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**A SEARCH FOR AN INDIGENOUS
APPROACH TO
DESIGNING URBAN PUBLIC SPACES**



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A Dissertation presented to the

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE

UNIVERSITY OF MORATUWA

SRI LANKA

for M.Sc (Architecture) Examination

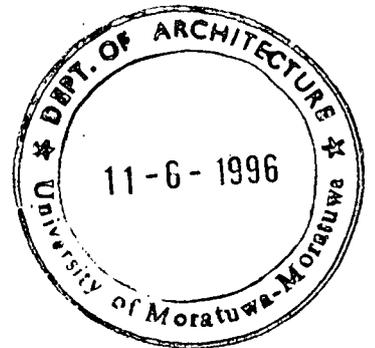
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Introduction

Topic Explanation

Space constantly encompasses our being. Through its volume we move, orientate ourselves to objects in space. We feel the air, hear sounds and see objects in space. Yet space is inherently formless. However as space begins to be captured, enclosed, molded, organized and experienced, architecture comes into being.

Architecture is the art of space making. Making of space to contain the activities of man and man experiences these spaces. Experiences and evokes emotions such as sadness, joy, pride, anger and many more within himself. Such experiences are meaningful to man, helps him to connect himself with the space. Such meaningful connections gained through experience helps man to dwell on earth.

Architecture, therefore provides meaningful experiences through which it establishes an existential foothold to man. Provides an existential foothold to man through meaningful connections which arouse a sense of belongingness in people towards such spaces.

This dissertation is founded on the basis that such spatial quality that evokes the sense of belongingness is an important criteria in producing architecture in especially urban public spaces. As man's environment around him is heading towards being entirely urban. These urban environments are to be the home for a numerous number of people, the urban dwellers. The urban dweller spends a good quantity and quality of time of his day out doors, working, travelling eating and relaxing. A good amount of time is spent in urban public spaces such as streets, parks, playgrounds and markets. Urban public spaces are dynamic spaces where the communal life unfolds. Spaces which are accessible to all. Spaces that help man to identify himself with in the urban environment. Thereby full filling a basic need for belong-



ing and this providing an existential foot hold space in the ever changing urban environment. Therefore creation of urban public spaces with the spacial quality that evokes the sense of belongingness becomes utmost important.

In this context the study, explores the concept of developing an approach to design urban public spaces, with an environmental quality of belongingness. Which eventually led to the search for an indigenous approach to designing urban public spaces.

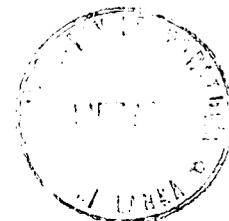
An indigenous approach is an approach that creates a sense of belongingness naturally to the users of urban public spaces. Belongingness naturally in all senses, spatially, contextually, culturally, socially and politically.

Initially the concept of developing such an approach is explored and then by analyzing contemporary urban public spaces creation of such spatial quality is examined.



The Need for the Study

Across the globe, urban centers, the towns and cities of the world are growing very rapidly. In most Third World countries the annual population growth rate is somewhere between 2-3%, but the town and cities are increasing at more than double this speed. This rapid urbanization has created urban centers which stand testimony to modernization, cultural progress and industrial vitality. However urbanization has also created another facet to these centers. Facet which is opposite, densely built, over crowded polluted centers with moral decay and danger. This haphazard, unplanned development has also encroached on the public spaces of the urban dweller. Spaces occupied by the individual buildings against the public spaces are greater. Thus the public spaces are ever decreasing both in the size as well as publicness.



These changes in the public space have obvious and well articulated implications on the urban dweller. The urbanization process not only has deprived the inhabitants of urban public spaces for interaction and other socio cultural activities but also has brought about crime, psychological disorder, ill health and unhappiness.

In such growing complexities of the urban environment architecture has been misinterpreted and underestimated, It has been reduced to the mere utilitarian, economic and aesthetic value. Its capabilities have been neglected. Many illusive and inappropriate values have been added to architecture and urban design. Thus reducing its meaningful depth to mere illusion. Thereby creating spaces without meaning and connections. Such spaces alienate man. These spaces have alienated man hence the lose of the sense of belongingness. Thus making the urban dweller feel rootless, a zombie.



