

# Social Resilience and Urban Growth Exploring Urban 'Strategies' and 'Tactics' in Bangkok and Colombo

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## Abstract

*This paper contends that re-inventing the city involves a level of 'social resilience' that permits to face the challenges presented by urban development at moments of growth as well as in times of adversity and crisis.*

*It is a conceptual exercise that largely draws on the distinction which the French anthropologist Michel de Certeau between 'tactics' and 'strategies'. He described 'tactics' as everyday practices through which large parts of the population respond to power 'strategies' imposed on them from above. While tactics and strategies may sometimes clash, synergy between them is crucial to build 'social resilience' and make city life more sustainable.*

*To illustrate this claim, the paper ventures into a comparison between the urban discourses that were circulating in Bangkok in the booming early-1990s and an exploratory observation of similar trends in contemporary Colombo. Whilst two decades and vastly diverging historical backgrounds separate these contexts, the urban development strategies deployed in both situations are marked by strong economic growth and a booming real estate sector. In spite of political turmoil, social resilience in Bangkok has manifested itself in 'tactical urbanisms' that range from dissatisfaction and confrontation to consensus-building and cooperation. In view of Sri Lanka's recent past of armed conflict, the paper cannot offer such clear-cut insights on Colombo. Instead, it advances a series of logical presumptions by way of final reflection and invitation for further research.*

**Keywords:** social resilience, tactical urbanism, Bangkok, Colombo.

## Introduction

Cities are continuously being re-invented through a mixture of social and cultural practices, powerful imaginaries about city life as well as astute discourses about a sustainable urban future. Everyday practices may pass largely unnoticed but virtual realities circulated by rumours and gossip circles, tabloids, marketing and advertising agencies, social media and mainstream journalism are more conspicuous in adding spice to urban life. The liveliness of these narratives, in turn, stands in stark contrast with the drabness of official communiqués and urban agendas put forward by national or international agencies.

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The French anthropologist Michel de Certeau (1984: xix) adequately captured this complexity by distinguishing 'strategies' from 'tactics'. He identified strategies with the "calculus of force-relationships" imposed by "subjects of will and power", typically associated with political, economic and scientific rationality. Strategies provide the policies, statements, reports and blue-prints that strive for political stability, economic growth and scientific progress. Tactics, by contrast, do not rely on calculus or clearly localized entities; they are typically associated with the ways of operating of ordinary people in everyday life. Tactics are fragmentary, unpretentious victories of the "weak" over the "strong" and range from necessary acts of survival to clever tricks and conscious acts of contestation and resistance.

This paper takes this distinction as a starting point to elucidate a growing interest among urban practitioners and academics for range of urban practices and interventions broadly labelled as 'tactical urbanisms' (Gadano, 2014:94)<sup>1</sup>. In addition, it links this distinction to the rising interest in notions of resilience and the relevance of 'social resilience' in particular (Asia Society, 2014; da Silva & Morera, 2014).

It then ventures into a tentative comparison between urban discourses that were circulating in Bangkok in the booming early-1990s and contemporary trends of urban development in Colombo. Here again, the distinction between strategies and tactics proves useful to explore the role, relevance and importance of social resilience in the re-invention of the city. Fieldwork in Colombo was limited and doesn't offer the benefit of hindsight as in the case of Bangkok. Yet, the exercise does allow to conjecture the likely development of tactical urbanisms in Colombo and offer recommendations for further research accordingly.

## 1. Paradigm shifts in urbanism perspectives and practices

As an ever increasing portion of the world population settles in urban areas, cities come to face a series of unprecedented challenges. Many cities have become more heterogeneous in terms of people (ethnic origin, religious conviction, social mobility), activities (global network, local markets, civil associations, artists' groups, street-wise gangs), and places (the CBD, downtown bazaars, suburban malls, recreation areas, slums, gated communities, etc.). At the downside, growing diversity also entailed growing disparities as well as rampant urban poverty.

This has created a situation where urbanites have been forced to come up for themselves, and local authorities had to 'rethink' the city in terms of planning, designing and management. Only trust and consultation could forge a way to re-invent cities' working and dwelling environment in a creative and sustainable way.

In the past decades, this realization has set in motion various new approaches towards urban development. In the Global North – and in the 'old' continent of Europe in particular – the combination of urban sprawl, massive inflows of (inter)continental migrants, de-industrialization and ageing society gave rise to public-private alliances. These partnerships began to "experiment with looser planning visions and design frameworks, linked to smaller, often temporary

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<sup>1</sup> By using the plural form, Gadano (2014:97) intends to cover 'spontaneous interventions', 'hands-on urbanism, DIY and handmade urbanism, open-source in the urban realm or even peer-based technologies to appropriate the city. The incredible challenges of urban development and the range of hybrid urban designs model that respond to it will be explored in an upcoming Moma exhibition: *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities*, New York; <http://www.moma.org/visit/exhibitions/upcoming>

initiatives designed to unlock the potential of sites right away rather than in 10 years' time when formal master-plans may reach implementation" (Bishop & Williams, 2012:3)<sup>2</sup>. In the Global South, where the pace and intensity of urbanization have become far more overwhelming than it ever was in the North, the close proximity of recent rural migrants, urban residents and local or foreign investors have generated unseen decisiveness, resourcefulness and entrepreneurship to overcome poverty, attain a middle-class urban life-style or capitalize on the development of industries, services, and real property.

