From Colombo to Sri Jayewardenepura: National heritage and the capricious subjectivities of postcolonial capitals

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Abstract

This paper studies the twentieth century transformation of Sri Lanka’s capital cities, Colombo and Sri Jayewardenepura, and the resultant conflicts over their cultural heritage. It demonstrates how a familiar process of reinventing and reimagining cultural identity became entangled in shifting national aspirations. The period studied spans the 26 year long Sri Lankan civil war. During this period when nation building combined with economic liberalisation, colonial, anti-colonial and national politics competed for representation. These transformations were further contextualised in wartime histories of displacement and dispossession causing demographic change. The multiple forces encountered illustrate the translation of postcolonial conditions into new economies of culture and capital. This paper examines the dual capital cities of Sri Lanka as conveying these divergent desires. Written from the threshold of a post war era where Colombo is the new focus of national-global aspirations, this paper examines their twentieth century contributions to national culture.

Introduction

In 1978, the government of Sri Lanka moved its administrative capital from Colombo to Kotte, a suburb ten kilometres southeast. Colombo, the capital of successive European colonisers with its fortified port and grand Victorian arcades was demoted to ‘commercial capital’ status (Figure 1). Kotte was the site of the pre-colonial city of Jayavaddanapura (city of victory) ascendant during the fifteenth century. Its revival was a grand symbolic gesture of indigenisation; of separating the sacred and profane. However, the actual physical remains of the city were negligible. Abandoned due to colonial hostilities and internecine rivalries during the sixteenth century it had reverted to marshland. The inner citadel and palace precincts were since lost in the conurbation of Colombo.

Kotte was renamed Sri Jayewardenepura following its rejuvenation in 1978, by Prime Minister, later President, Junius Richard Jayewardene. His ambition was of creating a free and just society...
along Buddhist lines. The new capital and the parliament would reinvent his United National Party which had been tarnished by associations with the colonial Commonwealth (Figure 2). Architect, Geoffrey Bawa designed a new parliament (1982) in a vernacular aesthetic which indigenised modern democracy and consolidated the shift. The parliament’s multiple pavilion forms invoked the five-fold monastic complexes of Lanka’s ancient Buddhist kingdoms. By moving the capital, invoking a Sinhala-Buddhist past, and indigenising democracy, the nation’s postcolonial status was inscribed spatially and culturally. Its ethno-national and hegemonic assumptions were revealed during the ensuing bitter civil war (1983-2009).

Colombo, vilified by national socialist sentiment, had no place in these postcolonial dreams. It converted to the refuge of ethnic minorities fleeing northern and eastern battle zones and grew upwards rather than outwards in defensive enclaves. It became an embattled city, a postcolonial cantonment, with its buildings and spaces barricaded against its public. Ethnic pogroms, suicide bombings and the insertion of myriad checkpoints lacerated its suburban grid.

The postcolonial condition is symptomatic of the split between Colombo and Sri Jayewardenepura, representing colonial and indigenous, and commerce and politics. The contrived duality of Sri Lanka’s capitals captures its contradictions. Yet these dualities were also inscribed internally in the Buddhist-style architecture of Colombo’s post-independence cultural institutions or Kotte’s Garden City Plan. While both Colombo and Jayewardenepura were conceived as equal and opposite spaces, the former serving capital and the latter idealising the nation, each had to make concessions to the subjectivities that were excluded. On the part of Colombo, this process occurred during the fever of independence and nation-building from the 1930s-1970s, when aesthetically Buddhist style institutions were inserted into the colonial city. Comparatively, in Sri Jayewardenepura (1970s onward) the adoption of a Garden City Plan, from an established Western tradition of urban planning suggested a flimsy ideological script. Not only were the traces of pre-colonial settlement ignored in its development but the resulting conurbation engulfed its archaeological remnants. Indeed, these two cities, despite their political representations, failed to conform to their spatial projections of distinctive cultural heritage. Capricious representations and turbulent subjectivities melded local hubris with global desires, collapsing these distinctions. They suggested complex agencies.

