PLACELESSNESS OF PLACE: 
AN EXAMINATION OF THE LOSS OF PLACE 
IN DESIGNING CONTEMPORARY URBAN SPACES

A Dissertation presented to the

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE
UNIVERSITY OF MORATUWA
SRI LANKA

for the Final Examination
M.Sc. (Architecture)

Peshali Perera
Faculty of Architecture
University of Moratuwa
1999.
ABSTRACT

The knowledge that people had of the places in which they lived is being lost. There is increasing ignorance of geography, whether international, national, or local, accompanied by an ephemeral commitment to their home places. Modern bonds to places are declining in the contemporary urban society. Places are becoming less meaningful, they have lost their identity, once used to establish exciting places. The interrelationship of people and place are parting; enforcing deterioration of the public realm, injecting “placelessness” in the locale. Modern cities all over the world are in a serious plight: resulting from the above. Cities were meant for the people in the past. Why shouldn’t it be so today? The street, the most important aspect of urban design, as a linkage of all scales of interaction are being invaded adversely by the automobile, thus setting the nature for going through, not for staying in. Other forces at work in modern society may do additional damage to feelings of being-in-place. Mass media, consumerism and intentional styles of architecture cause of homogenisation of culture makes many urban places similar in material form through symbolisation that is not tied to local culture. A sense of “dwelling” is often lacking in that the wholeness of place has become fractured. Modern landscape and cityscape tend to create environment without significant places. The study examines the concepts and definitions of places as against the causes for placelessness in its preliminary chapters. It will investigate into the adverse factors which results placelessness in contemporary urban places. It focuses on the social and physical contexts, which forms an urban culture and the experiences of it. It will concentrate on the morphological structures of the built fabric of the urban form and its relationship with people. The study is further focused on the relationship of man to the street, its activities and his movement patterns, and how he perceives it as a place in-order to determine “placelessness” in the city; in terms of the built fabric, the streets and the waterfronts; a wasted resource to make a place. The study will reveal the nature of successful urban places and how it could be materialised by enhanced design vocabularies, reinforced by better guides for urban design as a holistic approach.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To those people who helped me in the Dissertation to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude.

To Archt. Madura Prematilleke, senior lecturer, whom I’m profoundly grateful for his inspiring comments which initiated me in doing this study.

Archt Vidura Sri Nammuni, senior lecturer, for all his guidance in analysing the relevance of the study and the encouragement offered.

Mr. K.D. Fernando, senior lecturer, Town & Country Planning Dept., for the valuable comments offered amidst his busy schedule.

I shall remember with gratitude for all the support given by the Year masters Archt. Ranjith Alahakoon and Dr. L.S.R Perera for their efforts in making this a reality.

To Col. Vikum Siriwardena and Col. S. Perera for their help granted in making this study a success. I shall remember with great appreciation the assistance given to me by Lt. Jayaweera, Lnc.Corp. Alwis, Sgt. Indraratne and Pvt. Pushpakumara.

To Mark and MD, for their help extended to me, for the days they spent in trudging around places that I wanted to visit.

A very special thank to my colleagues Shantha and Nihantha and all my friends who supported me throughout at difficult times.

To Lalo, for all his support given to me even at the very last days of his stay.

Finally I wish to show my love and affection to my mother, and my father who stood by me all the time and who took up the tedious task checking the manuscripts even at very short notice, and all my family members who tolerated and helped me in different ways to make my project a success.
LIST OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
Observation
Need for the Study
Intention of the Study
Methodology
Limitations of the Study

CHAPTER ONE - PLACE Vs PLACELESSNESS

1.1 PLACE - A DEFINITION
1.1.1 Perceptions of Place
1.1.2 Attributes of a Place
1.1.3 Characteristics of a Place
1.1.4 The Identity of Places
1.1.5 The Urban Place

1.2 PLACELESSNESS: A DEFINITION
1.2.1 Characteristics of Placelessness

CHAPTER TWO - THE CAUSATIVE FACTORS OF PLACELESSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN SPACES

2.1 THE PROBLEM OF URBAN DESIGN TODAY
2.2 THE CAUSES
2.2.1 DETERIORATION OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS
2.2.1.1 Decline of Public Realm
2.2.1.2 Disregard for Human Scale
2.2.1.3 Restricting the Pedestrian Movement
2.2.1.4 - Denying the Access for All 31
2.2.1.5 - Separation of Use and Activities 32

