

## REVIEW ON ORIGIN AND EXPANSION OF COLOMBO URBAN AREA, SRI LANKA; PLANNERS' PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

Sri Lanka is a naturally rich country located in the Indian Ocean and it has a self-sufficient, sophisticated history which runs back in time for over 2000 years. At that time we had urban development which we could be proud of and all those cities were developed in agriculturally rich areas like North Central province. Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sri Lanka faced different colonial influences such as Portuguese, Dutch and British. After that the traditionally developed urban pattern in North Central part gradually shifted to South Western part, which was centralized around Colombo due to the advantages of the natural sea port. In 1978, administrative functions were moved to Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte and then Colombo was designated as the commercial capital of Sri Lanka.

Time to time various physical plans were introduced for development of Colombo but were not successful. Therefore objective of this paper is to review origin and growth of Colombo and historical planning attempts. After all sorts of criticisms, if we look back at the progress of Colombo, it is evident that the main concept of the current planners is to raise the standards of Colombo to suit the title of 'the Wonder of Asia'.

*Key words: Portuguese era, Dutch era, British era, legislative enactments, Physical plans, Wonder of Asia*

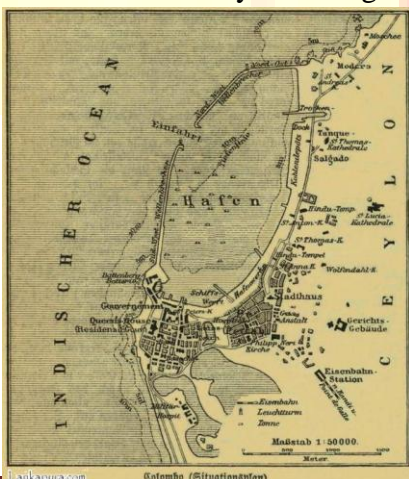
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### Historical origin

Colombo is located on the West Coast of the country. Development of Colombo is the main turning point in the history of urbanization in Sri Lanka. Its history has started over 2000 years ago. Large harbor and its strategic position along the East-West sea trade routes were of great advantage to initiate Colombo. This great location was known by Greeks, Persians, Romans, Arabs, and Chinese traders over 2,000 years ago (Panditharathna, 1963). Also Muslim Moors whose prime interest was trade, began to settle in Colombo around the 8th century AD, and the port helped their business and controlled much of the trade between the Sinhalese kingdoms and the outside world (Panditharathna, 1960) But the surrounding area of the port is predominantly agriculture and forest area with less population.

Early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Colombo faced colonial influence for the first time in history; in 1505 Colombo was invaded by Portuguese. The colonial rulers paid great attention to Colombo city because the emphasis was on the port and port related activities to support their trade activities and administration. They paid minimal attention to planning activities and they strengthened their city within limited boundaries and all streets had ends at the citadel wall. All urban activities were administered within the Fort in a specified manner. Development of the trading settlement and the port provided the initial impetus to industrial development in the area. When the Portuguese captured the Muslim trading settlement in Colombo, the first garrisoned factory was established in 1518. But they could not expand those industries over the Fort area (Pandithrathna, 1960). Following figure no. 1 shows the map of the city and fort of Colombo in 1762.

