

Context-Sensitive Urban Development Initiatives: An Investigation on Mobility and Accessibility on Main Street Urban Stretch - Ambalangoda and Its Impact on Public Life

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Abstract

Ambalangoda, a coastal township in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, is known for its cultural heritage of mask-making and puppetry but faces uncoordinated urban growth that has fragmented its spatial fabric. The historic main street, once a vibrant social and commercial corridor, now struggles with congestion, poor pedestrian infrastructure, and declining urban quality. This research investigates the socio-cultural and spatial evolution of the Ambalangoda Main Street, examining its potential as a catalyst for context-sensitive urban transformation.

The study explores how mobility patterns and accessibility infrastructure shape collective urban experience while balancing heritage preservation with inclusive growth. Methods included spatial mapping, behavioural observations, stakeholder interviews, and historical analysis. Mobility assessments and pedestrian movement studies were supported by photographic documentation and GIS-based mapping, while community engagement sessions captured the aspirations of residents and traders.

Findings highlight critical challenges in traffic management, fragmented connectivity, and underutilized cultural assets. The paper proposes urban design strategies to enhance mobility, prioritize pedestrians, improve streetscapes, and integrate cultural nodes within the mobility network. These interventions aim to revitalize public life, foster sustainable tourism, and strengthen socioeconomic resilience by placing the community at the centre of future development.

Keywords: Urban Mobility, Public Space, Cultural Continuity, Context-Sensitive Design, Main Street Revitalization, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Ambalangoda, located on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka, is a historic township celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, particularly traditional mask-making and puppetry. Positioned strategically between the prominent tourist hubs of Hikkaduwa and Bentota, Ambalangoda holds immense untapped potential as both a cultural and commercial center. Over the past few decades, however, the town has undergone rapid yet largely uncoordinated urban growth, resulting in fragmented land-use patterns, congested mobility networks, and a decline in overall urban quality.



Fig. 1: The Main Street in 1908
Source: Ambalangoda Puranaya, 1999

The Main Street of Ambalangoda, historically the town's social and commercial spine, once functioned as a vibrant corridor where trade, culture, and everyday life converged. Its fine-grained, mixed-use urban fabric, comprising traditional shop houses with commercial spaces at ground level and residential quarters above, once sustained active community engagement. Today, due to infrastructural neglect, inconsistent renovations, and increasing vehicular dominance, it faces multiple challenges: chronic vehicular congestion, inadequate pedestrian facilities, irregular building frontages, limited connectivity to transport nodes, and a lack of



Fig. 2: A sketch of the Main Street, today (left) and the current condition of shop-house facades (right)
Source: Author

coherent public space integration. These issues have diminished the street's vitality, undermining both its heritage character and its capacity to support vibrant public life, discouraging social interaction and economic activity.

The city's ribbon development pattern, shaped by its fishing harbour, transport nodes, and central commercial clustering, highlights how accessibility has historically defined Ambalangoda's urban core. Yet, without context-sensitive interventions that integrate mobility, accessibility, heritage, and public life, the town risks losing its socio-cultural identity and urban cohesion.



Fig. 3: Map showing roads and connectivity with the Main Street in Ambalangoda
Source: Author

By foregrounding mobility and accessibility, this study demonstrates how targeted urban design interventions can catalyse multiple layers of revitalisation. Enhanced circulation enables safer and more enjoyable pedestrian experiences, strengthens local businesses, and encourages the continuation of cultural practices. This research also highlights how transport nodes, cultural landmarks, and every-day public spaces can be strategically integrated to foster vibrant, resilient, and inclusive urban life. Its findings are relevant to urban designers, planners, and policymakers working in historic towns undergoing transformation, offering a transferable framework for similar contexts where public life is declining despite cultural richness.

This study therefore re-examines the spatial and socio-cultural dynamics of Ambalangoda's Main Street, exploring its potential as a catalyst for context-sensitive urban transformation that can balance heritage preservation, inclusive growth, and contemporary urban demands.

Research Problem

Despite its cultural significance and strategic location, Ambalangoda's Main Street is undergoing functional decline. The absence of coordinated urban planning has resulted in disorganized mobility networks, limited pedestrian connectivity, limited pedestrian infrastructure; making the environment unsafe and inaccessible, fragmented visual identity caused by unregulated renovations and inconsistent signage, and weak integration between transport, commerce, and heritage assets. These factors collectively reduce opportunities for public life and weaken the street's traditional role as a civic and economic spine.

