Towards Transforming Colombo to a 'Walkable' City: Policies and Strategies

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Abstract

Colombo, like many emerging cities in Asia is plagued with the ills of overcrowding, ad-hoc developments and chaotic systems of travel and transport. Once considered one of the best cities in Asia, its walkable streets have been inundated with obstructions to the pedestrians and Colombo has increasingly become a city in which walking is a hazardous activity. In the current interest in transforming Colombo to a more liveable graceful city, facilitating walking through its public spaces springs to the forefront as an indisputable strategy to be employed in urban re-developments.

This paper examines the issue of facilitating walking in the city of Colombo and discusses the problems and potentials of transforming it to a pedestrian-friendly city as perceived by the people. Based on the findings of a user response study carried out in 2008, it outlines the major issues raised by the urban dwellers of Colombo and proposes some remedial actions that could be taken. In the context of increasing urbanisation where vehicular traffic and the provision for it has begun to dominate the city spaces, the paper argues for a shift of approach in its urban development practice in order to improve its walkability so that the city could once again become a delightful place.

Introduction

If one walks through the streets of a Sri Lankan town today the journey is too often blighted by noise, conflict with vehicles and a variety of obstacles such as lamp-posts and sign-posts in addition to other crowded pedestrians and vendors on pavements amidst garbage and squalor. Areas that are water clogged, heaped with garbage and left-over building materials, unused furniture and other deterring junk are scattered around urban areas where people struggle to walk. In fact, the fear of being mugged or run down by a vehicle has begun to rise alarmingly that walking is seen to be not safe at all in most crowded streets in Sri Lanka[1]. While all individuals and organizations should strive to improve the walking environments, a greater responsibility no doubt lies in the hands of the city authorities in general and the transport engineers, architects and planners who are expected to foresee the problems and offer design and planning interventions and solutions.



Figure 1: Chaos in a Sri Lankan Street

This paper has three parts. It begins by exploring how walking could contribute to the quality of the urban environment and create an urban renaissance: the case for promoting walking and the need for creating exciting opportunities. Then, it presents the findings of a survey of pedestrians in Colombo assessing their perceptions on the opportunities and impediments to walking in Colombo. It examines the main factors that inhibit walking and suggests remedies as perceived by the pedestrians and articulated by the researcher. Conclusions are drawn on the obstacles and impediments that exist in the urban spaces of Colombo that inhibit walking. The paper envisages to highlight the issues relating to the promotion of walking that have been neglected by transport planners and the policy makers responsible for the creation of such spaces, so that the city could be transformed to a more habitable place.

[1]It is noteworthy that the number of pedestrians killed in Colombo and its suburbs run down by reckless motorists have notably increased during the past decade. These included school children walking across pedestrian crossings among innocent others. The incidents have angered the public and have created now-so-common fuming public reactions of setting fire to vehicles and assault on drivers in areas where they occurred (see Daily News, Sri Lanka), 11th October 2002).



Figure 2: Water clogged areas in Pettah

Walking and the Urban Environments

There is an increasing recognition that urban environments should be more conducive to walking for a number of reasons (Newmann,2001;Poebo,2002). Apart from being individually rewarding, walking is also a socially beneficial activity because it offers unplanned social encounters and breaks the urban social barriers. Thus walking has the potential to transform the usually introvert urbanites living in cities to loosen up the screens put up for urban living and strengthens local identity and community. Furthermore, it is an inexpensive way of getting from a place to place and allows people to experience their local environments more closely and appreciate them (Lynch,1960).

The tendency a community has for walking and cycling in urban spaces is undeniably related to culture. However, their manifestations are facilitated or hindered by the streets and the opportunities that prevail there. Examinations of streets around the world show that historical streets have always been full of life and were pleasant and healthy places where walking and slow travel contributed to such qualities (Williams, 1922). Sri Lanka is no exception and has had a complex and meaningful variety of streets that were authentic and culturally relevant to daily life (Fernando, 2000; Dayaratne and Senanayake, 2002) Such streets were meaningful living places rather than conduits for travel. Today however, many are transforming themselves to European models that are conduits for transport but are also chaotic and uninhabitable (Dayaratne, 2009).

In general, walking as an activity has been associated more with the rural areas although the needs for and the frequency of walking in the urban areas have been equally present in the cities of the past (Manning, 1984). While walking in the rural areas stems from the attitudes towards travel in as much as the lack of motorable roads and paucity of vehicles, urbanity itself is symbolised by the presence of vehicles for transport and the seeming abundance of motorable roads. This has been created by urban sprawl that enabled people to live away from the hustle and bustle of the city but work and shop there. Moreover, urbanites prefer vehicular travel to walking even for short distances for want of speed and to keep up with the pace of life in the cities. Today, walking in the cities happen either when the vehicles cannot take them any more or when the residents discover that walking will be necessary as physical exercise. This is aggravated by the fact that roads in cities are less safe particularly for children, women and the elderly. Moreover, social space and social interaction in cities are conceived and constructed with travel in mind since it is available, affordable and desirable by the social organisation itself.

It is no exaggeration to claim that the experience of walking in contemporary cities could be far more pleasant than what it is now (Gehl and Grimazee, 2001). Modern urban spaces are dehumanised in the quest for development and progress, despite the fact that most future human settlements will be in cities. Among many other causes, the motorcar has been often seen as the 'necessary evil' necessitating wide roadways dividing its space. The motorcar generates noise and pollution while speedy travel eliminates the potentials available to the people to relate to spaces at a humane scale. Since the motor car has been taken as the given for travel in the city, most developments have removed the opportunities people had for walking in cities.

