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The Street as A Collection of Places:
A Study of Selected Streets in Colombo

A Dissertation
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Department of Architecture
University of Moratuwa
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Final Examination
In
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List of Contents

Title			Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS			vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS			viii
PREAMBLE			ix
INTRODUCTION			xi
Topic Explanation			xi
Need of the Study			xii
Aims and Objectives			xiii
The Methodology			xiv
The Analysis			xv
Scope & Limitations			xv
Organisation of the Study			xvii
Chapter One: THE STREET			
1.1	**The Street: An Introduction**		02
1.2	**The Street: A Definition**		02
1.3	**The Street: The Semantics**		04
1.4	**The Street: Its' History**		05
	1.4.1	The Traditional Street	08
	1.4.2	The Medieval Street	09
	1.4.3	The Renaissance Street	10
	1.4.4	The Contemporary Street	11
1.5	**The Street Functions**		12
	1.5.1	Structuring Functions in a City	12
		1.5.1.1 Basic Configurations of Streets	14

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1.5.2 Functions of The Street 15
1.5.2.1 Physical Functions 15
1.5.2.2 Social Functions 16
1.5.2.3 Psychological Functions 18
1.6 The Street: Definition of Space 18
1.6.1 Definition by Horizontal Elements 19
1.6.1.1 Base Plane 19
1.6.1.2 Overhead Plane 20
1.6.2 Definition by Vertical Elements 20
1.6.2.2 Linear Vertical Elements 21
1.6.2.3 Parallel Vertical Elements 21
1.7 The Street: Fundamental Characteristics 22
1.7.1 Sense of Direction 22
1.7.2 Sense of Enclosure 22
1.8 The Street: A collection of Places 24
1.9 The Summation 24

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Electronic Theses & Dissertations
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Chapter Two: PLACE

2.1 An Introduction to Place 27
2.2 Place: A Definition 27
2.3 Place: Its' History 32
2.4 The Contemporary Place 35
2.5 Academics on Place 26
2.6 Literature Review 38
2.6.1 Place: The Spirit 38
2.6.2 Place: The Sense 42
2.6.3 Place: The Essence 47
2.6.4 Place: The Pattern 52
2.6.5 The Setting 56

2.6.6 The Concluding Comments on Review 64

2.7 The Summation 66

Chapter Three: THE BASIS FOR THE STUDY

The street as A Collection of Places

3.1 An Introduction to the Basis 69

3.2 The Basis for Identification 70

The Street as A Collection of Places

3.3 Identification of the Basis 73

3.1.1 The physical Characteristics of Place. 73

3.1.2 The Social Characteristics of Place. 84

3.1.3 The Psychological Characteristics of Place. 91

3.4 The Limitation for the Basis 94

3.5 Formulation of the Basis 96

Chapter Four: THE DILEMMA:

The Contemporary City & Urban Life

4.1 An Introduction 101

4.2 The Dilemma 101

4.3 The History of Streets in Sri Lanka 106

4.3.1 The Traditional Street 107

4.3.2 The Medieval Street 111

4.3.3 The Renaissance Street 115

4.3.4 The Contemporary Street 117

4.4 The Need of the Study 119

4.5 The Summation 120

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Electronic Theses & Dissertations
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Chapter Five: THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1	**An Introduction**		123
5.2	**The Basis for Selection of the streets**		123
5.3	**Selection of the Streets**		125
5.4	**The Research Methodology**		127
	5.4.1	Participant Observation	128
	5.4.2	Behavior Mapping	130
	5.4.3	Questionnaire	132
	5.4.4	Forms of Data Collection	133
	5.4.5	The Limitations	133
5.5	**Analysis of Data**		134
5.6	**The Summation**		139

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Chapter Six: THE RESEARCH

6.1	**Introduction**		143
6.2	**The Research**		143
	6.2.1	Kirulapona	143
	6.2.2	Bambalapitiya	167
	6.2.3	Pepiliyana to Boralesgamuwa	172

Concluding Remarks & Conclusions 193

Bibliography 207

Photo Street

Appendix 1

Appendix 2

* The Photo Street, Appendix 1 & Appendix 2 are included in a separate booklet.

