

Social Reflection of Lifestyles in Moratuwa Urban Area: An Exploration of Inherent Art Forms as an Attribute in the Urban Context

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Abstract

Art has a dynamic ability to reflect and express human skills that embody creativity and imagination across the various forms of artistic expression. Moratuwa is one of the vibrant cultural landscapes which once historically functioned as a mirror of social values and traditions, with the reflection of art forms. However, the dynamic relationship between art and society is facing disruption by the younger generation's diminishing engagement with traditional and contemporary art forms, where modernity often overshadows cultural continuity. Exploring these traditions within Moratuwa's urban context reveals their importance in maintaining cultural identity and a balanced way of life. The research aims to highlight the essentiality of art in human life, explore its reflection on Moratuwa's past and present, raise awareness among the younger generation about its vibrancy, and analyze its positive impact on the city's unique perspective, through urban context by integrating contemporary influences, while maintaining traditional values. The research deployed three methods, which are interviewing professionals in the art field, literature reviews, and deep self-observations along with discussions with the community and artists, about three art forms, music, wood carving, and drama, that are considered as the social reflections of people's lifestyle in Moratuwa within urbanism. Moratuwa is known as a famous city in Sri Lanka for carpentry and cultural art. As a positive result, this research emphasizes how inherent art forms serve as powerful media to reflect and communicate the evolving lifestyles of Moratuwa's urban context. Therefore, there is a need to reframe and revitalize the city's identity through a deeper architectural appreciation of its cultural heritage in its urban development. This initiative will foster awareness, appreciation, and renewed interest in the art forms along with economic progression. It shapes the social fabric of contemporary Moratuwa, which will be a significant attribute in its urban form, bringing a uniqueness to the city's perspective.

Key Words: Social lifestyle, Art forms, Urban identity, Cultural expression, Vernacular art, Heritage continuity , Urban transformation

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Introduction

Art is a medium of expressing an impression of a human skill or an imagination that communicates with or without words. Over time, the concept of art has evolved through various lenses. Initially, it focused on imitating reality, capturing the world around us in visual forms. But as time progressed, art began to delve deeper into the realm of emotion, particularly during the Romantic period, where expression took center stage. In urban contexts, art becomes an essential medium through which the social fabric of a city can be read and understood. The intersection of art and society provides insight into how cultural identity transforms over time, particularly within environments experiencing modernization and urban expansion. Understanding the relationship between inherent art forms and social lifestyles is therefore crucial in sustaining the continuity of cultural identity within urban areas.

Moratuwa, located in the western province of Sri Lanka, presents a distinctive cultural and artistic landscape. The city is widely known for its craftsmanship, particularly in wood carving and furniture production, as well as for its vibrant music and performing arts traditions. These art forms are not isolated cultural expressions; they are living reflections of the people's daily life, social relationships, and community values. Over generations, the residents of Moratuwa have cultivated a deep connection between their lifestyles and artistic practices, shaping the city's identity as a creative hub that harmoniously blends tradition with innovation.

Problem identification

In recent years, the connection between Moratuwa's social lifestyle and its traditional art forms has weakened due to urbanization, changing values, and a lack of appreciation among the younger population. The dominance of modern trends and mass-produced goods has diminished the visibility and relevance of local craftsmanship and performance arts within the urban context. Consequently, the city risks losing a vital aspect of its cultural identity and its potential to use art as a medium for social expression and community bonding. There is thus an urgent need to re-examine and revitalize the relationship between traditional art forms and contemporary urban life in Moratuwa to sustain cultural continuity and strengthen urban identity.

Research questions

1. How has urbanization influenced the preservation and practice of traditional art forms in Moratuwa?
2. What socio-cultural factors have contributed to the diminishing appreciation of local craftsmanship and performance arts?
3. How can traditional art forms be effectively integrated into the contemporary urban lifestyle of Moratuwa?
4. In what ways can art serve as a medium to reinforce cultural identity and social cohesion within the urban context of Moratuwa?

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze how social lifestyles in Moratuwa are expressed through its inherent art forms.
- To investigate the transformations of these art forms within the context of urbanization and generational change.

