

Creating Public spaces for All: Learning from Public spaces in Colombo

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Abstract

In the wake of heavy investment on public space in and around Colombo it is the responsibility of designers to ensure that public funds are utilized for the creation of context-appropriate public spaces which satisfy the expectations of all its users.

A study was carried out to understand the difference in use and enjoyment of public space by the different socio- economic groups that constitute society today to help decipher the values they associate with it.

The cases chosen for the study were Galle Face, Independence Square (IPS) and Diyatha Uyana.

The analysis of qualities provided at each place in conjunction with the composition of its users and their opinions, helped identify the attributes of public space that appealed to different socio-economic groups.

The study proceeded to identify commonalities and differences in preference amongst these urban social groups, to understand if public space may be neutral; so it suits all, irrespective of our differences.

Keywords: urban, public space, spatial quality, neutrality, socio-economic group, inclusivity.

Introduction

The power of public spaces is not to be undermined. They are indispensable tools for attaining social cohesion, economic return, and cultural inclusivity. In fast-paced urban environments, teeming with life and vehicular traffic, public spaces present an escape from our impelling daily routines in addition to being the reservoirs of nature we fiercely seek for healthier lives.

Urban populations are formed of numerous inextricably linked social groups; each possessing a unique perspective of the city they live in; including its public realm. The values therefore which are attached to a public space are rarely static. They can neither be derived from public record or theoretical writing, but 'may be understood by paying attention to the often seemingly trivial contests over the use and enjoyment of it', however big or small the public space may be. (Goheen, 1998, p.15)

In Colombo, peaceful times have resulted in the replacement of the expectation of safety from public space by that of quality; quality which is evident in the recent developments in public space in Colombo. At this pivotal juncture in time, it is the duty of designers to fulfil these expectations across all urban social groups. For the purpose of research however, the social

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groups chosen for study are those formed by differences in socio- economic status. The following queries formed the basis for research,

“Do different socio-economic groups perceive public space in the same way? Do they appreciate the same qualities in a public space, or do they see differently?”

The objective of the research stemmed from the conviction that all city-dwellers, irrespective of socio-economic status must be treated with respect by providing for their needs in a public space. A public space must not be exclusive, as they are places for all, irrespective of differences in gender, age, ethnicity or socio-economic standing.

Research was begun by defining the term ‘urban public space’. Literature on the subject was studied to understand the need for public space in a city and its numerous benefits. Two ideals of good public space were identified. The first attributed success of a public space to its democratic demeanour; the second was heavily biased toward good design detail.

A model was thus derived illustrating these findings (Refer Fig. 1). This model, a union diagram defined ‘good public space’ as one that is accessible, well-designed in terms of comfort and activity and has a representation of diverse social groups amongst its users.

The three public spaces identified as case studies were subsequently analysed against the benchmark set by this model. Key Attributes 01 and 02 were critically evaluated by map reading, physical visitations, observation and photographic studies of the location. Key Attribute 03 was assessed by interviews conducted of users at each location. This helped comment on the inclusivity of the public space under study, an attribute considered essential for its definition as a good public space.

These interviews also extracted the likes and dislikes of the users of each space with reference to Key Attribute 01 and 02.

The scope and limitations of the research were as follows,

- The context identified for the study was predominantly urban. Public activities in an urban context are limited as they reflect the busy lifestyle led by city-dwellers. A wider area of study that encompasses sub-urban and rural contexts would yield different results as regional differences in lifestyle would demand different public activity. This regional variation in public activity was not considered here.
- The study focuses on the qualities of local public space in relation to their appeal to diverse socio-economic groups. The use and qualities of public space preferred by a city dweller however are also influenced by physiological factors (gender, age and well-being), psychological factors such as previous experience and other factors such as culture. These were not investigated due to time constraints.
- The judgment of socio-economic status is an intensive exercise based on numerous variables. For the purpose of the study however, the differentiation in socio-economic status is based on three variables, i.e. educational attainment, occupational prestige and income.
- Grouping of individuals by socio-economic status is a matter of great sensitivity in society today. This study is not meant to be misinterpreted as an attempt to ‘label’ people. It is instead a genuine attempt to establish solidarity despite the differences that

are rooted within our social system; possibly an outcome of the caste system that prevailed in ancient Sri Lankan society.