The central problem addressed in this study is the declining vitality of the Main Street, driven by uncoordinated and fragmented development. This decline stems from the absence of context-sensitive urban strategies that integrate mobility, accessibility, and heritage character into a cohesive framework. Without timely interventions, Ambalangoda faces continued urban fragmentation and diminished socio-economic resilience.

Research Questions

1. How have mobility and accessibility patterns evolved along Ambalangoda's Main Street over time?
2. In what ways do current mobility and accessibility conditions affect public life and cultural character?
3. What context-sensitive urban design strategies can balance heritage conservation with improved mobility and inclusive development?

Research Aim

To investigate the relationship between mobility, accessibility, and public life along Ambalangoda's Main Street, and to propose context-sensitive urban design strategies that enhance connectivity, revitalize public spaces, and reinforce the street's role as a cultural and economic corridor.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the spatial, functional, and cultural evolution of Ambalangoda's Main Street within its wider urban context.
2. To examine existing mobility patterns and accessibility infrastructure, and their influence on public life.
3. To identify key socio-spatial challenges and opportunities for revitalization.
4. To propose urban design strategies that improve mobility, strengthen pedestrian experience, and integrate cultural heritage into the public realm.

Scope and Limitations

The intention of this study is to investigate Ambalangoda's Main Street corridor as a potential catalyst for context-sensitive urban transformation. The study focuses on the defined stretch of the Main Street, extending from the historic commercial core to adjacent cultural and civic nodes, considering its spatial, functional, and socio-cultural significance within the broader urban context.

Within the scope of this research, the study specifically examines mobility patterns, accessibility infrastructure, and their interrelationship with public life and heritage integration at a streetscape and corridor scale. It explores strategies that balance heritage preservation, inclusive growth, and urban connectivity, framed within the context of Ambalangoda's evolving identity as a heritage town.

The findings are derived from spatial mapping, behavioural observations, stakeholder engagement, and historical context analysis, conducted during the defined research period. As such, the conclusions and strategies presented are limited to insights drawn from this specific geographic stretch and the data collected within the timeframe of the study, taking into account factors such as seasonal variations and stakeholder availability.

literature and theoretical context

Streetscape Quality and Public Life:

Streets form the primary stage of public life, especially in heritage-rich small towns like Ambalangoda. A street's physical design, visual quality, and amenities significantly influence patterns of pedestrian activity, social interaction, and cultural expression (Gehl, 2011)¹.

According to Appleyard (1981)², vibrant streetscapes are characterised by comfortable walking environments, visual continuity, accessible amenities, and diversity of land use and activities.

When these qualities are missing, the street loses its role as a civic and social arena. Cullen's (1961)³ concept of serial vision further highlights that fragmented visual sequences caused by inconsistent façades, intrusive signage, or unregulated renovations disrupt the sense of place, diminishing user experience and collective memory.

For Ambalangoda, where Main Street historically functioned as a cultural and commercial hub, degraded streetscape quality has directly contributed to declining public engagement.

Context Sensitive Urban Design:

Context-sensitive urban design (CSD) promotes strategies tailored to the social, cultural, and environmental character of a place, as opposed to applying uniform, top-down planning solutions (Carmona, 2019)⁴. It emphasises respecting heritage identity,

¹ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

² Appleyard, D. (1981) *Livable Streets*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

³ Cullen, G. (1961) *Townscape*, London: Routledge.

⁴ Carmona, M. (2019) *Public Places, Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design*, 3rd edn, Abingdon: Routledge.

integrating local narratives into design, and encouraging community participation in shaping interventions.

Successful CSD frameworks demonstrate that streets can act as catalysts when they balance growth with preservation, prioritise public life alongside mobility, and integrate community aspirations with design processes. Such approaches are especially critical in historic towns, where urban transformations risk eroding cultural distinctiveness and community cohesion (Whyte, 1980⁵; Gehl, 2011⁶).

