Warrinah Council’s experiences with the Sri Lankan Exchange Program

Author: David Kerr

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.

Warrinah Council planners eagerly anticipated the arrival of Ajith Ratnapake following the successful visit of Toby Philip in 2008 as part of the PIA Post Tsunami reconstruction project. Ajith arrived in late March and attended the PIA national Congress in Darwin, where he was exposed to the latest planning works in the appropriately named ‘Northern Exposure’. Warrinah planners David Kerr and Peter Robinson also attended the conference and got to know Ajith before his arrival at council.

Ajith’s time at Warrinah was mainly with the Strategic Planning Team and he was welcomed into the team and helped on many of the current projects. Ajith also improved his technical skills and research ability with training in document management and the internet. Whilst with the Strategic Planning Team Ajith compiled research papers on climate change and sea level rise, engaged with council’s LEP review team and assisted in the preparation of the new Warrinah Comprehensive Local Environmental Plan.

Ajith also went on the journey that is NSW Development Assessment, following a single development application from lodgement to notification, through assessment and finally determination. This journey also gave some insight into the similarities and differences between the NSW and Sri Lankan planning environments. In particular the amount of open space and copious numbers of controls relating to the building form were matters that the Sri Lankan system did not really have. In completing the journey of the development application, Ajith was also able to undertake further training with the UTS School of Planning and attended the Development Assessment Short Course in May and June 2009. This course seeks to give students practical application of planning and Ajith has undertaken to complete the final assignment upon his return to Sri Lanka.

Warrinah Council is grateful to have the support of PIA with this project and the reciprocal arrangements for planners. Whilst Ajith was here, he presented a detailed outline of the Sri Lankan planning system and its features to the Development Assessment and Strategic Planning staff. Of greatest interest was the almost identical legislative evolution in NSW to that of Sri Lanka with regard to the principal Environmental Planning legislation.

Ajith was also fortunate to be based in an area of great natural beauty, and staff at council ensured that he was taken on site inspections and weekend excursions to some places ‘off the beaten track’. A day exploring the Hawkesbury River was a highlight for a couple of the Sri Lankan visitors. This day tour of Brooklyn and picnic lunch on Dangar Island showcased the natural beauty of almost suburban Sydney. Many thanks must go to Amber Pedersen and Clare Hall for arranging a wonderful day out that Ajith and Windy will never forget.

The visit of Ajith certainly altered the planners’ mindsets in Warrinah and enabled us to broaden our horizons with regard to the big picture. Whilst caught up in the minefield that is development assessment, Ajith was able to impart some wisdom to some of the younger planners with his descriptions and advice on planning in Sri Lanka. Rather than arguing about setbacks, Ajith presented greater challenges about reconstructing cities and villages almost entirely wiped out in the tsunami. The often complex world of NSW local government legislation, the almost insatiable desire to prescribe outcomes is not as evident in the Sri Lankan systems—rather a higher level approach is taken. There was significant debate about this between planners at Warrinah after hearing the presentations from Ajith, and there was much questioning of the fundamental assumptions of the NSW planning system.

Overall the experiences gained from the six week exchange program have been nothing but positive for Warrinah Council as an organisation and for its planners. PIA should be congratulated for making a commitment to the betterment of the planning profession in Australia and Sri Lanka.

Apology

The NSW Planner wishes to apologise to Rodney Jensen, author of the ‘Planning for Creative Cities’ article published on page 22 of the September 2009 edition. Australian Planner would also like to add that the highlighted text on page 22 was taken from another peer reviewed author’s paper, not Mr Jensen’s. Rodney Jensen’s biographical details are below.

Rodney Jensen

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Starting in Sydney as Principal Research Planner at the Sydney City Council in the early ’70s, Rodney has spent most of his planning career in the private sector, establishing his consultancy Roden Jensen and Associates Pty Ltd in 1983. During the ’90s he spent a year working in Hong Kong, and was subsequently appointed Executive Manager Planning and Development for Liverpool City Council, on a two year contract.

In the past decade, his practice has been involved in state and local government policy planning, including the SHPA, and several local councils, including Blacktown Council and Lane Cove Council. He has also served on Liverpool, Fairfield and Warrinah IKAPs. His most recent work has been as consultant for a major development project in the United Arab Emirates city of Abu Dhabi. He has played an ongoing role in various professional organisations including the Planning Institute of Australia (as Fellow, and member of its Urban Design Chapter), the Australasian Institute of Urban Studies (as its immediate past Chairman), former Board Member of AusHeritage and member of ICOMOS.

He has been the recipient of several PIA Merit Awards, including a NSW PIA Award for Planning Excellence and a similar National PIA Award - both for volunteer editor of the online newsletter 'CitiScape' which began publication in 2003 with co-editor Dr Penny Center.

During the last three years he has been responsible for planning programs for the Graduate School of the Built Environment at UNSW and the University of Sydney Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific. He is currently involved in PhD research on the positive impact that the film industry may have on creative cities at UNSW.