Creating good Public space for All

Theoretically, the attributes of successful public space maybe grouped into two distinct perspectives. The first refers to good public spaces as 'Spaces of neutrality' as defined by Richard Sennet. The second advocates good design detail as the core of successful public space; typical of Jan Gehl and William Whyte.

This concept of public space referred to by Sennet draws from none other than the Athenian 'agora'. Many activities occurred simultaneously within the agora. It was a place in the city for the tolerance of difference.

Richard Sennet argues that architects should focus, when designing public spaces, on how to build community amongst the people who differ, where citizens would care beyond the 'boundaries of their own individualized sphere'. (Pasca, 2012)

Residents of a metropolitan area depend on one another for a range of goods and services that make daily life possible. These are intricate networks of mutual dependencies across time and space, and sometimes across distinctions of race, culture, and socio-economic class. In such settings, citizens may understand their interests as being intertwined in ways that demand co-operative activities, but do not challenge their distinctive values, traditions, and aspirations in any fundamental way. Appropriately structured city spaces encourage fruitful public encounters across various dimensions of difference. (King, 2004, p.99)

William H. Whyte states that, 'it is hard to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished'. (Francis, 2003, p.xii)

In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world Project for Public spaces (PPS), an organization founded by William H. Whyte, dedicated to the study of public spaces globally, has found that successful ones have four key qualities. (PPS, 2012)

They are,

1- Access and linkages.

A successful public space is easy to get to and get through. It is visible both from a distance and up close. The edges of a space are important. Accessible spaces have a high parking turn over and are convenient to public transit.

2- Comfort and image.

Comfort and image are key to a space's success. Comfort includes perceptions about safety, cleanliness and the availability of places to sit.

3- Uses and activities.

Activities are the basic building blocks of a place. Having something to do gives people a reason to come to a place and return.

4- Sociability.

Often considered the most difficult qualitative aspect to achieve, sociability is the characteristic of a space which makes it welcoming to the community it serves, thereby establishing a strong sense of attachment to it.

Jan Gehl defines the three key attributes of successful public place as Protection, Comfort and Enjoyment. (Gehl, 2010)

The views of Richard Sennet, William H. Whyte and Jan Gehl combined maybe represented in the union diagram illustrated below,

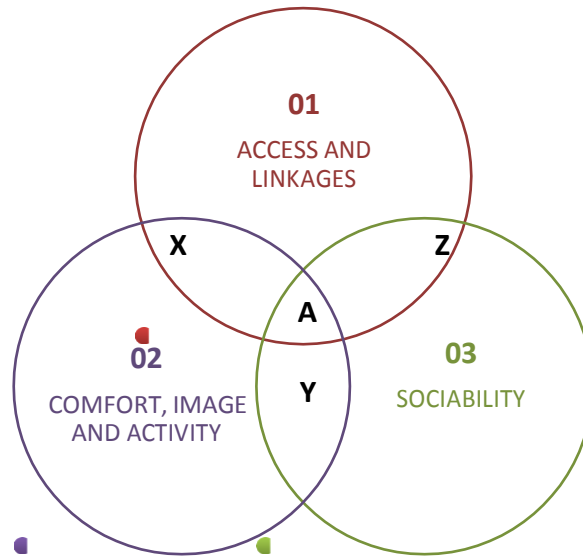


Fig. 1: The Key Attributes of successful public space. (Author, 2013)

Where,

- A:** Good Public space or 'Neutral public space.
- X:** A space where accessibility and quality is exclusive to a social group; cannot be considered truly 'public' by definition.
- Y:** A space that is not accessible despite providing comfort to all social groups fails as a public space.
- Z:** An accessible space, devoid of quality fails as a public space.

An ideal public space would have convenient accessibility and exemplary quality of space designed to appeal to the diverse social groups that make up today's society, such that its ultimate users are a rich, healthy composition of society.

