

CHAPTER II

PAST AND PRESENT ATTEMPTS IN PLANNING THE CITY  
OF COLOMBO

For the most part, the development of Colombo to its present state took place in an uncontrolled manner. Although Colombo is not an unplanned city, in the past, there were not sufficient planning controls imposed on the city's haphazard development ; and the extent to which these were successful are worth looking at.

In the Dutch and early British times, development proceeded according to a plan even if "Town Planning" as such was not a specialised study" (1)



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The earliest street planning of the Dutch period is evident even today, with the clearly defined grid system of roads in the Fort and Pettah areas. Traces of well laid-out residential areas to the north and east of Pettah can also be seen.

The first effort in planning the city of Colombo was made in 1915 by the "Board of Improvement" of the Colombo Municipal Council during the Chairmanship of Mr. T. Reid.

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(1) Hulugalla H.A.J. Centenary Volume of the Colombo Municipal Council - P . 166

This was after the enactment of the Housing Ordinance of 1915. But the planning ended only as a memorandum on the town planning and improvement of Colombo.

#### THE GEDDES PLAN

Concern for the future metropolitan development of Colombo was evident in 1920 when the government invited Sir Patrick Geddes to visit the country to prepare a comprehensive plan for the development of the city of Colombo.

Geddes prepared a plan which he submitted in 1921.

The main emphasis of this plan was on the horizontal expansion of the city and on the extension of the garden city concept in the residential suburbs.

According to Professor Geddes, the most urgent problem in Colombo at that time was that of housing. He recommended that the vertical growth of multi-block apartments be confined to the city area only.

Geddes also contended that the Colombo harbour, being fundamental to the city, would have a great influence on the development of the city. Thus Geddes viewed the construction of the harbour as a very necessary step in the growth and development of the city. He proposed a wet-dock scheme that would occupy most of the swampy areas in the north of the city.

According to Geddes, Colombo's growth was linked entirely with the design of the harbour and its facilities, and not with Colombo as a metropolitan centre. However his scheme was not taken up by the government for implementation.

The Centenary Volume of the Colombo Municipal Council reviews the implementation of the Geddes plan thus:

"Professor Geddes's advice was not taken in the spirit it was offered. His preoccupations about the development of Greater Colombo were ignored to a large extent. (2)

THE HOLIDAY PLAN



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In 1940, Professor Clifford Holiday, a British town planning expert, was invited to visit the country and prepare a town planning scheme for the city of Colombo. He studied the problems involved in planning the city for six months, and submitted a memorandum with ideas and suggestions for the improvement of the city and for effective planning control of existing and future development.

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(2) Hulugalla H.A.J. , Centenary Volume of the  
Colombo Municipal Council, P. 168

Professor Holiday introduced his report thus:

"I should, however, like to make it clear that my town planning work is only a beginning and cannot be considered in any way, final. This memorandum should, therefore, not be taken as a comprehensive report but it should serve as a basis for more detailed reports, to be drawn up by the Town Planning Department from time to time". (3)


Apart from his general plan for the city, Professor Holiday prepared a detailed scheme for Cinnamon Gardens. He drew up regulations for the control of out-door advertising, and also prepared plans for the Wamathamulla housing scheme. The main proposal in his plan was the functional zoning of the city according to different land uses-commercial, industrial and residential. The rationale of this proposal was that zoning would not only stabilize the existing character of the District, but would also provide incentives for further improvement, by the security it would offer to property owners.

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(3) Holiday, Clifford, City of Colombo-Memorandum on Town Planning, July 1940. P. 2.

The other important suggestion in the Holiday plan was the realignment of the existing arterial roads to enable a smooth flow of traffic, and the construction of a new bridge over the Kelani river. He also proposed to make use of this new bridge and the connecting by-pass through Baseline Road, to improve the transit from the North of Colombo to the South, without going through the Fort area.

The implementation of this scheme was one of the key events of the development of Borella. Baseline Road connected the south of the city to the north through Borella. Hence Borella became an important junction.

The  third proposal made by Professor Holiday was the shifting of the rail termini at Fort and Maradana to locations outside the city. This posed many practical difficulties and was therefore not taken up.

Professor Holiday's plan also brought in a proposal for the introduction of a "Green Belt" surrounding the city, and covering its low-lying areas. He also proposed the planning and construction of an entirely new satellite town in the outer region of Colombo. His memorandum says -

"I would urge the Colombo Council to consider the possibility of building a satellite town in the Colombo region.

