

URBANIZATION VS HERITAGE PRESERVATION: ASSESSING THREATS TO KANDY'S UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE STATUS

U. Jinadasa^{1*}, S. Subasinghe², D.M.L.D. Dissanayake¹, M.L.V. Mihiravi¹,
N. Senarath²

¹Department of Archaeology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

²Department of Geography, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

*ujinadasa@arts.pdn.ac.lk

UNESCO's World Heritage status to Sri Lanka has become prestigious today, bringing tourism revenue. By 2024, 1223 sites were World Heritage listed, with 56 in danger and three (03) delisted. The main objective of this study is to assess the factors affecting the World Heritage status of the Sacred City of Kandy, the capital of the last Kingdom of Sri Lanka, which was inscribed in the World Heritage list in 1988, based on UNESCO-identified 14 factors affecting the World Heritage properties. Using ArcGIS Survey 123, this study surveyed the current condition of 494 heritage monuments in Kandy, listed by the Central Cultural Fund in 1992, and identified the factors affecting them negatively. By function, 67% of these monuments are commercial, 15% are residential, 5% are shophouses with both residential and commercial character, 5% are religious, 4% are institutional, and the rest are of other categories. While 81% date back to the colonial period (1815-1948), 19% are Kandyan period monuments (1597–1815). Modern developments are the key factor affecting these monuments and the historic city as a cultural landscape. The study revealed that 86% of listed monumental buildings have been modernized due to ongoing urbanization in the city. While 11% of them have been fully modernized despite the strict heritage regulations, the rest are partially modified. Pollution, climate change, and natural hazards affect the historic city to a lesser extent. The developments of transportation infrastructure—especially the proposed USD 200 million underground tunnel project consisting of four tunnels—will have a positive impact on monuments and the historic city due to the ease of traffic congestion in the sacred area and the city center, resulting in less noise and air pollution, with increasing visitor safety. According to our GIS survey, the proposed developments will not affect the listed monuments. Despite no critical threats to the World Heritage status of Kandy, the findings emphasize the need to preserve the historic city's typical Kandyan streetscape and architectural integrity. The findings of this study are important for guiding urban conservation efforts and balancing modern developments with heritage preservation in Kandy. We here emphasize the need for protective measures, including community-friendly heritage regulations, to maintain the historic city's architectural integrity. These insights are relevant for safeguarding other World Heritage historic cities facing similar threats.

Keywords: Conservation, Kandy, streetscape, urbanization, world heritage

The authors wish to acknowledge the University of Peradeniya for funding this research (URG/2023/40/A).