

Submission to Ceylon Chronicle

'Colombo' by Alan Mammoser

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Why I came & first impressions

Flying in from Dubai at 5 a.m., I saw why Colombo enjoys a most fortunate location. From the airplane window I watched the lights of southern India fade off in the morning darkness. But darkness prevailed just briefly before the port city's glow appeared in the sea. This setting, on an island just off the subcontinent, suggests a great place of shipping and an historic port. It's with good reason that an ancient name for Sri Lanka – *Lanka Dvipa* – means 'fortunate island.'

I came to Colombo to learn about its place in the world and write about its plans for the future. I've seen other cities in the tropics, in Latin America and elsewhere, struggling to find their place in the new economy of knowledge and trade. But Colombo struck me as remarkable for its unique setting in the midst of great historic routes of the spice trade. The city will find its future here again, I believe, as a key node in the increasingly important flow of trade through the Indian Ocean.

Yet even with its serendipitous location, Colombo will need to compete for preeminence as a global hub. It will need good planning to be both beautiful and efficient, to become the kind of city that attracts investors and creates wealth for its people. So I was anxious to see it on the ground and study its plans for the future.

To get a quick feel for the city, I told my taxi driver to skip the tollway and take local roads from the airport to my hotel near the Port. It was a long ride through a traffic-filled corridor, past colorful, crowded shops and grimy garages and all the close-packed bustle typically seen on the outskirts of tropical cities. And this being my first time in Sri Lanka, I delighted in the little shrines holding serene Buddhas above the tumult.

Walking out from my hotel later that morning, I needed a guide. Just then, a friendly guy approached me on the street and offered to show me Buddhist temples, so we hopped in a *tuc-tuc* and set off.

We visited delightful Gangaramaya Temple by the calm waters of Beira Lake, then headed way out on a road along the banks of the Kelani River to beautiful Kelaniya Temple. After some time in those serene confines, we took off again on a long, hair raising ride through thick traffic back to central Colombo. I paid my impromptu guide and, fleeced but happy, walked through frenetic Pettah market streets to the crowded, antique railway station. I was quite amazed by it all.

But it was from the windows of my hotel room that I saw most vividly Colombo's opportunity and its challenge. The long Galle Face Green swept up toward the huge cranes of the historic Port. Between them, I saw a strange piling up of brown sand in the sea, which I recognized as new ground for a future 'Port City.' This city, a hoped-for financial center in South Asia, might someday help to remake Colombo's economy. Yet it's just part of what's needed.

To become a major business and trading center of the 21st Century, one offering new wealth and expanding opportunities for its people, Colombo will need good plans. Plans for transportation, housing, natural areas and employment centers are required. And, to be effective, these plans will need to be skillfully integrated. An overarching vision of the city's future is required, one that is compelling but also realistic.

Colombo is changing

Planners need to quantify a city to understand it. And the numbers show that, relative to many cities of the 'developing world' with ambitions to grow, Colombo stands in a good place. It's the island nation's largest city but happily lacks the overwhelming problems of India's megacities. Unlike them, it hasn't sucked in masses of people from the countryside. Its region, encompassing Sri Lanka's Western Province, covers 6% of the island's land, holds 28% of its population, and produces some 42% of its GDP.

That's a nice balance. The capital region concentrates people and commerce. It generates by far the most per capita income in Sri Lanka, like an engine pulling the country's economy. But the rest of the country remains stable, still largely rural and not over-dependent on the capital. This will help Colombo avoid problems that are too steep to be surmounted.

Nevertheless, there are troubling signs that things are worsening and need to be fixed. There are twice as many vehicles on the roads of the western province than 10 years ago, including cars, trucks, motorbikes and tucs. The number of privately-owned cars is growing at a rate far outpacing population growth (doubling from 20 to more than 40 per thousand people since 2002). Meanwhile, the use of public transport has been falling, from 80% of all trips taken 30 years ago to just 50% now. These trends underlay the worsening traffic congestion in many corridors. They also explain the air pollution that creates serious health risks in some heavily-travelled areas.

The metro area of Colombo and its suburbs, with a population of about 3.7 million today, is growing. It covers just over 25% of the Western Province but it's expanding, pushing outward with high density suburbs. Its growth is covering over open land, making the region ever more vulnerable to monsoon floods. Those that hit with devastating force in 2010 have returned regularly and can be expected to continue. And the city's expansion is fueling other problems too, such as the growing amount of waste that led to the deadly Meethotamulla garbage avalanche last year.