Underdeveloped land within the municipal boundaries is difficult to acquire and the pulling down of slum property would cause grave hardships unless alternative accommodation is provided". (4)

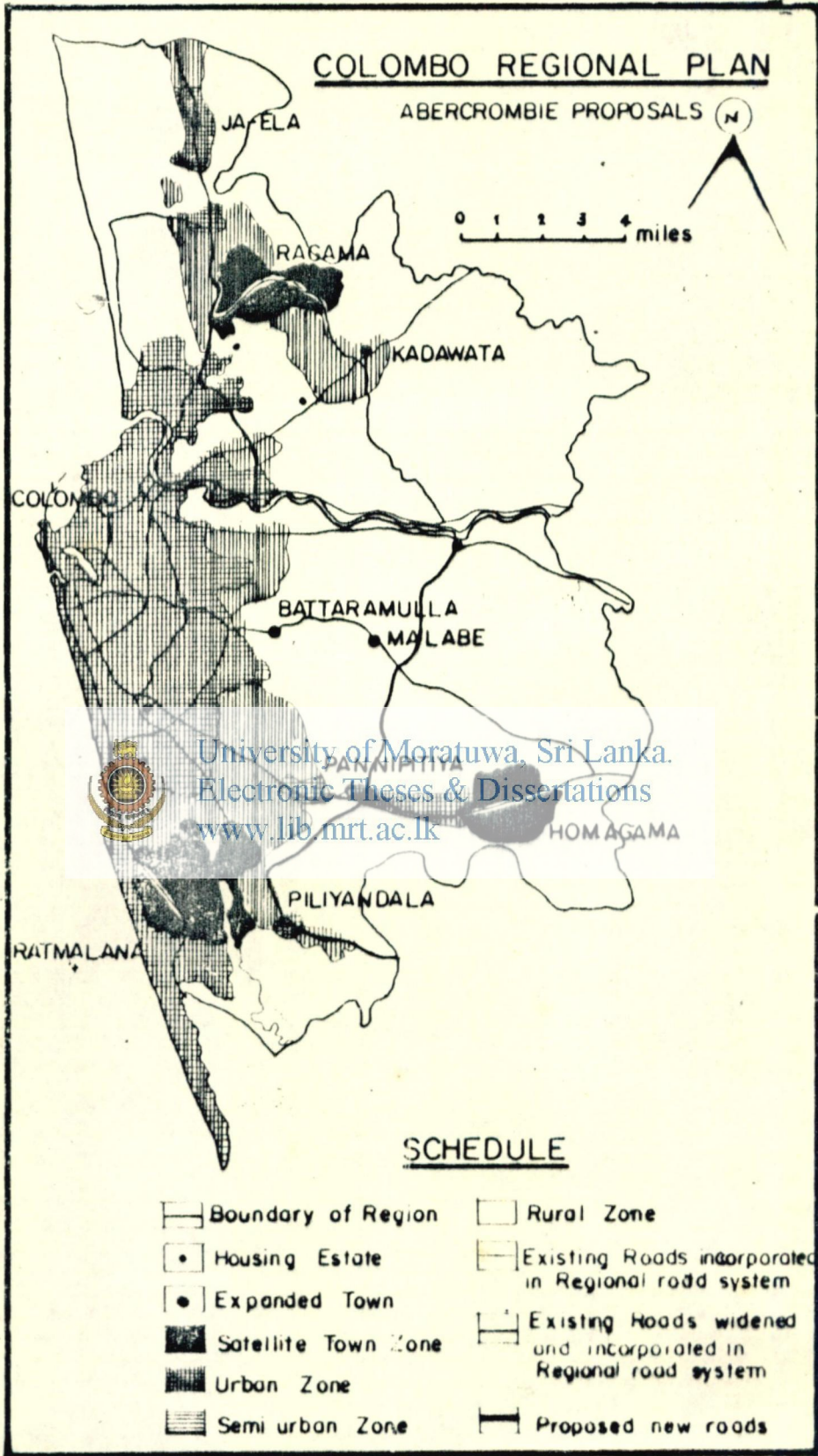
He explained in his reports that satellites are cheaper in the long-run than the reconstruction of old, congested cities. The concept of satellite town was accepted as a solution for the congestion in the shanty areas of the city, but was not implemented properly at any stage, until today.

#### THE ABERCROMBIE PLAN

In 1950 Sir Patrick Abercrombie was invited by the Sri Lankan Government to report on the problems of planning the city of Colombo and its regions. His study resulted mainly in a regional development plan for the Greater Colombo area and not in a city plan itself. He defined the metropolitan area of Colombo as an extent of 220 square miles within a radius of 14 miles from the core of the city.

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(4) Holiday, Clifford, City of Colombo Memorandum  
on Town Planning. P. 20



It contained a population of 1,167,153 persons of which 659,847 lived within the urban areas of the region.

