



# **CRAFT INDUSTRIES AND RIBBON DEVELOPMENT: PLACE CHANGE ALONG THE COLOMBO-KANDY ROAD, SRI LANKA.**

**Collaborative research with Monash University  
Art Design & Architecture, Australia**

## Introduction

The research project started in 2019 and by 2020 had completed the in- depth observation and collected the participatory observation data resources too. According to researchers from Moratuwa University, due to the country being locked down for two years periodically due to an unexpected COVID 19 pandemic, the huge economic backwardness that may occur in the country in the future is foreshadowed. As university researchers, conducting research predicting the future is an urgent need. The analysis of this research data revealed that traditional craft industries are a city system that has emerged over time based on geo- political, economic, social and cultural traditions of the country. The researchers explain that it is a local imperative to develop this craft village concept into a broader concept, the creative city concept, through government intervention. It will be a victory for us as researchers if we are able to convince the existing government to start a permanent program to nurture the local economy by combining the creative city concept, a greater concept, with the local tourism industry of the country. It is important to identify the existing craft-associated business model to implement the creative craft city concept. According to UNCTAD 2018, the craft industry is becoming more and more crucial for economic growth in Asian nations, both as a direct export and for destination-specific tourism (Cohen 1995; Gough and Rigg 2012; He and Gabhardt 2013; Saha and Sen 2016). Although the structure and purpose of commercial creative industries in Western cities have been extensively studied (Scott 2010, for example), this information cannot be directly applied to traditional craft industries, especially in other parts

of the world where histories, urbanization patterns, and agglomeration dynamics are distinct (Phelps and Wijaya 2020). Craft industries are prevalent in peri-urban cities, villages, and desakota in South and East Asian nations where the lines between urban and rural life converge (McGee 1991; Rigg 1998). They develop in a distinctive morphological pattern known as “craft ribbon development,” which runs along major thoroughfares or roadways (Cohen 1995).

The study's aim is to address two questions that examine the relationship between craft industries and their peri-urban environment:

- How is craft industry development related to placing history and geography?
- What is the relationship between craft industries and the spatial arrangement of their surrounding area?

### Literature Review

Place is a storehouse of traditional knowledge, and culture and heritage play a significant role in explaining how craft industries have grown. In order to support the agglomeration of craft industries, attributes of site may encourage economic interactions by luring enterprises, entrepreneurs, and tourists to the area (Fung & Erni, 2013; He & Gebhardt, 2013). Cultural identity and economic order “condense out to emerge as the monopoly power of location,” as Saha and Sen (2016:30) note. A variety of cultural craft clusters are supported by particular cultural foundations like traditional knowledge and rural resources.

The established literature on industrial clustering often emphasizes the cost-saving advantages of physical closeness while concentrating on the localization benefits of site. Trade in information, concepts, and symbolic aspects also supports cultural output. “Cultural commodities of place can act as its “emissaries,” strengthening its figurative representations and giving it a seal of validity that forbids the entry of potential rivals” (Scott cited in Leslie & Rantisi, 2011: 1774). Location has symbolic value for the sector because it enhances the reputation of the artisan product (Cohen, 1995; He &

Gebhardt, 2013; Molotch, 2002). Craft clusters in Asia are frequently rooted in deeper historical contexts and have emerged and developed as a result of variables like caste systems and land tenure (Saha & Sen, 2016).

To explain the physical growth of craft industries in “ribbons” along arterial routes in South and East Asia, place-specific culture and legacy are indispensable in addition to market dynamics (Cohen, 1995). This encourages the growth of the craft sector, which modifies conventional workplaces and makes use of inherited knowledge and traditional building form, in addition to supporting the development of tourist infrastructure (such as highways and air transport) (Khamdevi, & Bott, 2018). Gamage (2009) demonstrates how the development of major highways draws local craftsmen to open shops along the roadways, resulting in the establishment of craft ribbons linking the two major urban centers of Colombo and Kandy. To encourage market expansion, the British colonial authority built the roads, which altered Sri Lanka's political landscape. In South and East Asia, the development of rural and peri-urban craft and creative industries is frequently referred to as “ribbon development.” Cohen (1995) distinguishes between localized and ramified ribbon growth. The localized ribbon, which develops along a single road over a few hundred meters, corresponds to the street ribbons through-

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out the city. Localized ribbons exhibit homogeneity in the range of goods sold and the size of businesses, but they have the potential to grow and converge to become ramified ribbons (Cohen, 1995). The kilometers-long, ramified ribbon includes a variety of goods close to craft-producing villages located between large urban centers. As we investigate in the example of the Colombo-Kandy Road, craft ribbons may, over time, alter both the morphology of the area and industry development.

## Methodology

This research relies on a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, including field observation, mapping, key informants' interviews, and surveying to address the following research questions.

- How do place history and geography shape craft industry development over time?
- How do craft industries influence the spatial arrangement of their surrounding area?

The study is based on Pilimathalawa, Molagoda, and Wewaldeniya, three craft clusters along the Colombo-Kandy Road. Both the shape and industry structure of craft ribbon development are influenced by this fusion of rich history and culture with more recent political and legislative change. The growth of craft clusters along the road networks across three eras—before, during, and after British colonization—contributed to the blending of rural and urban boundaries and the alteration of livelihoods (McGee 1991; Phelps 2021; Rigg 1998). As a result, Sri Lanka's craft industries transitioned from being tightly linked under monarchical authority to being market-oriented under neoliberalism. Under British colonial control, the construction of major thoroughfares led local entrepreneurs to open shops along the Colombo-Kandy Road, resulting in the establishment of a craft belt between the two major cities. Neo-liberal economic policies instituted by the government beginning in 1977 created new business opportunities and transformed industries through the government's support of craft industries and market development through domestic and international tourism (Coomaraswamy 1984; Kelegama 2005; Uyangoda 2007).