Contextualizing Mobility and Public Life in Sri Lankan Secondary Towns:

Classic urban design theories promoting walkable, mixed-use streetscapes often assume a continuous urban fabric and social practices that may not hold in smaller South Asian towns such as Ambalangoda. The city's ribbon development along the Colombo-Galle highway, coupled with a predominantly commercial core and residential peripheries, creates spatial fragmentation limiting safe, continuous pedestrian movement and night-time activity. This separation discourages residents from "going to the city to enjoy" as a daily practice, reflecting broader socio-cultural and infrastructural barriers such as limited transport options, safety concerns in less lively residential areas, and environmental discomforts like heat and poor sanitation. Strategies to enhance public life must consider these unique spatial and social conditions, adapting urban mobility and connectivity principles to fit the lived realities of towns experiencing rapid but uneven urbanization.

Mobility and Accessibility in Heritage Streets:

In heritage contexts, mobility and accessibility extend beyond transportation efficiency; they directly shape how people interact with culture and space. According to Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht (2009)⁷, walkable environments support economic activity by strengthening street-level retail, encourage cultural participation, and enhance social inclusion by accommodating diverse groups.

Conversely, prioritising vehicular throughput over pedestrian experience leads to spatial fragmentation and reduced engagement, a pattern observed on Ambalangoda's Main Street. Integrating transport accessibility with streetscape upgrades offers a path to unlock Main Street's catalyst potential, reconnecting fragmented spaces and revitalising public life.

Placemaking and Public Realm Activation:

Placemaking focuses on creating engaging public realms by designing spaces that prioritise people, culture, and interaction rather than simply movement. According to Whyte (1980)⁸, successful streets are those where people choose to linger, interact, and participate in shared

⁵ Whyte, W.H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC: Project for Public Spaces.

⁶ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

⁷ Loukaitou-Sideris, A. & Ehrenfeucht, R. (2009) *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Public Space*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁸ Whyte, W.H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC: Project for Public Spaces.

experiences. Gehl (2011)⁹ expands on this by emphasising “life between buildings”, where public spaces are designed at a human scale, encouraging social connections and inclusivity.

For Ambalangoda, Main Street has the potential to serve as a cultural corridor where placemaking can strengthen identity and activate underutilised spaces. Strategies such as temporary street closures for cultural events, public art installations inspired by mask-making traditions, and curated gathering nodes could significantly enhance vibrancy. Precedents like George Town, Penang, where murals and street markets successfully foster “living heritage,” illustrate how placemaking can drive both community engagement and tourism appeal.

Global and Regional Precedents

Several global and regional precedents demonstrate how heritage streets can successfully act as catalysts for context-sensitive urban transformation. These examples illustrate integrated approaches where mobility, heritage, and public life are strategically balanced to revitalise declining urban corridors while safeguarding cultural identity.

Table 1: Global and regional precedents

Precedent	Key Strategy	Key Outcomes	Relevance to Ambalangoda
Chinatown, Singapore 	Pedestrianization, heritage-sensitive zoning, and embedding cultural storytelling into urban design (Yeoh & Kong, 1997)¹⁰.	Revitalized small businesses, improved walkability, and strengthened tourism potential while sustaining community identity.	Shows how mobility upgrades combined with cultural identity integration can transform Main Street into a vibrant cultural-commercial corridor.

⁹ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

¹⁰ Yeoh, B. & Kong, L. (1997) 'Heritage conservation in Singapore's Chinatown: National identity and global city formation', *Urban Studies*, 34(3), pp. 391–410.

Kampong Glam, Singapore 	Kampong Glam, recognised as Singapore's historic Muslim Quarter, focuses on the adaptive reuse of 19th-century shophouses, integrating cultural heritage with contemporary urban life. The area centres around Arab Street and blends heritage-sensitive zoning with vibrant tourism and local business activation.	Traditional shophouses have been repurposed into textile shops, craft outlets, and casual dining venues offering a fusion of Malay and international cuisine. This transformation has preserved the architectural character of the district while stimulating economic activity, enhancing walkability, and strengthening Kampong Glam's role as a cultural destination.	Kampong Glam demonstrates how heritage-rich streets can be revitalized by combining adaptive reuse with cultural storytelling. For Ambalangoda, similar strategies can be adopted along Main Street, transforming underutilized shopfronts into craft galleries, mask-making studios, and cultural cafés, enhancing tourism potential while maintaining local identity.
Precedent	Key Strategy	Key Outcomes	Relevance to Ambalangoda
Istiklal Avenue, Istanbul (Turkey) 	Restoration of historic façades and transformation of the corridor into a pedestrian-priority zone (Çelik, 2018)¹¹.	Improved street safety, reactivated the night-time economy, and strengthened the visual identity of a heritage precinct.	Highlights the potential of adopting a pedestrian-first approach to enhance street vibrancy and boost evening tourism around cultural hubs.