2.2.2 DISRESPECT FOR THE LOCALE 34
2.2.2.1 - Ignorance of local Environment/Culture 34
2.2.2.2 - Placeless Geography 35

2.2.3 INAUTHENTIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS PLACE 37
2.2.3.1 - Disregard for place 38
2.2.3.2 - Attitudes of Modern Movement in design 39
2.2.3.3 - Mass-media / Mass-culture 40

CHAPTER THREE - EXPERIENCING PLACELESSNESS IN A LOCAL CONTEMPORARY URBAN SITUATION

PART ONE

3.1 THE NATURE OF URBAN PLACE 41
3.2 EVOLVING A BASIS FOR THE REVIEW 45
  3.2.1 - The Street as a Place 46
  3.2.2 - The Built Fabric as a Humanised Design 53
  3.2.3 - Waterfronts as a Potential 59

PART TWO

3.3 THE REVIEW (Fort and Pettah) 62
  3.3.1 - The Street 62
  3.3.2 - The Built Fabric 72
  3.3.3 - The Waterfronts 80

3.4 MAKING SUCCESSFUL URBAN PLACES 83

CONCLUSION 84

REFERENCES 86
INTRODUCTION
INTRODUCTION

Observation

It has been observed that there is a noticeable change in the evolution of urban areas in contemporary urban design. Places all over are becoming similar, losing their significance in identity and uniqueness in their appearance. The quality and the meaning of spaces change with time acquiring new meanings as well as fresh values, thus there has been a decline of the public realm which is considered to be the most important social aspect of the urban context.

The significance of the present day public realm of the Cities are now being shaped by freeways. Streets devoted to the automobile has stolen much of the humanised activities in Cities. This has created a vacuum or a buzzer zone between the relationships of man and his environment.

Pedestrians have lost their sense of place in the City as urban spaces acquire new values of mass transportation systems, and mobility. It is observed that the flagship of enterprise culture development and the urban design challenge of the century adds up little more than market-led opportunistic chaos - an architectural circus - with a sprinkling of postmodern gimmicks, frenzied construction of ghastly megalumps.

Intention of the Study

Humans are by nature social creatures. They mingle with another of the same kind for their psychological fulfilment’s. They like to be associated by others, work-out thing with others, to chat, to eat and so on, they seek the company of another. The fulfilment of these psychological needs have to be housed at a reasonably place of interaction, where you need humanised places, for those activities to take place.

Urban areas have became a mess, as they are not appealing to the people anymore, and over the past few decades, despite with the best intentions, we have only succeeded in making the situation incomparable worse. We need a fresh look at what they really matters to people who use urban areas. We need to look at urban areas as a whole and not
as a series of unrelated, but competing sectoral interests. Most of all we need the commitment of the inhabitants and users of Cities. They must be interested not just in creating commercial viability, tourist attractions, liveability, sustainability, greenness or any trendy epithets now.

We see a necessity for the "Crated Place" in the City. In determining to create better places to live, we need to understand the short comings of those places, in making better places. The study will in detail discuss the repercussions of placelessness and its applications in the actual contemporary city-scapes to understand how those could be rectified to make places with lot of diversities and possessed character.

In short, the study intends to highlight the factors that has led to Placelessness in contemporary urban situations and examine those critically. It will also examine selected urban spaces with the view to determine the Placelessness or otherwise.

Methodology

To achieve the said conditions the study is structured on the following manner:

The study will be carried out as a survey tracing and examining the factors which has led to this situation of Placelessness in urban spaces and where relevant, to elaborate and illustrate them with the supporting examples.

(1) In the first chapter it will look into various definitions and concepts about the notion of place and their attributes with illustrations to understand what places are. It will also examine the nature of Placelessness. This will discuss the crisis of Placelessness in contemporary urban situations.

(2) Second chapter identifies and discusses the factors that has caused Placelessness in present-day urban places and will briefly determine the positive aspects of a place.

(3) Here the study will examine the nature of the urban place to determine the how a city functions, and evolve a basis to review the nature of Placelessness. It will review Placelessness on three components of an urban area: the street, the built fabric and the waterfronts.
Limitations of the Study

The study will concentrate on urban areas. It will only examine to determine Placelessness on the aspects. That is in terms of the STREET, the BUILT FABRIC and in terms of WATERFRONTS.