This paper studies the transformation of Sri Lanka’s capital cities across the twentieth century and the resultant conflicting constitution of their cultural heritage. It demonstrates how a familiar process of reinventing and reimagining cultural identity becomes entangled in diverse and often incongruent national aspirations. It shows how colonial, anti-colonial and national politics compete for representation and how definitions of cultural heritage are transformed by that process. Embedded in this history is a troubling process of the cultural suppression of minority identities during Sri Lanka’s civil war. Written from the lens of a post war era where Colombo is the new focus of national-global aspirations, this paper advances an analysis and critique.

The Changing Claims on Colombo

Long associated with European invasion (the Portuguese (1505–1656), Dutch (1656–1796) and British (1796–1948)), and the site of a colonial fort from 1505 onwards, Colombo’s reception by
indigenous residents has always been mixed. As argued by Nihal Perera (1998) it grew in space and stature as the end point of an extractive economy whereby agricultural products propagated at an industrial scale were syphoned via a network of roads to the port and to Europe. The colonial military and administration had their headquarters in Colombo Fort. Colonial residents and those Indigenous elites favoured by the colonial project inhabited the Fort’s environs, alongside regional migrants and trading minorities – including Tamils, Moors and Malays. The city that was being displaced, replaced and marginalised by the emergence of colonial Colombo was Senkadagala, known as Kandy, the last indigenous capital located in the central highlands, which fell to the British in 1815. Kandy was the seat of the royal court and the heart of indigenous resistance against successive European colonisers. Formal elements attributed to the Buddhist heavens were historically encoded into the city of Kandy, a pattern visible in the royal capitals of South Asia (Duncan 1990: 42-5). The cosmic mountain and ocean were frequently reproduced through multi-storey architectural elements surrounded by water-bodies. In Sri Lanka, only the city of Senkadagala maintained this configuration due to its defensive mountainous geography that prevented capitulation until the nineteenth century. Although the British maintained this cohesive urban template, the city was stripped of its authority and new colonial building types and configurations accumulated. Kandy was reduced to an administrative centre for the surrounding plantations, a part of the industrial agricultural landscape.

The expansion of Colombo into a capital city, the commercial hub of British Ceylon and the home of all its premier institutions has been thoroughly investigated by a number of scholars, including Perera, Michael Roberts and myself (Perera 1998; Roberts et al. 1989; Pieris 2012). The creation of a Christianised comprador class, the competition between caste groups to assume elite status and the expansion of the city southward during the late nineteenth century has been detailed elsewhere (Roberts 1982; Jayawardena 2001). The social actors in this shift from caste mobility to class consciousness, which was facilitated by the colonial project, and its manifestation in the changing residential architecture of the era – from colonial bungalows to Palladian mansions – charts a similar narrative to that witnessed in other colonial centres, in Bombay, Calcutta or Madras. The disruption of these spaces occurred during the early twentieth century around the granting of universal adult franchise when political movements for self-determination and cultural revival coalesced. This is the starting point for a different history of the city as a culturally contested ground.

The national inscription of Colombo and its displacement of the sacred city of Kandy in the indigenous imagination was initiated through a Buddhist revival in southern coastal cities. The desire to penetrate Colombo and claim it for a different cultural purpose was instigated by new caste groups, hybridised by colonisation, who were competing with old elites for colonial prestige. Their approach was combative, directed at aggressive Christian proselytisation, and advanced through strategies of mimicry, of institutions and methods. Perera describes their clandestine entry into urban space, through domestic environments, followed by the introduction of educational and religious institutions that would compete with their Christian counterparts (2002). Particular figures like the theosophist, Henry Olcott, or radical social reformer, Anagarika Dharmapala, strategically reclaimed cultural territory through inventive processes (Seneviratne 1999: 48, 57-9). Whereas early penetration was not visible in the built landscape, by the late nineteenth century a highly politicised Buddhist revival was evident in built form (Figure 3). Culturally symbolic Buddhist pirivenas (monastic colleges) were enlarged with new donations, and Buddhist schools were built. Although

Figure 3: Buddhist-style architecture in Colombo. (Source: Anoma Pieris)
parallels may be seen in the activities of other communities such as Tamils and Muslims, Sinhala-Buddhism dominated the stage (Pieris 2012: Ch. 4).