¹¹ Çelik, Z. (2018) 'Heritage-led pedestrianisation on Istiklal Avenue', Urban Studies, 55(3), pp. 411–429.

George Town, Penang (Malaysia) 	Integration of heritage-sensitive murals, artisan galleries, and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes (Khoo & Badarulzaman, 2014)¹².	Created a “living heritage city” where public spaces balance tourism with local livelihoods and cultural representation.	Offers a strong precedent for embedding mask-making galleries, street art, and curated cultural trails along Ambalangoda’s Main Street.
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Precedent	Key Strategy	Key Outcomes	Relevance to Ambalangoda
Galle Fort, Sri Lanka 	Galle Fort’s regeneration adopted a heritage-led conservation framework focusing on the adaptive reuse of historic colonial buildings, streetscape preservation, and heritage zoning guidelines to ensure new developments complemented the historic urban form (Wijesuriya, 2015)¹³. Through meticulous conservation policies and carefully controlled adaptive reuse, the Fort retained its	Today, Galle Fort is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a vibrant cultural and economic hub, where the adaptive reuse of colonial-era buildings into cafés, boutique hotels, museums, and galleries has revitalized the local economy while preserving its heritage character and balancing cultural preservation with commercial vitality.	Galle Fort demonstrates how heritage-sensitive regeneration can revitalize urban precincts while preserving cultural identity. By adopting similar strategies—such as integrating mask-making traditions, craft galleries, adaptive reuse, and pedestrian-friendly design—Ambalangoda’s Main Street can evolve into a catalyst corridor for regional tourism and urban regeneration.

¹² Khoo, S. & Badarulzaman, N. (2014) ‘George Town: Managing cultural heritage in a living city’, Cities, 40, pp. 1–10.

¹³ Wijesuriya, G. (2015) *Conservation of Galle Fort: UNESCO World Heritage*, viewed 20 July 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/451/>.

	original street grid, façade rhythm, and spatial hierarchy while introducing new economic functions.		
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Methodology - Research approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques to comprehensively understand the spatial, social, and mobility dynamics of Ambalangoda's Main Street. The mixed-method design allows for triangulation of findings, enhancing validity and depth by cross-verifying patterns between spatial data, behavioural observations, and community perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

Spatial Mapping and GIS Analysis:

Spatial mapping was carried out using Google Earth imagery, Nolli maps developed by the research team, road hierarchy diagrams, and historical street documentation. In addition, GIS-based land-use and spatial-integration maps from the Ambalangoda Development Plan (prepared by the Urban Development Authority) were used as secondary data sources. These mapping layers revealed the ribbon-development structure of the city, the separation between the commercial core and peripheral residential areas, and the role of the Main Street within the wider transport network. This spatial synthesis enabled the identification of connectivity gaps, mobility constraints, and areas where accessibility is limited or spatially fragmented.

Behavioural Observation Studies:

Field observations were conducted at multiple locations along the Main Street during different times of the day to capture variations in activity intensity. These observations focused on pedestrian movement tendencies, vehicular circulation, informal crossings, the condition and use of sidewalks, and the level of engagement with adjacent commercial spaces. The observed movement patterns and on-ground behaviours provided insight into the experiential qualities of the Main Street and its capacity to support public life.

Stakeholder Interviews and Community Engagement:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with shop owners, street vendors, daily commuters, and residents living near the Main Street. These interviews provided qualitative insights into perceived mobility difficulties, accessibility barriers, safety concerns, and aspirations for improving public space. The responses were used to contextualise and validate findings from spatial analysis and observational studies.

