

Refashioning the City: History, Tradition, Community, and Culture

Kumudu Kusum Kumara

Department of Sociology, University of Colombo

Designing a dream city is easy; rebuilding a living one takes imagination

Jane Jacobs

At the heart of Sri Lanka's post-war discourse on urban development – with the city of Colombo as its centrepiece – is a dispute over the character of the good city, which has moral implications. With city beautification, the figure of the Developer in the tradition of Le Corbusier and Robert Moses, with the desire to refashion the narrative of the city to suit the Contemporary, took centre stage. The affective realm of the occupants was tapped into, treating them as consumers of space at best. Gentrification came into play in the design of spaces of recreation and leisure, and order was imposed on the urban scene with revanchist undertones betraying the Developer's lack of imagination which was highlighted in the forcible relocation of low-income households. The ensuing public critique based on freedom and social justice underscored a lack of due process, equity, and inclusivity. This resonates with Ramachandra Guha's call for democratic planning, exemplified by Patrick Geddes who was someone "although respectful of tradition... was not a backward looking reactionary ... neither a nostalgic romantic nor a fervent modernizer." If Guha demands respect for history and continuity, while being rooted in the present, Jane Jacobs argues that 'the good city is the city which understands the daily life of its occupants and whose growth is responsive to it'. Jacobs' thinking points to the notion of a communal life with its diversity, which the city expresses. When Ashley de Vos critiques gentrification, that it leaves "the communities, the preservers and the repositories of the cultural matrix disoriented and helpless," a connection is evident here between the form of the city, the communal life it expresses, and culture. This has moral implications for our understanding of the good city which this paper, in an analysis based on literature, examines in considering the distinctive character of the city of Colombo as a community.

Keywords: Urban design, Community, History, Tradition, Culture