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In Sri Lanka too a similar situation has begun to emerge. The reasons are numerous but the most appropriate reason for this chaotic situation is that some architects have over looked the essence of architecture as a source of providing an existential foot hold to man. This may be due to the lack of understanding and knowledge about the local culture, context, society that help the architects to evolve meanings and connections that create spaces which evolve the sense of belongingness. These are evident from the urban public spaces created by professionals trained in the west and who apply western models with inappropriate values to the local situations.

Some feed back from the recently initiated Gampaha District Integrated Urban Development Programme shows that architects have evolved concepts form the west and applied them directly. This may be due to lack of knowledge and understanding from the local point of view. These are only few studies which attempt to



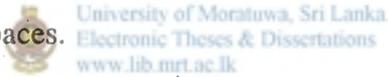
examine the public urban spaces from an indigenous point of view.

Therefore it is important to examine the urban public spaces and evolve an appropriate approach to designing of urban public spaces that evoke the sense of belongingness.

Aims of the Study

Contemporary urban public spaces in most instances, have become disorderly, mis-managed and lack the sense of place and identity. Hence they also lack the sense of belongingness to the urban dweller.

The current approach of designing urban public spaces are as isolated sites in the larger urban fabric. Decisions about the creations of spaces are made without considering the relationships between places and the people, people and the people. Therefore what emerges in most environments today is unshaped, anti spaces as urban public spaces.



In this context, the main aim of this study is to provide a directional thought through which a more meaningful environment in terms of their concern for people and place could be achieved. The study, therefore focuses on an indigenous approach as a solution for designing urban public spaces with meaningful connections. Connections that create the sense of belongingness.

The expected out come of this study would be a set of propositions which would enable designers to design great positive urban public spaces which will evolve and endure, well loved by the people in its reach, adding joy and meaning to their lives.

Since urban cities of Sri lanka are to be larger and denser with growing population, it is these well developed, designated urban public spaces that would enhance their lives.



Methodology of study

The methodology will lay the ground work for the aims the author hopes to achieve. In order to provide a directional thought to create a more meaningful environment it is important to begin with an understanding of urban public spaces.

Hence the first part of this study reviews urban public spaces. It defines, examines the manifestation, types and significance of urban public spaces in today's urban society. Then goes on to look at the contemporary urban public spaces from a critical point of view. This scrutinized look into these spaces enable designers to identify the positive and negative factors which help to create meaningful urban spaces. This part of the study is based on literature reviews, observations and informal discussions with the users of these urban public spaces.

In order to formulate the indigenous approach the research leads to the review of urban design approaches in the part two of the study. Chapter two reviews four urban design approaches. They are not in themselves precise or internally consistent theories but are inclinations or directions. By conceiving them in this way we can accommodate the ideas and hopes of a range of individuals in several countries over a number of decades - their values, visions and means of tackling urban problems. In trying to understand these approaches the following key points are pondered :

1. The visions, ideas and means of tackling the urban problems ? or what is their attitude towards urban spaces and cities ?
2. The attitude towards the people, place and the past ?
3. The typical criticism towards these approaches ?



The third part of the study is an attempt towards formulating an indigenous approach. In order to establish the approach theoretical ideologies are based on

available literature. This will be further confirmed by analysis of existing urban public spaces. Selected case studies are analysed in Chapter four.

Propositions are suggested since arrival at conclusions for design itself would be an extensive study which would not be able to incorporate in this study.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this dissertation is to study the contemporary urban public spaces and provide a thought to design meaningful spaces. Spaces with the sense of belongingness. Creating spaces with a special spatial quality. Thus a study of this nature can be extensive in its capacity being based on a qualitative aspect. Therefore the degree to which the subject matter is explored had to be limited.



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The indigenous approach is best understood by a theoretical background and description. Yet, it cannot be a fully fledged approach unless it was made understood by relevance and application in practical realistic terms. Therefore the theoretical background in which the notion was based upon had to be minimally yet sufficiently exposed in the study. Within the study especially in the case studies, the breath of the study had to be limited. As the contemporary urban context in Sri Lanka is wide, varied and the level of complexity of urbanity differs certain limitations had to be made with regard to the specific purpose of the study. Therefore the spaces discussed should not be considered as only spaces available or of relevance.

The study was based on available literature such as books, periodicals which posed a limitation and the ideas produced are also derived from lots of informal discussions with academic and architects.