A public space that has a reasonable representation from each attribute therefore may be classified as a 'good public space'.

Each of the Key Attributes was further broken down into a set of criteria that may be assessed when studying a public space. This formed the basis for the analysis of the case studies; Galle Face, IPS and Diyatha Uyana.

Table 1: Data Collection Method (Author, 2013)

| Key Attribute | Qualities associated with Attribute | Evaluation Criteria | Data collection method |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| 01. Access and Linkages | Accessibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A legible environment. ▪ An environment accessible to all. | Map reading, physical visitations, observation and photographic studies. |
| | Connectivity and Permeability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presence of links to attractions beyond space. ▪ Presence of visual links-views to and into the space from near and afar. | |
| 02. Comfort, Image & Activity | Perception of safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protection from vehicular traffic, crime and violence. ▪ Protection from unpleasant sensory experiences. | Physical visitations, observation and photographic studies. |
| | Pleasant to use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Possibilities for walking, sitting and standing. ▪ Possibilities for hearing, seeing and talking. | |
| | Activities to suit users' needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Possibilities for play, recreation and interaction. ▪ Presence of activity by day and night. Provision/ presence of temporary and/ or seasonal activity. | |
| 03. Sociability | Versatility of space | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presence of diverse socio-economic groups and their preference in quality. | Observation and interviews. |

The examination of the socio-economic profile of users at each of the three cases identified was carried out via the conduct of interviews.

A sample size of 30 was maintained at each location, with the random sampling technique being adapted for choice of interviewees. Interviews were conducted on three consecutive weekends, between 04:00-06:00 pm.

The interview schedule included questions aimed at extracting educational attainment, occupational prestige and monthly income of users to enable classification by Socio-economic status (SES).

Categories for occupation included Un-skilled labour, Skilled labour and Professional employment based on the categories of employment indicated in the Economic and Social Statistics Report prepared by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka for the year 2012.

SES was therefore defined as follows,

- **High SES:**

Education: Tertiary education.

Occupational attainment: Professional.

Monthly income: Greater than LKR 50,000.

- **Middle SES:**

Education: Secondary education.

Occupational attainment: Skilled workers.

Monthly income: LKR 15-50,000.

- **Low SES:**

Education: Primary- Secondary education.

Occupational attainment: Un-skilled workers, or Unemployed.

Monthly income: Below LKR 15,000

SES in the local context is more strongly associated with educational attainment and occupational prestige, and most often, monthly income did not reflect either.

The interview proceeded to ask users “What do you like about ?” and “How often do you come here” with reference to the public space in question to help identify the qualities of space that appealed to this social group. Travel distance and mode of transport was inquired to establish the influence of location and ease of access to the public space, if any.

Case 01: Galle Face

The Galle Face stretches for half a kilometre along the Western coast of Colombo’s financial district. This five hectare ribbon of land between the Galle Road and the Indian Ocean is the largest open space in Colombo. It is a popular recreational destination amongst both locals and tourist for flying kites, indulging in street food or simply immersing in its rich ambience.



Fig. 2: A panoramic view of the Galle Face Green (iloveyoucolombo, 2013)

During the war large sections of Galle Face were cordoned off and security was tightened restricting access and discouraging visitors. One of Colombo’s most popular public spaces became desolate. Today, in peaceful times, Galle Face Green is entirely open to the public once again, and had regained its former glory.

Analysis of Galle Face against the definition of ‘good public space’ (as seen in Fig. 1) revealed that it satisfactorily fulfils Key Attribute 01 & 02 but falls short at Key Attribute 03 as its users do not constitute a fair representation of all SES but are biased towards the Low and Middle SES.

The word cloud below illustrates the most commonly used words by visitors when asked “**What do you like about it?**” with reference to the location under study. This inquiry helped identify the qualities of space that appealed to this social group. Responses received make constant reference to the qualities of space identified in Table 1: Data Collection Method (Author, 2013).

The most frequently used words in responses received are connoted by a larger font. Responses received in Sinhalese and Tamil were translated to their English equivalents to allow their representation in the word cloud.