- To evaluate the cultural and social significance of maintaining artistic traditions in contemporary urban life.
- To propose ways of integrating traditional art forms into modern urban development as a means of cultural preservation and identity reinforcement.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on three major art forms that represent Moratuwa's cultural identity: **music, wood carving, and drama**. The research explores their relationship with the city's social lifestyle and urban development. Data collection is limited to interviews with selected artists and professionals in the field, literature reviews, discussions with the community and artists, and deep self-observation within the urban area. While the study provides qualitative insights into cultural reflection through art, it does not extend into detailed economic or technical analyses of art industries. The findings are therefore interpretative and intended to highlight cultural and social dimensions rather than provide statistical generalizations.

Importance of study

The selection of Moratuwa as the focus of this research stems from its unique position as a city where traditional artistry continues to coexist with rapid urban transformation. It was once known as the reign of art.

Historically, Moratuwa's economy and cultural identity have been deeply rooted in its local craftsmanship, particularly carpentry and woodwork, which have contributed significantly to Sri Lanka's artistic reputation. However, with the influence of globalization and industrialization, many of these traditional practices face challenges in maintaining their cultural significance. Younger generations are increasingly drawn to modern, technology-driven lifestyles, leading to a gradual decline in engagement with traditional art forms. This shift not only threatens the survival of cultural heritage but also alters the city's social dynamics and collective identity. Therefore, Moratuwa provides an ideal context to explore how inherent art forms continue to reflect and shape social life within an evolving urban framework.

The lifestyle of people

The life of Moratuwa's residents is characterized by a blend of traditional customs and modern influences, where family ties and cultural heritage are deeply cherished. Residents actively engaged in social gatherings and religious festivals come together to celebrate tradition and reinforce their sense of community. The connection to the sea plays a major role in the daily life of the Moratuwa people. Moratuwa's urban growth has ushered in a myriad of changes, including an expanded job market, improved facilities, and increased educational opportunities. Yet, amidst its modernization, the city retains its allure through bustling markets, a vibrant music scene, and a flourishing artistic community that draws from diverse influences.



Fig1: wood carving done by the artist Damith Asalanka: and musical influence and stage plays in Moratuwa.

Theoretical Basis

Literature often explores how different forms of art, like music, wood carving, and drama, reflect and communicate societal essence. These art forms serve as mediums to convey cultural identity, values, and experiences, offering insights into the beliefs and heritage of a community. Through music, wood carving, and drama, researchers gain a valuable understanding of a society's cultural, social, and historical contexts.

The relation between music culture and society

As Barton (2018) depicts, music is inextricably linked with the context in which it is produced, consumed, and taught, and the inter-relationship between music, society, and culture has been researched for many decades. Seminal research in the field of ethnomusicology has explored how social and cultural customs influence music practices in macro and micro ways. Music, for example, can be a core feature of social celebrations such as weddings as a means of cultural expression and maintenance through ceremony. It is this meaning that can alter across contexts and is therefore reflected in the ways music and sound are manipulated or constructed to form larger works with different purposes. Whether to entertain or play a crucial role in ceremonial rituals, music practices cannot be separated from the environment in which they exist.

Music as a reflection and communication medium

Perera (2020) portrays, musical expression in Moratuwa are deeply rooted in tradition, with rhythms and melodies reflecting the region's diverse cultural influences. Whether it's the rhythmic beats of traditional drumming or the soulful melodies of indigenous instruments, music adds depth and emotion to dramatic performances, engaging audiences on both a visceral and emotional level. Among them, bail music plays a vital part in Moratuwa's cultural heritage.

The songs that have been written about the city of Moratuwa are characterized by joy, relaxation, and a strong sense of Community, encapsulating the spirit and vibrancy of the coastal town in Sri Lanka.