But I got a look beneath the numbers, to know how people feel about their city, my second day in Sri Lanka. Some new friends invited me to lunch in their lovely home in the 7th district. There I met a crowd of people who've lived in Colombo for years. Inspired by my journey of the day before, I had many questions for them about their fortunate yet rapidly growing city.

What they expressed, over and over again, was affection for their city mixed with fear for its future. Colombo is changing – not necessarily in a good way – was the common refrain. They fear that the timeless quality of their tropical, low-rise city is being lost. Colombo's intimate buildings and single-family homes, open spaces and parks, and admirable cleanliness compared to the cities of India, is at risk. High rise buildings threaten to take over the cityscape. And there is traffic, traffic, traffic! It's getting worse everywhere, although people shared one redeeming sentiment about it: "At least we're not Delhi!"

It is the danger of increasing density, as Colombo fills with cars and apartment towers, that troubles them. More deeply, people expressed a sense of larger forces controlling Colombo's destiny, signified above all by the 'Port City' being built into the ocean with massive Chinese investment.

I stayed for ten days in Colombo, discovering a city full of possibilities yet facing the future with uncertainty. I found there are good plans but plenty of doubt about Sri Lanka's ability to realize these plans.

In a rare moment

More people and cars are coming, that seems certain. The Colombo Metropolitan Area (CMA), the central city and its suburbs that cover some 25% of the Western Province, is expanding. Now suburbs that lay 25 km and more from the center of Colombo are increasing in population. Planning forecasts assume that the CMA's population will rise above five million in twenty years, while the whole Western Province will add another 2 million people, rising from the current 6 to almost 8 million people. The number of people working in the region will increase too, with the addition of up to a million more jobs in the region's economy by 2035.

These forecasts, produced for transportation plans, are not unreasonable. Even if the figures are not completely right, it's clear that Colombo and its region will have more people, more density and more traffic. And, because Sri Lanka's annual GDP growth is expected to be healthy, increasing by more than 4% annually on average for the next 20 years, we can assume a wealthier region. A rising tide that lifts all boats, giving most everyone a higher standard of living in 2035, will be a good thing. And it will most certainly bring more cars and driving.

As transportation planners measure it, the number of motor cars in the Western Province doubled from 2002 to 2012 (from 20 to 42 per 1,000 people). That rate of increase will likely continue in the next 20 years, with the number of vehicles increasing at a much greater rate than the region's population. This increasing vehicle ownership, and a widely perceived lack of quality in bus and rail services, will likely cause a continuing decline in public transport use. The current share of daily trips on public transport, now about 50% of all km travelled in the CMA, could drop to as low as 30% of km travelled by 2020.

This will lead to many more trips on the roads every day, making current traffic problems twice as bad by 2035 – if you can imagine that. Meanwhile, more high rises will be built and more valuable open land consumed by sprawl.

Clearly, before this scenario comes to pass, there's need for intervention guided by a plan. One prominent planner who's optimistic about Colombo's future is Nayana Mawilmada, who served as Head of Investments and policy advisor for the Megapolis Planning Project. Megapolis, or Great City (in Greek), is a plan for the whole Western Region, encompassing the three districts of Gampaha, Colombo, and Kalutara in the south.

An MIT-trained planner who honed his craft during years at the Urban Development Authority, Mawilmada worked on long-range planning before going into the private sector earlier this year. His positive outlook comes from a broad view of history, both the distant and the recent past.

“We’re in a rare moment,” he says. “We’ve emerged from war, and we’ve seen an awakening of our country.” Now, he believes, with Sri Lanka’s recommitment to democracy under a new coalition government, the country is poised to strengthen its ancient and enduring role as a key center of Indian Ocean trade.

Mawilmada sees clearly the problems but senses opportunity. He conveys a planner’s vision of form, not sprawl; of order, not chaos. He wants Colombo to become a major economic hub in South Asia, a city of high finance, high tech and advanced manufacturing and logistics. Yet he wants it to grow without losing its beloved identity.

“We want to grow without losing our city - we don’t want to become another generic Asian city,” he says. Now he thinks there’s momentum to get things done, “to move the needle,” as he puts it.

It may not be a pipe dream, because Sri Lanka was at the heart of Indian Ocean trade in centuries past, and the Indian Ocean was at the center of global trade. Many believe this will be an emerging story of the 21st century, as global trade routes between rising China, India, Africa and the Middle East again converge here. But to take full advantage of such a fortunate convergence, Colombo will need to take control of its future.