Figure 1 Colombo City in Portuguese era

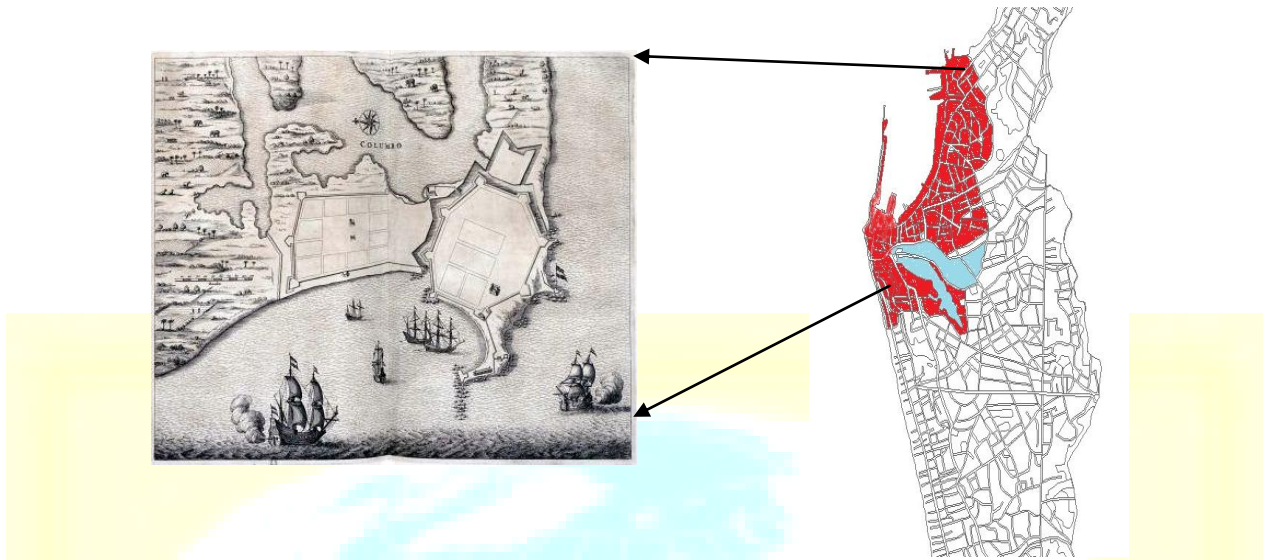


Portuguese concentrated only on ports and port related activities to strengthen their trade activities and administration. They paid minimal attention on expanding the city and managing the city in the limited area.

Afterwards, the city faced another foreign invasion by Dutch in 1656. Their intension is rather different from Portuguese; they extended the Portuguese base into a few more Square Kilometers, including the areas currently known as Pettah, Slave Island and Modara (Figure 02). They centralized all administrative activities, official residences inside the Fort and the other activities were located outside the Fort. They paid great attention to the gradual growth of the urban activities and natural arrangement of city space. At that time Pettah was a main commercial and trade center and it was a much attractive and vibrant urban centre during the Dutch period. Apart from that, they paid attention on residences for working communities and Slave Island area was identified for that. Rest of the area around that was predominantly rural and rarely scattered with houses within large agricultural areas. Considering the industrial development of that period several other industrial activities were begun in the settlement, giving it a new functional basis. They were boat building and repair, rope and coil making, bakeries, shoe making, carpentry and distilling etc. Therefore during the Dutch period attention was paid to develop a main commercial and trade area, providing housing for workers and development of port related industries but urban area was not much expanded.

After 140 years (1796) from Dutch influence, Colombo faced a colonial attack by British. At first British captured coastal areas from Dutch and acquired the ruling of the entire island using a historic agreement between Sri Lankan elite and the British governor of Ceylon in 1815 (Munasingha et.al., 2002).