Historical and Document Analysis:

Archival material—including historic maps, old street photographs, and existing planning documents—was reviewed to understand the evolution of the Main Street from its origins as a trade route to its present condition as a commercial corridor. This historical layer helped connect present-day mobility issues with long-term patterns of spatial transformation, commercial expansion, and infrastructural changes.

Data Analysis and Limitations

The analysis combined insights from spatial mapping, field observations, photographic and sketch-based documentation, stakeholder input, and secondary GIS-based datasets. By comparing these sources, the study identified recurring mobility barriers, accessibility constraints, and socio-spatial opportunities for revitalising the Main Street. This integrative analytical approach ensured a coherent understanding of Ambalangoda's mobility dynamics while grounding the findings in both spatial evidence and lived experiences. The findings are based on data collected during the defined research period and reflect conditions observed within that timeframe. While seasonal variations in pedestrian flows and the limited availability of some stakeholder groups influenced the scope of data collection, the adoption of a mixed-methods approach and the use of triangulation helped mitigate these constraints, ensuring a balanced understanding of the urban dynamics.

Analysis and Discussion

Urban Character and Current Challenges:

The Main Street of Ambalangoda, historically a horse carriage route during the cinnamon trade era, has evolved into a bustling commercial corridor, situated between the Beach Road and the Colombo-Galle main road. Its urban fabric reflects a fine-grained, mixed-use structure, with traditional shop-houses comprising ground-floor commercial spaces and residential quarters above. Spatial mapping and historical imagery show that this linear commercial spine has remained the core of urban activity for decades, yet its physical infrastructure has not kept pace with contemporary demands.

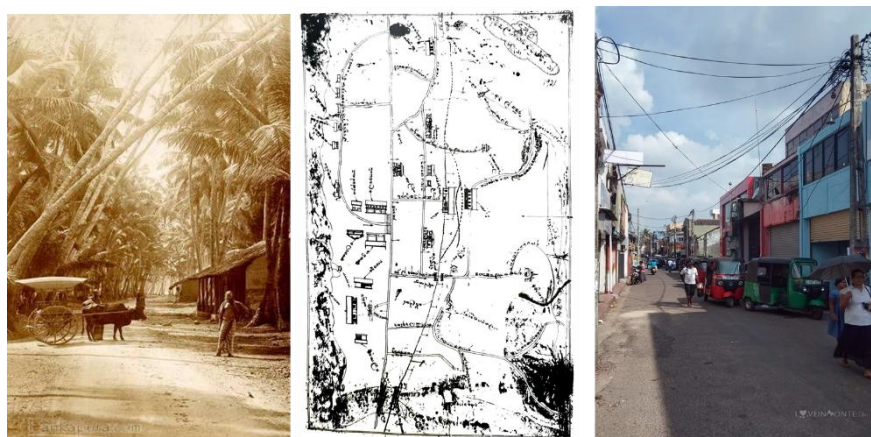


Fig. 4: An old picture of streets of Ambalangoda in olden days (left), a hand sketched map of early Ambalangoda (center) and the current condition of the Main Street (right)

Source: Google Images and Ambalangoda Puranaya, 1999

Narrow and damaged sidewalks, open drainage ditches, and poorly maintained roads compromise pedestrian safety and accessibility, forcing users to constantly navigate hazards rather than engage with the street environment. The street's visual identity has become fragmented due to uncoordinated renovations, modern billboards, and tangled electric wiring, overshadowing the historical and cultural character of the built environment. Traffic congestion further exacerbates these issues, as the street's dual role as a commercial and vehicular corridor creates safety risks and disrupts the pedestrian experience despite one-way measures introduced in certain sections.



Fig. 5: Fragmented visual identity and pedestrian safety challenges on Main Street
Source: Google Images and captures by author

While the urban character creates a vibrant street life during the daytime, significant urban decay and infrastructural challenges hinder the street's potential as a public space. These observations align with Jan Gehl's (2011)¹⁴ principles of human-centred urban design, which emphasize that pedestrian comfort, safety, and visual interest are critical to sustaining public life. William H. Whyte's (1980)¹⁵ research also supports this by highlighting that well-maintained infrastructure and spatial quality directly influence social interactions in urban public spaces. The fragmented visual identity due to unregulated renovations and signage can be justified using Gordon Cullen's (1961)¹⁶ concept of serial vision: discontinuities and visual clutter disrupt the sequential experience of the street, weakening the sense of place and memorability.