“Leebadu gana lakbima randa –masun marana oru sayurata kanda
Adara hoda hitha smawetha kanada –moratuwa wajabei ada kodo banda”
Clarance Wijewardena-song about Moratuwa-19th century

The song about Moratuwa has kept a name in the island through the wooden furniture, fishery, and the people spreading love and goodwill which makes Moratuwa proud. Moratuwa reflects the creativity of its people, who lead simple lifestyles yet strive to cultivate skill, joy, and a lasting cultural legacy in Sri Lanka. However, with the rapid pace of urbanization, the freedom to experience everyday life has diminished, and the artistic rhythm once embedded in the community has begun to fade under busy schedules. It is important to recognize that integrating artistic heritage into urban spaces can restore this rhythm, creating environments that are both vibrant and meaningful.

Wood carving art and human personality

With the literature on wood carving, it is not just a craft. It's an art form that involves a deep level of creativity, patience, and attention to detail (Yanfei. et al., 2025) Patience and persistence: Wood carving requires patience and persistence, as it often involves intricate and time-consuming processes. Through the practice of wood carving, individuals learn to persevere through challenges, setbacks, and the need for precision. This fosters a resilient and determined personality. Attention to detail: Successful wood carving demands a keen eye for detail. Practitioners must carefully observe the wood's grain, texture, and structure to create harmonious and aesthetically pleasing designs. This attention to detail can translate into other aspects of life, encouraging individuals to approach tasks with thoroughness and precision. Creativity and imagination: Wood carving is a creative endeavor that allows individuals to bring their ideas and visions to life (YanFei & Azahari, 2025). As they work with the natural qualities of wood, carvers develop their imagination and ability to think outside the box.

In Sri Lanka, wood carving is a centuries-old tradition found in temples, shrines, and crafts. The ‘Embekke Devalaya’(kovil) in Kandy is renowned for its intricately carved wooden pillars depicting swans, dancers, and floral motifs. Woods such as teak, ebony, and jack are used. The craft also extends to traditional masks (Ambalangoda) and furniture making (Asia InCH, 2024). Built during King Vikramabahu III (14th century AD), the ‘Embekke Devalaya’ features 32 carved wooden pillars and over 500 unique designs. According to the article Amazing Sri Lanka (2024), carvings depict everyday life, animals, and mythical figures, showing how structure and ornament merge seamlessly. It highlights the integration of craftsmanship, symbolism, and materiality in architecture.

Wood carving is a traditional art form globally used to express cultural identity and belief through timber craftsmanship. In Malaysia, *ukiran kayu* features floral and geometric Islamic motifs in traditional architecture, while Thailand and Indonesia showcase intricate Buddhist and Hindu carvings in temples and homes. The Māori of New Zealand use *whakairo* to depict ancestry on meeting houses and canoes, and Ghanaian artisans carve symbolic masks and stools reflecting tribal heritage. Japan’s refined wood carvings in temples and Noh masks emphasize spiritual and aesthetic precision. Across cultures, wood carving remains a vital medium of cultural storytelling and artistic expression (Britannica, 2024; Kamaruddin, 2018; UNESCO ICH,2023).