Great City Plan

The Megapolis Plan combines many ideas, some new and some not so new. It builds on schemes for Colombo going back to the 1980s, as well as planning by a Singaporean team from the engineering company CESMA. The CESMA team, joined by Sri Lankan planning experts, worked at the behest of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in the early 2000s. They strove to give Sri Lanka a plan for a major metropolis; for the kind of big, dynamic capital city that powers the economies of other Asian countries.

They came up with a regional plan looking to the year 2030, a classic ‘regional structure’ scheme with a high density downtown core and development corridors extending north, east and south, gradually decreasing in density. Urban centers within these corridors are linked by expressways and rail lines.

This scheme was brought back with Mr. Wickremesinghe’s return to power in 2015. A Megapolis Ministry was established, producing a revised and updated plan last year. An accompanying regional transportation plan, based largely on reports from experts at the University of Moratuwa and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), was also issued.

The planners adapted the regional structure into a ‘zones and corridors’ scheme, with 13 unique ‘planning areas’ for industry and environmental conservation across the Western Region. Overlaid on these are urban centers of differing densities, all linked together by expressways and modern transit systems. The intention is to contain urban development within the zones, to relieve pressure on the surrounding countryside that should remain largely natural and rural in character.

It’s a lofty, ambitious plan for the long term, looking outward 20 years and beyond. Its transportation scheme is quite costly and probably overambitious. But a plan must be compelling if it is to inspire major change. So even if not all of it happens, it can still serve as a useful blueprint guiding the region’s development for decades.

“Implementation of the Megapolis Plan will shape Colombo – and Sri Lanka – for the next century,” says Mawilmada.

Imagine a swift, sleek light rail train (LRT) swooping over tracks above the streets of central Colombo. It comes from Malabe to a new ‘multi-modal transportation hub’ at the Fort railway station, where it connects with busses, boats on Bera Lake, and newly electrified and modernized railways. It’s not a futuristic fantasy. The LRT project is already in an advanced design and engineering phase with JICA expected to help finance its \$1.5 billion construction cost. Meanwhile, railway electrification is proceeding with feasibility studies funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

According to Mawilmada, the LRT will cut travel time between Malabe to Colombo Fort nearly in half, from over an hour now to about 40 minutes, while riders enjoy the air-conditioned comfort of a modern metro. “It will be a fundamental shrinking of this city,” he says.

Malabe to Fort is the first of what the Megapolis Plan foresees as a network of six LRT lines leading to central Colombo. These will connect with a modernized railway system, with new electric trains running much more swiftly and comfortably than the current ones. But the plan embraces natural systems as well as high tech transit. It foresees a revival of water transport on Bera Lake, the Kelani River, and a canal in the Kalutara district from Battaramulla to Wellawatta at the sea.

All these will be coordinated to counter the traffic snarl and, if not reduce it, at least keep it from getting worse. A vast expansion of public transit will be needed because the city center will continue to grow. Indeed, it will undergo a remarkable remaking according to the plan.

“You get a chance to define the skyline of Colombo, to create a new skyline,” says Mawilmada as he shares a compelling vision. He foresees a handsome array of commercial and residential towers, not scattered about, but rising in the city’s heart.

Imagine a dense gathering of towers in the new Port City, which continue in a gleaming swath to the area around the Bank of Ceylon and WTC towers, and along both shores of Beira Lake. “Let’s allow the city to cradle this body of water, and to celebrate it,” says Mawilmada of Bera Lake’s future look.

This glittering high-rise office and residential center will lead the country’s economy with top corporate and financial services. But it will be balanced by new growth throughout the region, in a careful pattern that doesn’t overrun agricultural and natural lands.

“Sprawl is getting worse, cutting into landscapes, causing flood damage,” says Mawilmada. “But our landscape in the Western Province is still not destroyed; an amazing ecosystem remains.”

The Megapolis Plan will seek to preserve and enhance this. A ‘Plantation city’ will conserve agricultural lands and improve rural livelihoods in the area around Hanwella, with connections to transport on the Kelani River. To the south, a ‘Forest city’ will preserve natural lands in an area of more than 1,000 sq. km. Meanwhile, an ‘Industrial city’ will try to concentrate industries around Mirigama, while another will rise at Horana and connect to Colombo via the modernized electric railway. A ‘Science and technology city’ will be developed in the vicinity of Malabe, enjoying the aforementioned speedy link to central Colombo on the new LRT.

