

PRODUCTION OF NEOLIBERAL SPACE THROUGH REBUILDING THE CITY: A CRITIQUE OF HERITAGE-LED CITY BEAUTIFICATION IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

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Introduction

As an economic development tool, the embracement of the role of cultural heritage of cities has become more important catalyst than ever under neoliberalism. Rather than simply focusing on conservation of cultural heritages of cities, it has become a response to demands to regenerate the economic base of cities that have lost their ability to attract local and foreign investments (Brenner & Theodor, 2002; Gunay, 2008; Hariss, 2006). As in many other developing countries, planned development of the capital city as a centre of economic growth and as a window to the rest of the country has been a deliberate development policy in Sri Lanka from 2009 to 2014. Along with infrastructure development, a conscious effort at city beautification has been a key element in this development policy. City beautification project (CBP) has involved conservation of colonial style buildings, development of shopping malls, establishment of tourist hotels, establishment of urban parks with walking and jogging tracks, slum clearance and resettlement of former slum dwellers in newly established high rise apartment buildings. In Sri Lanka this urban development was perceived as part of a wider programme of post-war reconstruction whereby economic growth was to be accompanied by social and political reform, supposedly generative of a new social order. Against this background, drawing from post-development perspective this paper explores how the discourse on heritage-led city beautification and related urban development is constructed in the post-war social context. To investigate this larger research problem, the study has two objectives: to explore the discursive construction on heritage-led city beautification in Colombo and to understand the real motive factors related to the said discourse.

Methodology

This analysis used documentary reviewing and visual analysis methods in data collecting and analyzing process. The researchers analyzed data

gathered through visual and recorded texts namely, newspapers, advertisements, video graphs, photos, recorded speeches and internet messages on city beautification programme. The researchers employed content analysis in textual analysis researches to describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in recorded or visual texts. Basically, in this background, content analysis method was used in this study to identify the key message and special characteristics associated with the text. Specially, through this method the researchers tried to identify opinions and views of development policy makers towards conservation of heritage in Colombo.

Results and Discussion

The CBP has seriously considered renovating historical valuable places and buildings. Developers emphasized that one of aims of the CBP is to preserve historical and cultural identity of Colombo as a colonial city while promoting these spaces as commercial and public spaces. Project leadership strongly stated that it is their responsibility to protect these heritages for the future while work on development at present. "Therefore, it is vital that this colonial heritage in the form of architecture is preserved for the future," (the Chairman of UDA, adopted from Jayathilaka 2012). One of the main claims of project actors is these heritage buildings and places had been abounded since 1970s due to failures of city administration and the LTTE threat in the past that inherited a dilapidated city. Therefore it is very difficult task to renovate these architectures without damaging to the original value of architecture. But we took on the challenge of rehabilitating them while making sure not to damage their original architecture and design. When we started working on the Dutch Hospital, some even laughed at us disbelieving our ability to transform the building to what it is today (the architect, Fort Area Development Project, UDA, 2013).

There is no doubt that the CBP has succeeded to introduce a fresh look for the old buildings and places in Colombo. Though the state spooked out that the project targets to preserve cultural heritage, the ground reality is cultural heritages have been used for market oriented activities. Mainly concerning tourists' attractions, these renovated places have been converted as commercial centers appearing with shopping and dining precincts, entertainment; restaurants etc. (see the pictures of Old Dutch hospital after renovation). The project actors strongly believe that these

places definitely will create new job opportunities to urban community while protecting its historical value. In this sense, project actors legitimize their reordering actions by stressing that the project will not harm the heritage. As they communicate, it is a project of protecting the nation's heritage for future generations. Moreover, the project will bring benefits for all. Nevertheless, when studying the project actors' view, it is clear that the notion of protecting cultural heritage has become a discursive field where adopted in the journey for world-class city. The following statement made by the Chairman, UDA, at the opening ceremony of renovated Dutch Hospital strongly remarks the actual purpose of renovation cultural heritages under the CBP.

Not so long ago Colombo used to be a dim city, going to sleep by about ten in the night. Go to Geneva or to Stockholm or go to Singapore, these cities go to sleep at four in the morning. Pubs and restaurants are open all night and the cities are bustling with activity. We plan to have that sort of Colombo. We want people to enjoy; places like Dutch Hospital are a part of creating this active, bustling city (the Chairman of the UDA, adopted from Jayathilaka 2012).

The above narration very clearly demonstrates how developers have been stimulated by values of consumer economy in the CBP. The developers' ambition is to adjust Colombo into the global market economy by using heritage as a cultural capital. Under the banner of conservation, cultural heritages are promoted by conservationists and planners into consumer spaces. Specially, by showcasing cultural significance of cities, the states target to attract more tourists. Therefore, new urban policies that are structured through neoliberalism necessitate the use of cultural heritage as a tool to respond to the rapidly changing socio-economic conditions of the new economic order. Following two pictures communicate how the project leaders have used colonial heritage to regenerate the economic base of Colombo through attracting tourism.



The Dutch Hospital-before renovation



The Dutch Hospital- after renovation

Source:

https://www.google.lk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=images+of+dutch+hospital+colombo

Responsibility of rehabilitating old buildings was given to Brigadier Senarath Nivunhalla of the Sri Lanka Army and Captain Hiran Balasuriya of the Sri Lanka Navy. They were entrusted with the task of demolishing the former buildings and reconstructing within just 2 years. In this exercise, to gain international exposure to heritage buildings and the beautification of a well-planned city, a team of young and enterprising architects were sent to Paris. Then they studied many global locations and cityscapes in details to painstakingly create a masterpiece etched with

the glory of a nation with a proud heritage ([http:// www.defence.lk/new.asp](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp)).

Conclusion

The leaders of the CBP have widely adopted the preservation of cultural heritage as a prominent discursive practice to present and legitimize the state's urban rebuilding agenda in the post-war social context. In fact, through rhetorical presentations such as 'protecting the nation's heritage', 'preserving colonial heritage for future', the project leaders emotionally influenced the audience to accept and approve the state city rebuilding project as a public friendly and sustainable development effort. However, as study reveals, the hidden truth is the project leaders have attempted to convert colonial heritages into consumer spaces of tourism as response to demands to regenerate the economic base of city that targets to attract local and foreign investments than preserving them. These new form of urban interventions promote a kind of 'consumer-citizen' politics and usually dominated by the elites and middle class, who have used these platforms to set the 'urban environment' agenda supported by the corporate sector. In other words, project leaders have standardized and reproduced the taste of high mobility middle class through reordering the heritage spaces of Colombo.

References

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