List of Illustrations

01. A landmark as an ideational reference 06
02. A Ritual path from settlement to initiation camp 06
03. Formation of Cities 07
04. Navigation Stones 08
05. The Traditional Street 09
06. A Medieval Street in Rome 09
07. Haussmanaization on Paris 10
08. A Contemporary Street 11
09. Acting as a seam 13
10. Acting as an edge 13
11. Acting to link two important entities 13
12. Generating circuit of space 13
13. Dividing in to large fields 14
14. Linear 14
15. Radial 14
16. Spiral 14
17. Grid 14
18. Network 14
19. Physical Functions of Streets 16
20. Social Functions of Streets 17
21. Elevated Base Plane 19
22. Depressed Base Planes 19
23. Over head Plane 20
24. Defining by vertical elements 21
25. Sense of Direction 23
26. Sense of Enclosure 23
27. Stonehenge is a historical Place 29
28. The river Ganges is a Holy Place for Indians 29
29. The Market is a place at Mt. Lavinia 29
30. A Water fall is a place in the forest 30
31. A Place for Contemplation 30
32. We make a Home for each other 30
33. The Ultimate Universal Place, Home 31
34. Pada Bedeema helps to select appropriate Best Place to build 33
35. Cosmic and Spatial Order in Aoni House 34
36. Social and Sacred space of Pygmy Camp 34
37. Theory of David Canter 43
38. A revised model of Constituents of Place 65
39.Opened shops and closed shops 73
40. Multi story buildings with and without verandahs 73
41. Vendors in shop fronts making different levels of settings 74
42. Positions and orientations 74
43. The fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed elements in the street 75
44. The boundaries and edges of the 'patterns of places' 77
45. The boundaries and edges form the enclosure 77
46. Closeness and Openness of the shops 78
47. Kadala seller, fruit seller, flower seller, lottery ticket seller gives variety 79
48. The untold signs signify the products and service.... 79

University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.
Electronic Theses & Dissertations
www.lib.mrt.ac.lk

49. Variety in the facades 80
50. Variety in Sea Street at Pettah 80
51. The Panoramic View and the Glimpse view 81
52. The Vista and The Framed View 81
53. The predominent social element 84
54. A 'nucleus of events' in street vending 85
55. Kadala, fruit, flower and lottery ticket sellers 86
56. A non-routine event Dalada Perahera at Kandy 88
57. Kadala seller, fruit seller, flower seller, lottery ticket seller 91
58. The untold signs signify the products and service 91
59. Intention of the basis of the study 95
60. Limitation of the basis of the study 95
61. A street in 'The Immigrant City' 105
62. The same street in the New Year 105
63. Tank fed Village 107
64. Rain fed Village 108
65. Hill Country Valley Village 108
66. Historic City of *Anuradhapura* 110
67. The Temple Villages emerged during *Gampola period.* 112
68. The City of *Kandy* 113
69. Phases of Historic Urbanization in Sri Lanka. 113
70. The Portuguese Colombo 114
71. The Chatham Street during the British 116
72. The Chatham Street today 117
73. Linear Configurations 124
74. Three Fundamental linear configurations 125
75. The three streets within the CMR 126
76. The Street Diagram 135
77. The Street Diagram and the Street Analysis 137
78. One side of the street analysis 138
79. Summation of the basic linear streets 139
80. Summation of the selected streets for the study 139
81. Map of Kirulapona stretch 144
82. Street Analysis of kirulapona 145
83. Srteet Diagram of Kirulapona 145
84. An allowed parking place along the street... 147
85. A non allowed parkign place along the stretch of the pavement 147
86. A not allowed parkignplace on the pavement 148
87. The pavement is occupied by vendors 149
88. The pedestrians use the pavement in different manner 150
89. The open shops provide places along the edge of the entrance 153
90.The open shops provide places for the pedestrian inside them 154
91. Closed shops/ buildings do not provide places 154
92. Shops/ buildings at ground level 155
93. An independent place 159
94. Less prominent similar patterns of places 159
95.More prominent identifiable patterns of places 160
96. A temporary place 160
97. The structure of patterns of places 164
98. Map of Galle road showing bmabalapitiya 167
99. Map of pepiliyana to Boralesgamuwa 172
100. The structure of patterns of places 191

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Preamble

"For nearly a century, the street has been under persistent attack from several directions: the designers of Siedlungen and Garden Cities, the CIAM modern masters, and local government and welfare architects of Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian countries have all attempted to postulate forms of urban settlement in, which the street was deprived of its past function or analysed out of existence. (Rykwert, J. 1978: 15)

At the same time there has been a correlative attack by those followers of them in Asia, particularly referring to street as primarily a carrier of traffic. It is highly based on the strong impact of the vast changing technology both in building and transport, transforming the streets effecting on it.

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In one way it has resulted the solids on both sides to stand free, marked out on the ground as independent systems. On the other way it has made the street space to consider as the transportation conduit. Hence this separation between the building system and the street system has become the main characteristic in the present Contemporary Street.