In fact, planning often aims to give priority to movement space than to social space. Although heavily trafficked streets are stripped of life by noise, congestion and fumes, city planning is driven by the attempts to create more and more wider roads for vehicular traffic even at the expense of pedestrians (Correa, 1989). Often, pavements of streets in the developing world are narrowed to give way and to manage the ever-increasing vehicular traffic on the roads.

In such circumstances, it is difficult to foster social interaction and community spirit since neighbours cannot easily or safely move and converse outside their houses. If we consider the significant characteristic of the city as having to provide opportunities for social exchange, hostile streets can be seen to drive this exchange activity away. It pushes social interaction inside and makes it a more privatised and exclusive activity. Lack of spontaneous encounters on the streets prompt people for more planned encounters that involve car journeys. The street environments are further degraded and a vicious cycle is established.

There are powerful forces creating vehicular dependency that cannot be altered significantly simply by making physical alterations to the walking environment. As Emmanuel (2001) has pointed out, action is required on a broad front including planning policies for the location of housing, jobs and services, the

taxation of transport and measures to improve public transport and roads. Nevertheless, measures to improve the walking environment can transform urban areas to cherishable places, discouraging migration to the urban edge. In fact, ease of walking is a good measure of urban health. For example, the steep decline in children walking unaccompanied to schools is a symptom of urban decay. Hostile walking environments push parents to restrict their children making journeys independently, removing opportunities for physical, social and educational development. They prompt out-migration of families to the peri-urban regions in search of more fulfilling environments. These inevitably increase the needs for vehicular travel in the city resulting in a vicious circle.

Walking without doubt is non-polluting, environmentally sustainable and healthy. It reduces vehicular travel, help purify the air and save non-renewable resources. Given these, measures that encourage walking will foster a caring attitude among people towards their local environment and help lead more healthy and fulfilled lives in cities. However, while people may prefer walking for short-distance travel, other modes such as cycling should also be coupled with walking to make them attractive alternatives. Such slow travel is the means by which delightfulness of a place can be fully experienced and appreciated and thus enables people to build up emotional attachments to places where they could 'dwell poetically' (Heidegger, 1980,1985:Schultz, 1985). However, it is often not recognised that people cannot be expected to love the places and contribute to their positive growth unless they are offered such opportunities to experience the environments and build up emotionally charged attachments to the places (Lynch, 1960).

role of walking and the need to facilitate opportunities for walking in urban places. For example, Bently et.al. (1985) argue that in the preparation of transport planning and urban development schemes, each route along which people are likely to walk must be assessed to determine whether it is convenient, safe and comfortable. They point out that walking must be conceptualized at the inception of projects to avail the opportunities and facilitate them.

There is no doubt that social attitudes are influenced by the ways in which facilities for walking are provided and urban spaces are created and managed. Unfortunately, not only walking is completely ignored as an activity to be facilitated and promoted, the opportunities that may prevail in undeveloped and under - developed areas are often eliminated in the contemporary approaches to planning and urban development (See Fig. 3). Given these, it is not unusual that people look to the motor vehicles as the convenient means of moving from a place to place in the urban space, increasing traffic, congesting the roads and creating socially unhealthy urban communities.

Creating pedestrian streets had been a popular strategy to encourage walking in cities (Danielle, 2002). They are connected to major places to which people want to go and also connect to a system of car parks, cycle parks, and public transport terminals. Thus promoting walking in cities is not an isolated activity but must be integrated to the entire structure of a city. In many European cities, core areas have been recently paved and transformed as entirely pedestrian areas. Coupled with cycle parks surrounded by greenery and buildings with porous boundaries and walk-throughs, they encourage walking and slow travel within the cities that are fascinating places.

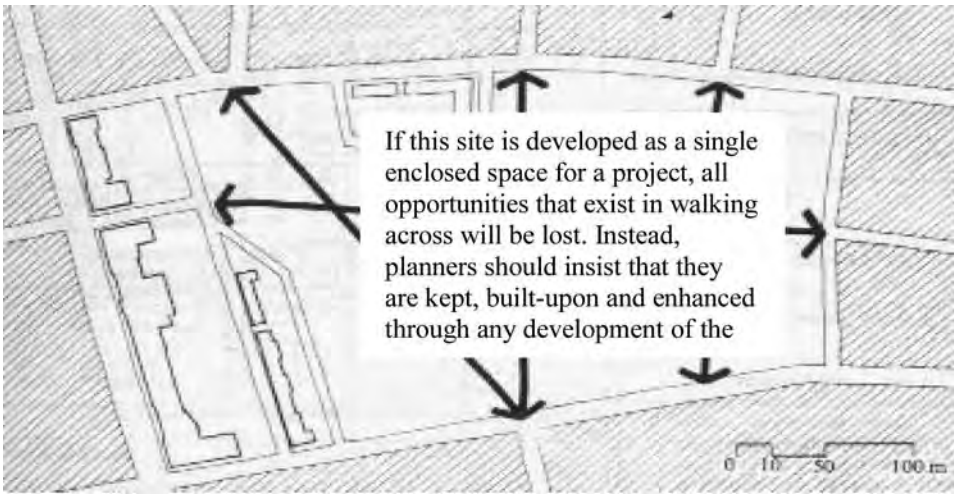


Figure 3: Analysis of Route Relationships through a Site
(Source: Bently. I, et.al, 1985)