Figure 2 Expansion of Colombo City in Dutch era



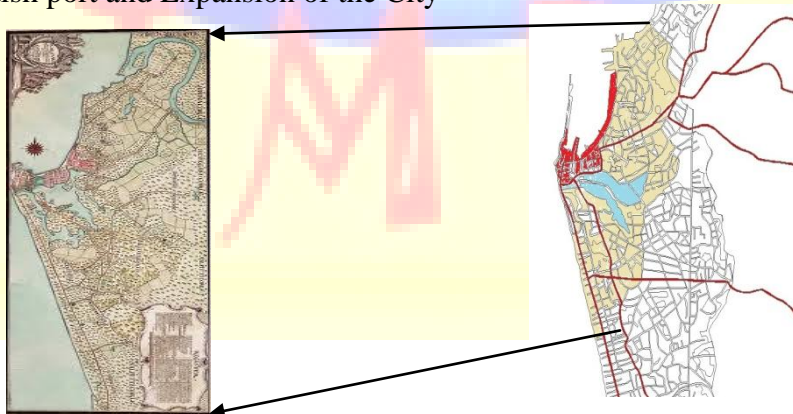
British who approached the Colombo city were completely different from Portuguese and Dutch. They aimed to link Colombo with other main strategic centers through transport linkages. At first, they initiated the construction of a set of gravel roads connecting Colombo to other strategic centers of the Island. Those roads were set along the coast towards South (Present Galle Road), on Kelani River valley towards East (Avisawella Road), across Kelani River Ferry to the North (Modara Road), and two lines through the marshes of South East towards Kotte. (Figure 3) It proved that early stages of British Administration identified the need of urban growth spread along the main road arterials linked from Colombo to other regions of the country. Similar to the Dutch period, British established all administrative activities inside the Fort and the commercial activities spread over the streets of Pettah. After they established those activities, they were concerned about finding suitable greenery for their administrator's residences and they selected areas around the lake close to the Fort, named Beira Lake. After that they established high class residential areas for rich native business owners and local leaders towards the North of Pettah in Kotahena and Modara areas, toward the South of port in Kollupitiya and Bambalapitiya area and the Eastern segment of Maradana and Dematagoda. At that time those areas were occupied by cinnamon plantations, coconut lands and Marshes. Hence, at first British rulers concentrated on three things:

- Developing transport network in the surrounding area
- Finding green areas for administrative residences

- Establishing high class residential areas

In the secondary stage they focused on expansion of backyard facilities of the sea port. As a result of that, Northern part of the Fort and Pettah grew as the higher order business district and it also helped to attract more population to the city from other parts of the country. Further, British rulers' establishment of good road network also facilitated the growth by opening land to development with accessibility to different parts of the region. Construction of Baseline road from North to South of Colombo is a landmark of this road development. Further, they took some attempts to plan the city and administrative activities were partly shifted to the main administrative area. As a result of that, surrounding agricultural land converted to residential purposes of the city. Figure number 3 shows the evolution of the City in the British period. During the British period, they established some industries like metal working, production of coconut oil, desiccated coconut, production of tea, cardamom, areca nut etc, besides the development of the trading and commercial activities. This also caused to attract a large number of people into the city. In the secondary stage they focused on proper road development around the city, planned and shifted administrative activities, converted surrounding agriculture land into built up area and the establishment of some main industries.

Figure 3 The British port and Expansion of the City



Following pictures illustrates proud Colombo under British ruling.



York Street Colombo 1900



Chatham Street, Fort Colombo 1890



Grand Orient Hotel, Colombo 1900



General Post Office Colombo 1910

### Legislative enactments for physical planning

Over 150 years, British ruled the country and they gradually changed the shape & structure of the city to suit their trading and administrative purposes during this period (1815 to 1948). The first census of Sri Lanka (1984) recorded the population of the Colombo city as 5000. In 1865 they regularized the first administrative boundary of Colombo with the establishment of Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) under the Municipal Councils Ordinance. It was a major initial transformation to manage the development activities of the city and it advantaged to develop civic amenities of the city population. However there was absence of proper planning legislation in the country until 1915, except for sanitary ordinances. At that time the essential need was to establish legal powers to control haphazard development in towns of Sri Lanka. Hence, the Housing and Town improvement ordinance was legislated in 1915 to fulfill that need and it was the first major legislation of physical planning for this country. It was applicable within the administrative limits of Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Town councils and within any other limit in build up areas of village Councils. Also this ordinance made provisions

for better Housing of the people and the improvement of towns in Sri Lanka. In this period British also attempted to prepare a plan for Colombo.

### **Historical planning attempts for Colombo**

#### **1921-1948 Period**

Patrick Geddes, who was a local town-planning expert, was invited to prepare a plan for Colombo and arrived in Colombo in 1921. Geddes saw a “successful” city in Colombo and he identified the significance of the port as the 3rd largest in the Empire and the 5th largest in the world. He recommended the carrying out of the metropolitan legislation in the colonial city. He noted that large-scale slum clearance would be harmful and recommended a gradual execution. The approach was conservative but the objectives were driven by planning. Geddes adopted a conservative approach to change the extant spatial organizations.