Pilimathalawa, Molagoda, and Wewaldeniya are traditional craft industry villages specializing in brassware, pottery, and cane products, respectively (Figure 1). These three sites provide a unique morphological character and are the only three visually significant craft clusters along the Colombo-Kandy Road (Colombo-Kandy Road is classified as the number one road in Sri Lanka). As the first step, observations were carried out to map the craft clusters. Maps for each site were prepared to facilitate the field survey. Identified 163 building units from Wewaldeniya, 104 units from Molagoda, and 100 units from Pilimathalawa were included in the survey. The survey questionnaire was designed to gather information on land size, land use, floor area, and floors from each unit within the demarcated areas.

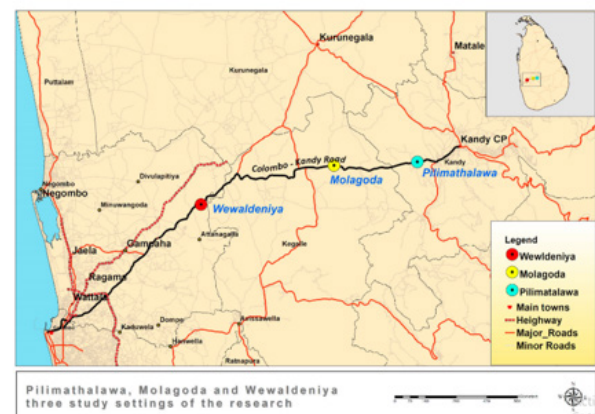


Figure 1: Selected study craft villages.

Nine semi-structured interviews, three from each site, were conducted by the research staff in early 2020. The interviews were carried out with the primary community leaders, craft artisans/traders, government officers, and senior citizens who know the history and the evolution of the clusters. The interview guide was prepared to cover the industry's historical development, the connection between the place and the surrounding areas, and the current status of the industry. Additionally, a range of chronicles such as local history reports, dairies, and written folk stories were referred to understand the historical background of craft industries. To analyze the spatial agglomeration of craft industries, this research adopted a spatial analysis method with the assistance of QGIS software. A database was created using field observation data and tabulated separately into three phases pre-1948 1948-1977, and 1977-2020.





Figure 2: Wewaldeniya cane ribbon development.



Figure 3: Molagoda pottery ribbon development



Figure 4: Pilimathalawa Brass ribbon development

## Research Findings

Historical roots and development was examined through three phases consecutively: the pre-independence era (1590-1948), post-independence (1948-1977), market and industry-oriented reforms After 1977. The pre-independence era encompassed the last Kingdom of Sri Lanka (1590 - 1815) through British colonization, and up to Sri Lanka's independence (1815-1948). Here it was observed how the caste and land tenure system called Rajakariya, which assigned industries according to caste, affected craft industries. Post-independence (1948-1977) is significant as the country began to enforce strict closed economic policies and restricted importing foreign goods and foreign investments in Sri Lanka. Market and industry-oriented reforms After 1977, a new government formed and turned toward market-oriented, neo-liberal economic reforms that focused on creating new business opportunities. The country's small scale industry liberalization programme began with several established bodies under the Ministry of Rural Industrial Development, including the Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB), the National Crafts Council (NCC), and the National Design Centre (NDC).

There is a significant relation between craft industries, place, culture, and the country's political-economic history. During the Kandyan kingdom, caste played an important role in choosing a profession. Although the caste system's power has decreased over time, the industry still relies on this heritage for place branding to compete with substitutes today. Craft industries still rely on a close-knit family labour circle, and it is rare to see professionals from outside joining the industry. The skills were passed through generations. Although craft clusters' origin began based on land tenure system (nindagam) the expansion occurred based on accessibility. Currently, most sites on the Colombo-Kandy Road

act as points of sale, while the production is done in the surrounding inner village. After the 1970s the open economy was introduced to the country, and these policies have reshaped the traditional industry to focus on more market-oriented production and competing with other imports. After the 1970s, the country's infrastructure development accelerated, and Colombo-Kandy road development was among the major investments. The relationship of artisans to the land can be viewed through the historical formation of village structures and networks. Additionally, the road network provides the interface to interact with the broader community. With improved roads, increased motorization and increased demand, craft outlets began to relocate along the main roads. The findings indicate that some significant morphological changes have occurred in all three sites at each stage. The ribbon development has created a visually significant transition among other roadside developments along the Colombo-Kandy Road. Mono structured, semi-permanent architectural outlets have been a significant landmark for Wewaldeniya and Molagoda sites over the three phases. Although the vertical development did not occur rapidly, the changes are significant during the third phase (1980-2020). This trend increased the subdivision of lands into small parcels and introduced other activities, including residential, production and business type land uses in all three sites. New entrepreneurs have entered the market. It was observed that some planning implications are associated with the new developments. Most roadside outlets have been built with temporary and/or poor-quality materials and the designs of outlets are not responsive to the local character and identity.

## Conclusion

We understood geography, history and economy as the driving factors of craft ribbon development in Sri Lanka. Therefore, we point out the immense

value of using culturally specific approaches in understanding craft ribbon developments in the Asian region, which differs from western understanding. This research shows the need of connecting history and culture in facilitating physical development by planners and policymakers as these factors provide a robust platform for the connectivity of culture with physical planning. Up to now, little attention has been paid to promote cultural identity and place experience of study locations through physical planning in Sri Lanka. It is important to consider the cultural identity of the sites through planning design guidelines. In this connection, planning authorities can devise appropriate setbacks, street designs and building standards to support craft industry development.

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