Encouraging Walking- Planned Interventions

As Emmnauel (2001) rightly points out, planning at both macro and micro levels are important to promote opportunities for walking. Indeed planning and urban development theories had well–recognized the

While planning can lay the structure for walkable streets, the design of the streets themselves contributes tremendously to walking and cycling. In fact, street paving, street furniture and street lighting are

essential accompaniments to make streets more habitable, walkable and liveable. Even if vehicles may be allowed to pass, streets could be predominantly designated for pedestrians, if the paving changes from the tarmac to the cobbles or some other materials which indicate predominant pedestrian use. In other words, planners and architects have decisive roles to play in making cities walkable, by creating the appropriate spatial characteristics and gestures.

Unfortunately, while some interesting streets had existed in the fort of Colombo sometimes ago, most of them have been converted to motorable roads thus throwing the pedestrians at the mercy of the vehicular traffic. Attempts to create well-planned pedestrian streets in the Sri Lankan context, in development of Sri Jayawardanapura, Kotte have been abandoned, although its planning proposal outlined clear strategies for encouraging walking in the city (see Fig 04).

It is assumed that public perceptions of the "walkability" of urban space and the likely problems they see as impediments to walking can help understand the ways in which the existing urban spaces could be made more pedestrian oriented. A series of common problems that make routes inconvenient, unsafe and uncomfortable seem to prevail in Colombo and these problems need to be systematically addressed and obstacles eliminated.

The Research

As a prelude to understand the patterns of walking and use of urban space, a recent research attempted to ascertain the public perceptions towards walking in the urban streets in Colombo, Sri Lanka. It was conceptualized as an exploratory study, open to the public to express their perceptions with regard to transport planning, vehicular traffic, public spaces, pedestrian routes and the degree to which they either facilitate or inhibit walking in the city of Colombo. The intentions were two fold, first to obtain an understanding of the conceptualisations, perceptions, and concerns of the public on the streets of Colombo. Second, to unravels the issues that emanate from them, so that they could be specifically addressed.

Methodology

The methodologies adopted in this study were three fold. Firstly, open interviews were conducted with a small number of city dwellers (pedestrians) in Colombo for the purpose of understanding the major issues that seem to confront those who often walk. These included early morning pedestrians going to work, visitors to the city walking to specific destinations, returnees from work, and evening leisure-walkers. The informal interviews enabled the recognition and formulation of 'critical issues' that needed a thorough investigation. Thus a structured questionnaire was prepared and administered among city dwellers (pedestrians and vehicle travellers were both included and were randomly picked up). Once the structured questionnaire divulged the widely held perceptions with regard to the issues probed, informal interviews with selected respondents were carried out in order to probe, illuminate and re-confirm the findings of the structured survey. The study was concluded during the month of August 2008 around Thimbirigasyaya in Colombo 5; a popular residential area of the city where a number of government and private offices are located together with facilities for leisure and sports and therefore walking does take place during both mornings and evenings.

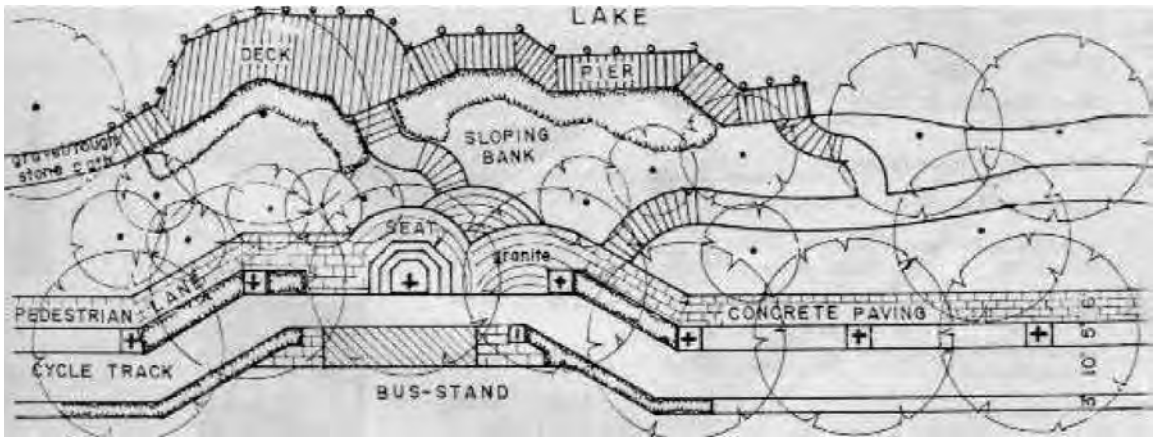


Figure 4: Planning Proposals for promoting walking in Sri Jayawardanepua, Kotte, Development Proposal UDA

Issues:

Most respondents complained that one of the major issues of walking in the city is to do with the impediments posed by the security check points, which have been necessitated by the security of the city. As a city under siege from terrorism spearheaded by a separatist movement, this is both understandable and unquestionable. However, most respondents recognise that this impediment is common to both the walkers as well as the vehicle travellers, although the former are likely to be affected more by the check points rather than the latter[2].