Fig. 3: Word cloud: Qualities which made respondents like Galle Face (Author, 2013)

The five most predominant qualities of space that surfaced in responses received are further listed and presented graphically below.

- 1- Its location; ease of access to and from it.
- 2- The presence of the vast ocean; its sight, sound and the breeze generated by its presence.
- 3- The vast open space; the ability to gather in medium-large groups for recreation. Privacy was never cited as a concern.
- 4- The activity available; kite-flying, pony-rides and vendors selling street food. An energy considered unmatched at any other location.
- 5- The ambience by night.

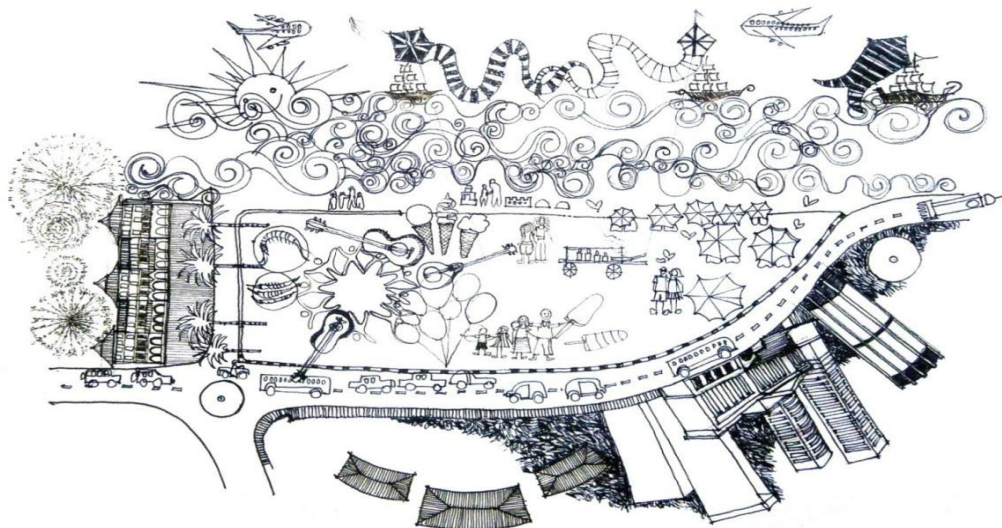


Fig. 4: Sketch illustrating the findings at Galle Face (Perera, 2013)

Case 02: Independence Square (IPS)

The IPS is home to the Independence Memorial, the monument of freedom. Located in Colombo 07, an urban context strongly associated with institutional, cultural and recreational activity, it has long been established as a popular public space owing to its ability to offer tranquillity in the heart of the city.



Fig. 5: Strong axes lead to the Independence memorial enhancing its grandeur (Daily News, 2009)

Fig. 6: The Independence Memorial (Explore Sri Lanka, 2011)

Analysis of IPS against the definition of ‘good public space’ (as seen in Fig. 1) revealed that it satisfactorily fulfils Key Attribute 01 & 02 but falls short at Key Attribute 03 as its users do not constitute a fair representation of all SES but are biased towards the High SES.

The word cloud below illustrates the most commonly used words by visitors when asked, “**What do you like about it?**” with reference to the location under study. This inquiry helped identify the qualities of space that appealed to this social group. Responses received make constant reference to the qualities of space identified in Table 1: Data Collection Method (Author, 2013)