Lacking power and resources to restrain or control migration flows and urbanites' spontaneous initiatives, top-end authorities engaged in high-level debates whether cities were engines for economic growth or rather causes for concern, if not for an unending crisis. Local leaders and urbanites worldwide, however, were less concerned about these macro-economic dimensions as they became ever more focused on the urban 'system' – in the ecological sense of the term – and ways to make their habitat a better and more liveable dwelling environment.

### **1.1. Sustainability, resilience and the built environment**

As a result of these ground-breaking efforts, the issue of sustainability has come to revolve around a better understanding of 'resilience'<sup>3</sup>. This notion refers to the capacity of a system – a company, a city, an eco-system – to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of unforeseen changes, even catastrophic incidents. By now, it is generally understood that the "triple bottom line" of sustainability lies with a multi-dimensional assessment of resilience, i.e.:

- *Economic resilience:*  
Reflects the financial strength and stability of the system, including the economic vitality and diversity of the communities in which it operates, the supply chain that it rests on, and the markets that it serves.
- *Environmental resilience*  
Reflects the operational efficiency and effectiveness of the system in terms of resource utilization and waste minimization, as well as its ability to protect and nurture the natural ecosystems in which it operates.
- *Social resilience:*  
Reflects the "human capital" of the system, including the capability, teamwork, and loyalty of its members, the strength of its relationships and alliances, and the political and cultural cohesion of its host societies.

Resilience thus implicates both strategic and tactical – i.e. both top-down and bottom-up – approaches towards urban development. More recent discussions even favour to erase these labels in order to establish a level playing field where fresh alliances can be forged and new

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Temporary City* (2012), Bishop and Williams elaborate cutting-edge research and writings by Berlin's Urban Catalyst team (2007) and the seminal work of Haydyn and Temel (2006). This body of work covers a range of temporary projects in Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and the US. Some of these ventures were initiated by private entrepreneurs, others by local authorities and yet others through private-public partnerships. The trend is continuously updated in websites such as: <http://popupcity.net>, <http://www.urbantactics.org>, <http://www.meanwhilespace.com> (all accessed on 22 July 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For a broader discussion of sustainability and resilience, cfr. <http://www.resilience.osu.edu/>, on which this passage is largely based.

possibilities emerge (Kee 2014)<sup>4</sup>. Viewed in this perspective, it is clear that social resilience is essential to realize the other two dimensions of resilience. Social resilience essentially is a characteristic of a social system: it relies on a system's grasp of cause and effects, as well as interdependencies and reciprocity. The level of social resilience of any given system – be it an eco-system, a corporation or a city – thus is largely determined by personal traits of the members of the system, the social structure and processes in which these members interact, and the cultural narratives that underlie these interactions. This does not belie the materiality – the forms, states and qualities – of the built environment. Quite on the contrary, since the built environment constitutes one of the major media to shape, express and (re)produce social structure and processes.

### **1.2. Strategies, tactics and urban discourse**

Discourse embraces all of the practices through which meanings are communicated, not just speech and writing. The built environment, like food, fashion or film, is a primary form of discourse. Discourse is entangled in power relations since 'subjects' [i.e. human beings as individual agency] are constructed according to certain interests. These include the interests of the state in maintaining power and social order; private interests in stimulating consumption; and those of dominant classes, cultures and groups in the maintenance of privilege.

Dovey, 2008: 33 (my brackets)

Both strategies and tactics envisage to strengthen resilience; both are deeply implicated in the discourses that build, maintain, and transform the city. To illustrate this act of continuous re-invention, I draw on fieldwork conducted in Bangkok in the early 1990s as part of my doctoral research<sup>5</sup>. With a robust economy, a strong faith in future growth and prosperity and a booming real estate sector, the situation in Bangkok twenty years ago brings to mind current developments in Colombo. This resemblance leads me to venture into some analogies and differences between the 1990s testimonies on urban discourse in Bangkok and tentative observations on urban-ness which I made in Colombo over the past year.

### **1.3. Methodological considerations: gathering scraps of information**

A short note on methodology will clarify that these reflections are meant as a thought experiment rather than as a thoroughly researched exercise. While the proposed comparison may seem random, more in-depth research is required to prove it right...or wrong.

In Bangkok, I conducted fieldwork over a period of 18 months. In line with anthropological tradition, I anchored research in a "locale" that served as a unit of reference for broader "processes". On the one hand, I relied on participant observation of daily practices, casual conversations and interviews with residents to gain insight in the dwelling environment where I had resided since 1988. On the other hand, I included a wide range of urban issues that were raised in the local media, in private conversations or in public discussions. This included participatory observation of a loose association of "concerned citizens" who addressed issues like civil education, self-governance, urban environment and conservation.

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<sup>4</sup> For a global analysis of how people take ownership of their urban surroundings in Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Moscow, New York and Taipei, cfr. Kee and Miazzo (2014) *We Own The City*.

<sup>5</sup> Text and illustrations about the situation in Bangkok were largely drawn from De Wandeler (2002) *Locality and Urban Discourse: Bangkok in the mid-1990s*. London: SOAS.

In comparison, my observation of urban-ness in Colombo is only in an infant stage: it was limited to less than a month's observation on site, follow-up of local and international news on Sri Lanka – and the Colombo real estate sector in particular – and scraps of information gathered from just a few public discussions and exchanges with students, academics and urban practitioners. Given this limited exposure, my presumptions about tactical urbanism in Colombo are based on logical deduction rather than on data mining in the field. I explore some of these viewpoint tentative. Although I present some of these conjectures in the final section of this paper in order to set a scope for further research.