These centers of economic development will be designed at fairly high population densities to counteract sprawl patterns. Meanwhile, the plan calls for completing the expressway link from

Bandaranaike Airport, with construction of a New Kelaniya Bridge and elevated road to Colombo Port and the Fort area. This will lay the basis for development of a 'Logistics city' along this route, generating jobs and attracting investors to what will become a primary transport, logistics and manufacturing hub of South Asia.

The plan does have three big, expensive highway projects including new Central and Ruwanpura Expressways to the interior, and an elevated expressway from New Kelani Bridge to Battaramulla. Nevertheless, it does not focus primarily on these, emphasizing instead the electrified rails and LRT to achieve balance, such that people find numerous options for travel and traffic does not overwhelm.

It also complements the big transit projects with other non-auto alternatives. It talks at length of improving bus service. And there is much talk of "transport demand management," using strategies like flexible work hours and traffic flow management that spreads traffic out over the day to reduce rush hour congestion. It even emphasizes bicycling and walking, with the expectation that 10% of trips in the central area should be on foot or pedals.

Such, in summary, is the Megapolis Plan's regional structure, which strives to make Colombo the best city to live and work in South Asia. It would be the spatial underpinning of Sri Lanka's efforts to create an advanced, high income economy in its capital city.

Years to show results vs. turn things around quickly

Most everyone I asked about the Megapolis Plan agreed that it offers a worthy vision for the city's future. The trick though, as with any regional plan, lay in its implementation. The Megapolis Plan looks to the year 2035 as its 'long range' horizon for completing the big infrastructure projects, including the expressways, railway electrification and LRT system. Some of this will likely be built by then. But building three expressways and all six LRTs will no doubt take much longer, if they're ever built at all. They're just too expensive.

Amal Kumarage, former Chairman of the National Transport Commission, and Professor at University of Moratuwa, puts the plan into perspective. He contributed to Megapolis and its related transportation plans. Now he's working on more short-term and affordable solutions to Colombo's transport challenges, focusing on busses.

"I'm a big supporter of bus transport," he says. "Sure, we need to begin work on railways and LRT, but those take years to show results. Busses can turn things around quickly."

Kumarage believes that Sri Lanka has a great heritage in busses, but they have fallen into disrepute, sadly neglected by the government. "The thinking has been that busses are for the poor, and as the country gets richer we won't need them anymore," he says.

To the contrary, he points to wealthy Singapore, where bus service composes some 60% of the city's public transit system. "Singapore and Hong Kong have risen into first world status on the back of public transport," he says, "and busses play an indispensable role there."

To make busses popular again for the middle class and professionals, he calls for a broad approach that combines bus reform with new technology. It would encompass a revenue pooling system, new high

quality busses, electronic fare pay, better terminals and stops, GPS, IT, and road improvements with special bus lanes that give priority to busses at intersections.

Kumarage has helped to plan two bus priority lanes that are now in operation and, he says, showing good results. One is a 12 km stretch of Galle Road (A002) between Moratuwa to Pettah. Another is on Parliament Road (A000), on 6 km between Battaramulla to Pettah. Further funding to extend bus priority lanes in and around Colombo is anticipated in the national budget for 2018.

Better bus service is gaining support of the government and international funders, including ADB and the US's Millennium Challenge Grant. Sri Lanka is now formulating a comprehensive bus reform called *Sahasara*, which is derived from the Sinhalese words *saha* (many, community) and *sara* (movement). A pilot project occurred in Kandy this year, with a countrywide rollout anticipated in 2018.

So the Megapolis Plan could well be pieced together by busses. Kumarage's argument in their favor is convincing. They can greatly enhance Colombo's whole transit system, but they'll need to be closely integrated with the newly electrified railways and LRT. The objective is to connect short bus trips to longer train trips, giving greater mobility to everybody without adding more cars to the roads.

This is looking increasingly possible, because bus reform is happening even while the country is pushing forward with modernization of the old railways. Comfortable, electrified passenger trains will move fast while still being able to make quick starts and stops, thereby linking efficiently to other trains and busses. The first such improvement is planned for the line from Panadura to Veyangoda, passing through Fort Station. It's a 60 km stretch that's slated to begin construction 2019 and begin actual operations in 2021.