Apart from this central issue, the respondents raised three major areas of concern of the built-environment that influenced walking. These were related to the convenience, safety and comfort of the routes. The respondents have often indicated that convenience matters most while safety is a major concern. However, comfort seems to be less sought after. In order to understand the issues, they are listed in the following table although there are obvious overlaps among them.

Table 01: Major Issues confronting the pedestrians

Convenience	Safety	Comfort
Pedestrian routes almost always follow vehicular roads	Fast traffic intimidates and endangers pedestrians	Fixed obstructions on the pavement, such as lamp posts, telephone boxes
New developments shut the routes used for a long time and have been available through the sites	Pedestrian safety threatened by roadside advertising that distracts drivers	Inadequate widths of pavements reducing the space for pedestrians
Absence of any designated walking routes or segregations for vehicles, people and cycles.	Inappropriate and complex road hierarchies	Intrusion of pavements by vendors street
Presence of routes that do not go where people want to go.	Fear for personal safety from muggers.	Vehicle parking in pedestrian routes
Lack of continuity of historic routes	Inadequate lighting of routes	Presence of garbage and smell
Closure of routes by residents	Potholes and uneven surfaces	Crowding in small pavements
Lack of small scale public spaces	Stray dogs and sometimes domestic dogs	Having to share the lanes and roads with other vehicles and cycles.
Lack of linkages between open spaces	Habits of walking in the vehicular road although there are pavements	Encumbrance: having to carry shopping and other goods
Awkward positioning of pedestrian crossings on streets	Drivers total absence of respect for road manners/ pedestrian crossings	Lack of shade and resting areas
Rivers and railway lines block the routes	Lack of pedestrian crossings where natural walkways exist across roads	Engine noise makes conversations difficult while walking

Perceptions of the Issues

1. Convenience:

1.1 **Vehicular roads and pedestrian routes:** One of the main issues cited by many is indeed the lack of specifically designated pedestrian routes. It is perceived that the pavements adjoining the vehicular routes are the only areas upon which people can walk and where the vehicular routes stop the continuation of the pedestrian walkway is seen to be undefined. The predominance of this combination is seen as one of the major aspects of many of the issues, although the presence of this combination enables the pedestrian to walk at least in some areas.

1.2 **Shutting down of existing routes:** New developments shut the routes used for a long time and have been available through the sites: New developments in the city are seen as totally insensitive and a threat to walking. In the absence of any legislature that ensures the continuity of long time used routes, new developments at once shuts down the routes that have existed without offering any alternatives. It is seen that 'developments' have been a major cause of the disappearance of walking routes in the city of Colombo.

1.3 **Absence of any designated walking routes:** Some routes on which many people walk are not given recognition as pedestrian. As a result, there are no segregations for vehicles, people and cycles: This lack of separation between people and cycles is a serious inconvenience. Indeed, the vehicle drivers and cyclists are seen to be notoriously careless about the pedestrians and intimidate those who walk.

1.4 **Presence of routes that do not go where people want to go:** It is perceived that wherever possible 'pedestrian routes' are available, they hardly relate to the popular places to which people need to go to. The absence of routes where popular places exist and the presence of routes where not so many people wish to walk seem an under-utilisation of space and resources available in the city.

1.5 **Lack of continuity of historic routes:** Historic routes not only provide opportunities for walking but also maintain the memories of the places in the city. The residents in particular seem to value the historical routes, because they have been part of their lives. Historical routes are believed to be sometimes abandoned, or shut down as noted in issue 1.2 and this inconveniences the city dwellers both to continue getting from a place to place but also to anchor in the city.

[2] It is noted that at the time of this research, the issue of the check points prevailed in Colombo but has since been removed. This is a major relief and it is to be expected that people will take to walking more now and the opportunities so availed must be made use now to rejuvenate the urban spaces in Colombo.

1.6 **Closure of routes by residents:** It is seen that a recent trend has developed in the closure of roads within many new housing estates. Particularly the luxury housing developments create road networks together with new housing but restrict the use of those roads only for 'residents'. Control mechanisms are placed by means of 'security' persons and gates preventing people from using such roads to cross the areas.

1.7 **Lack of small-scale public spaces:** It is seen that the public spaces are often being 'privatised'. Many thought that the access to large public spaces are being limited to special social groups or completely closed while the smaller public spaces are being built-upon by the government and or given to private enterprises. There is a serious question about the 'publicness' of spaces and indeed the availability of small public spaces for real public use.

1.8 **Lack of linkages between open spaces:** While there is a severe lack of public open spaces in the city of Colombo, many see that the few available spaces are also isolated. It is seen that routes do not exist in any way connecting the few spaces that are there forcing people to walk only along the roads open also to traffic. An example cited was that the popular open spaces such as the Viharamahadevi park and the Independence Square, although so closely located have no pedestrian links; which if there were any, would have offered great opportunities to walk in between.

1.9 **Awkward positioning of pedestrian crossings on streets:** One of the major inconveniences cited in walking even along the main roads is the difficulty of crossing roads. While the drivers hardly respect the pedestrian crossings, the very locations themselves do not make much sense, because they seem to happen for the convenience of the vehicles rather than the convenience of the pedestrians. Crossings were seen not to connect naturally occurring popular routes but attempting to shift them for the convenience of the vehicular traffic.