## 2. Bangkok in the mid-1990s

Bangkok has been experiencing exponential urban growth since the 1960s. It was marked by a 'leap-frogging' urban sprawl characterized by 'superblocks': built-up areas stretched along the city's major roads and left interstitial land unaffected. Public agencies could not keep up the provision of welfare housing to a swelling corps of civil servants and the number of private sector employees in need of housing was sharply increasing. In response, land brokers and petty entrepreneurs embarked on small-scale land- and housing schemes (PADCO-LIF 1990). Their projects penetrated the superblocks with a multiplication of *soi* – side-streets off the main roads – that could either stretch over a few hundred meters, or become concatenated over several kilometres and ramify into an outgrowth of sub-*soi* (Cohen 1985; Yinyeod 1971). As large tracts of land at the core of the superblocks remained poorly accessible, they became encroached by squatter- and slum settlements<sup>6</sup>. This development pattern heavily affected urban mobility: the city was plagued by defective public transport and notorious for its continuous traffic jams.

Authorities generally adopted a "laissez-faire" attitude towards urban development. In 1973, the government had established the National Housing Authority with the mandate to address housing needs of lower-middle and low-income groups. By 1991, the agency had constructed 80,000 new housing units and improved another 70,000 housing units through slum upgrading. By then, the first phases of an extensive network of elevated toll-ways had been completed and efforts to 'retrofit' super-blocks were underway. New distributor roads or conversion of cul-de-sac *soi* into regular 'through-traffic' side-streets opened the way for a further expansion of the property market, albeit at the expense of poorer sections of the population (Durand-Lasserve 1976, 1983; Angel & Sapon 1989; Dowall 1989; Angel & Sureeporn 1990).

Meanwhile, Thailand had steadily realized double-digit economic growth for several consecutive years and became branded as the emerging fifth "Asian Tiger". The country's political leadership and business community displayed an indomitable faith in progress and modernization, as demonstrated by following titles in a publication promoting the 1995 Board of Investment Fair:

Thailand's Real Estate Draws Global Players  
Can Thailand make Top 10?  
Construction pumps up the volume  
Tapping into Vietnam

Bangkok Post, Showcase Thailand, 1995: 36; 44; 49; 54

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<sup>6</sup> These 'underdeveloped' tracts of land absorbed flood waters during rainy season and functioned as 'lungs' for the traffic-choked city. Their later conversion to urban land uses proved detrimental for the city's ecological balance (Anuchart & Ross, 1992).

“Globalisation” had become a new national buzzword but also an issue over which people were deeply divided (The Nation, 28 Jan. 1995:6). One view regarded globalisation as a growing exposure to foreign customs and practices. In conjunction with rapid economic growth and the consumer behaviour spurred by higher income levels, it caused a Thai cultural crisis and threatened Thailand's “unique cultural heritage” (The Nation, 5 December 1994). Adherents of this perspective tended to question whether national development plans had been right to prioritise economic development over “human” development. To emphasise their argument, they pointed out social and environmental problems that besieged Bangkok in the wake of its unbridled growth: traffic congestion, income disparity, stress, alienation and criminality. Notwithstanding such discussions, Bangkok’s property markets came to reflect the country’s impressive economic track record.

### **2.1. Dwelling environments as the workings of an industry**

By 1990, more than one thousand professional developers were active in Bangkok alone. The total value of property transactions nationwide increased with nearly 60 per cent from roughly 300,000 million Baht in 1990 to 475,000 million Baht in 1994. Within the same period, the number of property companies listed on the Stock Exchange increased from six to thirty-two. Internal growth of the sector led to a higher degree of professionalism and more sophisticated outputs, which in turn required increasingly complex brokerage roles. The processes of site prospecting, land conversion and -subdivision became dominated by specialised agencies. Supervision and construction management, marketing and promotion, as well as sales and estate management followed suit. In addition, local consultants and think tanks began to face competition from international real estate agents.

Not surprisingly, real estate advertising became one of the ubiquitous features of Bangkok’s streetscapes. Gigantic billboards towered along motorways and at major intersections. Stacks of property magazines piled up at news-stands. Radio- and television channels aired weekly broadcasts to provide home-buyers with brisk, business-like updates of the property market.

### **2.2. Weaving dreams in real estate...**

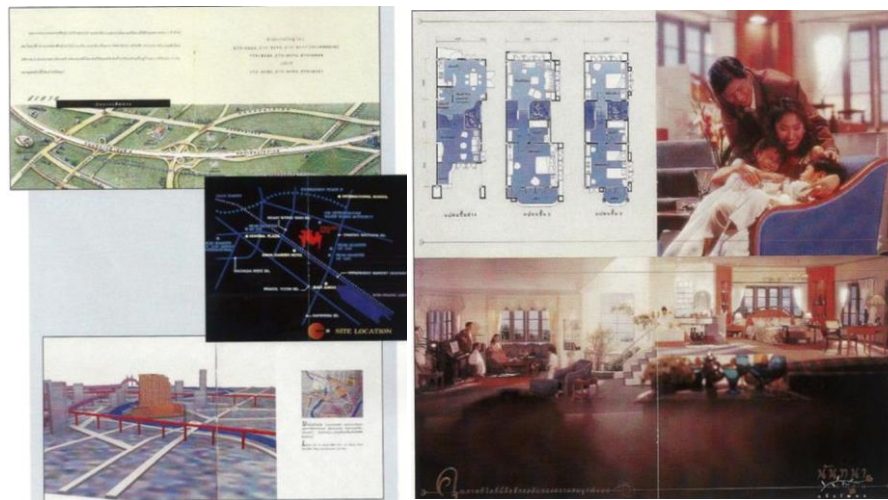
Property advertising seized daily life in its minutest details. Its message was unambiguous: “YOU could be so much better off, if you'd live in OUR housing estate or condominium”<sup>7</sup>. Location was and still is the foremost feature on which consumers need information, especially in a traffic-choked city like Bangkok. Location maps showing major access roads and nearby amenities therefore figured in every advertisement and brochure. Whether the location was accessed by ground-level streets, elevated highways or toll-ways implied a different level of wealth and distinction at a time when city authorities had yet to implement the mass transportation schemes.

