URBAN CONSERVATION AS CONDUCIVE TO PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT

A STUDY FOCUSED ON THE HISTORIC CITY OF KANDY

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ABSTRACT

One of man’s greatest achievements is undoubtedly the City, which is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to time immemorial. As a physical entity in space, each city possesses a distinct form which though ceaselessly changing and evolving, is the very proof of its existence. The Form of a city is not only an indicator to the state of civilisation but also living evidence of its construction over time. Gerald Dix (1990) appears to put this in to proper context when he says, “... Towns are a part of our history; they reflect our likes and dislikes, our fashions and technologies, our wealth and poverty...” (Conservation and change in the city, Third world Planning Review - November 1990)

Today, especially in the third world the once humane cities are changing at an unprecedented pace on the pretext of development. If not controlled this pace may ultimately leave us junk yards and debris, and the ‘beautiful’ image of the city only in long lost memory.

Urban conservation sets the framework within which to manipulate and modify this image of the city. It must be understood as one means of re-civilising our cities, and not just a mechanism through which face lifts for specific historic structures can be accomplished. This understanding of the nature of urban conservation as a constructive process should play a major role in any urban development policy. This is particularly true to those areas where a considerable measure of history and tradition exists and are also susceptible for exploitation by modern development demands. Although there is ample indication that such an understanding exists in the more developed world, there remains a measure of hesitancy in giving serious thought to urban conservation in poorer countries. Lack of resources is an underlying cause for many cases, but it is also total or partial failure to appreciate the positive contribution of urban conservation in the process of development.

This study aims to analyse these issues in the context of Kandy, a world heritage city with past glory still intact, but needing immediate measures to withstand the negative implications of modern development.
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INTRODUCTION

(A) The Study

Cities reveal as much about time as about place. Their shape and appearance are derived from history as well as their present function, and to some extent from their future development. It is now almost everywhere accepted that an eagerness to enjoy the advantages of new technologies has too often resulted in the destruction of valuable attributes of society that have evolved over centuries, and which once lost, cannot be restored.

It is common feeling that most of today's cities are less than satisfactory, uncomfortable, ugly and dull. Only fragment from the settled world are generally exempted from this dismal view. A historic town, a great city etc. If we could be articulate about why this is so, we might be able to make effective changes to our environment.

This perception has led to the increased awareness of urban conservation philosophies and applications starting as early as the turn of century spanning up to present times. The conservation strategies range from out to out preservation of historic quarters to redesigning urban areas tracing and using symbols from the past.

The proposed study is aimed at examining conservation as a futuristic approach, re-assessing its purpose and principles. Future operations may be better conducted in historic cities that needs to absorb development pressure, by a broader understanding of the effects of these strategies.

(B) Problem Area / Architectural Problem

Success of a conserved city in today's context of full fledged economical and technical revolution lies in its ability to reveal time, while being compatible with
demands and aspiration of present generation. Too much emphasis on preservation may eventually lead to dead cities or museum cities. This has not been proven very successful especially in historic urban nodes, with increased population growth and scarcity of resources. On the contrary uncontrolled development to historic cities results in disintegration and chaos both in the physical fabric and social structure. The physical fabric, as that which best externalises the cultural changes could be used to its optimum potential in urban conservation. This would mean,

- preserving desired built forms and places with the function, if culturally significant
- Infusing new functions to existing built forms
- Altering, refurbishing the urban fabric
- Urban design to fill in the voids

In a way that would enhance the character distinct to each city. (Appleyard D - 1981)

Thus, a variety of opportunities exist to Architects, Planners and Urban designers in contributing to strike the vital balance between the past, present and the future of a historic city.

(C) Justification Of The Study / Practical Relevance

Sri Lanka as a developing country, experiences immense pressure on large city centres and urban nodes. This leads to exploding of cities, with economy and commerce overpowering culturally and socially conscious urban design solutions. Living historic cities with high potential for development due to their hierarchical and geographical location are also most vulnerable to this phenomenon. A typical example being the city centre of Kandy.

Also a world heritage city, Kandy is a significant town in the country. Its essential characteristics are rooted in the times past. Aptly termed as the hill
capital, it is the religious centre, administrative centre and the business centre of the hill country. The size and form of the city, strictly restrained by geographical reasons also evoke a unique character compared to other cities.

Conservation of Kandy as a living city has been given ample thought and consideration in the present context. However this cannot be an end to the road and remain static. A new conservation and development approach is needed to prepare Kandy to absorb rapid changes in the future. The growth potential of Kandy as a historic city and as an important urban node should be optimised through integrated urban design solutions and conservation strategies.

(D) Aims, Objectives/ Method Of Study.

The study would be through literature survey and research of case studies. Development issues that befall third world countries are discussed in the first chapter. The implications are analysed briefly in order to understand the contemporary urban landscape.

Conservation, the process and its applications are detailed in the following chapter, drawing examples from around the world to strengthen the text. However detailed studies of conservation / development programmes successfully executed in few of the third world countries could be found in the Annexure.

The outcome of research carried out are then examined as suited to Sri Lankan context, a third world developing country with rich cultural heritage still in tact. The conclusions are applied to Kandy with possible areas of their application indicated.

Factual documented information on Kandy would be used for this purpose as study material, accompanied by actual field surveys and photographic survey.
Conservation and development strategies presently being executed in Kandy would also be analysed. However an in-depth academic research has not been carried out, and the absence of a strong theoretical basis for the development and conservation of the future of Kandy is seen. Without a generally accepted philosophical basis, misunderstandings can be arisen on the nature and purpose of conservation and lead to serious conflict. In a pluralistic society as ours, a sympathetic understanding of the needs of our diverse cultures must be incorporated in to our conservation priorities.

Hence, the voids in the present situation may be filled effectively and a comprehensive introduction provided for the future approaches through the research of this dissertation.

(E) Scope And Limitations

In the best interest of an Architectural student, the study will mainly focus on the image of Kandy and its built and natural environment. Nevertheless one cannot deny that the built form of the city is strictly shaped by social and economic issues. In-depth discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this study, and demands a large town planning and urban design exercise. This dissertation aims at discussing the framework within which the physical image of a historic city may change due to social, economical and political forces.

However, in any growing city, development approaches cannot be timeless. Time will demand fresh changes and alterations to the city. The urban design and conservation issues applied to Kandy in the study may only act as a base to any other development approach in the years to come. If the base could provide the continuity of the past, man's psychological need for time dimension in the environment would be catered for, in the future.