1.10 **Water ways and railway lines block the routes:** Often, the routes are blocked by railways and waterways, the crossings of which seem hazardous even along the main roads. While the railway crossings on main roads may have gates, there are many routes that seem to come across the railways where there are no signs, protections or any other facilitators. The railway running from Maradana to Nugegoda through Narahenpita seem to have divided communities whose natural routes need convenient and related points for crossing, particularly to ensure that the trekking does not have to take place along the railway lines to catch the other part of the routes.

2.0 **Safety:** A large number of issues raised could be recognised as having being generated by the concerns for the safety of pedestrians on the streets. While inconvenience has been a major issue, safety of the available routes are questionable. Particularly vulnerable are the children although even the adults seem threatened by the motor vehicle and the lack of proper planning.

2.1 **Fast traffic intimidates and endangers pedestrians:** This is the most often-cited safety issue. Stemming largely from the private bus drivers and the individual motorcyclists, speeding has become an intolerable issue of road discipline that has threatened the pedestrians even at the pedestrian crossings. Almost all respondents believed that the roads are not safe because of the errant drivers and the lack of discipline on the roads.

2.2 **The roadside advertising distracts drivers and inconveniences pedestrians:** The pedestrians believe that the vehicular indiscipline is affected by the roadside advertising that distracts drivers. However, this is considered to be a small factor in the city where speeding and inadequate signposting leads to more distractions. Lack of lane-based driving and the inadequate provisions for the signs are a major cause. However, advertising on or covering road signs and route directions are seen as a major obstacle. Few respondents valued the efforts the Colombo Municipality was making sometime ago to introduce overhead road signs as a positive development that would have helped road discipline among drivers and thereby would have helped safe walking for the pedestrians.

2.3 **Inappropriate and complex hierarchies:** The pedestrians also suffer from the emerging complexities of different types of roads and road junctions. The complex heirachies of roads are sometimes confusing and misleading when one if simply trying to get across a road. Given the fact that roads are created for the convenience of managing vehicular traffic, pedestrians are at the mercy of these complexities to negotiate to get across.

2.4 **The fear for personal safety from muggers:** In fact, this is one of the most often cited reason for not walking the Colombo streets in the nights. The fear for personal safety from muggers is on the increase, and the lack of lighting makes the pedestrians undeniably vulnerable. Often, dark spots exist and the recent increase of the drug addicts in street corners have made the street walking in the night a very dangerous activity.

2.5 **Inadequate lighting and routes:** According to many respondents, if the day- walking is inconvenient, walking in the night is even inconceivable. Colombo suffers heavily from inadequately lit roads. Even the primary ones leave alone the lanes and other smaller lanes have no street lights. In the absence of well-maintained and reliable lighting that ensures convenient walking, Colombo is unlikely to see people walking in its streets in the night unless in sheer necessity and unavoidable discomfort.

2.6 **The presence of potholes and uneven surface:** It was noted that one of the major obstacles in walking along the existing pavements and footpaths is the presence of potholes and uneven surfaces. On the one hand, women are unable to walk with their usually higher-heeled shoes and on the other hand, they cannot push the buggies with children in such unevenly surfaced pavements if they have to go out walking with small kids. In the first place, the roads do not appeal to walking and encourage pedestrians, because they know the inconveniences availed to them in those pavements.

2.7 **Stray dogs and sometimes domestic dogs:** Although not cited often, stray dogs in the city seem to also deter the pedestrians, specially the children, the elderly and the weak. Added to this in Colombo and particularly in the area this research was carried out, people walking bewildering dogs on public streets deter the others taking to walking in the evening hours, when the dogs are walked.

2.8 **Habits of walking in the vehicular road:** Some respondents also felt that part of the blame should go to the pedestrians themselves. It is noted that although there are pavements, many people have a habit of walking on the road itself, which contributes to the general chaos of traffic on the roads. As same as the vehicle drivers have no manners and do not obey the rules of using the roads, the pedestrians themselves do not obey the rules and thus make themselves vulnerable and inconvenient.

2.7 **Drivers' total absence of respect for road manners/ pedestrian crossings:** This reason cited is in fact related to the former. It is no secret that the pedestrian crossings are marked and remarked every now and then by the municipality although no one seems to enforce the law. The vehicles including those of the road traffic police themselves ignore the pedestrian crossings and this has become the normal behaviour on the roads in Colombo. Those drivers who will stop at the road crossings will find themselves in the minority and at odds with the other drivers.

2.8 **Lack of pedestrian crossings where natural walkways exist across roads:** Most often, people are found crossing the streets without any pedestrian crossing. There are two reasons for this. Primarily, the pedestrian crossings are not located where the people are most likely to walk. Instead they are created to facilitate the vehicular traffic. People are made to walk longer distances to cross the road, while the vehicular traffic is facilitated. Secondly, pedestrian crossings themselves cannot be crossed because drivers do not stop for the pedestrians.

3.0 **Comfort:** Interestingly, people do not seem to expect a great deal of comfort in the Sri Lankan streets, although this is a matter of concern too. Comfort is an aspect related to the space that is available for walking and to be shared with many unknown others at the same time. Pavements are intruded by the shopkeepers and the vendors alike, leaving very little space for people while service providers such as the Electricity Board and the Telecommunication Department show no sensitivity to peoples' movement. Leaving these apart, Sri Lankan street space is neither conceived nor constructed with the comfort of the walking people in mind.