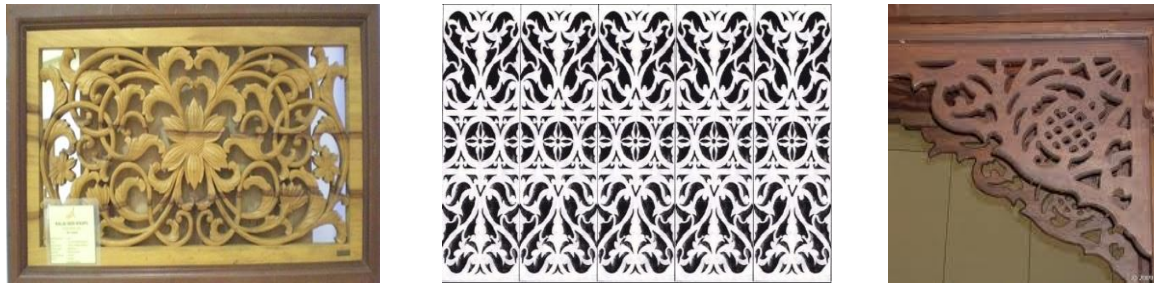


Fig. 2: Malaysian Wood Carving, a flower decoration.
Source: author

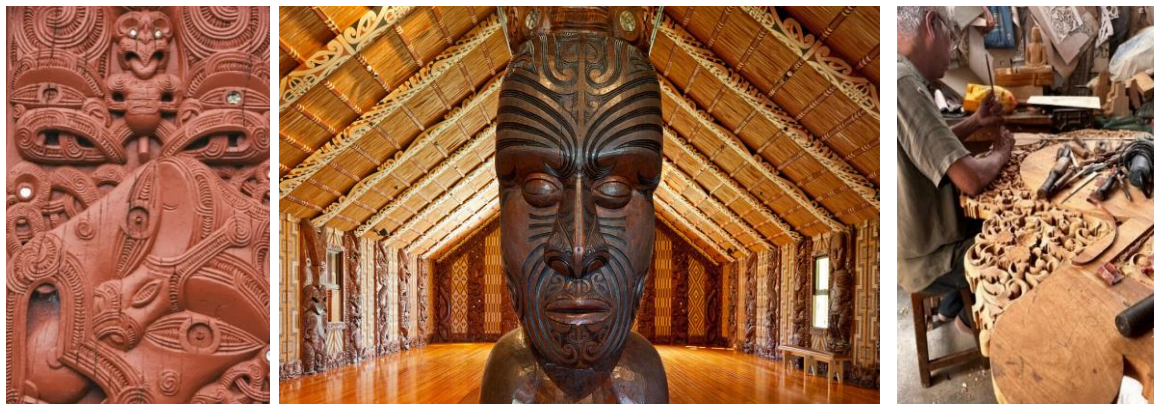


Fig. 3: Left Maori traditional meeting house at Waitangi, carved meeting house, New Zealand
Source: author, right A Wood Carving Artist carving a lotus flower decoration on a wooden table.
Source: author, on-site Photography while interviewing the artist

Wood carving as an expressive and communicative art

In accordingly to the study of Fujian woodcarving art, it has a long history. From a perspective, a harmonious environment, it's the author's unique and geographical distinctive characteristics of folk lifestyles, and multi-cultural compatibility that have nourished Fujian wood carving art with obvious artistic characteristics and cultural values (Jin, 2021). Fujian wood carving art is an important part of Chinese wood carving art. It contains traditional artistic values such as subject selection, composition form, wood carving techniques, and craftsman spirit. It is an important source for the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional art and culture, which needs our continuous research, exploration, and practice.

Fujian wood carving art is a traditional craft from China known for its meticulous, intricate designs and detailing. It encompasses various styles and applications, including relief carving, sculpture, and architectural decorations, and often incorporates symbolic motifs drawn from Chinese culture. Reflecting the region's cultural heritage, Fujian wood carving art showcases the skill and creativity of artisans, adding both interior and exterior spaces. This reflects that wood carving is an expressive art form that communicates emotions, ideas, and cultural values through intricate

designs and sculptural forms, fostering connections and preserving generations (Jin, Jiang and Chen, 2021)

Drama, Art, and human connection

Theatre relations and communication between actors and the audience. According to Dani Karmaka (2013), theatre is a dramatic art of communication. Communication means,

The imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium. Theatre is mankind's instinct. We gather the experience from our world. Experience equals information. Theatre is a living, breathing art form, where live actors are present on stage in front of live audiences. Further author describes the connectivity of the audience and the actor. He says theatre creates a human connection. Peter Brook insists "hidden impulse of man," which is the inherent nature of a man (Karmakar, 2013).

Drama in Moratuwa acts as a vibrant social mirror that brings people together through shared stories and emotions. Rooted in the city's cultural and communal fabric, local theatrical performances often draw inspiration from everyday life, family ties, neighborhood dynamics, and social values. These performances not only entertain but also evoke empathy, allowing audiences to see their own experiences reflected on stage.