Kumarage also points to the importance of several new 'multi-modal transportation hubs' that are now in the works. One, at Kottawa, is to open in early '18, while two others are now being planned for Kadewacha and Moratuwa. These hubs will be important points where the whole system connects together. They will feature park-and-ride, connections to long haul and short run busses, and connections to the rail system (except at Kadewacha).

All this begins to show the outlines of a realistic, functional transport system, the bones on which the Megapolis Plan can build. So Colombo residents should expect the continued modernization of the old rail lines, probably one LRT (the Malabe to Fort line), more multi-modal hubs and a lot of bus upgrades. This system can reverse the decline of public transit and keep traffic congestion at tolerable levels, even while the city grows. It is something Sri Lanka can do, grounded in the visionary Megapolis Plan, but realistic in terms of the country's budget and actual needs.

A roof with a view

Looking out one afternoon from the rooftop patio of the Kingsbury Hotel, I could see Colombo's future taking shape. A new skyline of high rise luxury is under construction. To the south the new Hyatt, stately and tall, is nearing completion. A little further up the Galle Face Road is India's ITC Colombo One, billed as 'responsible luxury' for its subtle environmental design. Inland from there, in the Slave Island area, is the massive Cinnamon Life project that developer John Keells Holdings calls 'a city within a city.' Nearby stands the just-opened Shangri-La Hotel, with two towers still under construction, dwarfing the stately

Old Parliament building. And at the top of Berea Lake the three-tower project of India's Krrish Group – marketed as a 'vertical city' – is rising. Meanwhile, just below me where the shoreline once ran, a great expanse of yellow sand now spreads over the sea, being readied to hold a new financial center in South Asia.

In a couple years this rising skyline will glitter with lights, sparkling like a jewel in the Indian Ocean. Yet it will look like many other places with the standard global array of luxury apartments, hotels and office towers. As they multiply, filling in the city center, they will make Colombo look much like the generic Asian city mentioned by Nayana Mawilmada. But what will happen to the old neighborhoods that make up Colombo's historic character?

Later that day, as evening came on, I walked through the packed, close-knit streets of Slave Island. Workers were streaming in from the construction sites, walking up narrow stairways and disappearing into apartments. While exploring these small, lively streets, which are so obviously important to the city's vital life, I wondered what would hold them intact. When the construction is finished, and the new high-rise city is standing, it will still need workers and places for them and their families to live. It occurred to me that while some parts of the city centre will inevitably be transformed, others should be preserved for the working people of Colombo.

Preservation

For Hirante Welandawe the question of preservation is urgent. A Colombo-based architect, she spearheaded an effort to catalogue the city's historic buildings and districts. But her concern extends to what she calls 'inclusive development' that allows people of all income levels to continue living and working in historic neighborhoods.

"I think new trains and other things in the Megapolis Plan are good, but development mustn't lead to demolishing the whole central area," she says.

We spent a couple hours one afternoon walking through the Fort, examining gems such as the old Passenger Terminal and the Grand Oriental Hotel. From there we took a long walk through Pettah to see the tight knit streets lined with shop houses. She explained to me how the area's plot structure is unique, with long narrow plots for shop houses. It's an unusual urban grain from long ago that could easily be destroyed by the megablocks required for new high rises.

Later I made my way to Hultsdorf Street, where I marveled at the twin Greek facades of the old court building. Welandawe pointed out how, besides being badly deteriorated, the double façade is marred by a newer building in its forecourt. Her acute sensitivity to setting and context has led her to catalogue not just stately old buildings, but also to survey whole districts. Her study focused on Fort and Pettah. But it extends to parts of Maradona, with its British-era buildings and old railway station, and to Kotahena with its cathedral and collection of Dutch-era buildings that she calls "a beautiful complex."

She meant her study to be a preliminary catalogue of important areas to be preserved, which the government could use as a basis for protecting historic districts. The current national Antiquities Act protects individual buildings over 100 years old but does not preserve their surroundings.

“It’s not enough,” she says, referring to current law. “If a new project is plopped down between old Dutch buildings, it will completely destroy the urban fabric of that area.” She’s advocating for new conservation laws that consider the urban context, the way buildings integrate into their surroundings. And she wants the government to think more broadly about how preservation fits into strategies for tourism.

But all this seems far off, she says, as the government has so far done little with her report. She grieves for what’s already been lost and worries about what remains in the central area, where developers have bought up large areas to hold for future development.

