Postcard from Sri Lanka

Author: Clare Hall

Sri Lanka featured in international news bulletins for its suicide bombers and abductions, not for its rich cultural history and diverse natural beauty. Today, things have changed.

There is a palpable sense of excitement amongst those interested in Sri Lanka’s future.

Tropical rain pours down from thin grey clouds following overhead. They are on a fast flight west from the Indian Ocean to the Sri Lankan hill country some 12km inland. It is around noon on a warm day in mid-July 2009 and I am stranded on my scooter at the side of a local road in Halawathota. Hikkaduwa, sits deep in water.

I cannot see 50 metres in any direction, my view is suddenly obscured by the daily monsoon rains.

While removing my umbrella from under my seat, I frantically try to cover the maps I’m holding.

I hear the voice of a woman calling urgently: “Oya banawa, tea?” she is inviting me to drink tea. I see her emerge with a huge smile on her face from the grey haze of rain and vision rising from the road. I guess I might look a little funny. Smiling gratefully in return, I follow her into a tiny cement and mud brick house with a terracotta roof and sit down on a plastic chair in the main room.

We chat about the monsoon, our families, and food, in a clumsy combination of Sinhalese and English while the rains blow over.

I discover that my new friend is a tower with two sons. Her husband died of cancer several years ago.

She says she is happy now. Feeling the same, I leave her house with an invitation to dinner.

Sunshine has burst through the grey ceiling above, illuminating terracotta roofs of houses and the friends of coconut palms. Hikkaduwa is washed clean, shiny and vivid with colour. It is beautiful. I get back to work, spending the remainder of the afternoon riding around the 25,012 hectare Hikkaduwa Urban Area council recording details of land use, roads, topography, new corridors, and heritage buildings. This was part of my work collaborating with the Sri Lankan Urban Development Authority (UDA) to prepare a new Development Plan for Hikkaduwa.

Hikkaduwa is a growing coastal town on Sri Lanka’s south western coast, some 90 kilometres south of Colombo, the nation’s capital. It is one of Sri Lanka’s most important tourist destinations; therefore, it is important to the national economy.

Like many parts of the Sri Lankan coast, Hikkaduwa was devastated by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and still bears visible scars from the disaster. The tsunami rehabilitation has occurred rapidly and largely unchecked, to the detriment of Hikkaduwa’s commercial centre, beachside hotel precipice, and its once pristine sandy beaches and coastal vistas.


With a background in statutory and strategic planning, and a strong craving for adventure, I joined the project in early 2008. My role was to prepare Stage 2 — the Development Plan itself in collaboration with the UDA’s Galle District office under the direction of Mr. Hemanthi Jayasuriya, the Sri Lankan TRPS Director, and Mrs. Indra Weerasingha, UDA Director Development Planning.

I joined at various stages throughout this process by fellow Australian planners Claire Findlay and Carol Pilat, as well as Sarah Haq, a Melbourne based landscape architect.

The planning process involved months of consultation and collaborative workshops with government officers and community stakeholders regarding the matters raised in the Stage 3 Situation Report.

Currently, the Sri Lankan planning system does not incorporate any formal consultation process.

Consequently, the current approach could be considered fairly ad hoc, with final sign off on strategy and zoning made by experts based in the nation’s capital, Colombo.

This appears to be an impendence to achieving local relevance and respect for planning development and urban design regulations, and ultimately the overall effectiveness of planning in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, although the implementation process was a challenge in itself due to lack of barriers, the greater challenge was ensuring that the information gained from consultation was actually embedded into policy. During this process, it became apparent that the 20-year-old land use maps held by the UDA were an insufficient base for mapping new zone and precinct focused policies. The maps depicted a vastly different pattern of urbanisation to what was observed in the field.

So, to address this issue, I set about undertaking a Council Area Survey to discover just how well the diverse and ancient Hikkaduwa’s natural environment and villages are aligned with our landmappings through the paddy fields and village streets — far removed from its chaotic main street.

I found myself with a new daily ritual of afternoon tea with warm-spirited locals. This experience was totally thrilling.

The Development Plan was adopted in November 2009 by the Hikkaduwa Urban Council Chairman, Mr. Wimnie Karannagama. It comprises planning strategies, development regulations and guidelines, Urban Design Frameworks (essentially concept plans) for eight precincts, and a companionary zoning all-project Capital Works Program.

The implementation of the plan is now in the hands of the Hikkaduwa Urban Council, while they wait for its gazettal by the Minister for Urban Development and Sacred Area Development.

The Urban Council has limited resources for items such as computers, stationery, staff, and capital, and has difficulty generating revenue through rates and issuing penalties for unauthorised work.

Furthermore, the local community does not regard development regulation by government with a great deal of respect.

It was with these significant challenges to implementation in mind that we included the Capital Works Program in the plan to describe discrete infrastructure, recreation, and community facility projects that would greatly contribute towards the achievement of the overall planning strategies.

The idea was that each capital works project could be implemented as the funds become available. This would still result in localised improvements to environment and quality of life, even if the implementation of development guidelines through the planning approvals process continues to be difficult.

Now, more than ever, there is a strong chance that implementation efforts will succeed. The war that has gripped the nation for over three decades recently ended with the military defeat of the LTTE. When I arrived, a ceasefire had just ended and the war was interminable.

The nation was littered with checkpoint; guards were armed with AK 47s. Sri Lanka featured in international news bulletins for its suicide bombers and abductions, not for its rich cultural history and diverse natural beauty. Today, things have changed.

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It seems likely that the economy will begin to recover and tourists will again set their sights on Sri Lanka’s beaches, temples and curry.

For the Hikkaduwa Urban Council and the community of Hikkaduwa, this will mean the achievement of its vision and the protection of its assets — its beautiful surfing beaches, rivers, coral reefs, and people. This means that now is a great time to get involved.

PIA is constantly seeking new skilled volunteers to work on the project.

If you are a planner or urban designer and have the drive to use your expertise to make a difference, contact PIA to discuss how.

The following people deserve a mention for their contribution to the Hikkaduwa Development Plan: Mr. Hemanthi Jayasuriya (TRPS Project Manager); Mrs. Indra Weerasingha (Director Development Planning UDA); Miss C. Gunathilaka; S. Bandara (Project Director UDA); Mrs. H. Pathmananda (Planning Assistant UDA Office); Mrs. R. Vinodini De Silva (Planning Officer UDA Office); Mrs. H. Dhammikadi (Planning Assistant UDA Office) and particularly Mr. H. Dhammikadi (Planning Assistant UDA Office) and Miss P. Wickrama (Planning Assistant UDA Office) and Mrs. R. Wickrama (Planning Assistant UDA Office).