Mobility and Accessibility Limitations:

Mobility and accessibility along the Main Street are constrained not only by the immediate street conditions but also by the broader urban configuration of Ambalangoda. The city's ribbon development along the Colombo-Galle highway has concentrated commercial activity within a central node, while residential areas remain largely on the periphery. This separation limits safe and continuous pedestrian access and reduces temporal accessibility, particularly at night, when peripheral areas are inactive and transport options are limited. Although the city benefits from the proximity of the bus station and railway station, the availability of transport modes at all hours is insufficient, discouraging residents from using the street as a recreational or social space beyond functional errands. Consequently, public life is fragmented: the Main Street may appear lively during peak hours, but its potential as a civic corridor for inclusive social interaction is underrealized.

¹⁴ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

¹⁵ Whyte, W.H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC: Project for Public Spaces.

¹⁶ Cullen, G. (1961) *Townscape*, London: Routledge.



Fig. 6: Constrained mobility and accessibility on Main Street

Source: Captures by author

This spatial separation reduces continuous pedestrian accessibility and temporal accessibility, particularly at night. Lynch (1960)¹⁷ emphasizes the importance of legibility and connectivity in urban networks: fragmented pathways and poorly integrated transport nodes hinder the ease of movement, discouraging residents from engaging with the street. Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht (2009)¹⁸ further argue that pedestrian accessibility is critical in sustaining social interactions and economic activity, particularly in heritage streets.

Interventions to Enhance Public Life:

To address these challenges, a series of context-sensitive interventions can be used to enhance mobility, accessibility, and the vitality of public life along the Main Street. Complete pedestrianisation of certain sections of the Main street along with linkages to adjacent roads emerges as a viable strategy, given that the parallel roads (Beach Road and Colombo–Galle main road) can accommodate vehicular traffic and provide alternative service routes. Removing vehicles from the street would eliminate congestion and safety conflicts, allowing pedestrians to move freely and interact with the urban environment. This aligns with Gehl (2011)¹⁹, who argues that prioritizing pedestrian movement over vehicles fosters a safer, more socially engaging environment. Pedestrianisation would redistribute traffic flow across adjacent roads, requiring updates to junction management, signage, and wayfinding. The proposed traffic plan (Fig. 7) indicates how service access, deliveries, and emergency routes can still be maintained, ensuring that pedestrianisation enhances mobility rather than compromising it.

Complementary measures, such as multi-story parking with integrated green facades or public spaces, can provide accessible parking without compromising the heritage character or human scale of the street. It reflects Jane Jacobs' (1961)²⁰ principles of maintaining mixed uses and promoting urban vitality without sacrificing human-scale public spaces. Based on the spatial analysis and mapping of movement patterns, the proposed locations for potential multi-storey parking facilities (Fig. 7) may be strategically positioned near the bus terminal and railway station,

¹⁷ Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁸ Loukaitou-Sideris, A. & Ehrenfeucht, R. (2009) *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Public Space*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁹ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

²⁰ Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House.

functioning as edge-of-core access points. Positioning parking at these points allows visitors to leave their vehicles before entering the pedestrian-prioritised zone, while still maintaining convenient walking access to the commercial core. These sites are also directly connected to the enhanced mobility corridor and the two parallel service roads, enabling smooth redistribution of traffic and reducing vehicular pressure on the Main Street itself. These possibilities suggest that appropriately located parking structures can complement the broader mobility strategy and support a more walkable, human-scaled environment.

Enhancing transport modes, such as bus and railway facilities, and off-peak accessibility addresses temporal and spatial accessibility, which Lynch (1960)²¹ and Handy et al. (2006)²² note as crucial for sustaining inclusive urban activity. By optimizing the bus and railway stations, improving waiting facilities, and ensuring availability during off-peak hours, the Main Street can become accessible at multiple times of the day, supporting temporal flexibility in public life. In addition, encouraging mixed-use development along the peripheral residential areas can gradually activate these zones, increase safety and extend the reach of the urban core. This approach aligns with Jacobs' principle that active streets create safer, socially integrated neighbourhoods.