On another way the effect of globalisation through innovation of communication is not replacing the direct human interaction in the urban life. Hence the impacts of all the modern changes on our lives have slowly effected in alienation of us from streets as inhabitants. So far it is generating a wasted street space and is producing urban blight.

In spite of above the street is a 'social space' for us. We have a multiplicity of choice with vehicles, people and certainly with animals and birds. All these do work out well in our streets. Probably our lack of sensitivity, high degree of respectfulness, short sight in action might have effected our behaviour. Most importantly the tolerable nature of us stands above all.

The daily expectations of us on unique 'patterns of offers' on the street and the intact nature of us has helped to generate a cohesive community within our urban structure. The changing culture, values and beliefs, with significance are associated with the street, pressurising on our movements, thoughts, communication networks and on the natural and built environments.

At the same time it is contributing on negative attributes on streets with feeling of fear, of street culture, on the street, street crime, streetwalker, street safety basically being a social stress. This darker aspect of human nature and action is now creating a disappointment and a fear in use of streets enforcing us to withdraw from them.

Now it is becoming no longer the public urban space between buildings, which we used to have until recent past. This results in a progressive movement of this 'public urban space' in to the interior of the structures of solids on both sides. No longer it will take time to be considered the street as a secondary component within our urban structure.

Hence today streets are becoming less an integral part of our urban lives. Already it is just a 'utilitarian channel' or just another 'utilitarian thing' for us. The miss use of poverty and exploitation coupled with centuries of deprivation has affected our lives so far that we long to have **'a surreal urban life'**. This is a part of the continuum within our economical and political factors. Correa (1985) expresses this in a broader sense referring to cities,

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> **But perhaps we are paying too much attention to the physical and economic aspects of a city-and not enough to its' mythical, metaphysical attributes. (Correa, C. 1985: 81)**

It is true that it is easy to condemn it but this is the outcome of the natural human concerns. Hence it seem to be that we are moving further and further away from the need of the urban street as a **'public social entity'** generating a cohesive community. The problem of generating the viable urban street lies beneath our own hands. This is the cruel dilemma we have faced today.

Introduction

Topic Explanation

In the centre of the dilemma we are facing at the moment in contemporary streets, moving out of it depends on our capacity to search and recognise the elemental facts within them. In doing so the numerous entrenched expressions streets possess give us the basic conceptions of its' importance in urban life. Basically it is the spatial and temporal context of the urban street within, which much complex events of physical, social and psychological factors of our urban lives occur.

The street is considered as the origin of settlements. Since then through out human civilisations they have acted as the 'principle place' of public contact and public passage. It is the 'principle place' for exchange of ideas, goods and services, for recreation, and of course for protest and celebrations. Like wise the streets provide 'range of places' for human interaction. **Hence it can be regarded as 'a collection of essential places' providing spaces for numerous events of our lives to happen.**

If the street to be considered as a collection of places the question arises, **'What is a 'place'? What do we really mean by place? What gives its' identity and its' aura?** In answering the above, 'place' has become the centre of attraction in architecture. It has been a central issue receiving a great deal of attention in the recent past.

Various academics have defined it in many ways and at the same time it affect humans in their daily life in many ways at many levels. Some would refer it as a concrete locality while some refer to it as a mythical, religious and magical location. Nevertheless place has been given various interpretations. The most basic and the most important characteristics of them all is its' intrinsic capacity to transmit meaning.

It is place that has been always able to uplift the physical, social and psychological needs of the human life. Possessing its' own identity where ever they are placed, places provide boundaries, enclosures and therefore territories with the help of various other factors stimulating the human mind creating a sense of attachment to them. Finally allowing a meaning to be emerged.

Hence the essence of the argument relates to the street as a collection of places with human attachment to the places concerned giving meaning. Therefore the research is based on the question of How do humans relate to streets in terms of considering it as a collection of places?

The objective of the topic underlies the meaning that, design of urban streets is to recognise the nature and limits of the interaction of people with their physical environment. **Therefore the study regards the street as the physical environment as a structurally integral part of the society.** It suggests that streets provide arenas for human needs, their cultural systems, and their events to happen being mutually interdependent with it as the physical environment.

Need of the study

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What ever the disappointments or fears we have on streets we do possess enough time to begin to evade them in order to generate a new form of 'urban street life'. Here probably the most crucial factor may be that architecture and urban design seem to be alienated from each other.

Nevertheless in recent times more academics, professionals or specialists have attempted in 'urbanity' in respect to their own fields. While planners work at a scale where the street is often looked at as the traffic channel, sociologists bury themselves only in to the social factors. Others have impinged on economical, political factors while interestingly philosopher's dream of 'anti-urban utopias'.