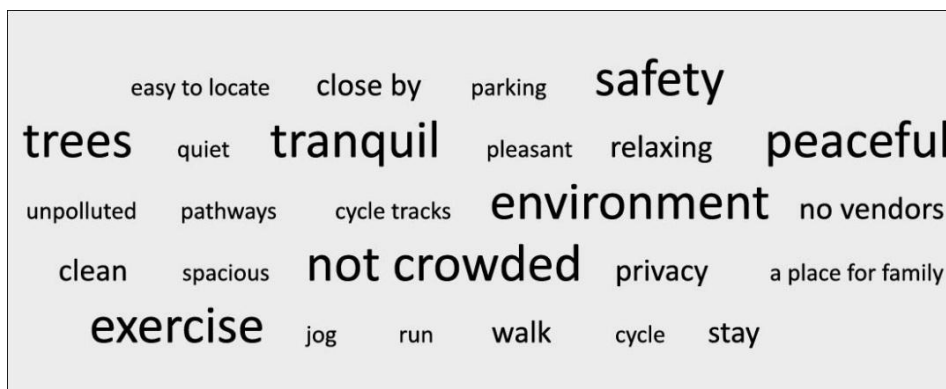


Fig. 7: Word cloud: Qualities which made respondents like IPS (Author, 2013)

The five most predominant qualities of space that surfaced in responses received are further listed and presented graphically below.

- 1- Its location; ease of access to and from it.
- 2- The predominant natural environment, which offers tranquillity in the heart of the city.
- 3- The privacy offered; a combination of narrow pedestrian pathways and wide open spaces allows for varying degrees of privacy.

- 4- The activity encouraged; primarily the parallel walking and cycling tracks for parents to exercise while their children cycle alongside them.
- 5- The level of maintenance; its cleanliness.

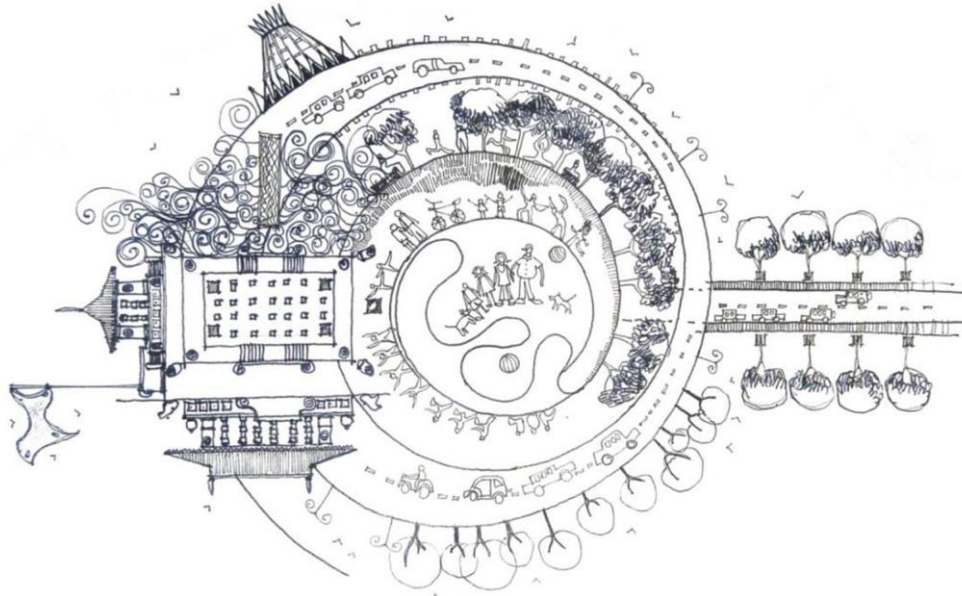


Fig. 8: Sketch illustrating the findings at IPS (Perera, 2013)

Case 03: Diyatha Uyana

Diyatha Uyana, an urban park bordering the Diyawanna Oya in Battaramulla was opened in September 2012. In addition to being a dedicated horticulture trade zone, it comprises of walking tracks and seating for the public overlooking the serene waters of the lake. A fountain overlooking the main access road (Sri Jayawardenapura Mawatha), bathed in constantly changing colours of light is a popular feature.

Since its construction by the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development in conjunction with the Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Corporation, Diyatha Uyana has gained immense popularity amongst the public.



Fig. 9: Diyatha Uyana by day (Defence, 2012)

Analysis of Diyatha Uyana against the definition of 'good public space' (as seen in Fig. 1) revealed that it satisfactorily fulfils Key Attribute 01, 02 & 03. As the users of Diyatha Uyana do not constitute a biased segment of society. It may be concluded therefore, that by the definition of a good public space, it is the better of the three discussed.