Strident demands for self-determination and the political upheavals of the independence era (1930s-1950s) saw their impact on official culture. Mindful of their elite – and political clientele, Colonial architectural firms like Edwards Reid & Booth (ER&B) developed a new aesthetic based on Buddhist decorative motifs – reminiscent in their stylistic approach to the Travancore or Indo-Saracenic variations of the Gothic rival. Having experimented on the expansion and renovation of the politically significant Royal Temple at Kelaniya, Reid of ER&B applied this new vocabulary to secular institutional buildings (Robson 2002: 45). Buildings in Colombo like the Art Gallery or the Buddhist, Ananda and Nalanda Colleges would be embellished with Buddhist decorative motifs. In contrast, the parliament building in Colombo designed for the State Assembly by A. Woodson in 1930 (now the Presidential Secretariat) was conceived in the neo-classical mode. The Buddhist style penetrated government architecture belatedly. It was tested at the new university in Peradeniya (1952), a town adjacent to Kandy, which was far more receptive to a Buddhist national style. The style was subsequently introduced for the new Independence Hall (1953) modelled on the Audience Hall at the Kandy Palace and decorated with motifs from Kandy temples. By now these transformations could be attributed to the changing face of the Public Works Department as a generation of local architects, trained in Bombay or London, asserted the hybrid style. The modelling of Colombo’s Protestant, Cathedral of Christ the Living Saviour after a Buddhist chapter house (1973) asserted the politics of the trend. The buildings seldom differed in plan from the neo-classical institutions they emulated, and were designed in a previous orientalist tradition created for the colonies; yet they can be read as efforts to indigenise the colonial city along Sinhala Buddhist lines. The success of Peradeniya in producing an extension of the Kandyan aesthetic and the continuing incongruity of similar Buddhist-style eclecticism in Colombo suggests the difficulty of reinscribing colonial space through culture. This was also a feature of political contestations that underlay the nation-building process.

Political Turbulence and Cultural Change

To fully understand the competition for prestige between Sri Lanka’s two capital cities, we need to understand political competition as it emerged during the nation-building era. Two major parties competed for government: the pro-capitalist United National Party (UNP) and pro-socialist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). There were two periods (1948–56 and 1965–70) when capitalist policies were adopted under the UNP, and alliances with Britain and the postcolonial Commonwealth delayed cultural decolonisation. A robust import-export economy and aid from British dominions shaped an environment open to Western influences. These were interspersed with periods when socialist coalitions were formed, first under the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP – People’s United Front, 1956–65), and second under the United Front, a coalition formed by the SLFP, Communist Party and Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP – Ceylon Equal Society Party) (1970–7). This period was marked by trade agreements and foreign aid from Russia and China and cultural insulation from Western influences. Expedient decolonisation through a national language policy (1956) and the nationalisation of key industries and institutions was their particular legacy. Land reform (1972) divested plantation owners of their lands in a radical levelling of the capitalist classes.

Colombo had always been a global city operating with an eye to Europe even during the height of socialism from the 1950s-70s. Yet long years of economic insulation, anti-Western agendas and political alignment with socialist giants had educated a generation into a form of national-socialism that was culturally framed. The Sinhala Only policy created majoritarian platforms that consistently marginalised ethnic-minorities. Colombo’s Independence Architecture had a majoritarian audience. Yet while political and economic insulation could contain the city’s growth, it could not transform it.

The UNP returned to government with a landslide victory in 1977 and economic liberalisation followed (1977-1994). When economic liberalisation was first introduced in 1977, Colombo was ready to embrace the market. Indeed the rapid transformation of Colombo through the
influx of new construction materials suggested its preparation for a complete makeover. After decades of indigence and material deprivation, the nation’s population was poised for change. Yet, in defeating its opponent the SLFP in this extraordinary manner, the UNP created a political void which was occupied by a Tamil opposition party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). The TULF’s calls for secession escalated into armed conflict.

It was at this point that the incoming UNP government made a momentous decision, conceived, it is argued, to conceal its overtly market-focused agenda (Richardson 2004). The party was smarting from a long period spent in opposition and eager to maintain its unexpected windfall. JR Jayewardene reinvented the party as a champion of a free and just society along the Ashokan model of the just ruler, and looked expectantly for a new stage for expressing his changed ideals. Colombo, replete with colonial associations proved unsatisfactory for a revised Buddhist ideology, and so a new capital had to be invented. In 1978 Jayewardene announced the decision to create an administrative capital in the suburb of Kotte (Kottai meaning fort in Malayali and Tamil) naming it Jayewardenepura. While a city named Jayavaddanapura had indeed occupied that site during the sixteenth century, the association was deliberate.