At the same time architects' also have begun to concentrate on urban issues. So far as architects we have often buried ourselves in individual building projects concerned with the order of the plan or concentrating on ideal forms, ignoring our responsibility to this 'urban public space'. Hence we are also responsible for the social responsibility of creating a worsened condition in urban life.

As Correa says (1985),

> **"In the context of the Third World, the architect must have the courage to face very disturbing issues. For what is your moral right to decide for ten thousand, for a hundred thousand, for two million people? But when what is the moral advantage in not acting, in merely watching passively the slow degradation of life around you?" (Correa. 1985: 134)**

At least now we should understand the actual role of our selves- our role within the 'urban context'. In building up the bridge between the people and the urban physical environment. Most probably study of this nature would be one of them.

Aims and Objectives

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The main objective of the study is to understand and establish the nature of The Street as A Collection of Places. The study aims to focus on the 'concept of place' 'on streets'. In doing so, the study attempts to formulate a detailed basis deriving prepositions in physical, social and psychological components to identify 'general places in streets'.

First various meanings and mechanism of 'places on streets' have been considered through studying both 'patterns of events' happening and experiences of people in the streets concerned. Considering the 'events' the study aims to explore different components in the street contributing to the 'patterns of events' and their intensities. These 'patterns of events' are also geared to provide the psychological components of the people coupled with their experiences.

Then the study attempts to grasp the 'places' and 'patterns of places' through 'patterns of events' happening in the streets. These 'patterns of places' are aimed to formulate a 'structure of places' within the streets concerned. These various 'patterns of places', which are identified forming the 'place structure' is geared to provide the 'place collection' within the streets in the research study.

Most importantly this research attempts to confront the issue in the most basic three linear configurations of streets within the context of Sri Lanka. The research might help to recognise the existing conditions, specifically concentrating on the basic elemental man-environmental relationship on the selected prototype 'urban streets'. Basically the manner in, which this relationship has helped 'our urban street' to come in to 'being as places' within our community.

The conclusion will provide **findings** of these 'patterns' and their 'collections' aimed on **'enabling potentially positive places'** in the **'selected potential urban streets'** in the context of Sri Lanka.

The Methodology

As previously stated the research is based on three selected basic configurations of streets within the Colombo Metropolitan Region. The streets are selected on the knowledge and understanding of the physical, social and psychological impact of the street user within them.

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The research is adopted based on certain derived concepts on man-environmental relationships done by several academics. This relationship is regarded as reflected in human behaviour within the concerned physical environments. Therefore the methodology adopted is primarily based on identifying human behaviour in the streets concerned.

Observation, specifically the participant observation is the primary method adopted in the study. The other, the behaviour mapping and questionnaires are regarded as supplementary methods. These are carried out in the research settings in identifying several key examinations. Still photographic documentation has provided further clarifications. In doing so several forms of data collection has been adopted.

The research deals with the intangible phenomenon of place as well as the practical situation on streets. **Hence this is an authentic, qualitative, practical and a systematic approach.** It gives specific information applied in different situations based on individual and personal observations on the selected streets. Therefore the researcher plays an important role in the study. The research is carried out as an exploratory and an understanding study, largely generated based on derived information and insight on the streets concerned.

The Analysis

The data collected in the research setting is analysed using a content analysis. They are mainly focused on generating answers for the derived questions from the studies carried out by other academics.

For better and easy reference it is recorded in a diagrammatic manner coupled with the summation of the collected information during the research. Both the analysis and the piled up summation can be referred according to their given identity.

Specifically the analysis provides a clear understanding on 'patterns of places' in organising the said 'structure of places' in deriving the research objective. **Finally the 'patterns' and 'collections' are identified aiming on 'potentially positive streets as collections of places' in the study.**

Scope and Limitations

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A research study on 'urban streets' within any context is definitely extensive in its' capacity. Therefore a definite scope should be acquired for better and easy reference on urban studies of this nature.

Although urban streets and their different aspects have been studied extensively in the West at present we have not concentrated much on them within our contexts. It may be that still we have great potentials to begin adapt our urban streets to suit our needs. Although there are beginnings of 'little discussions' most of us are still not much aware of the urban issues we are likely to encounter in the near future.

At the same time, so far the 'concept of place' has been limited to the theoretical confrontations. Its' application on practical situations have been merely attempted specifically within our urban context. Therefore this research is an attempt to apply the theoretical orientation of the 'concept of place' in to a practical application in undiscovered man-environmental relationship in the selected urban streets in Sri Lanka.

At the same time this study is based on qualitative attributes of the street as a collection of places. Under the prevailing limited resources the study of this complex nature will not be able to grasp the aimed holistic nature of the place concept on the street. Therefore several aspects may have been left out in regard of the concentrated objective of the study.