The word cloud below illustrates the most commonly used words by visitors when asked **“What do you like about it?”** with reference to the location under study. This inquiry helped identify the qualities of space that appealed to this diverse social group. Responses received make constant reference to the qualities of space identified in Table 1: Data Collection Method (Author, 2013)

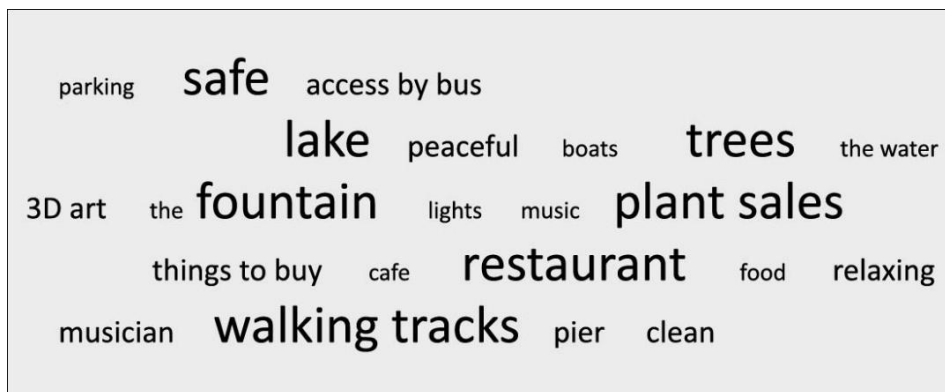


Fig. 10: Word cloud: Qualities which made respondents like Diyatha Uyana (Author, 2013)

Analysis of responses revealed a contrast in the qualities of space that appealed to this sample. The five most predominant qualities of space that surfaced in responses received are listed below. The contrasting views presented within a single quality are included to illustrate the diversity in views.

- 1- Its location; ease of access to and from it.
- 2- The predominant natural environment, which offers tranquillity in the heart of the city.
- 3- The privacy offered.
 - a. Wide open spaces.
 - b. Narrow pedestrian pathways.
- 4- The activity encouraged.
 - a. Exercise along walking and jogging tracks.
 - b. Plant sales and a musical fountain.
 - c. The restaurant with a combination of indoor and outdoor seating.
- 5- The level of maintenance; its cleanliness.

This case study proved that the qualities of space provided at Diyatha Uyana appeal to a wider cross section of society, whilst Galle Face and Independence Square provided qualities preferred by more specific socio-economic groups.