The Move to Jayewardenepura

The sixteenth century city of Jayavaddanapura, the capital of the Kotte kingdom was ideological located in the Sinhala-Buddhist imagination. It was the island’s capital city during a period of Sinhala cultural supremacy, geographic sovereignty and the overlordship of its ruler Parakramabahu VI over the whole island. Following the conquest of Jaffna and pacification of competing urban centres for political sovereignty, Parakramabahu VI inaugurated an era of cultural efflorescence invoked as a golden age. Jayavaddanapura was his city of victory. This was the last period prior to European colonisation when the entire geography was ideologically and politically unified. The political assertion of this history had implications for The TULF’s incipient secessionism. A new capital that reinforced a particular mono-cultural heritage involving the suppression of the Tamil minority was being realised at a time of heightened inter-ethnic unrest. The new parliament at Sri Jayewardenepura had already converted to a hotbed of competing chauvinisms. The anti-Tamil riots of 1983 underlined these political sentiments targeting and uprooting Colombo’s Tamil middle class.

This ideological connection is only hinted at in the parliament building, designed by the architect, Geoffrey Bawa, in 1982. His architecture was a synthesis of numerous styles that projected an aesthetic of indigenisation without fixing its sources. It was indicative of ambivalent global bourgeois sensibilities towards both identity and nationalism at that time. However, the parliament’s utopian setting on a man-made island and lake, its five pavilion plan, evoke the South Asian cosmologies described previously. Shanti Jayewardene traces similar attributes in Buddhist monastic complexes of ancient Anuradhapura (Jayewardene 1984: 218-19). Yet, the narrow guarded causeway, inaccessible to general visitors, captures the problems of postcolonial democracy, beyond formal or aesthetic concerns. The history and politics of the parliament’s urban plan have been discussed at length by Lawrence Vale (1992) and Nihal Perera (2005) as visible inscriptions of political authority. Perera, for example, cites contradictory motivations between the personal desires of the President, the colonial roots of the garden city plan and what he describes as the ‘critical vernacularism’ of the parliament building (Perera 2005: 264). He also reminds us that the emergence of this ideological space coincided with the internationalisation of Colombo’s Central Business District (CBD) in the old Colonial Fort. Although the symbol of a new era of economic liberalisation, debates within the parliament fuelled an ethno-nationalist contest that would eventually erupt in civil war (1983-2009). The dual city conurbation of Colombo and Jayewardenepura that had come to signify the nation’s capital was ethnically inscribed.

So who were the residents for the new city? Increasing congestion in Colombo, the carving up of properties into smaller and smaller parcels instigated a demographic shift of largely Sinhala residents out of the city and into the new suburbs of Sri Jayewardenepura-Kotte. Areas like Nawala, Rajagiriya and Battaramulla swelled with their influx. Land was abundant in Kotte...
where paddy fields and rubber plantations were soon appropriated for housing developments. The salubrious setting also provided an opportunity for a new kind of elite-formation along indigenous lines. The suburban villa – modelled on the feudal *walavva* (manor) and championed by architects like Bawa offered a luxurious idealisation of rural life. Indigenisation, linked to rural dwelling styles and spaces was integral to the forms of postcolonial cultural reinvention envisioned by local publics. The nascent tourism industry elaborated on these themes. The shift also suggested a growing suburban middle-class among the Sinhalese who had benefitted from economic liberalisation.

The shift of the Sinhalese to Sri Jayewardenepura echoed more troubling ethno-national undercurrents for the creation of the new capital. On the surface they were anti-colonial – Colombo was being demoted and exposed for its mercenary goals. To all intents and purposes, Sri Jayewardenepura was satisfying its cultural objective to invent a new locus for national ideology uncontaminated by a colonial past. Its utopian plan, its salubrious environs and its invocation of a pre-colonial past should have magnified its agenda allowing it to overtake its profane competitor. But the reality was quite different. Jayewardenepura’s garden city had been dredged from a marshland water-retention area that had long received Colombo’s flood water during the monsoonal season. Approximately 780 acres of land were reclaimed at a cost of 140 million rupees and a 300-acre lake was created (Roberts, *The Sunday Observer*, 3 February 1980).

