

Lessons from the Roman Architect Vitruvius to Overcome Urban Development Failures in Sri Lanka

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At present 56% of the world population is living in urban settings and the number is expected to double by 2050. In Sri Lanka, postwar development has brought rapid transformation. A main focus of scholarship on recent urban development is the negative impact of accelerated development due to ignorance, lack of reason, foresight, scale in planning, political interference and erratic decision-making. These have resulted in environmental, economic and public health problems in cities such as Hambantota, Colombo, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Negombo in spite of the presence of ancient and modern wisdom, both Sri Lankan and western. *De Architectura*, the work by the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (1st century BCE-1st Century ACE) is a practical guide to architecture and the architect from the principle (*ratio*) of *firmitas* (durability), *utilitas* (usefulness), and *venustas* (beauty). Scholarship acknowledges the practical usefulness of Vitruvius' work to civil engineering today. The objective of this study is to use the urban development project in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, as a case study to highlight the contemporary value of Vitruvius' wisdom. Through a close reading of the relevant sections of *De Architectura*, the study reinforces the applicability of Vitruvius's wisdom to the Hambantota Urban Development Project (2005-2030). It reveals that useful, beautiful, sustainable structures and cities are necessary for private and public use, that they are self-sufficient and sustainable because the architect is guided by reason, knowledge, and training to follow the fundamental principles of architecture based on theory and practice. The study concludes that the wisdom of Vitruvius may have prevented the initial failures of the ongoing Hambantota Urban Development Project traceable to lack of knowledge, and ignorant, illogical planning and design. Therefore, the study recommends Vitruvius as an invaluable guide to political, social and economic success in current and future urban development undertakings.

Keywords: Urban development, Architecture, Urban planning, Vitruvius