The streets are selected on a certain basis within the Colombo Metropolitan Region. The application of this study should be limited to similar streets within this region. A similar application out side this region will be in need of another study, probably of this nature within that context.

Specifically the research is concentrated on the basic men-environmental relationship within the urban context concerning as 'a collection of places'. It does not intend to identify the character of the urban street concerning as one whole place.

The temporal component can be regarded as one of the most important aspects of studies on streets and on place. How all the 'patterns of events' and 'perceptions of the users' change with time and their effects on emerging 'patterns of places' in the street have not been considered. The limited time, the complexity of the analysis and the prevailing security reasons within the urban region have been effected in limiting the study in to certain extent.

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Therefore observations at certain times and annual, seasonal components have been avoided. Time has been needed to note down the necessary on site information. Therefore the research has been carried out during certain pre-scheduled time limits at certain intervals. The study has considered people as an entity at certain times that do not need to specify. At the same time it has specifically emphasised and specified the variety when necessary. The derived patterns of the research will be the out comes within these limitations.

The study of this nature on the undiscovered relationship in our urban streets based on the place concept will probably be an insight in to other similar urban studies within our context. Hence it would be better to look in to this research as a first attempt, in discovering the man-environmental relationship at least on the few selected urban streets in Sri Lanka.

Organisation of the Study

It is assumed that this part would provide the reader a better and a clearer understanding of the research study allowing a directional thought on its' procedure. Therefore it is important to begin with the primary understanding on this dissertation.

The First Chapter speaks of The Street. It aims to explain different physical, social and psychological definitions attempting to understand the common urban street. Then the study looks in to its' semantics. These provide different angles on our daily urban space, the manner it has been looked and viewed at. Then you will move in to notion of street during pre historic man allowing evolution of the street to emerge. Here the traditional, medieval and renaissance streets have been discussed finally focusing on the present contemporary street. Later the chapter speaks about how the streets organise themselves allowing structuring functions to the city. After math on the different physical, social and psychological functions it allows to happen in every day life. Next the chapter focuses on space defining elements of the street space concentrating on its' fundamental characteristics. At last the street is assumed as 'A Collection of Places'.

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Therefore it is important to begin the Second Chapter with the primary understanding on the concept of place. At first it explains the varied definitions given to place in our every day world. How the places are identified, their basic characteristics are taken in to view. Then it brings us in to the view that place is also a very much part of the lives of the man being the central concept of being. Next you'll be moving in to one of the most important sections of the study. It analyses the 'place' in academic terms bringing an extensive literature survey. It brings us in to the light of how others have dealt with this concept in their own theoretical orientations. In the concluding comments the study derives an own theoretical interpretation on the concept arguing and criticising them in order to facilitate the research.

The Third chapter speaks on the basis of the study- The Street as A Collection of Places. First it aims to identify The Street as Places establishing prepositions on Physical, Social and Psychological Characteristics. This is highly based on the adopted questioning, and analysis of the theoretical orientations of other academics in the Second Chapter. This is geared to provide a general basis on identification of place. But the study is focused specifically on streets assuming that it may allow the reader better understanding of the basis in the study. This can be regarded as the core of this study, which allows the research to emerge.

Next the question arose why are we in need of understanding this phenomenon? The answer lies within the Fourth Chapter. It focuses the study on Contemporary Street within the context of Sri Lanka. This concentrates on the present dilemma we have faced in our Contemporary City and urban life. At next it explores the evolution of the street in Sri Lanka correlating the history of the World Street giving a precise understanding on how the street of Sri Lanka changed up today. At last the chapter attempts to bring us in to the light of the architects' role in The Dilemma of the Contemporary Street in Sri Lanka.

Now the study is focused within our context and is ready to allow the basis of the study to be impinged. Therefore the next task is the research. In doing so three streets have been selected on a certain basis within the Colombo Metropolitan Region. Therefore the Fourth Chapter concentrates you in to the method, which the research has been carried out. It also contains the manner the analysis has to be read allowing an easy reference on this research study.

The next Sixth Chapter is focused on the research in selected three streets. It contains the collection of data, the analysis of data and the still photographic documentation. Several Hypotheses have been derived in order to derive the 'place collection'. Chapter contains a summary of the analysis establishing the hypotheses at last. Place is an intangible phenomena. Hence a theoretical approach of this nature would not be successful if not understood in a practical situation. Therefore the research analyses the streets in to a depth and helps to derive the Collection of Places.

Conclusions are derived based on the understanding and the analysis of the research on the selected streets within the context of Sri Lanka.

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