As it was built up, both cities would be increasingly prone to flooding (CEA & Euroconsult 1995). Far from respecting the garden city plan, land acquisition in Jayewardenepura followed a predictable path marked by political favours. Haphazard development ensued. The areas marked for expansion, on the periphery of the parliament precinct, developed rapidly into a disorganised suburban slum. Far from out-staging Colombo, Sri Jayewardenepura exemplified a series of failures, the most critical being its failure to retain its residents. Each morning, grid-locked in traffic jams, the residents crawled from one capital city to the other to transport their children to prestigious schools in Colombo or to jobs in commercial offices in the old Colonial Fort.

## The Dereliction of Colombo

Throughout the 1990s and under the shadow of civil war, political leadership was based on coalitions led by the SLFP (the PA- Peoples’ Alliance 1994-2001, UPFA - United Peoples’ Freedom Alliance 2004-present) or by the UNP (2001-2004), but economic change continued. Despite swings from one political party to another, the trend towards marketisation persisted. Yet the fruits of economic liberalisation had not been equitably distributed. Their effects were crippled by a new era of political violence that responded to failures in resource allocation.

Colombo, perceived as the beneficiary of economic change was the major target of separatist activities throughout the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009), a reality that suggests its continuing significance as a centrepiece of the nation. Or, we might argue that it was targeted as a symbol of economic rather than political strength, an economy which had not reached rural minority constituencies. This was evident within both the Sinhala and the Tamil populations, since Marxist insurrections by landless peasants from the south and heightened Tamil separatist activity dogged the UNPs first political term of this period (1977-1994). If Colombo had failed the nation, then it was made to suffer for its negligence. Insurgent attacks on Colombo, suicide bombings and anti-ethnic pogroms revealed that uneven wealth distribution under neo-liberalism had produced multiple resistant constituencies.

The history of anti-Tamil pogroms in Sri Lanka date from 1958, but three conflagrations in 1977, 1981 and 1983 occurred during this liberal era, when rising inflation and cultural change impacted majority expectations. The resultant insecurities fuelled by political support led to attacks on Tamil residential properties and lives, beginning with Colombo, leaving around 100,000 displaced (Sharvananda et al. 2002). In contrast, the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, People’s Liberation Front) insurrections in 1971 and 1987-90 were born of revolutionary ideals among predominantly rural Sinhalese youth. The incumbent capitalist government, the failed left
movement and the social and economic privileges of the urban bourgeoisie were targeted (Chandraprema 1991: 52). The insurrection was violently suppressed. Yet the denigration of Colombo’s urban landscape was not over. Its latest and most successful assailants were the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who, having suppressed their competitors emerged as the champions of the Tamil separatist cause. Following a first major bomb detonated at the Central Bus Station in Pettah, Colombo, in 1987, the war was brought home to the capital city. LTTE attacks on the city mirrored Sri Lanka Air Force bombardments of Tamil areas in the country’s north and east.

A study of buildings targeted by the LTTE during suicide attacks on Colombo reveals the urban context for or the objects of destruction. The link between the economy, the nation and its institutions were made explicit. The Independence Hall and Town Hall were arenas for assassination attempts on politicians while the bus stations, Bank of Ceylon and Colombo’s World Trade Centre attracted direct attacks. In particular, a vehicle bomb explosion by suicide cadre in front of the Central Bank, Colombo, on 31 January 1996 was a direct hit on the national economy (Figure 4). Adjacent commercial buildings and the main thoroughfare of the Central Business District were destroyed. Fifty-five civilians were killed and 1200 injured. Michael Roberts interprets this episode as ‘a multi-purpose project’, which ‘sought to destroy the country’s gold reserves and told the Sinhala-dominated bureaucracy and Colombo’s elite, who allowed the lower classes to do their fighting, that the LTTE’s reach was unlimited’ (Roberts 2004: 32). The World Trade Centre, the tallest building in the city and symbol of corporate power and private capital was targeted in 1997. The LTTE recognised Colombo’s economic centrality as the root of rural Tamil impoverishment while neglecting the new political symbols at Jayewardenepura.