Street dramas and community play in Moratuwa create spaces for dialogue and understanding, breaking social barriers and uniting diverse groups through collective participation. They serve as platforms for expressing local concerns, preserving cultural narratives, and celebrating the humor and resilience of the people. In this way, drama strengthens social cohesion and maintains a sense of belonging amid the city's growing urbanization and modernization.

As actor Chamila (2024) mentioned in a personal interview, drama will teach you lessons for life. How to be a humble, kindhearted, caring person by maintaining personality towards people. As the same goes with the people, the audience who enjoy the drama. The message the attitude conveys through the drama is immense in creating an intellectual humanity through society.

The interest and mindset of an audience can be determined through the level of engagement with specific interesting drama. It serves as a mirror reflecting societal philosophy, revealing whether it's tumultuous or tranquil. A lack of interest in artistic expressions often indicates a society overwhelmed by the grind of daily life, fostering a generation devoid of appreciation for their cultural heritage, leading to a dull and uninspired populace.

"I like the concepts that people hold. I like it when people have coexistence with each other. At present, this has departed from society where the younger generation is involved in more violence than compared to the past. I like to address people's intelligence rather than to the heart then we can convey a better message through art while making them entertaining" (Chamila, 2024).

Indeed, this illustrates the dual role of art: as a means of communication and as a mirror of reflection on society. In the context of Moratuwa's drama culture, it is not only a performance but also conveys messages about the community's values, struggles, and aspirations. Through drama, artists highlight societal issues, provoke thought, and spark conversations among audience members. The stage becomes a platform for cultural expression and social commentary,

raising a deeper understanding of the community's dynamics and serving as a catalyst for change.

Method of the study

This research has developed mainly three strategies for studying art forms. They are interviewing professionals in the art field, conducting literature reviews, and self-observations.

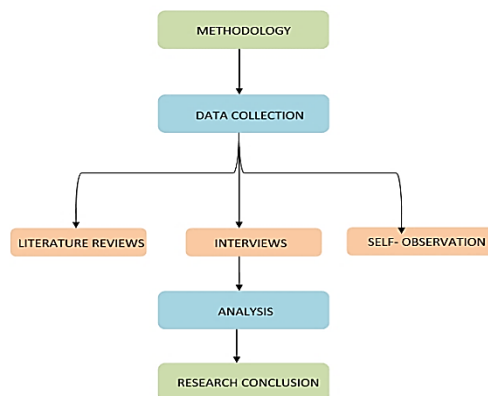


Fig 04: Representing the structure of the research approach.
Source: author illustration

Interviewing professionals in the art field will engage directly with artists, musicians, dancers, actors, and other professionals within the art community. Through structured interviews or open-ended conversations, researchers can explore a wide range of topics, including artistic processes, influences, challenges, and perspectives on the role of art in society. Secondly, deep Self-observations and discussions with the community involve immersing directly in the study areas of art forms and actively participating in or observing artistic events, performances, exhibitions, or workshops. By engaging in firsthand with artistic practices and experiences, researchers gain experiential knowledge and insights that complement the data obtained through interviews and literature reviews. Self-observation allows researchers to capture the nuances of artistic expression, audience reactions, and contextual factors that may not be fully captured through other research methods. Literature reviews involve systematically examining existing scholarly works, publications, articles, books, and other relevant sources related to the study of art forms. Researchers analyze and synthesize the findings, theories, and methodologies presented in these sources to contextualize their own research within the broader academic discourse. Literature reviews help to identify gaps in knowledge, establish theoretical frameworks, and build upon existing research to contribute new insights to the field.

Analysis and discussion

Art Influence in the Moratuwa Context

The artistic landscape in Moratuwa enriches the city's cultural embroidery, weaving together a vibrant collection of expressions and traditions. From age-old practices such as woodwork and the craft of mask-making to modern visual and performing arts, Moratuwa's artistic flair mirrors its deep-rooted cultural legacy and innovative energy. Artists in this community serve as guardians

