



From Chaos to Harmony:

Reimagining Pettah, Colombo Through Lens of Strategic Urban Planning

Urban Planning incorporates elements that can recognize chaotic, ad-hoc environments and transform them into inclusive, accessible, and vibrant places. Pettah stands out as the most significant transit and commercial landscape of Sri Lanka, is a unique case study which illustrates both the challenges and opportunities for such transformation. This site was selected given its significance as outlined in Colombo City Development Plan [1] (2022–2031) towards strategic transform in the

area and surrounding to meet contemporary needs while preserving cultural and economic value.

This study began with systematic data collection including an initial ground observations and further mapping out the urban stressors to identify the misfits of the urban core. Through several analyses these problems and potentials were identified. Contemporary needs were sorted through a stakeholder mapping exercise.

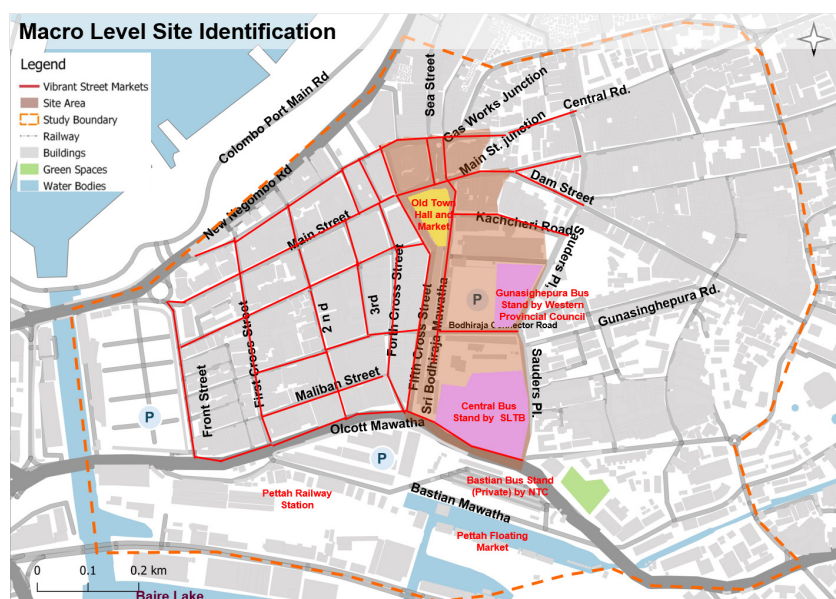


Figure 1: Site Identification (Source: Author)

Among many context-specific planning approaches, the Local Area Planning approach (LAP) explains creating a detailed strategy for a specific geographic area, such as a neighborhood or a small township, to guide future growth and sustainable development [2]. This focuses on several levels of planning – Area, Building, and Street, incorporating

context-specific and community-specific details. This study utilizes this approach to perform several analyses combining with multiple data collection methods (Table 1) to analyze the urban stressors and opportunities and to present strategic urban planning solutions.

Analyses Performed and utilized Data Collection Methods		
Analysis	Data Collection Method	Sample Size/ Area investigated
1. Figure Ground Analysis	Satellite Images & GIS software	Study Area
2. Connectivity & Spatial Integration	Satellite Images & GIS software	Study Area
3. Movement & Walkability Analysis	Participant Observations	Study Area (During 2 weekdays and 2 days in weekend 6 hours per day)
4. Building Use Analysis	Participant Observations	Study Area
5. Legibility Analysis	Participant Observations	Study Area
6. Functional Mix Analysis	Participant Observations	Study Area
7. Space Matrix (Building Density)	Participant Observations	Study Area
8. Land Use Analysis	Documentary Review & Semi-structured Interviews	Study Area Interviews were conducted with 12 shop owners with snowball sampling.
9. Market Analysis	Documentary Review, Observations & Semi-structured Interviews	Study Area Interviews were conducted with 15 shop owners & 8 street vendors with random sampling.

Table 1: Analyses, Data Collection Methods & respective sample sizes

Pettah Old Town Hall building is a colonial piece of architecture built back in 1873, surrounded by a grid-pattern road network, accommodating mainly wholesale and retail commercial activities with its proximity to the Colombo port. At present, as Pettah is the regional main transportation node, the site includes Central Bus Stand (CTB), Gunasighepura Bus Stand, Bastian Bus Stand (Private), and Pettah Railway Station, while facilitating the nearly 14,000 passenger population throughout the day. This site is bearing natural walkability with its smaller block sizes and availability of intersections. Being the core commercialized space of Colombo, this area attracts commuter population, facilitating economic growth.

Although the road is designed to colonial light foot traffic in the earlier period, now congested with heavy vehicles, creating several major challenges in its surroundings. Under Area-specific attributes in the LAP approach, congested mono-functional usage of space has been identified with 75.9% of space only utilizing for commercial activities only. According to the Building-specific attributes, dilapidated condition of buildings with an identical pattern has been noticed, with 84% of buildings utilizing for commercial uses, maintaining an uncomplimentary & ad hoc built pattern. From the community-specific perspective, retail traders are occupying the pavements, forcing pedestrians onto the roads, and forming inconvenient conditions.