Following a relentless chain of violence along these lines, Colombo was reconfigured as a battlement; barricading its public buildings against the separatist onslaught. Walls were raised, gateways surrounded by barbed wire, check points set up at major junctions and whole sections of the city closed down for public access. Areas surrounding military facilities or homes of important politicians were removed from everyday circulation paths and concealed from public view. The map of the city developed gaps and omissions, new boundaries and fortifications. Passage through checkpoints, on-ground surveillance, guard towers, and spot checks on vehicles produced a very different pedestrian experience of the city. In 2002, following an assassination attempt on the Minister of Defence, traffic was redesigned following a one-way system to reduce the number of stationary vehicles or head-on traffic. Colombo became a city in motion rather than a static landscape.

This sensibility of perpetual transience and spatial displacement accompanied the ethno-spatial transformation of Colombo during the civil war. The spaces vacated by the 1983 ethnic pogrom were re-occupied by Muslim and Tamil refugees fleeing the North and the East. As a colonial metropolitan centre, Colombo was always more attractive to minorities than indigenous cities linked to Sinhala-Buddhist pasts. The city had several minority enclaves in its poorer areas while middle class minorities were dispersed in suburbs. Tamils resided predominantly at Kotahena (Colombo 13) and Wellawatte (Colombo 6) with affluent families interspersed among the Sinhalese. Anti-Tamil pogroms provoked the concentration of these groups and demographic transformation of minority enclaves. The war altered the character of Colombo’s...
Tamil population from educated middle-class Tamils, Tamil traders and (mainly Indian-Tamil) labourers to a more diverse demographic. The city became an escape route for those able to leave and a space of entrapment to those who could not. Sharika Thiranagama’s description of ‘Tamil Colombo’ distinguishes between the ‘diaspora’ and ‘shadow diaspora’ (2011: 247, 254), and the conditions of displacement, migration and continuous surveillance that defined their everyday existence. The census figures for the Colombo District in 2001 saw percentages of Sri Lanka Tamils 11.0, Indian Tamils 1.1 and Sri Lanka Muslims (Moors and Malays) 10.1, forming the largest Tamil speaking minority in a southern city (Department of Census and Statistics 2001). The Sinhalese in the city comprised 76.6 percent.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a range of multi-storey developments from spacious condominiums to one room apartments without amenities (Figure 5) re-defining Tamil areas. Following their incongruous insertion into Colombo’s low-rise morphology, other suburbs would follow their lead. In short, the upward rise of Colombo was instigated not by globalisation but by displacement.

Colombo was also a sensitive register of the war in the North and East. The location of the main military headquarters and hospital adjacent to the Fort (CBD) meant that ambulances transporting military personnel (from airport to military base) could be heard by residents. When in 2007 the LTTE launched an air raid on Colombo, damaging the Inland Revenue Building, which was proximate to a military facility, the aerial war on the North and the East was inverted.

The Sri Lankan civil war ended in May 2009, with heavy civilian and military casualties which have been discussed at length elsewhere. Colombo’s Galle Face, the colonial parade ground outside the old, neo-classical parliament building was the sight of the military victory pageant. While colonial grounds have always staged such military extravaganzas, Sri Jayewardenepura was not the theatre of choice. Perhaps, this is because the UNFP government had no affinity for Jayewardenepura, which had been the brainchild of their political opponents. Perhaps, it was because Colombo residents who were unsupportive of the government’s militaristic drive needed convincing. Relayed nation-wide on television, the grand march of ordinary soldiers acknowledged the ultimate sacrifices of the rural poor.

**The Revival of Colombo**

In 2011, nearly two years after the end of Sri Lanka’s bitter civil conflict, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) was drawn under the Ministry of Defence (as the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development) in a new partnership focused on national development (MCND 17 October 2011). Its development and beautification programme for Colombo was gazetted. The UDA Director General declared that the government was committed to developing the city, although the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) was controlled by the opposition. The Metro Colombo Urban Development Project, a US$223 mega project, funded by the Government of Sri Lanka with a concessionary loan from the World Bank, was launched in 2012 (MCND 05 June 2012). Its objective was to turn Colombo into a world class city. The envisioned metropolis included four urban local authorities: the Colombo Municipal Council, Dehiwela-Mount Lavinia Municipal Council, Kolonnawa Urban Council and the Sri Jayawardenapura-Kotte Municipal Council.
There are several political subtexts to this amalgamation of Sri Lanka’s two capitals, Colombo and Sri Jayewardenepura-Kotte, into a larger metropolitan identity. The first issue is the political tussle between the government-run UDA and the opposition, UNP, stronghold – the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC). The Beautification Programme for Colombo was introduced by the UPFA government to win over a voting bloc controlled by the opposition. Their lack of support had become evident in the 2010 election when the government failed to win several seats both in Colombo and the Jaffna districts.