of tradition while also pushing boundaries with contemporary interpretations, fostering meaningful conversations, and enhancing the city's aesthetic attraction and cultural vitality. In the realm of performing arts, Moratuwa is a melting pot of traditional and contemporary expressions. The city's distinctive 'Baila' music, with its lively rhythms and infectious melodies, embodies the fusion of diverse cultural influences that characterize Sri Lanka's musical heritage. Moreover, Moratuwa's contribution to the music industry is significant, with a plethora of renowned singers and influential bands hailing from its vibrant streets. Drama and theatre also thrive in Moratuwa, serving as vital forms of cultural expression and entertainment. Local theaters and performance venues provide a platform for a range of productions, from traditional plays to contemporary dramas, enriching the community's cultural landscape and fostering artistic appreciation among its members. Residents. And fostering artistic appreciation among its residents. Overall, Moratuwa's artistic tapestry is a testament to the city's enduring cultural legacy and creative spirit. Through its diverse artistic expressions, Moratuwa continues to celebrate and preserve the rich heritage of Sri Lanka while embracing innovation and creativity in the modern era.

Art's reflection of society and the communication media

At present, the influence of art forms has departed from Moratuwa by making the lifestyle of society a monotonous place by challenging the artistic, colourful lifestyle they inherit from generation to generation. Through interviewing the professionals and self-observation through the research process has uncovered the driving forces behind artistic expression have been uncovered, a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of their work and explored the impact of societal trends on the art forms in wood carving, music, and drama. Moratuwa is especially famous in Baila music, which was introduced to Sri Lanka in the early 1960s. In essence, Vaada Baila serves as a vibrant reflection of conveying societal cultural heritage and communal spirit through its rhythmic movements and spirited performances. As a master of this traditional Sri Lankan music form, Vada baila champion, expertise illuminates the profound ways in which art shapes and mirrors the collective identity and values of Moratuwa's community, fostering connection and expression amidst the rhythms of life.

Due to the restless, busy lives of the people, they have less interest in involving artistic traditions and festivals. The art forms have now become professions for some of the artists. Due to this, the mutual harmony between the artists has gradually decreased. Also, the shyness makes them less forward towards art because many talented newcomers are too shy to perform in front of people. These are the main causes of the decrease in the diversity of art influence in the present compared to the past Moratuwa society. You need to have an interest in this field; that's when it will be a blessing to you; otherwise, art will be just art for the sake of doing (Rajapaksha 2024).

'Baila' lyrics often serve as a reflection of society, delivering positive messages that resonate with the community. For instance, in songs like Vada Baila, contemporary societal issues are highlighted and discussed, using music as a vehicle to address important topics. The lyrics not only mirror the current state of society but also emphasize the need for progress and growth, encouraging listeners to engage in actions that benefit the collective. By doing so, baila music becomes a form of social commentary, fostering awareness and appreciation for those who contribute positively to society. Through its vibrant rhythms and meaningful lyrics, baila continues to inspire social responsibility while celebrating cultural values.

Involvement in art by the younger generation

According to the point of view of Dimuth (2024), art should be your source of happiness, not the pursuit of money. If the artist is happier and appreciates his or her work, then the output product will be a blessed creative product. I will talk about my experience in wood carving. Happiness in this art form is patiently evoking creativity through the tools by craving wood for a creative outcome.

Artists believe art should bring happiness, not just money. He emphasizes patience and dedication in the craft, highlighting the need for concentration and meditation during carving. He has observed a lack of these qualities in the younger generation. Urging dedication and commitment to creative success, emphasizing that true mastery takes time and cannot be rushed. So, this has been causing a decrease in the value of art, which reflects the creativity of society.

Essentiality of drama and its impact on society

According to the comparison made with the then and present Moratuwa, the people became dull, lazy, and restless in expressing, communicating, and being active in work. During further exploration of the issue, it is known that rapid urbanization and the economic crisis have hindered the creativity and interest in art among people. The drama was used for relaxation.

The expression of the actors conveys the emotions that were communicated. When art was a victim of financial society made its move, and the perspective of the colourful society departed from the community. According to the Greek and Shakespeare dramas, drama articulated a five-act dramatic structure, which enhances curiosity, excitement, realization, and resolution.