Promotion material for suburban housing estates showed a rosy picture of life. Healthy-, trendy-looking young people and cute little children – one boy, one girl – figured in impeccable leisure wear in nearly every picture. Their life seems to consist only of leisure and romance. The names of housing estates exude an air of exclusiveness and distinction, and carry obvious connotations to a green and healthy environment. Set in these lush environs, then, neighbourly contacts are friendly, joggers greet each other on their rounds, and friends jovially spend time together near

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<sup>7</sup> Property developers spent millions to get this message across: the amounts increased nearly five-fold from 1,260 million Baht in 1990 to 5,647 million Baht in 1994 (De Wandeler, 2002)

the swimming pool. This closely-knit community is safely guarded from the outside by private security guards and yet, within easy reach of all urban amenities.



**Fig. 1:** (left) Representations of location in real estate advertisements in Bangkok, 1994  
Source: De Wandeler, 2002

**Fig. 2:** (right) The brochure of Nantana Gardens proclaims  
“Thini mi khwamsuk nai thuk tarang niu – Here happiness reigns in every square inch”  
Source: De Wandeler, 2002

In contrast to this predictable array of connotations; marketing of inner-city condominiums communicated a different – and often more puzzling – message. Some, like the advert for Ban Chao Phraya Condominium, stress comfort and convenience: it does not depict anyone enjoying these comforts, as if living high above the crowds made people invisible.

Visual metaphors were taken one step further in a promotion campaign for “Sarin Place”, a building surrounded by major thoroughfares that was designed as an office tower but converted into a residential condominium while under construction. The campaign included newspaper ads that cleverly targeted yuppie consumers. It departed from expected patterns as it turned the building's unattractive location as an isolated tower into an asset. To see without being seen was here promoted as the ultimate of city living (“*maimi saitakhudai marobkuan pomloei*- no pair of watching eyes can bother me here”).



**Fig. 3:** Newspaper advertisement showing the comfort and privacy to be enjoyed at Sarin Place  
Source: De Wandeler, 2002

### **2.3. And waking up to reality...**

Property developers often failed to live up to the expectations created in marketing campaigns. Administrative red-tape to approve projects sometimes took longer than developers cared to wait; they disappeared once they had cashed in on the sales campaign (Bangkok Post, 4 April 1995: 17). Some other projects were approved while the developer was not the rightful landowner or had mortgaged the land (The Nation, 21 May 1995: B2). Other approved construction sites were situated underneath high-voltage lines or crossed by oil- or gas pipes (The Nation, 30 May 1995: B3). Faulty workmanship and the use of substandard materials caused major disturbances to neighbours, damaged surrounding building or even caused new buildings to collapse (Bangkok Post 22 April 195:2).

Only major cases of fraud or mismanagement were reported in the media, but thousands of households saw their dream housing delayed, cancelled or delivered without any of the promised recreational facilities. Until the present day, living conditions in suburban housing estates as well as in inner-city condominiums hardly ever comply with the projected imagery. Many suburban housing estates are walled, rather bare stretches of land where standard-type houses are packed rather too closely together. Residents go about their lives minding their own affairs (*tang khon tang yoo*) and, except for an occasional jogging round in the early morning or the late evening, do not trouble much to enjoy communal spaces. In the daytime – when children are off to school and their parents at work – the maids, gardeners and security guards have the place for their own.

Due to the estates' remote location, residents had to rely on private modes of transportation to commute to work or reach the suburban shopping mall and other amenities clustered near it. High-rise, high-income condominium buildings that mushroomed along well-connected *soi* in the inner-city or near the major thoroughfares, by now line up at a stone's throw away from one another. Entire *soi* are plunged in their shadows, clogged up with through-traffic during most of the day, commuters' coming and going at rush hours and plunged into darkness at night.

The real estate boom created new types of trendy, exclusive neighbourhoods that provided a home for some and displaced many others. More than half of the households in Bangkok could not afford to purchase the cheapest unit in what analysts assessed as an "efficiently performing housing market" (Dowall, 1989). In Bangkok and its suburbs alone, the property sector produced 755,000 housing units between 1992 and 1995. Yet, about 40 per cent of those units remained unsold at the time. Statistics showed that only thirty per cent of the households in Bangkok owned their housing unit; fifty per cent could not afford even the cheapest housing unit for sale at the time. Instead, they relied on rental or rent-free accommodation which they secured in niches within or in between formal housing delivery systems. Amongst them were over one million dwellers of slum- and squatter settlements and – at the height of the construction boom – near to one million construction workers housed in temporary camps (Ogunlana, 1993).