3.1 **Fixed obstructions on the pavement:** One of the major causes of discomfort to the pedestrians is viewed as being the presence of the obstructions on the pavements, such as lamp posts and telephone boxes which far too often are located right in the middle of the pavements and sometimes entirely blocking the pavements. Once when this happens, people have to negotiate these obstructions often having to walk into the vehicular road, and it seems that such de-routing is nearly impossible for women particularly with children.

3.2 **Inadequate widths of pavements reducing the space for pedestrians:** In fact, the inadequate widths of pavements are one of the major issues of discomfort that is made worse by the obstructions in the pavements. Moreover, it is observed that many roads being widened with already lined up shops, it is the pavements that have been narrowed in an attempt to ease the vehicular traffic on the roads.

3.3 **Intrusion of pavements by vendors;** In contrast to the narrow pavements being uncomfortable, wider pavements seem to attract street vendors who feel that such pavements can be well-utilized for laying their goodies for sale. Although many of the pavements in Fort were recently cleared of the pavement vendors, up until recently, this had been a major discomfort to the pedestrians.

3.4 **Vehicle parking in pedestrian pavements:** Similar situations occur when the pavements are wide enough for the motorists to feel that they could park on the pavements, in the absence of sufficient parking facilities. This undeniably is a violation of the pedestrian's rights and a major discomfort to them even when the pavements are wide and available.

3.5 **Presence of garbage and smell:** Yet another common reason for discomfort stems from the fact that Sri Lankan streets are often littered with garbage; sometimes rotting for days before collection thus creating unbearable smells and discomfort to the pedestrians. Garbage tends to be thrown around a vast area despite the presence of garbage containers. This acts as a major deterrent to walking.

3.6 **Crowding in small pavements:** This is repeated often in a number of ways, but the issue here is that the pavement widths are not in keeping with the numbers of people likely to use a certain area. It is under-

stood that streets canot always keep up with changing behaviours of pedestrians but a certain sense of proportion between the size of the pavements available and the likely numbers of crowd should be taken into consideration in deciding the widths of pedestrian pavements. Take the case of popular bus stops where large crowds gather and large numbers of people also have to cross.

3.7 **Having to share walkways with other vehicles:** Where large groups of people are expected to constantly walk, allowing vehicles also to pass the same route is clearly a problematic situation. Sri Lankan urban streets share the spaces with cattle, three wheelers, cycles, cars, carts and many other transport vehicles of both slow and speedy travel. This is a severe discomfort to the walkers.

3.8 **Encumbrance:** Having to carry shopping and other goods. Most people walk from shopping to home when the homes are close-by and as they say "within walking –distances". However, when it comes to carrying shopping home, walking becomes the last option given the fact that pavements offer no possibility for pushing trolleys or dragging pushcarts. In fact, supermarkets and shops offer no such options to help pedestrian to carry shopping home and thus tempts the people to use the motor vehicles instead of walking even when the destinations are within walking distances.

3.9 **Lack of shade and resting areas:** Most pavements are exposed to direct sun and provide no shading. It used to be a good practice in urban buildings to create arcades in front of shops, continuously stretching from one street to another which provided shaded comfortable spaces to walk in the city. This practice has now been completely abandoned. This is aggravated also by the fact that street furniture that could help the pedestrians to rest and relax are absent too. The elderly and the children find long walks unimaginable given the fact that there are no safe places to rest.

3.10 **Engine noise makes it difficult to engage in conversations while walking:** It is also observed that the Sri Lankan streets are far too noisy than they should be. Engine noises, coupled with errant hooting by the undisciplined have made the streets so noisy that the pedestrians find it uncomfortable to engage in talking while waking. This is a major factor that makes walking a cumbersome activity rather than an enjoyable and pleasurable one.

4.0 Solutions:

A closer examination of the public perception of the absence of comforts, conveniences and safety for walking in the cities, and their causes reveal that the main issue lies in the absence of a public policy in urban development and planning that appreciates the value of walking and incorporates strategies to create possibilities for walking in cities. Thus the city of Colombo is becoming increasingly, anti-pedestrian compared with many major cities and towns across the world where a greater emphasis is now being placed on humanizing the urban spaces and making them more amenable to the pedestrians. In England for example, the city centres are often paved for pedestrians and walking is considered and given the right of place. The vehicles are allowed to cross and pass those streets but with care and concern for the primacy of the pedestrians. In the developing cities of Asia such as Singapore, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, whole areas of cities have been cordoned off for the pedestrians, with drop and pick up points for the taxis, private vehicles, buses and the three wheelers making it possible to link the walkers with the vehicles in a meaningful way. Given these, it is time that the opportunities available in Colombo for people for walking are re-examined and more healthy possibilities are created to ensure the development of Colombo as a livable and healthy place. A number of strategies were conceived as being necessary starting points of such solutions discussed as follows.

4.1 Creating New Opportunities in New Developments

One of the most urgent and implementable strategies would be to ensure that the future developments likely to change the urban landscape of Colombo offer greater possibilities for walking. It is necessary to create built-in mechanisms that could test new proposals for their contribution to walking from and around those developments. However, this will need a firm statement in planning policy towards sustaining existing ones and creating new opportunities for pedestrians in applications for development proposals.