Moreover, drama acts as a vehicle for education and social change. Community plays often address themes such as social inequality, youth challenges, and cultural preservation, offering both reflection and inspiration. In doing so, drama nurtures civic responsibility and strengthens community identity, helping residents reconnect with their shared cultural heritage amid rapid urbanization and modernization.

In contemporary Moratuwa, where traditional art forms face declining visibility, drama continues to play an essential role in sustaining cultural continuity. It keeps alive the storytelling traditions that define the character of the city while adapting to new urban contexts. By combining creativity with social engagement, drama not only entertains but also unites, reaffirming Moratuwa's identity as a city of rich culture, resilience, and human warmth.

Social Reflection on Timber Craft and Livelihood

Timber craft in Moratuwa represents a strong link between tradition, livelihood, and community identity. For generations, woodworking has been more than an occupation—it is a cultural expression deeply embedded in the social fabric of the city. The craft reflects creativity, discipline, and inherited skill, passed down through families and sustained through informal apprenticeship systems.

As a major source of income, timber craftsmanship supports a wide network of carpenters, designers, and workshop owners. It has long defined Moratuwa's reputation as Sri Lanka's

furniture capital. However, industrialization and mass production have posed challenges, leading many artisans to adapt their techniques and aesthetics to remain competitive.

According to wood carving artist Asalanka (2024), the traditional culture of timber craftsmanship is gradually declining due to the increasing involvement of machinery in the creative process. He explains that this shift has led many artisans to prioritize financial independence and commercial viability over creativity, patience, and qualities that once defined the essence of wood carving. Asalanka further notes that what was once regarded as an artistic practice rooted in skill and dedication has now become more of a business-oriented activity in the contemporary context.



Fig 05: Some of the wood carving arts which had been done by the Artist
Source: author, on-site Photography while interviewing the artist

Woodcarving artist Asalanak (2024) further explains, there are people who are hidden talented and working in wood carving arts without exposing themselves. Moreover, Moratuwa reflects still the famous place for furniture where the art in the furniture is still immensely valuable.

The story of timber craft in Moratuwa is a reflection of the community's enduring relationship with material, skill, and identity. It demonstrates how a traditional art form can shape both livelihood and cultural expression, even amid modern challenges. By acknowledging its social value and fostering innovation within tradition, Moratuwa's timber craft continues to stand as a testament to the city's cultural resilience and creative spirit

Through the analysis of livelihood within the Moratuwa context, it becomes evident that wood carving has increasingly become an occupation or business for many, rather than a purely artistic pursuit. Due to economic challenges and shifting social conditions, artisans are often compelled to prioritize financial stability over creativity, patience, and craftsmanship quality. However, the artistic essence embedded within wood carving persists, though often overlooked. It is therefore essential to create opportunities and dedicated spaces for artisans to showcase their talents and to raise public awareness of the cultural and artistic value of this traditional craft

Conclusion

The exploration of Moratuwa's inherent art forms reveals how deeply they are intertwined with the city's social fabric and urban identity and transformed into the uniqueness of the urban quality. From the rhythms of baila music to the complexity of wood carving and the expressive

power of drama, each art form reflects not only creativity but also the values, struggles, and aspirations of its people. Historically, these practices enriched daily life, encouraging joy, community, and cultural continuity. Yet, with the challenges of rapid urbanization, economic pressures, and changing lifestyles, the vibrancy of Moratuwa's artistic traditions has been disrupted, gradually diminishing their role in everyday society.

Nevertheless, the resilience of artists and the persistence of cultural expressions highlight the potential for renewal. Art in Moratuwa continues to serve as both a mirror of society and a medium of communication, capable of bridging tradition with modernity. By reintegrating artistic heritage into the urban environment through music, theater, festivals, and crafts, communities can revive the rhythm and colour once intrinsic to Moratuwa's identity. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that art is not merely an accessory to urban life but an essential attribute that shapes social reflection, nurtures creativity, and strengthens the collective spirit of the city. It will remarkably contribute to shaping Urban Futures: Navigating Identity of the city, inclusive of the socio-cultural viewpoints unique to each city.

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