### **2.4. Manifestations of tactical urbanism**

The massive, multifaceted transformation of the city-scape spawned conflicting interests which involved rows, violent clashes as well public outcries. Ever since the late 1980s, the Ban Krua community, for example, had opposed construction of an elevated expressway overhead their neighbourhood. Over the following decade, successive city administrations had construction plans approved, modified, questioned, withdrawn and re-approved. In the meanwhile, the little Muslim community set up an efficient neighbourhood watch system and a local fire



brigade to prevent arson, as well as a strong leadership and tight relations with congenial groups, both Muslim and others in Thailand as well as abroad.

Similar incidents of displacement occurred throughout the city, wherever absentee landlords (both private and public) saw an opportunity to cash in on the sale or development of land which low-income households had rented or squatted upon for years. Many communities resisted and secured support from NGOs or government agencies to claim their “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2008).

These claims were not limited to the urban poor but also transpired in the political climate. By 1997, academics, social critics, NGO's, and broad sections of Bangkok's middle classes had pressured political reform towards decentralisation and promoted a more responsible, more ‘civil’ society. In Bangkok, civic groups like Bangkok Forum advocated to revitalise a sense of community in order to ‘humanize’ the city<sup>8</sup>.

## **2.5. Struggles towards reinventing the city**

Bangkok's unprecedented property boom came to an abrupt end in July 1997: the Thai government was forced to float the national currency in the face of an overextension of real estate loans and excessive circulation of so-called “hot money”. Whilst the financial crisis spread like a fire throughout Asia, the economic resilience of Bangkok's financial and property sectors were scattered. Many Bangkokians – disillusioned with corporate strategies – showed renewed respect for the countryside and its agricultural, manufacturing and trading potential (Pasuk & Baker 1989). Admonished by country's revered monarch, public discourse and practices adopted the adage of self-sufficiency. White-collar employees dispersed to secondary cities and plied their trade in less corporate ways. Migrant workers returned upcountry and fell back on the social resilience of traditional family support systems.

After two decades of retrofitting road infrastructure, tinkering with public bus lines, cancelling one mass transportation scheme and delaying others, government strategies finally managed to remedy urban mobility. Two elevated light railway lines became operational in 1999, and part of subway loop system was inaugurated in 2004. This mass transit system meant a major step forward in the environmental resilience in inner city. As the network is spreading to suburban areas, it has the added benefit to attract property development to its immediate vicinity.

Whilst the economy had regained some resilience by the turn of the century, repetitive political upheaval and the 2008 global recession thwarted a full recovery. Mounting political antagonism in recent years is often portrayed as a deficit of social resilience, while it may well mark an uprising of a tactical nature against established forms of patronage, cronyism and corporatism. Whilst the down-market trend in communication technologies helped raise citizens' awareness, it also strengthened media competence to critically evaluate the cultural and environmental impacts of projects and policies. Contestation of public schemes and resistance against random private development projects has indeed grown beyond piece-meal occurrences. Disinvested communities, for example, have realized important progress in bridging the ‘top-down-bottom-

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<sup>8</sup> This programme was set to address five topics which include: the conservation and restoration of neighbourhoods and communities, the aesthetics of urban life, the management of the urban environment, the management of the urban geography and city life, and the restructuring and reform of the city's bureaucratic system. Even though this particular program has since been abandoned, the association has continued its awareness-raising campaigns until the present.

up' divide by strengthening NGO networks, as well as cooperating with the State-led Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) and its nation-wide *Baan Mankong* project<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Present-day Colombo

As you walk in to the arrivals area of the international airport at Katunayake, a large brightly lit billboard declares 'Dream City, Happy Life!' It is advertising Sri Lanka's latest infrastructure and real estate project, the Colombo Port City. \*...+ you could be fooled into thinking it was something coming up in Dubai or Qatar \*...+ The ambition and optimism of this project reflects the wider sentiment about Sri Lanka's economic prospects after the end of the war in May 2009.

Wijesinha,A. 2014



**Fig. 4:** Overview perspective of Colombo's new Port City

Source: <http://cdr-international.nl/portfolio-item/sri-lanka-chec-port-city-colombo-value-engineering/>

Sri Lanka's development aspirations over the past five years have brought relief from protracted separatists violence, realized impressive economic growth and rising living standards for many citizens. GDP growth in the past years has averaged 7 per cent while the Asian Development Bank forecasted a 7.5 growth rate in 2014; lower inflation and greater price stability helped to reduce absolute poverty and income inequality across sectors and provinces of the country (Weerakoon 2014). These headlines match the confidence in continued future growth that marked urban discourse in Bangkok in the mid-1990s. Contemporary growth in Sri Lanka, however, has been spurred by massive government efforts to restore physical and social infrastructure and communication systems. With generous support from foreign donors and – largely Chinese – government loans, recent public works include two ports, an international airport, and a power plant. Three expressways and a multitude of new roads and bridges reach out and funnel funds into war-torn and impoverished regions. Notwithstanding efforts to extend the benefits of political stability and economic growth to the wider population, the Colombo metropolitan region remains the main commercial and financial hub and the international

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<sup>9</sup> Somsook (2011) explains that CODI focuses on the mobilization of financial resources for disinvested communities: it organizes community saving groups and mobilizes revolving low-interest loans for upgrading or resettlement. The *Baan Mankong* project streamlines this kind of projects country wide: it seeks to provide a common forum for disinvested communities within any given city, to strengthen their capacity to rank development issues in their city and to build a national (and even international) network. For full information on this initiative, cfr. <http://www.codi.or.th/housing/aboutBaanmankong.html>

gateway to Sri Lanka. Government strategies so far have sought to tap this competitive advantage in order to stimulate country-wide economic growth.

