

Responsive Social Spaces in Sri Lankan Urban Environment:
An Examination of physical and social determinants and their
impact in modifying social spaces in an urban context

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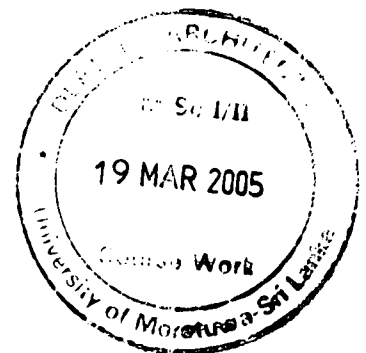
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Preface

The Sri Lankan urban environment contains different types of public social spaces with varying size, functions or activity pattern. Obviously these spaces enliven the urban environment and the degree of liveliness depends on determinant factors, which could be identified as social and physical. These factors are of vital importance as they enable to strengthen the character of a place to be a responsive urban space. “ Responsive urban space” is considered as a place where the built environment that provides its users with an essentially democratic setting which enriches their opportunities by maximizing the degree of choice available to them.

This dissertation attempts to generate some conceptual insights of contributory physical and social determinant factors of social spaces and how best they can be utilized to modify or design a social space and the immediate context. In the course of examining the problem, the writer looks at three different types of social spaces in Sri Lankan urban environment namely, religious oriented, recreational oriented and transport – commercial – recreational oriented social spaces at Kandy, Colombo and Nuwara Eliya respectively. The work that lies behind this study was done by observation of sites, photographic study, study on historic literature and questionnaire aimed at users of the social space. The analysis revealed that the goals must be balanced and merged with economic, contextual and user preferences so as to modify the social space and immediate built form.

The writer intends that the dissertation would help the students in the field, town planners, architects etc. as a guide line to design buildings in the proximity of urban social spaces as it is believed that shaping the built form will in turn shape the behavior pattern of the users.

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Introduction

Topic explanation

The Built environment that provides its users with an essentially democratic setting, which enriches their opportunities by maximizing the degree of choice available to them, is considered as a responsive place. Thus it is a space where human values are linked to activities and places. Generally a responsive place has been identified as a socio – spatial dimension in built environment.

According to Perera.L.S.R.(15,2001)*“Responsive is understood as where human values are linked to activities and places in order to create an image that portrays the true nature of that environment.”*

In this context a responsive urban place should provide identity, security, comfort and sense of belongingness in the user’s mind. The close relationship between user and the built environment is linked by determinants which can be categorized as physical and social determinants.

The physical determinant forces will depend on the built form, location and the visual definition of the social space. The social determinants will depend on category of people, type of activities etc. These physical and social determinants are the main factors that support to strengthen the character of an urban social space. The impact of these factors can therefore be used to modify and strengthen the character of existing social spaces in an urban context.

Observation

During the process of development an urban environment gets changed and shaped in order to become compatible with the social, political, and cultural aspirations of the living community that particular period. Therefore, the architecture is a “reflection” of a society at a given time and it expresses the social and economic achievements of that period.

The architecture of buildings built during the British and Dutch periods in Sri Lanka exhibits the degree of responsiveness contributed by the built form to strengthen the quality of the urban social space. But most of the buildings, which have come up in the recent past, tend to focus their attention to visual and aesthetic aspects rather than the responsive aspect. This has resulted in creation of individual buildings to attract the society

to their own territory and hence they are not contributing to the built environment as a whole. Thus most modern buildings have not provided the user a democratic setting to enrich the opportunities available to them. This means the designers often do not realize that the building design as a part of built environment. Such buildings have resulted alienation and hence not contribute to create a successfully functioning urban social spaces.

Criticality

In reality, people may experience an urban social space but they view that space as a whole in relation to built form in that particular environment.

A responsive urban built environment is very much important to a social space because, it is from that built form that people will derive so much of what they value; their perception of space; the characteristic identity of the locality; which are different from one social space to another.

The psychology of perception is greatly controlled by the totality of the physical environment. Therefore, the physical and social determinants are the vital factors that contribute in making a responsive urban social space.



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According to Geremy.C *“Through a process of control and influence, the form may be provided with some insights”*

As the quotation describes, the buildings have greater power of expression to form a responsive urban social space: Therefore, this potential should not be neglected to achieve the social, political and cultural needs.

Causes

Lack of responsiveness is one of the major factors that encourages the formation of unsuccessful urban social spaces. Responsiveness is a matter that depends solely on the creative ability of the designers. There are various weaknesses in attitudes of the designers, perhaps, may not intentional, but tend to express from the design of the buildings, especially in close proximity to an urban social space. Therefore, it is well understood that the designers are the key party responsible for the image of an urban social space but they seem to have not sufficiently exhibited their ability, knowledge and interest to the factor ‘responsiveness’ to near by urban social space due to varied reasons. Some designers tend to ignore the responsiveness to a social space due to heavy pressures

imposed by various forces such as the threats by security, political issues, the financial management bodies etc. Therefore, It can be well noted that these types of designers have not sacrificed their talents for the public benefit in the name of above issues.

There are some designers who are aware of the responsiveness but are not convinced about the advantages of responsiveness. This category normally tends to concentrate on the individual building while disregarding the communal targets.

Yet, there is another group of designers who are keen on improving the quality of the urban social space by responding to the environment, despite the attitudes of the others. They seem to have been following the theories, mechanisms suggested by architectural theorists and scholars and also with the knowledge they have gained from the projects where these theories and mechanisms are being implemented, have been able to achieve the desired targets despite the various obstacles encountered with.

Intention of the Study

It is to analyze the potential of the social and physical determinants in creating a responsive urban space, which would also be a meaningful social space too. Also it intends to analyze design strategies of social spaces functioning successfully and to identify the trends prevailing locally with the fervent hope that it may help to improve the quality of living and generate guidelines that would enable the present and future architects to design buildings in the proximity of an urban space . This analysis will be based on the following research questions.

- What design concepts have been utilized and how well are they working?
- Have the precedents for these place types been acknowledged in the development of new forms?
- How well do they fit into the existing city in terms of massing, appearance, and streetscape?
- How are they experienced, accessed, and used by pedestrians?
- What are the sociological, political and economic effects brought about by the rapid introduction of pedestrian social spaces in the city center?
- What future design directions can be suggested based on this analysis?

Methodology

The analysis will be mainly based on selected case studies and user response survey. The historical background of a particular social space will be obtained from maps and literature available while the present situation will be examined by photographic study and conducting a questionnaire based survey. The statistical data obtained will be analyzed by using a software, which will enable to identify the link between the human activities surrounding a built form. The above data will be utilized to identify the strategies, guidelines, which can be, implemented in future development work.



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