It is suggested that every development should be connected to the existing street network by an obvious and simple system of pavements and footpaths. In this sense, the use of traditional perimeter blocks with buildings that front the street could be restored as a potential development pattern. It minimizes walking distances while windows overlooking the pavements would increase feelings of personal safety. When car access to a site is required, there should be a single common entrance and exit so that the pedestrians do not need to cross two access roads at every plot. Car parking other than along a street should be behind or on the sides of buildings and not in front, so the pedestrians reach the entrances without having to cross large car parks.

4.2 Recreating the Lost Opportunities in the Present Developments

Although it may be difficult to recreate all opportunities which existed in the city before the recent developments that took away opportunities for walking,

an attempt must be made to recognize, facilitate and re-instate some of the already existing fragile routes. Further studies are needed in this regard that will map out the routes that are being blocked and barricaded sometimes by establishments and sometimes by individuals, in the guise of privacy, security and progress. It is proposed that the Colombo Municipality together with the UDA launches a survey to identify these routes, their potentials for development and work out strategies for-reinstating those routes as liveable pedestrian walkways.

It is undeniable that only two decades ago, the government was much concerned about facilitating walking in the city of Colombo and this was visible in the construction of a number of pedestrian overhead bridges. After their indisputable failure however they have now been removed, while no devise has been created to ensure that those pedestrian crossings are available to the public in a more convenient, safe and comfortable manner. The recent developments show no indication of the re-instatement of those pedestrian crossings in any way, except to leave the pedestrians at the mercy of the increasingly bewildering traffic[3] .

Similarly, many lanes in residential areas have been closed to pedestrians by the residents in the wake of petty crime such as theft and mugging. Shopkeepers and residents unfortunately block historical alleyways such as those in the Fort area. If recreated, they can be incorporated into walking trails, which can lead to an appreciation of the local historic environments. There is the added advantage that these visitors are more likely to spend money in small shops that are hard to access by car and are located in such areas. Without doubt, a coordinated strategy is perhaps needed to bring together shopkeepers, residents, police and development regulators to transform the negative trends in city life through increased opportunities for walking.

4.3 Creating Unique and Celebratable Routes: Learning from Others

Yet another strategy would be to create memorable and cherishable routes that link significant places in the city and thereby make walking an attractive activity and an unforgettable one. Tourists could be lured to walk such routes and the city could regain its image as an enchanting place in Asia. Many examples exist of walking trails in cities from which lessons can be learnt and similar strategies can be adapted tailored to local circumstances.

4.3.1 One most notable of such examples is the case of the “Green London Way”[4] that links open spaces and corridors in London. There are proposals to create similar green trails in many cities in England and it would be possible to create equivalent trails to be established in large towns in other parts of the world. The opportunities to link existing open spaces to provide attractive routes for pedestrians and cyclists, often using watercourses and tree belts, in all cities need to be exploited to the full, creating memorable streets.

4.3.2 The redesigned “Peace Gardens in Sheffield”[5], which won a Civic Trust Award of England in 2000, allows people to use a number of gardens in the city as a route from one place to another rather than simply a place to hang around. In contrast to these efforts, gardens in Colombo remain not only totally separated but also sometimes even inaccessible to the general public.



Figure 5: Left: A view of the peace garden in Sheffield. Right: alleyways in York

[3] For example, the pedestrian crossing bridge at the entrance to the Colombo hospital on Ward Place has been dismantled recently with no alternative mechanism being put in place.

[4] The Green London Way is a completely new approach to the London landscape. Bob Gilbert describes a hundred mile walk that circles the capital, its canal tow paths, commons and woodlands, combining insights into the history of London’s people with an in-depth knowledge of its land and wildlife. The Green London Way is divided into easy-to-walk sections, each of which has its own mood and theme. The separate walks provide a focus for a local relationship between human occupation and the landscape. The routes which is the product of many years’ of constant use is full of other discoveries, and offers the walker a different view of London.

[5] The Peace Gardens take their name from Neville Chamberlain’s declaration of ‘peace in our time’ in 1938. The green space came into being in that year, on the site of the demolished St. Paul’s Church. The area was re-developed in 1998 to become the mix of water features, seating areas, lawns and planting that it is today.

4.3.3 The historic city of York in England has "Snickelways"[6] which form a fine network of picturesque walking routes that thread between buildings and are often more direct than the road alternative. They are a tourist attraction as well as a useful way of shortening journeys on foot. It is not difficult for cities such as Colombo with ancient alleyways to open and incorporate them into walking trails. If civic societies are also involved in incorporating small businesses en-route, then they can lead to an appreciation of the local environment. In fact, there is the possibility that inquisitive visitors are more likely to spend money in small shops that are hard to access by car. It is well known that walking allows people to appreciate the fine grain of a place.

4.4 Balancing Transport Priorities

Undeniably, at the heart of these lie transport policies of the cities. While the central government, the provincial administration and the local authorities must unite in recognizing the need for facilitating both the motor car and the pedestrian at the same time, a balanced transport policy must ensure that neither one overrides the other. It seems that at the present moment the vehicular traffic has become overbearing and that pedestrian crossings are shifted to suit traffic arrangements and the pavements are being narrowed to provide for vehicular traffic. At Thimbirigasyaya Junction for example, a recent road widening squeezed the pavements to a narrow two feet width in certain locations and it is difficult to understand how the authorities expected people to walk across such spaces without getting onto the main road.