Geddes mostly stressed on the significance of larger development and beautification of the city and he proposed to develop the “garden city” on a much grander scale. He addressed to beautify Colombo by the incorporation of Beire Lake, at that time the banks of which were used for warehouses. The tree lined streets (Buddhaloka Mawatha) and the grid system of roads in Cinnamon Gardens are legacies of the Geddes Plan which still provide the most sought after residential areas in the city. Geddes (1921) thus argued that there is a need of a permanent Town Planning Office, which would approach the city from a town planning perception. But the important suggestions of planning were not implemented. For first time, Town and country planning ordinance was introduced in 1946 to strengthen the physical planning of the country.

Colombo was made the capital of the island when Sri Lanka was ceded to the British Empire in 1985 and its status as capital was retained when the nation became independent in 1948.

#### **1948- 1978 period**

After independence, Colombo showed rapid growth and the city expanded haphazardly to surrounding areas. Gradually, Colombo City got involved in urbanization process in order to expand the service and manufacturing industries in the city. All pull and push factors which affect the third world urbanization are also common to the Colombo city. As a result of that all

drawbacks of third world urbanization was mixed with the city economy. In 1946, 8.6% of the island's urban population, which stood at 15.2 %, was in the Colombo district (Rasanayagam, 2012). The influx of the people in the city was so rapid that, by the first quarter of this century overcrowding population became a problem in Colombo and 1/7<sup>th</sup> of the city's area consisted of slums (Panditharathna, 1965). In this time, planning was a very essential requirement for expansion of urban area to overcome the problems and therefore there was concern for another plan for Colombo.

In 1948, the Government invited Sir Patrick Abercrombie to prepare a regional plan for Colombo and to considering its surrounding region focusing on an area of 220 square miles. The region included the capital city, the adjoining built-up urban area and a considerable extent of rural country in the periphery. The main problems highlighted in the Abercrombie plan were the high concentration of economic, trade and port related activities in the city and their effects.

According to that in 1948, Patrick Abercrombie developed a plan and it was approved by the Central Planning Commission in March 1949. Abercrombie's Regional Plan and his proposal for the development of the Colombo Metropolitan area were subsequently amended according to the decisions of the Central Planning Commission in 1957 (CMR Structure Plan). Decentralization of activities is one of the main objectives of the plan. According to that he introduced 3 satellite towns within the region to accommodate the overspill of the people from crowded city area. Also his plan introduced some Character Zoning and Density Zoning concepts. But it was recognized that Abercrombie's plan was not adequate to accommodate the rapid changes taking place in the urban areas, especially in Colombo and its surrounding sub urban areas.

### **Period after 1978**

Year 1977 demarcated a significant land mark in urban development in Sri Lanka with the open up economy to the open economic system. The appointed new government stressed on their vision on country's urban development. According to that the Government obtained UNDP assistance to mitigate the perceived problems in Colombo and surrounding area. It was the beginning of preparing proper Master Plan for Colombo and its surrounding environs.



Hence in 1978, UNDP team prepared a Master Plan for Colombo. Regularizing the Urban Development Authority law (No 41 of 1978) and establishing Urban Development Authority as a planning organization were direct outcomes of the Colombo Master Plan. According to the Act “A law to provide for the establishment of an urban development authority to promote integrated planning and implementation of economic, social and physical development of certain areas may be declared by the minister to be urban development areas” (UDA Law). The City of Colombo Development Plan was prepared and gazette by the Urban Development Authority in 1985 and it permitted to the UDA to implement zoning and building regulations. Initially these were strictly imposed but often modified later.