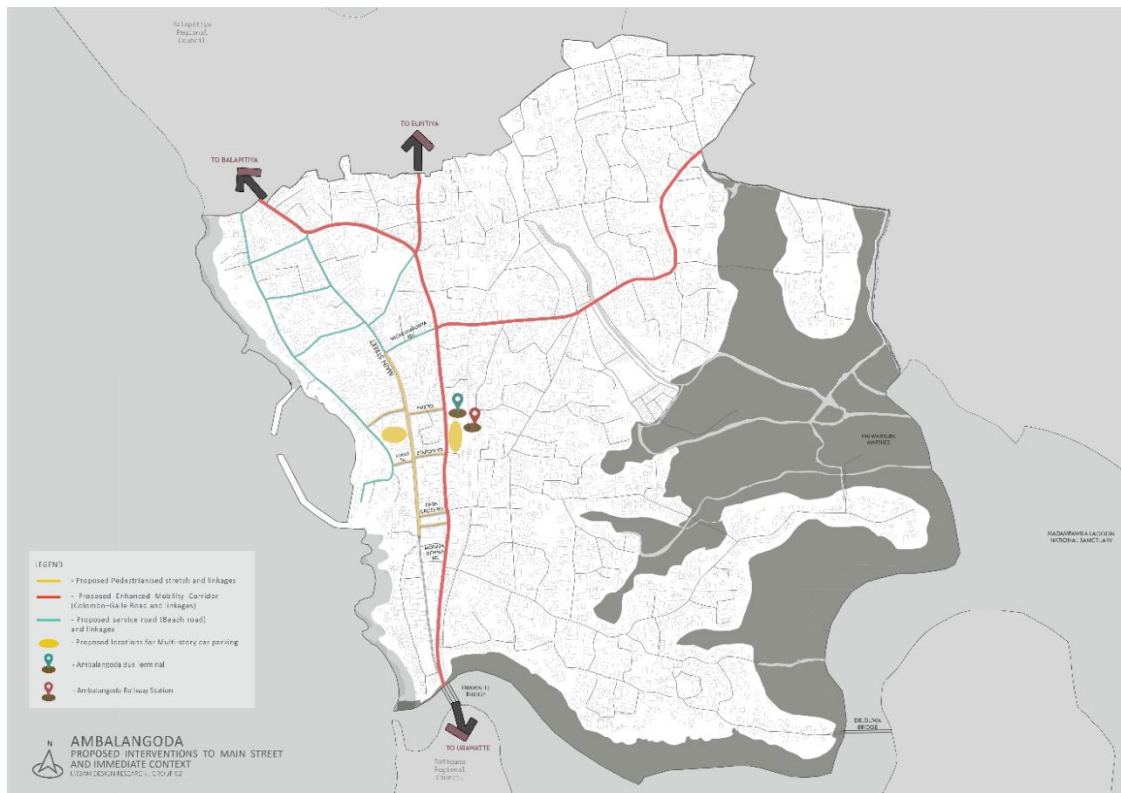


Fig. 7: Map showing the proposed interventions to the Main street and immediate context
Source: Author

Streetscape and Pedestrian Enhancements:

Once pedestrian mobility is secured, the quality of the public space itself must be addressed. Sidewalk improvements, ramps for accessibility, proper drainage, and enhanced lighting would

²¹ Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

²² Handy, S., Boarnet, M.G., Ewing, R. & Killingsworth, R.E. (2006) 'How the built environment affects physical activity: Views from urban planning', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 23(2), pp. 64–73.

create a comfortable and safe pedestrian environment. Gehl (2011)²³ stresses that pedestrian comfort, including proper infrastructure and environmental control, is key to supporting public life. Appleyard (1981)²⁴ highlights that visually coherent streetscapes encourage lingering and social interaction, while Cullen (1961)²⁵ demonstrates that preserving sequential visual experiences along streets strengthens memorability and urban identity. These strategies collectively support inclusivity, safety, and cultural continuity. Heritage-sensitive façade guidelines would protect the visual identity of the street, reinforcing cultural continuity and ensuring that new interventions respect the historical context. Such enhancements collectively transform the Main Street into an inclusive and attractive public space, accommodating residents, tourists, children, and the elderly alike.

