintenance of a town's spirit while providing positive user experience.

Based on the findings of this research, even though there were several limitations such as time and resource limitation, reluctance of participants to respond to certain questions, and so forth, we come to the same conclusion as the above. Planning and design interventions affect differently on user experience or the SOP. Those interventions can lead to either hide existing place values, such as historical value of places, or, can emphasize such values and support a positive user experience that will ultimately leads to the creation of the image of an urban environment.

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