It is also doubtful if the transport policies have much concern for pedestrian movements at all except those bounding on the vehicular roads. There are no comprehensive trails mapped, no attempts to create new ones and no understanding that they form part of the unified transport system of a given urban place. This must change and a concerted effort must be made to recognise the existing routes, maintain them and create new ones.

4.5 Engaging the Employers and Employees

Once a set of balanced traffic policies are created, they must be put to the general public for acceptance and that major employers and employees must be party to transport plans for specific regions. At the moment, there is no such integration but the creation of roads on the basis of counts of traffic at peak periods and diversions and management of them. Employers and employees create those movements and if transport policies are to be really meaningful, they should be related to sources that generate them rather than the end results.

In some countries for example, an employer with a large number of employees is required by law to produce and implement a 'Green Travel Plan' which means that the employers must take care of the travelling arrangements of their employees and be involved in managing how they get to and from work, as same as they are given housing or accommodation, loans to build houses or buy cars, or organize buses for travelling. There is no denial that some organisations do provide such organised services even in Colombo. However, the authorities must by policy, engage employers as potential partners in initiatives to encourage walking and diversify travel. It is not in Sri Lanka that trade unions defend the right of their members to transport facilities, specially for walking and cycling. Perhaps, the trade unions should be asked to also work with government and environmentalists to facilitate a change in their members' travel behaviour.

It is not unfair to ask new developers of large complexes to provide green travel plans for their employees as a condition for the grant of planning permission. They should be required to appoint travel plan officers who should ensure through educational work and police the compliance with such green travel plans that have been required. Unfortunately, there is no responsibility now for employers who only expect the employees to find their way to work somehow on time even in the absence of good transport facilities, roads and walking routes.



Figure 6: City centres facilitated for walking with cycle parks pedestrian-friendly paving and vehicle ban.
Source: Author, in Newcastle, UK and Linköping, Sweden.

[6] A Snickelway is defined as a narrow place to walk along, leading from somewhere to somewhere else, usually in a town or city, especially in the city of York.

4.6 Building Awareness

This also points to the general strategy required to make development controls so set up and any pedestrian routes so generated will eventually transform the city to a more liveable and walk-able place. It is undeniable that creating a fine network of walking routes through the city of Colombo will be acceptable to its residents, visitors and the authorities alike but the availability of such routes and their values need to be brought to the attention of the residents and visitors. A number of strategies are available for city authorities for building public awareness through campaigns for walking competitions, publicizing a guide book for short-cuts and walking in the city, and using distinguishable road signs to clearly indicate pedestrian walkways. If and when the city is ready to function without the car perhaps it may declare "car-free days in the city".

An increased awareness is needed among the residents of the city while a quick guide to the many visitors and tourists is needed to get them all to traverse the city on foot and enjoy its splendour, which is available only to the pedestrians. Planners and architects are often used to see the city from the sky through their models and aerial visual images which without doubt help understand things at a macro scale, but it is the pedestrian view that can make a city a human, liveable and cherishable place for habitation.

Concluding Remarks

This paper raised the issues of facilitating walking in cities as perceived by the public in Colombo, who perceive that such opportunities are dwindling as a result of the modern developments. The paper outlined three public perceptions in terms of safety, convenience and comfort and articulated many variations of these facets as they have manifested in Colombo. The paper also elaborated on some of the strategies that may be adopted in dealing with those issues and argued that a change in transport policy, clearly articulated planning practices involving public employers and employees of regions and a campaign for awareness are needed to re-orientate the development activities to transform the emerging urban landscape to be more humanistic and people-friendly.

It was noted that the planning approaches of the 1970s had had a very sensitive and positive approach to this aspect, which unfortunately have been overlooked in the rush to sort out the traffic jams in the city. The current system of one way street system introduced recently has made the need to promote walking all the more relevant given the fact that driving now seems to take long routes to get from one place to another located within a short distance when it could have been promptly accessible if walking was available as an option.

The present experiment of 'park and ride' to Colombo shows that the authorities are grappling with the motor cars and its impact on the roads in Colombo. This is a positive sign of recognition of the issue, but the way in which it is being dealt with is focused only at the vehicular traffic and overlooks the pedestrians. There is no denial that transport planning must take care of the motorcars but certainly this should not marginalise the city dwellers as pedestrians. It is more so important in the context of the need for 'greening' development that has been now recognized as being most urgent and imperative. Green travel is an imperative of the city in which travel consumes and generates pollution and impinges upon the sustainability of cities. Given this further research into the potentials and problems of transformations of Colombo's public spaces and walkways is necessary to both understand and produce meaningful strategies of their improvements.

It is hypothesized that neither the issues nor the solutions are specific to Colombo and can be generalized and applied to many other urban locations. The problem of recent developments becoming more and more insensitive and restrictive to the pedestrians is an indisputable reality of contemporary Sri Lanka and it is hoped that this paper will incite the authorities to take a closer look at the pedestrian environment and create vibrant opportunities for walking in cities. Today, we are envisaging a renaissance in Sri Lanka and it is well understood that the cities will be the inevitable habitats of the majority. Architects and Planners have an inherent responsibility to make the cities liveable and habitable and walking inescapably is a core activity that will enable it to create cherishable street life and experiences.

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