Considering street-level attributes, movement patterns of different uses, such as commuters, Nattami people (good carrying people), shoppers, vendors, workers, and visitors has been identified to cause congested foot traffic within the area. Vehicular traffic congestion at the Sri Bodhiraja Road, 5th Cross Street, Bodhiraja Connector Road, and the Saunders' Place intersection slows down the vehicle flow and disturbs pedestrian mobility

(Figure 2). Even though the average vehicular traffic speed is limited to 10 kmh-25 kmh, most of the streets are vehicle dominated, making it unsafe and uncomfortable for pedestrians. Intensified harsh urban environment due to insufficient tree cover, limited public seating, and inadequate pedestrian facilities are additions to this chaos. Despite its economic vibrancy, area has become a congested, polluted, and stressful urban core.



Figure 2: Real Ground Conditions (Source: Author)

Figure 2: Real Ground Conditions (Source: Author) Urban Planning is not just about converting spaces, aligning with regulations, but also engaging with stakeholders and building consensus among all parties. As per the ownerships and authorization, UDA owns the land and Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) holds the responsibilities regarding the local road network. However, the whole site is currently on a 99-year' leasehold agreement with the Colombo Land and Development Company PLC. Measuring all parties' requirements along with public needs, a plan is needed to overcome

urban stresses, facilitate future-oriented projects, and maximize the economic benefit.

Transforming Pettah requires a careful balance between commerce, mobility, and heritage preservation. The framework of 'New urbanism' [3] is particularly useful, emphasizing mixed-use blocks, walkability, and the public realm (Figure 3 & 4). Additionally, with place-making principles, healthier alternatives can replace urban stressors. These approaches draw key principles and strategies (Table 2).

Key Principle	Recommended Strategies
Heritage-led Regeneration Conservation of Old Town hall as a cultural anchor integrating with urban culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transforming Old Town Hall and Market into a cultural space with adaptive reuse. Providing spaces for exhibitions, performances, and public gatherings with omnidirectional access to reconnect colonial-era architecture with contemporary community life.
Sustainable Mobility Prioritizing pedestrians and walkability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pedestrianizing the Sri Bodhiraja Mawatha prioritizing urban greenery and pedestrian facilities. Altering bus routes via Olcott Mawatha creating safer conditions for pedestrians. Introducing public urban green parks in vacant lands for softening the harsh urban environment.
Mixed-use Functional Integration Optimum allocation of space for commercial, cultural, and civic functions for creating a balanced urban fabric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate enough space for wholesale activities with dedicated space for loading & unloading activities. Providing dedicated spaces for retail shops, informal vending activities such as shop lines and kiosks reducing street-level clutter. Utilizing vacant spaces for mixed-use developments allocating spaces according to the demand analysis.

Table 2: Key principles and Strategies

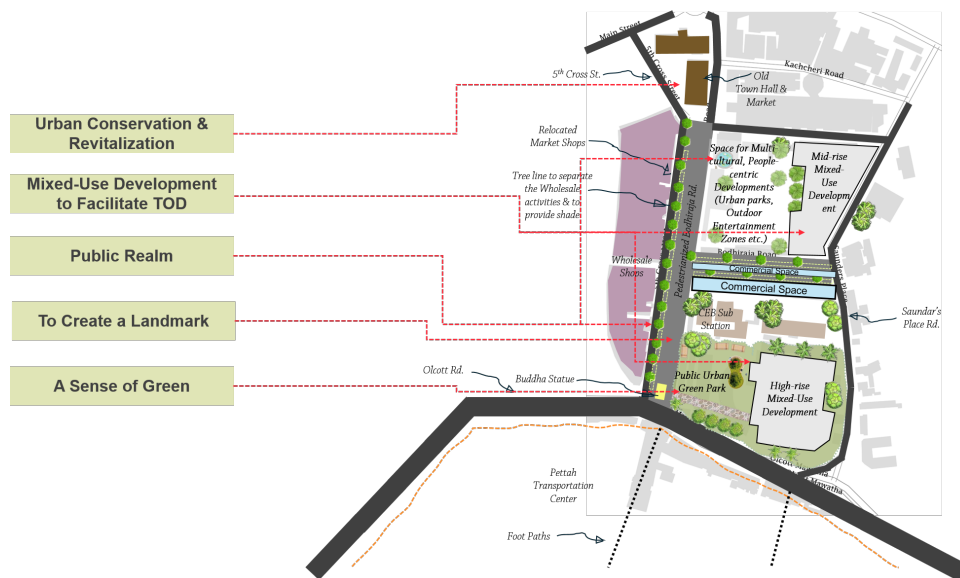


Figure 3: Planning Approach (Source: Author)



Figure 4: Expected outcomes with pedestrianizing Sri Bodhiraja Mawatha (Source: AI Generated)



This case of Pettah exemplifies urban planning is not simply about physical transformations or imposing regulations, but it is about heritage conservation, commercial vitality, sustainable mobility and inclusion. Through a multi-layered approach which incorporates heritage-led regeneration, integrated transport and land use planning, stakeholder participation, and proper governance, Pettah can evolve into a culturally rich, socially

inclusive, economically viable, and environmentally resilient urban core. Beyond Pettah in Colombo, such a planning approach can be utilized as a replicable modal to apply in heritage-rich, dense commercial cores around the world. By valuing culture while addressing social, economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions together, urban planning can indeed transform chaotic urban centers into thriving, future-ready spaces.

References:

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