Linking Mobility, Accessibility, and Public Life:

By framing interventions in line with established theory, the analysis emphasizes that mobility and accessibility are prerequisites for vibrant public life. Gehl (2011)²⁶ and Whyte (1980)²⁷ both demonstrate that streets are not just conduits for movement but are arenas for social interaction. Ensuring temporal and spatial accessibility, integrating cultural nodes, and activating peripheral areas aligns with resilience thinking (Walker & Salt, 2006)²⁸, which advocates for adaptability and redundancy in urban systems. These strategies provide a theoretically grounded approach to revitalizing Ambalangoda's Main Street while maintaining cultural integrity and supporting socio-economic resilience.

Potential Catalyst Nodes:

Spatial mapping and behavioural observations along Ambalangoda's Main Street revealed several locations with significant potential to act as catalyst nodes for revitalising public life and triggering broader urban transformation. The Dutch Rest House precinct, with its historical value and central positioning, emerges as a cultural anchor that can connect heritage identity with modern pedestrian experiences. Similarly, the intersections around craft galleries and mask workshops hold the capacity to integrate Ambalangoda's globally recognised artisanal traditions into the everyday street environment, strengthening both cultural visibility and tourism potential. The proximity of the bus terminal and railway station further positions the Main Street as a natural multi-modal hub, where improving linkages could enhance spatial accessibility and encourage continuous activity throughout the day. Additionally, beachfront access points and smaller secondary lanes branching from the Main Street remain underutilised but can serve as extensions of the public realm, supporting recreational uses and spill-over pedestrian activity. By strategically enhancing these nodes through heritage-sensitive design, improved mobility infrastructure, and cultural placemaking, Ambalangoda's Main Street can evolve into a demonstration corridor that activates surrounding urban areas and sets a precedent for context-sensitive regeneration in similar Sri Lankan heritage towns.

²³ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

²⁴ Appleyard, D. (1981) *Livable Streets*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

²⁵ Cullen, G. (1961) *Townscape*, London: Routledge.

²⁶ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

²⁷ Whyte, W.H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC: Project for Public Spaces.

²⁸ Walker, B. & Salt, D. (2006) *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*, Washington, DC: Island Press.

Conclusion

The study of Ambalangoda's Main Street demonstrates that mobility and accessibility are fundamental determinants of public life in small, heritage-rich towns. The analysis reveals that while the street possesses significant historical, cultural, and commercial value, fragmented spatial organization, inadequate pedestrian infrastructure, traffic congestion, and limited temporal accessibility restrict its potential as a vibrant public realm. The research highlights that these challenges are not merely localized to the Main Street but are closely tied to the broader urban form, including ribbon development patterns, peripheral residential areas, and the integration of transport nodes.

Context-sensitive interventions that prioritize pedestrian movement, improve streetscape quality, and enhance transport connectivity are critical for revitalizing public life. The study demonstrates that strategies such as pedestrianization, upgraded sidewalks, improved lighting, drainage, heritage-sensitive façades, and strengthened transport links can significantly enhance both physical and temporal accessibility. Furthermore, ensuring activity in peripheral areas through mixed-use development reinforces safety and encourages engagement beyond traditional commercial hours, supporting continuous public life throughout the city.

By grounding the proposed interventions in urban design theories and principles, including human-centred design (Gehl, 2011)²⁹, public space vitality (Whyte, 1980)³⁰, serial vision and place-making (Cullen, 1961)³¹, and resilience thinking (Walker & Salt, 2006)³², this research establishes a framework for context-driven, socially inclusive urban transformation. Ultimately, the findings underscore that preserving cultural identity, improving connectivity, and fostering accessible, safe public spaces are interdependent objectives. Addressing these factors holistically can strengthen socio-economic resilience, sustainably enhance tourism, and re-establish Ambalangoda's Main Street as a vibrant civic corridor that meets the needs of residents and visitors alike. It can thus serve as a model for balancing heritage conservation with contemporary urban needs, proving the transformative potential of context-sensitive urban design.

²⁹ Gehl, J. (2011) *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, 6th edn, Washington DC: Island Press.

³⁰ Cullen, G. (1961) *Townscape*, London: Routledge.

³¹ Whyte, W.H. (1980) *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Washington DC: Project for Public Spaces.

³² Walker, B. & Salt, D. (2006) *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*, Washington, DC: Island Press.

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