Based on his study, Abercrombie proposed the decentralisation of the Government offices, Armed services and industries that could function outside the Fort area. He accepted that the commercial centre would continue to remain in the Fort and Pettah on account of the convergence of communications to the core of the city.

The regional plan for the metropolitan area of Colombo, had five major proposals, the first two of which were closely inter-related. (see - illustration VIII)



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- (a) The resettlement of 7,000 working-class families and 2,000 middle-class families who could not be provided with accommodation in the city.

According to Abercrombie, the overflow from the reconstructed slum areas in Colombo, and of the people moving to the city would amount to 100,000 persons. Accommodation for these had to be found within the region.



(b) To develop three new towns as satellites to the central urban mass of Colombo but independent in regard to employment. The sites suggested were Ratmalana, Homagama and Ragama. The regional plan provided for the growth of each new town to a maximum of 35,000 people and proposed that sufficient land be acquired in these areas for at least 7,000 working-class houses. Land would also be provided for civic centres industries and open spaces.



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(c) The decentralisation in one of these new towns ie. Ratmalana, of certain government departments, industries and institutions, that could be moved out of the city.

(d) The planning and reservation of land for the construction of a ring road within a distance of about 12 miles from the city.

(e) The zoning of the region into urban, & semi-urban satellite town and rural areas, in order that appropriate regulations may be framed under the Town and Country Planning Ordinance to control the disposal and use of land in each zone, and to ensure that uniform

action throughout the region is taken, particularly to prevent straggling growth taking place in the semi-urban zones and in the neighbourhood of the new towns.

The Abercrombie Plan was put into legal effect on 22 September 1961 in all areas of the region, with certain reservations in the cases of Colombo, Dehiwela, Mt' Lavinia and Moratuwa.

The Abercrombie Plan, however, was not intended to be more than the general framework of a planning scheme. However, since the preparation of the plan, development in Colombo and its region has proceeded at an increasing pace without the necessary guidance and order envisaged in the plan. In consequence, many of the regional proposals have lost their rationale and are no longer appropriate and realistic.

The past efforts in planning the city of Colombo no longer remain totally valid or feasible. They were mainly very general and contained only broad recommendations. Even when the details were worked out, the implementation did not prove to be very effective.

It is important to note that in the case of Borella, none of these plans directly controlled or promoted its development.

The Cinnamon Gardens development scheme in the Holiday plan considered Borella as an important nodal link, but did not make any recommendations to improve it. The plan only proposed a surface drainage layout for the Borella area as a continuation of the drainage system for Cinnamon Gardens. (5) The UN-assisted project in the Urban Development Authority is presently engaged in the metropolitan planning of the city of Colombo.

For action to follow in metropolitan development, a conceptual basis in planning must be evolved.

Such a basis must take note of the problems and the goals in planning. Accordingly, the Master Plan Project has identified certain strategies for the planned development of the Metropolitan region.

One of these strategies is the continuation of the high concentration of people and non-agricultural activities in the Western province and the creation of the infrastructure and other facilities for industry and employment.

Another strategy is the establishment of a growth corridor connecting Colombo with Galle or Kandy or Anuradhapura. However these strategies contribute little to the shifting of the inter-regional balance of the population. Hence they need more careful study.

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(5) Holiday, Clifford, Report on the development of Cinnamon Gardens - Colombo P. 3.

The Urban Development Authority of Sri Lanka which originated from the Colombo Master Plan Bureau enforced a radically different approach to urban development from that of the Colombo Master Plan. The basis of the UDA's development programmes and projects by which it hoped to enhance the physical, social and economic development of the country. The UDA has identified and commenced work on many action projects within the region of the city of Colombo. In the central area of the city, the following are the major schemes. (see appendix)

1. Echelon Square project

2. Lotus centre project

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Electronic Theses & Dissertations Development project

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3. Major slum and shanty upgrading

projects.

4. New administrative capital development project

5. Integrated Development Action programme for Peliyagoda and Urugodawatte.



The UDA plans the development of the Colombo metropolitan area through these action projects, envisaging the attraction of investment to the city.

The Colombo metropolitan area has been divided into 13 planning divisions or units by the UDA for planning purposes. These divisions are based on the major sub-centres of the city which will become the core areas of the planning unit.

Borella is one of the thirteen planning units of Colombo. The central area projects of the city - the new administrative capital development project



(Kotte) and the Integrated Development action programme for Peliyagoda and Urugodawatte- are

located in the three corners of a triangle in the centre of which is Borella.

The importance of a detailed development plan for the Borella area becomes very evident from this.

It is also important to note that throughout the past and present planning attempts, Borella gained no significant benefit. It is therefore time for a new effort to plan this urban settlement, to solve its growing problems, and to spread the benefits of progress in urban development among the inhabitants of Borella too.