“We shouldn’t be saying ‘yes’ to every developer,” she says, “but for now these districts are unprotected.”

Indeed, development in central Colombo may well be rushing ahead of the Megapolis Plan, threatening to become an unlovely sprawl of buildings that does not respect the plan’s aspiration for coherent urban form. But my walks through the crowded inner city districts, filled with working people and small businesses, showed me that it’s not just a matter of buildings but a matter of people. Losing them – forcing them out with high land prices and high rise development – would be tragic for the city.

Fairness

The Megapolis Plan promises to remake Colombo’s centre into a sparkling hub of the global economy. But first the city must free up land for high value development. The result is relocation, as properties are assembled into big blocks for high rises and lower income working people are moved out of the way. That’s happening now and it raises a critical question: can the plan guide the region’s growth in an equitable way, in a way that lifts all boats as the economy rises?

Some public policy advocates, who decry the previous government’s intimidation and violence in the relocation process, and continue to monitor relocations, are skeptical.

“For now, the new government’s suspension of forced evictions is holding,” says Danesh Jayatilaka, an economist at the non-profit International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo. “But development is picking up speed, with luxury buildings and new flats for expats returning from work overseas.”

Jayatilaka recently coauthored a report, “The right to adequate housing following forced evictions in post-conflict Colombo, Sri Lanka,” (January, 2017), which describes the government’s ongoing Urban Regeneration Project (URP) and its preferred option of rehousing people in large, high density housing projects away from the central area. While the URP officially seeks to beautify the city and address inadequate housing, Jayatilaka’s report documents a breakdown of communities.

According to the report, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) found more than 68,000 families in Colombo – over 50% of the city’s population – living in clusters of what are called ‘underserved settlements’ commonly referred to as *wattas* (literally ‘gardens’ in Sinhala). There are as many as 1,500 in the city, many of them on valuable land in and around the central area. The authors surveyed 900 households in Colombo, half of which had been relocated, to get a picture of how people make their livelihoods and build communities within *wattas*, their attachment to where they live, and the disruption that occurs when they are relocated to distant high rises.

Iromi Perera, a senior researcher at the Colombo-based Centre for Policy Alternatives, also sees a loss of community and profound social cost with relocation. She's authored several reports on the topic.

"The selling point of all the new developments coming up is luxury living," she says. "But this is not Colombo's history, because half of the city's population has been working class."

What Perera sees in the URP and the Megapolis Plan is a misguided effort to make Colombo mimic big global centers like Singapore. It's something she criticizes as an overbearing attempt to change the basic DNA of the city.

"Who are they creating the city for?" she asks. "It's extremely frustrating because they're creating something without thinking about who is going to use it."

When I asked her about Slave Island, she told me it's actually an exception because long-time residents there are not being relocated far away but are going into new towers nearby. They were able to stay because of two factors: they hold title to their properties and they went to court. Elsewhere, such as in the Mawatha and Bauddhaloka areas near Independence Square, relocation is looming for people living on state-owned land. It's land they've lived on for decades but they don't hold title.

There are approximately 65,000 families subject to relocation under the URP, and by Perera's estimate not even 10,000 families have been moved so far. She bases her estimate on the number of high rises recently built or now under construction in the northern Colombo area. Dematagoda, where new apartment buildings are going up to receive many of the relocated, will become much denser.

A big problem, she points out, is that new apartments are allocated on the basis of house-per-house replacement, not house-per-family. They're about 430-450 square feet, just two rooms that are not enough for extended families. And families getting relocated have to pay 1 million rupees for one of these. Some families are literally becoming homeless.

Perera also describes the broader costs of people leaving their long-established homes and communities to live in the high rise towers. They lose access to good schools for their children in central Colombo, and they lose opportunities for home-based income generating activities. Small businesses that cater to daily neighborhood needs, such as making food items for local businesses and so forth, become difficult if not impossible when people are concentrated in large buildings.

The two researchers see these problems arising from what essentially amounts to an out of sight, out of mind approach. Instead of in-situ slum upgrading, it's a policy that breaks up communities and puts people into high-rises in very dense environments. Their critique would find support among many in the planning profession today.

One prominent South Asian thinker who has something to say here is the architect Charles Correa. He writes eloquently about the region's long tradition of building at low scale with simple materials, for a life that's lived much of the time in open-to-the-sky spaces. In concentrated low rise housing, small dwellings are enhanced by ample courtyards and other communal spaces. These are the shared spaces to meet, talk, cook and wash clothes, which are so common in tropical climes.