These qualities are illustrated in the sketch below,

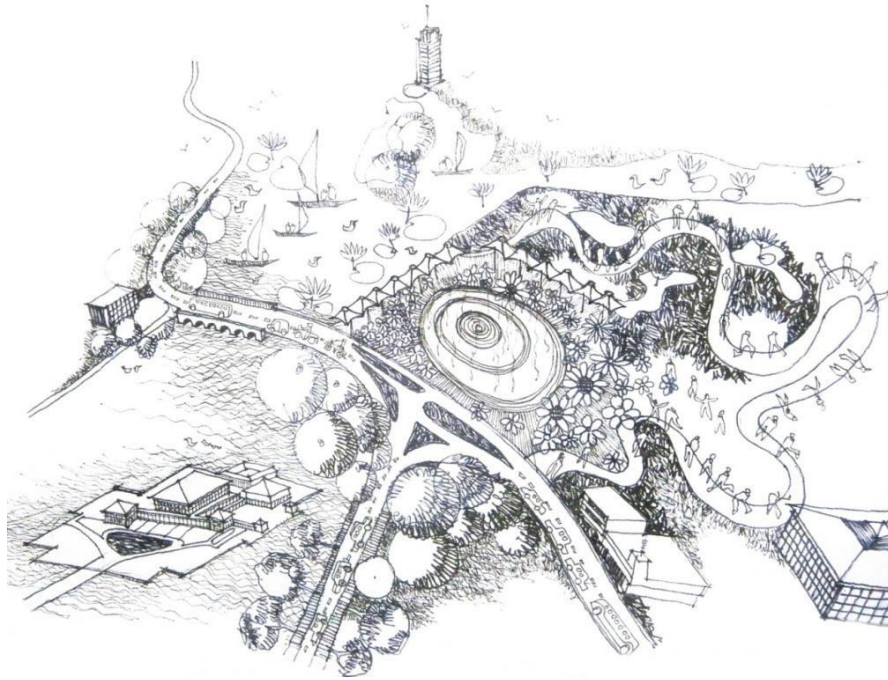


Fig. 11: Sketch illustrating the findings at Diyatha Uyana (Perera, 2013)

Conclusion

As per the definition of successful public space illustrated by 'Fig. 1: The Key Attributes of successful public space (Author, 2013)' it may be concluded that Diyatha Uyana is the most successful public space of the three cases discussed. Diyatha Uyana is accessible, well-linked, comfortable and brimming with activity enjoyed by a cross-section of socio-economic groups. This characteristic allows it to also be defined as the most neutral of the cases discussed.

The democratic perspective of a 'public space for all' is neither manifest in Galle Face or Independence Square. Does this make them any less successful as public spaces? A visit to either of these public spaces would dismiss this uncertainty, as both locations are relished by people; and have been for years.

The concept of a neutral space is a Western ideal. In such contexts the design of public space caters to a public amongst which there is minimal financial disparity in terms of employment. Socio-economic policies (such as those governing minimum wage) in developed nations, ensure to a great extent a level standard of living.

In Colombo however, the metropolis of a developing nation, significant socio-economic disparity exists. This is apparent in the cases studied. These socio-economic differences are further enhanced by the stratification of society by social class: a result of the association of certain social groups with colonial powers that imbued superiority and the caste system which prevailed in ancient Sri Lankan society. The lack of neutrality at Galle Face and IPS can be attributed to this trait as both public spaces offer comfort to a distinct social group.

Each socio-economic group prevalent in society today appreciates and anticipates uniquely different qualities from it. In today's context, the success of the most recent case, Diyatha Uyana stems from its ability to simultaneously foster the presence of different socio-economic groups

whilst offering each their expected sphere of comfort. This may be defined as the essence of successful local public space in today's context.

The research conducted helped identify qualities of a public space that appeal to all:

- Ease of access to the location.
- Its association with nature. The ability to connect with the natural environment; see it and hear it.
- Protection from the sun and rain, typical of the local climate, and
- Protection from traffic, crime and violence. The urgency for protection from mass terrorist attack has given way to the need for protection at a personal level from threat of rape, sexual harassment, kidnapping and murder, which have risen in the recent past. Safety is pivotal to the success of any public space.

Differences lie however, in the preference for qualities such as,

- Possibilities for walking, sitting and standing.
 - ❖ Those belonging to Low-Middle SES prefer wider paths for walking in groups, clustered seating for heightened interaction and standing in congregation,
 - ❖ Whilst those belonging to Middle-High SES prefer narrow pedestrian tracks which allow for walking as a means of exercise- most often a solitary act. Privacy is a consistent request as association in large groups is not a common trait amongst them.
- Possibilities for play, recreation and interaction.
 - ❖ The possibility for walking, jogging and cycling most often surfaces as preferred activity amongst those belonging to Middle-High SES, versus the possibility for mere relaxation or activities such as kite-flying, playing cricket and football.
- Activity provided.
 - ❖ Those belonging to Low-Middle SES prefer the presence of a lively commercial component such as vendors dishing out street food, selling toys, kites and balloons for children,
 - ❖ Whilst more subdued activity, such as the presence of cafes and coffee-houses are preferred by the Middle-High SES.

This variation may further be expressed in terms of the differences in,

- Context and location.
- Symbolism of space.
- Permeability of space.
- Scale of space.
- Time of usage.
- Lifestyle of user.
- Facilities available.
- Scales of affordability.
- Preferred group sizes for interaction, and
- The influence of western ideals on the attitudes of city-dwellers.

These factors set foundation for further investigation on the subject.

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