Colombo Master Plan which was prepared had focused on Colombo Metropolitan Region and it consisted of two parts:

- Colombo Metropolitan Regional Structure Plan
- Colombo Urban Area Plan

According to that, they demarcated the city of Colombo and adjoining 14 urban local authorities as Colombo Urban Area and Western province which includes Colombo, Kaluthara and Gampaha districts as Colombo Metropolitan Region. Colombo Master Plan project aimed to create a balanced regional development strategy for Colombo. But this was not successful. Urban sprawl continued at a rapid rate than in the past and the Colombo urban area continued to expand beyond its physical limit. “In fact, towns in the periphery and outer regions were created as nuclei in order to moderate the excessive concentration of development in the centre and to disburse it over a larger area” (Dayarathna, 2010). To achieve this aim, special projects were created. Those were,

- Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte Parliamentary Complex
- the Superior Courts Complex
- Biyagama and Katunayaka Free Trade Zones.

According to the plan, administrative functions were moved to Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte. Colombo was designated as the commercial capital of Sri Lanka.

In 1996, the government of Sri Lanka directed the UDA to revise the Colombo master plan of 1979. The planning team realized that there is no point in revising the plan due to drastic changes of economic features and the urban fabric of Colombo. Hence above mentioned updating of

master plan was not pursued and a decision was taken to prepare a new structure plan covering the entire Western province including Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara districts. It was greatly influenced by the changes during the last twenty years and it concerns all aspects of the region, such as infrastructure, transport, health, education, industry, housing and agriculture etc. The proposed physical formation strategies of this plan intended to make the City of Colombo more orderly and environmentally friendly and yet highly dynamic and economically diverse. “The strategy of the CMR Plan is to utilise this natural layout by making further improvements for sustainable development through the application of appropriate environmental and physical planning strategies” (UDA 2007). Having taken into account the urbanization processes of the past, CMR has recognized seven urban agglomerations (the peripheral towns of Negombo, Gampaha, Biyagama, Homagama, Horana and Matugama) that can be employed to promote growth and act as development centres (UDA-CMR Structure Plan). Those are categorized as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> order centers. The study on urban hierarchy helped to identify several urban agglomerations in different parts of the region. But this plan was unable to address the removal of the centrality concept in Colombo because the CMR accounts for 80 percent of all industrial establishments, 53 per cent of industrial employment and 31 per cent of total employment in the country while contributing 44 per cent to Sri Lanka’s GDP’ Sevanatha (2000). Further Colombo’s permanent population is only 800,000 living within a land area of 3,731 hectares, but it attracts on average of a million people a day, creating huge demands on the transport infrastructure (Dayarathna, 2010).

A remarkable disturbance to the development within this period was the dreadful civil war from 1981 to 2009 period. It disturbed the civil society badly and most of the civil disturbances arose in Colombo and peripheral areas. The war intensified during the latter part of this period (2001-2008) and caused disturbances to the urban development and at that time people moved to other areas. A milestone in Sri Lanka was the termination of civil war in 2009 and the urban development programme accelerated again with the government changing their urban policy to focus on Sri Lanka becoming the “Wonder of Asia”. According to that, many open spaces and leisure areas were introduced and as a result, people have again showed a favour in residing in urban peripheral areas. Newly established Southern highway, Katunayake highway, proposed Kandy highway, Hambantota Seaport and Airport will provide proper gateways to enter

Colombo. As a result, infrastructure in peripheral areas is growing fast and most of the land is converted to urban uses due to high demand of land. So land prices have been increasing unmanageably and it has created an imaginary land market.

### **Conclusion**

Colombo is the commercial capital of Sri Lanka and its growth boasts the ownership of a long history. Mainly it was developed based on strategic location of sea port and as a result of that, time to time it faced different colonial influences. Portuguese and Dutch era did not consider much about its physical development and expansion, but British expanded physical area and established legislative enactments for physical planning. After independence, physical plans were introduced for development of Colombo but were not fully implemented. Perera (2002) mentioned that Colombo was a colonial product that was planned to meet the needs of the colonial rulers and some of its features are not practical with our environment and culture to be carried out currently. Due to the above mentioned issues, modern planners took some attempts to develop Colombo urban area focusing their attention on transforming Colombo as 'Wonder of Asia' to create a budding interest among local and foreign investors to resonate our pride worldwide.

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