Correa argues convincingly that this way of life can be accommodated in big cities, even at densities high enough to support public transit. His main principles are to retain the timeless quality of low rise dwellings, keeping employment nearby to have a good work-dwelling mix, while avoiding exclusive one-

use zoning that disallows such a mix. These principles are violated when buildings get too tall; when their courtyards are inevitably reduced from living spaces to parking lots.

For Colombo's planners, his principles are worth considering. They suggest that lower income working people, who are vital to the city's economy and cultural life, need not be relegated to distant high rises. Even as the city transforms in the larger global economy, they will be needed in that economy and should remain a large part of the city's mix.

For his part, Danesh Jayatilaka likes many ideas in the Megapolis Plan even while he critiques it. He questions whether the plan is realistic given its high ambitions and its cost to a country already deep in debt. "Sri Lanka is in a special moment and this city will change," he affirms. "The diaspora is coming back with a lot of hopes for transformation.

"But making Colombo a 'garden of Asia' or another Singapore? It may all be pie in the sky," he says with a laugh.

Finance

The price tag for such ambitions is rather forbidding. The public transit projects, including the LRT system and railway upgrades, are estimated to cost US \$11 billion. The entire scheme, including Port City, is put somewhere in the range of US \$40 billion, which is about two-thirds of Sri Lanka's average annual GDP. And everything is expected to be built rather quickly, as the Megapolis Plan's transportation component looks to a horizon year of 2035 – less than 20 years from now to finish.

"Megapolis is a reasonable plan; it will require a large purse to implement," says Amali Rajapaksa with some understatement. Rajapaksa, a World Bank infrastructure finance specialist, agrees there is much of value in the plan even while she voices a need for institutional reform to make it happen.

The Megapolis Plan emphasizes the need for Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to leverage private investment in infrastructure. Rajapaksa agrees this method is needed, and she says it's already worked well for the ongoing redevelopment of the Port of Colombo, which has been led by a private sector consortium since 1999 (South Asia Gateway Terminals Ltd). But she is concerned about transparency and urges competitive tendering, a practice that has not always been followed.

"The easiest thing to give away is transport infrastructure," she says, referring to the dangers of poorly structured PPPs that are negotiated behind closed doors and tend to favor private interests over the public. "So there is a need for careful evaluation of each project."

The World Bank is now advising the Sri Lankan government on how to set up a special PPP unit within the Ministry of Finance. Such a unit would be staffed with experienced financial experts to negotiate and manage these complex deals.

In the meantime, Rajapaksa urges the government to look for low cost, interim solutions to Colombo's growing urban problems, especially its traffic problem. Planners call such low cost strategies "transport demand management," and these do play an important role in the Megapolis Plan's transportation component. They include staggering work hours, managing parking and traffic flow, rerouting busses and so forth.

“This is low hanging fruit that can be had now,” she says, echoing Amal Kumara’s emphasis on improving the region’s relatively low cost bus system. “The basic issue is to have fewer vehicles and more people coming to the center.”

A new urbanism in Sri Lanka: Getting it done?

“It’s hugely ambitious,” says Madhura Prematilleke of the Megapolis Plan. A Sri Lankan who’s practiced architecture throughout Asia, now principal of the firm *team Architrave* in Colombo, Prematilleke has thought much about planning and about his country’s peculiar characteristics. “I know how difficult it is to get things done here,” he says.

“It’s a worthy plan,” he continues, “but it follows a mindset of development that really doesn’t work for us – it requires so much efficient management.”

This is not the natural way of doing things in Sri Lanka, Prematilleke believes. He quotes a common Sinhala saying, ‘somehow or other.’

“We need a plan that will allow us to do it ‘somehow or other,’ and not in highly specific, defined ways,” he says.

Still, he thinks something must be done and that the Megapolis Plan – at least parts of it – should be tried. “Megapolis has the underpinnings of a structure, of a good urban fabric. Our best hope is to pull out its critical transport elements and focus on these,” he says. The transportation pieces are the bones of it all, he implies, which once in place should help to channel the city’s growth in a good way.

In this he agrees essentially with Nayana Mawilmada, who told me: “The LRT and the rail electrification are the real game changers. We’ve got to get them in place so that they continue to shape the city over the long term, no matter who is in government. They’re ‘politics-proof’ so to speak.”

