Making Sense of Placement
by Mary Hoffmann

Imagine yourself in a country where language, religion, custom and culture are foreign. Imagine negotiating your way through the mixed ethnic landscape with limited verbal communication, relying heavily on unfamiliar visual and other sensory cues to guide you in your understanding and on decisions regarding even the simplest matters.

Imagine how you might experience this environment - from forming a routine around eating new food, to learning the rhythms of the monsoon, and finding a space to call home.

Imagine being a planner in this strange place.

As one of the first group of volunteer planners in Sri Lanka on PIA's post-tsunami planning project in association with the Institute of Town Planners, Sri Lanka, I find myself in this strange place.

So, how do you start to make sense of this place?

Do you cling to the familiar? Are you drawn to the enduring British legacy of the Victorian-era railway and the avenues of the garden city movement – in a mind-mapping of the colonial imprint? Such an exercise presents missionary churches, Dutch forts, clock towers, lighthouses and the anomalous left-over, yet still functional, red-issue phone booths and cast-iron post boxes under frangipani trees and next to Buddhist shrines.

Add to this Sri Lanka's inherited British legal system, cricket, and a post-colonial bureaucracy, (which is frightening in its complexity and seemingly operating in a 1950s time-warp), and you may have nearly reached the limits of your known world.

Are you making any headway? Do you have a sense of place yet? Or have you simply established a sense of security and identity from which to explore the unknown world of the exotic? - the world of saris and shalwar kameez, temples and mosques, Sinhalese and Tamil, Buddhist and Hindu, Muslim and Christian, conflict and peace-keeping.

This is a place where everyone knows where they belong in the social hierarchy, where skin-whitening products are sold in the supermarket, where cows share the main roads with cars and men with guns, and where planning institute meetings are held on Friday nights with no beer.

It is a community of extended families, of respected elders, of market-shoppers, of an English-speaking elite.

It is not something which can be simply defined, categorised, classified, or mapped.
So, how can you plan it? Can you plan it?

Step back.


Imagine what it's like to live in a donor-friendly country, where the principal Development Plan states that the authority administering the plan 'may receive gifts, funds, donations, grants and loans by the public and private sectors, within or outside Sri Lanka for specific activities under the ... plan'.

Imagine what it’s like to be a world bank recipient with world bank economic development obligations.

Imagine planning for a rhetorical 'Megapolis', when you have a '5 star bureaucracy, 2 star economy'.

Imagine relating all foreign aid projects back to the December 2004 tsunami, however tenuous the link may be.

Imagine losing your house and family to the tsunami.

In this context, it makes sense that planning is designed to direct and facilitate foreign aid and investment, and it makes sense that ‘big brother’ aspirational, yet altruistic, planning is alive and well. It makes sense for Australian planners to work alongside and not independently of Sri Lankan planners, and it makes sense to take the time to understand what already works and what doesn’t, rather than impose an ill-fitting Australian standard.

From this starting point we have begun working with the National Physical Planning Department on a new and improved National Physical Plan, and are developing a working relationship with local planners in Hambantota – a southern coastal town with a population of 10,000 people – to assist with their long-term local and regional development planning.

Slowly, we are making sense of placement. How the project will progress – we can only imagine.

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