### **3.1. Making Colombo “the most attractive city in South Asia”**

Whilst Colombo has long been established as an international harbour and the country's transportation hub, civil unrest long stifled the city's comprehensive urban development. Hardly one year after the conflict was ended, devastating floods hit the city and strengthened the government's resolve to boost the city's resilience. With financial backing from the World Bank, it formulated the “Comprehensive Metropolitan Colombo Urban Development Plan” (MCUDP) aiming to reduce the physical and socioeconomic impacts of flooding and to improve urban infrastructure and services (World Bank 2013).

According to reports by the Urban Development Authority ([www.uda.lk](http://www.uda.lk)), fact finding surveys identified priority concerns as diverse as poor solid waste management, frequent flooding, massive hawkers' trading along road sides, poor walkability of pavements, inadequate and ill-maintained infrastructure, underserved settlements, and insufficient city spaces for the public. To address these issues, the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, in cooperation with the Urban Development Authority (UDA), the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) and other local authorities, devised urban development strategies that envisaged city beautification, urban regeneration and revitalization of landmark cultural heritage sites as well as mega development projects. The latter would be realized through PPP arrangements or land concessions to local or overseas investors.

First priority was given to issues that could be addressed in the short run and had a high visibility impact. These included: more efficient waste collection, the resettlement of street hawkers, reconstruction of damaged pavements for improved walkability and rehabilitation of roads and intersections for alleviating traffic congestion. In addition, several tracts of public land were cleared of their surrounding walls and developed into urban spaces for the citizenry to gather and enjoy the views and the greenery: the Galle Face Green, Independence Square, Vihara Maha Devi Park, and the Parliament Grounds have by now become some of the most popular spaces for locals and tourists alike.

In addition to initiatives to make the city green, clean and accessible to the public, authorities initiated various schemes to make Colombo “the most attractive city in South Asia”. This array of projects targeted various categories of investors (local and foreign enterprises, Sri Lankan expats, HNI's) and end-users (civil servants and armed forces, middle classes and the urban poor, as well as expatriates, returning Sri Lankan retirees, etc.). The common feature of these projects is that they generate return on investment and revenues to secure additional loans from international donor agencies. In this way, authorities could realize long range strategies that strengthen the city's resilience in terms of water- and waste management, provision of basic amenities, and handling capacities of supervising agencies and local authorities<sup>10</sup>.

One set of actions focussed on the renovation of colonial buildings and other large buildings in prime locations of the city. Interventions restored heritage buildings to their former glory and

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<sup>10</sup> Immediate measures in flood prevention, for example, were limited to the digging of new lakes in the upper catchments areas, clearing of obstructions and accumulated debris from the main canal system, installation of cleaning mechanisms and more efficient maintenance for micro drainage systems. In the long-term, however, measures will need to include the provision of micro tunnels and pumping stations, the improvement of the micro drainage system, and canal bank protection ([www.uda.lk](http://www.uda.lk)).

refurbished them into venues of leisure and luxury with retail spaces that catered for the needs of high-end consumers. Outstanding examples comprise the Old Dutch Hospital, the adjacent precinct and further expansion into the historical Colombo Fort area, the Race Course complex and the former Auditor General building. In addition, the former St. John's fish market and Gaffoor building are due to be renovated and refurbished into high-tech economic nodes in central Colombo (Yatawara 2014b).



**Fig. 5:** Arcade Independence Square on opening day, 13 July 2014  
Source: [www.dailynews.lk/](http://www.dailynews.lk/)

Arcade – Independence Square has been created to fulfil a unique requirement. That is to create “one space” where entertainment, shopping, leisure and dining can all be offered to please the requirements of the entire family. The portfolio of brands that are present at the Arcade become a crowd puller for they are the most coveted global brands available.

Newspaper advertisement, Sunday Observer, 13 July 2014: 22)

The regularisation of street vending is less cost-intensive and serves to ensure less affluent portions of the population with access to daily consumer goods. It resettles market vendors and street hawkers to regular market sites, including some that are developed as part of a beautification project. These venues are highly accessible to a wider range of people and particularly popular among citizens who spend leisure time in outdoors settings. Examples include the floating market along Beira Lake offering retail spaces for the sales of handicraft and food, and the Diyatha Uyana market with retail spaces for horticulture products as part of the Diyawanna Oya Lake Development programme.

A far more problematic and lengthy process of negotiations is required to realize the authorities' ambition to “eliminate shanties, slums and other dilapidated housing from the city of Colombo by resettlement \*...+ in new housing schemes of internationally recognized standards”<sup>11</sup>. City-wide surveys had revealed that close to 70,000 “underserved” settlements occupied some of the most valuable land in Colombo. Only a portion of the revenue generated from clearing this land and putting it up for sale, long-term lease or concessionary holding is needed to provide

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<sup>11</sup> The quote is taken from the UDA vision on urban regeneration through resettlement: "To eliminate shanties, slums and other dilapidated housing from the city of Colombo by resettlement of the families presently living under unhygienic and poor environmental conditions in such housing in new housing schemes of internationally recognized standards and in doing so to make the City of Colombo the most attractive city in South Asia" [http://www.uda.lk/investment\\_relocation.html](http://www.uda.lk/investment_relocation.html) viewed 28 September 2014.

displaced households with financial compensations, temporary rental provision and the allocation of a new housing unit in UDA's newly built low-income apartment buildings (e.g. in Wanathamulla and Demathagoda). However, unlike other mega development projects such as the relocation of the Defence Quarters or the restoration of Beira Lake, these interventions risk confronting UDA with contestation and resistance from disgruntled households, community leaders and political activists.