Yet beyond this basic agreement, Prematilleke looks at the challenge more deeply. Considering whether a plan of such scale and complexity can come about, he asks, “Are we really even an urban culture?”

He reflects on the experience of Turner Wickremasinghe, chief architect for the country’s State Engineering Corporation in the 1970s. Wickremasinghe led the design of Summit Flats, a housing development consisting of 960 units in numerous mid-rise buildings in Keppetipola mawatha. Originally built for journalists attending a summit of non-aligned countries, which Sri Lanka hosted in 1976, it was later opened to middle income families and remains a vital residential area in this part of Colombo today.

At Summit Flats, Wickremasinghe carefully fitted 4-story brick buildings into the existing neighborhood of colonial British bungalows and ancient trees. It was a successful weaving that preserved the old homes and trees while creating a much higher density urban environment. The handsome brick mid-rises were artfully designed to give a good mix of private and shared public space, allowing families access to the important ‘open-to-the-sky spaces’ that Charles Correa would later write of.

Summit Flats represents a kind of tropical urbanism that Prematilleke admires and that he thinks has gone by the wayside. He sees little of it in the current focus on luxury towers and high rise replacement

housing. “We’ve missed an opportunity to create Wickremasinghe’s kind of solution, to create a vital urban culture,” he says of contemporary planning.

“In Colombo,” he continues, “the urban poor compose about half of the city’s population but they live on just 10% of its land. A good urbanism will sustain them in place while creating high quality public spaces for a diverse population – rich and poor – in the future.”

Prematilleke expresses particular concern about Port City, soon to be rising on the reclaimed sand on the edge of Colombo. The Chinese-led development may well become the country’s long-sought financial center in South Asia, holding a place between Singapore and Dubai. But Prematilleke fears it will be under Chinese domination, a thing in Sri Lanka but not of Sri Lanka. “It may just take on a life of its own while the rest of the city flounders in sprawling, chaotic growth,” he says.

Finding the will

On my last morning in Colombo I took a long walk down Galle Face Road to the Kollupitiya railway station by the sea. It was a bright morning in early December as train after train rolled in from the north, horns blasting, wheels screeching loudly to stop. Each train delivered a large crowd of people, men in dark dress shirts, women in colorful saris, young people and students all piling onto the concrete platform. They flooded over its broken concrete stairs and across the tracks toward the city.

I enjoyed standing amidst these crowds of Sri Lankans coming off the ancient, rusty trains. I stood there quite a while watching each train resume its journey, slowly, almost painfully picking up speed and chugging off down the tracks. I tried to imagine them replaced with sleek new electric railcars, with the latest Japanese or European technology. I couldn’t quite visualize that, although I saw the need for it.

During my stay in Colombo I saw that the city will continue to grow, one way or another. But for it to flourish, and for Sri Lanka to flourish, it will need to grow well. Sri Lanka will need a vibrant, well-functioning capital for the 21st century – the century of cities. And for this it will need a good plan to follow.

There is great danger it may fail. That Megapolis is a good plan is widely recognized. But to avoid the fate that Madhura Prematilleke fears – a chaotic growth that does not serve the Sri Lankan people – the plan will require a vigorous implementation. This will not be easy. If it is to occur then all Sri Lankans, not just the government, will need to see its importance and support it.

“It comes down to political will, on the part of the government and civic society,” said Amali Rajapaksa, as we discussed the difficulties facing the Megapolis Plan. She made the point that it’s not always governments that are to blame for failure of implementation. Civic society, including the press, the business sector, thought leaders and nonprofits, must also step up and hold their government accountable for its good plans and intentions.

It’s here, I think, in the matter of public will and civic commitment, that Prematilleke’s questioning of what he calls Sri Lanka’s ‘urban culture’ really hits home. Is there a sufficient civic sector to push for this plan or for any plan that promises to remake Colombo? He suspects that even among the city’s business leaders, who would naturally form a core constituency backing such a plan, there may not be enough desire to see what must be done and push for it.

So I sensed, at the end of my ten-day stay, that a critical moment has arrived, a time of important decisions. A very good plan is in place and there's some momentum behind it. Much determination will be required to implement it, to transform Colombo into a vital hub of South Asia, one that artfully combines lively commerce with a high quality urban environment for its people. Somehow or other, I believe, Sri Lankans will indeed rise to the occasion, remaking Colombo for a new century, securing its future as a great capital city for this fortunate island.

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Author bio -

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