Voters in Colombo include metropolitan elites who have always lived in the colonial city, and the educated suburban middle class who are suspicious of the national and socialist origins of the UPFA. They also include disaffected minorities alienated by the ethno-national character of military culture and the urban poor in informal settlements along the urban periphery. The appropriation of CMC-run public amenities gives the government an opportunity to influence established residents while the relocation of Underserved Settlements dislodges the opposition’s most vocal supporters (Fazlulhaq, *The Sunday Times*, 23 October 2011). Additionally, whereas the CMC must draw on municipal revenue gleaned from rates and taxes, the government, post-war, is deploying military labour in urban development. Throughout the city, SLAF (Sri Lanka Armed Forces) personnel, recognisable for the dark coloured clothing, caps and boots, dismantle walls and barricades, build new public spaces and tend gardens. By their intervention the militarisation of civic space, initiated during the war is normalised (Figure 6). The discipline they impose on the liberated city carves the way for the operation of capital.

**Capricious Subjectivities**

It would be easy to argue that cultural division of capital city space as it panned out during the Sri Lankan civil war revealed in microcosm the secessionist politics occurring in the wider island geography, between the north-eastern ‘Tamil/Muslim’ and south-western ‘Sinhala’ parts of the island. But close examination of the post-war demographic belies this division. Although symbolically reduced by the rise of Jayewardenepura, Colombo remained a powerful economic locus – the engine of society and government, home to the old-elites and displaced minorities. Even as Jayewardenepura was enlarged to signify the nation, and to dwarf Colombo in that respect, the global capacity of Colombo increased. We might even argue that Colombo was released from the burden of national representation and left free to assume a new role in the post-war era. That role was reinforced by its reconfiguration through ideologically unattached market forces, diasporic movement of minority populations and the freedom to embrace Western symbols of prestige.

The national inscription of Colombo during the independence era became a lost episode in a longer history of colonial capital, now reinstated via neo liberalism. The nationalist institutions with their pseudo-Buddhist decorations that had been deliberately inserted into the post-independence city were displaced and replaced in a new more homely locus. Sri Jayewardenepura received these institutions as pieces in its garden city plan, which although incongruously appropriating a Western planning model invoked the idyllic context of its tropical environment. By committing its public sphere to national public institutions, to be followed by embassies and residences of cabinet members, Sri Jayewardenepura was converted to a local phenomenon, ethno-specific and historically entrenched. The island-parliament aptly conveyed its insular politics. The proposed distinction of administrative and commercial functions had been transferred onto a different register of national and global representations. In fact, we
might argue that a political juxtaposition introduced with the advent of European colonisation – of the coexistence of indigenous and colonial capitals had been reinstated.

**Representing National Heritage**

A symbol of security, an anchor for national ideology, the locus of exaggerated economic investments and the point of concentration for symbolic capital, the capital city has, for those very reasons, been subject to the greatest upheavals in history, while lesser towns and villages have survived political change. Inasmuch as it is seen as a symbol of permanence, its destruction and displacement, and its appropriation and reinvention appears to have been guaranteed across history. The capital city has been most vulnerable to historic forces and most indicative of social transformations. The threat of social and physical displacement is inscribed in its text. The social indicators of this displacement, changes in labour, internal refugees and demographic change seldom enter its cultural register. Yet, as argued in this paper, the cultural transformation of the capital city as in the cases of Colombo and Jayewardenepura, their significance for residents, for politics and the nation are presaged in these shifts. They provide the record of changing cultural sensibilities that negotiate urban authority and produce the latest chapters in the nation’s cumulative heritage. Capital city identities are revised and historicised for the contemporary gaze via these social changes. Yet, neither the national inscription of Sri Jayewardenepura following 26 years of civil war nor the globalisation of Colombo through a militarised civic sphere suggest the attributes of free market liberal democracy anticipated in their urban plans. The decade-long struggles to achieve these separate utopias, one national and the other global, point instead to the impossibility of stabilising their mixed cultural heritage. They suggest the impossibility of representing the nation as a homogenous cultural identity through capital city space.

**References**