### 3.2. Colombo: the heartbeat of Sri Lanka?

Meanwhile, the private sector caught up with the evolution of the real estate market: driven by increasing land prices in Colombo and rapid urbanisation of the population, the demand of condominium residencies in central Colombo has been rising, while traditional villas and detached houses were being pushed to the peripheral areas. Colombo became a city brimming with construction sites for standard and luxury apartment buildings as well as five star hotels and shopping malls with glossy frontages for international clothes chains.



Fig. 6: Southward view from Galle Face Green, Colombo, July 2014  
Source: author

A survey conducted in mid-2013 found that on-going developments would add 3,000 apartment units and more than 3,000 three to five star hotel rooms in the coming four to five years. Most apartments fell into the standard category, while medium to luxury units were mainly in demand by Sri Lankan expatriates or by families of businessmen living in rural areas. While the former group intended to let the unit to another party, the latter made the purchase in view of convenient access to schools, higher education and employment in the vicinity of the project. (<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=business/colombo-modern-city-making/0>, 23 and 24 July 2013, viewed 28 September 2014).



Fig. 7: Billboards and magazines advertisements promote medium to luxury apartment units  
Source: author (left); HitAd Classifieds 13 July 2014 (right)

In spite of recent restrictions on the purchase of property by foreigners, and warnings that these market segments would soon be saturated, property development companies baffled the markets with projects for which they had commissioned world-famous designers. For its first project in Sri Lanka, the Indian property group South City Projects (Kolkata) Pvt. Ltd. (SCPKL), commissioned architect Moshe Safdie who designed a high-end, eco-friendly 65-storey condominium tower (<http://archives.dailynews.lk/2012/05/28/bus01.asp>). More recently, the well-established John Keells Holdings (JKH) which primarily concentrates on the development and sale of residential apartments announced details of its Waterfront project. The scheme will include a 6 star hotel, apartment blocks, large retail centre, office buildings and car parks. The entire project including design and interior design, engineering, cost-control, project management and site supervision, will be provided by a multi-disciplinary team led by world renowned architect Cecil Balmond.

With the exception of the huge displays at the construction sites of mega developments or five star hotels, the Colombo cityscape remains relatively spared of billboards similar to those that are still disfiguring Bangkok until this day. It is not clear whether that is due to the absence of major cross-city expressways or regulations on city beautification. Moreover, promotion campaigns nowadays have found direct entries into consumers' homes through television commercials, promotion on internet and direct mailing through social media. The advertisements, however, contain almost an identical message to what was noted in Bangkok. They depict a happy family life with a life-style, in which a healthy diet, exercising and socialising are essential – and often complementary - ingredients. It is not by chance that property developers seek to set up projects near public parks, renovated lakes and newly paved jogging and cycling tracks. Even in the vicinity of these facilities, they try to integrate elements of this new life-style in so-called mixed-use developments. Many of the materials promoting these new dwelling environments suggest a sense of fulfilment and what their realization implies for national pride.



Fig. 8: Magazines advertisements for suburban villas and detached houses depict the fulfilment of a life-long dream and a family life set in greenery and luxury/  
Source: HitAd Classifieds 06 July 2014 (left); Sunday Observer ADZ, 13 July 2014 (right)

### 3.3. Limitations to strategists' deployment

Amongst the mixed use developments that are already in use, Havelock city is known as an estate that was quickly sold out and timely completed. However, the same cannot be said of all developments: a summary review of the property pages in newspapers and magazines reveals that quite some developers neglect the timely provision of collaterals for bank loans, adjourn or suspend project implementation, or fail to deliver the services that were included in the original blue-prints and sales brochures<sup>12</sup>.

In view of the sudden growth and the pace and complexity of the real estate developments, local authorities may lack qualified experts to check projects' conformity to building codes in detail (Yatawara 2014a). Likewise, the judicial system handling complaints from disgruntled home-buyers may face difficulties in mobilizing all stakeholders for on-site inspection and thus cause further delays and considerable backlogs (Balendra 2014).

Pressure to raise the financial resources and to strengthen the human resources capacity of these regulatory and judiciary bodies is likely to increase as commodification of urban property proceeds, disputes over property development multiply and the range of plaintiffs grows larger. Landowners may be opposing land reclamation, dissatisfied with the granted compensation or fighting encroachment of their land by rural migrants in search of work. Likewise, migrant workers or slum dwellers may oppose eviction, or beneficiaries of low-income resettlement housing may refuse to move. Home-buyers lured to invest their savings in projects that are cancelled, postponed or poorly executed, may want to fight back especially if they include disappointed Sri Lankan expats returning home. Last but not least, stakeholders in the real-estate sector itself may start infighting over deliveries delayed, payments eluded or workmanship poorly executed.

On the bright side, the real estate sector is likely to fine-tune its discipline to deliver quality products as expats' remittances increase, customers' purchasing power grows and competition with foreign companies intensifies. Provided that transparent and accountable control mechanisms are in place, internal competition will single out those companies that pursue high standards of quality control, top-end customer care and professional after-sales and maintenance services.

In addition, urbanites are likely to grow accustomed to the new trends of urban living and wary of ever more "must-see" developments and "must-do" leisure venues. Whilst they may enjoy jogging along wider pavements with flower-troughs and unbroken curbs, they might also yearn for the diversion and liveliness of road-side stalls or succession of hawkers throughout the day. The vendors' presence may help passers-by to quench their thirst or appease a sudden craving. Such digressions from the monotony of daily routines helps keep both mind and human relations in a healthy state. They mesh with the aspiration for a healthy urban lifestyle, rather than contradicting it. Colombo, like other world-cities, may do well by integrating citizens' concerns for a green and clean environment as well as their fondness of an animated street-life.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, cfr Balendra, 2014 in bibliography; also: <http://www.lbt.lk/news/business/6156-krish-controversy-re-surfaces-dr-harshas-concerns>

#### 4. Final Reflections

The Sri Lankan government has laid down a clear vision for the future (*Mahinda Chinthana*): “to transform Sri Lanka to be the Pearl of the Asian Silk Route once again”. This aspiration calls to mind Thailand’s ambitions to spearhead economic development in Southeast Asia by “turning battlefields into a marketplace” under the Chatichai Choonhavan administration (1988-1991) or resurrecting the *suvarnabhumi* or “golden peninsula” concept under Thaksin Shinawatra’s premiership (2001-2006). While Choonhavan’s government was cut short by a military coup, Thailand subsequently saw a succession of short-lived governments and an unprecedented economic crisis. After an economic revival under premier Thaksin and another military coup, Thailand has been plunged in repeated political upheaval that may express the country’s social resilience, but has left the Thai population deeply divided. By contrast, Sri Lanka thrives on a desire to consolidate national unity ever since the end of civil war in 2009.

A stable political situation has helped the Sri Lankan government to gain international recognition, forge new alliances, and secure foreign donor commitments. Foreign Direct Investment has been soaring; as it was mainly directed at real estate and tourism development the manufacturing sector is somewhat lagging behind (Wijesinha, 2014). Government and corporate strategies thus have created employment opportunities for a wide range of professionals and absorbed a huge mass of skilled and unskilled labourers. This certainly came as a blessing for thousands of households left stranded after years of hostilities and helped to consolidate social resilience. Since Colombo is in the thick of this investment hype, however, it would be particularly hard hit if the property market would collapse as it did in Thailand in 1997 and in the U.S.A. in 2008. In such a scenario, the tourism- and the IT and software development industries could only absorb a portion of the unemployed. For many others, tactical diversions towards secondary cities or the countryside could only be successful to the extent that Colombo’s economic benefits have trickled down and raised economic resilience elsewhere in the country as well.

In terms of environmental resilience, present-day Sri Lanka benefits from the deepened ecological awareness accrued over the past 20 years. Government strategies have clearly prioritized water- and waste management as well as a “green and clean” urban agenda. However, the private sector drive for short-term gains could well undermine government-initiated environmental achievements. Whilst the urbanization pattern in metropolitan Colombo may be more evenly spread than it used to be in Bangkok, current development trends are geared towards densification of the most sought-after inner-city neighbourhoods. Inhabitants’ tactical urbanism – their life-style and aspirations – including a higher car-dependency – could be counter-productive: the concentration of emerging urban middle classes could lead to traffic congestion and higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In order to pre-empt this decline and prevent a highly polluting stalemate as experienced in Bangkok, city authorities will need to muster the city’s potential as transportation hub and develop a multi-modal mass transit system that covers the entire metropolitan area.

To an outside observer, the sense of national pride runs as the most striking feature throughout all aspects of Colombo’s contemporary urban discourse. Such a unified and clearly stated vision for creating liveable cities provides a formidable asset from a strategic point of view. In terms of tactical urbanism, however, key questions remain: to what extent leaders and citizenry share that vision; to what extent institutions are capacitated and empowered to implement that vision; and above all: to what extent the crafting and implementing of that vision is done



inclusively i.e. giving the poor and marginalised an opportunity to realize ownership and participation (Asia Society/ULI 2014:10)?

The tribulations that have dominated Thai social and political life over the past twenty years indicate that the country's economic progress has achieved little more social resilience than was already in existence before. Aside from people's pervasive reverence for their monarch, even crises like the 2011 floods give rise to expressions of solidarity as well as demonstrations of envy and dissatisfaction. And, yet, a positively oriented interpretation may view the current divisiveness as tactical urbanism trying to come to terms with long-established malpractices.

As post-war exuberance in Sri Lanka subsides and the number of stakeholders multiplies, social partners are likely to critically examine the state-led vision on the future and the way it is being implemented. Among the elements at stake in the emergence of tactical urbanisms in Colombo, one may presume that the issues of prosperity, returning diaspora, education and institutional capacity will be of critical importance. Rising remittances and income levels heighten living standards as well as aspirations and expectations: emerging middle classes are likely to express their views in the same way their counterparts in Bangkok did 20 years earlier. Returning Sri Lankan expats bring outside perceptions and perspectives: they may become vocal in any citizens' initiative. Education – an obvious consideration in any crafting of the future – will figure as a prime concern for a generation that overcame the fear, suspicion and insularity of protracted civil unrest.

Based on these presumptions, one may expect that issues like transparency, accountability and governance will soon be at the centre of civic concern in Sri Lanka. Further research will need to establish the specific, local conditions required to come to a level playfield where strategies and tactics – top-down and bottom-up approaches – meet one another. It will need to establish how Institutional capacities can overcome post-conflict trauma and acquire the skills and confidence to realize the formidable challenges ahead. But research should not only focus on public institutions: community organizations and NGOs, business associations and media also need to be enabled and empowered. The level of synergy between all these players will shape the social resilience, the dynamism and the tactical motivation required for crafting sustainable prosperity.

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