Reclaiming the beach
Planning and design
Hambantota’s Beachside Park after the tsunami

Introduction
This article is intended to shed some light on the work of the Tsunami Reconstruction Planning Support Project (TRPSP). The TRPSP is a collaboration between the Australian and Sri Lankan Planning Institutes, the Urban Development Authority of Sri Lanka and the Australian Red Cross. One of its principal, but by no means only, functions is to place Australian planning and urban design volunteers in Sri Lanka to work with local planners and communities to assist them to meet the challenges of reconstruction in a way that reflects the highest standards of planning and design, meets future challenges and avoids the problems of the past. The project is now into its fourth batch of volunteers and this article explores how the work of the different groups has progressively built firm foundations upon which detailed planning is now happening with confidence. This article traces back the work of previous batches of planning volunteers to establish the genealogy. If you like, of one particular output, a plan for a beach park on devastated land in the town of Hambantota undertaken by the third group of volunteers, comprising Alison Rumley, Clare Findlay, Verity Lee and Jenny Donovan.

The impact of the Tsunami on Hambantota
Hambantota is a coastal town of around 10,000 people in southern Sri Lanka. The town is nestled between a low headland called tower hill and two lagoons; Lewaya Maha and Lewaya Karagan. Looking north from Tower Hill towards Hambantota beach the view is of a fishing harbour from which little blue outrigger fishing boats come and go. Beyond the harbour lies dramatic sweep of sand against which waves which originated as far away as Australia and Antarctic crash. The long sloping nature of the beach is contrasted by the resolute vorticity of the Pal trees (coconut palms) that provide the area with much of its considerable landscape character. Behind the palm trees other tree species predominate and dominate the landscape as far as you can see. The green skyline is broken only by the occasional building and distant blueish mountains within which wild elephants and monkeys roam. From this perspective there is little to indicate that this area was the scene of great tragedy when the 2004 boxing day Tsunami struck the area, wiping clean a swathe of land in the middle of the town between the coast and one of the lagoons approximately 3km inland and resulting in the death of over 1200 people and making many more homeless. The Tsunami and its immediate aftermath continue to exert an economic toll to the present, having destroyed much of the area’s tourism and economic infrastructure. Since that time the Sri Lankan people, supported by many overseas aid groups have sought to rebuild this and other areas affected by the Tsunami but their efforts have been hampered by the civil war, which although it has not directly affected the south coast it has cast a shadow over the whole country, discouraging tourists and draining the country’s already struggling economy.

It is the author’s view that the fundamental role of planning is (or perhaps should be) to enable all the people that experience the results of our interventions to enjoy surroundings that give them the best possible chances of meeting their needs, thriving and reaching their potential, now and in the future. This perspective focuses on a places ability to provide the settings within which needs satisfaction can occur and considers the relationships that are fostered in any given environment both between people and between people and their surroundings. With this perspective in mind the Tsunami might be seen as fundamentally changing the areas ability to meet the needs of the people who previously occupied it. The area used to offer people a home, a workplace, a movement corridor and a recreational asset. It also contained many areas of spiritual significance to the community, distinguished by the unusually even split between followers of the four main faiths in Sri Lanka, with cemeteries for three faiths and religious gathering places for two. It was valued by fishermen who benefited from being near the harbour adjacent the town and so could respond fast to reports of shoals of fish in the area. The devastated area also contained many of the town’s hotels and guest houses, as well as most of the tourists on that fateful day.

After the Tsunami much of the areas social, physical, and environmental infrastructure was destroyed and the place was overlaid with a new set of meanings and associations. The emotional capital that the survivors had invested into other people or the houses, businesses or other valued aspects of their life remained even though the physical expression of them may have gone. In a response to the destruction and in an understandable effort to prevent this sort of destruction ever happening again the Urban Development Authority, the body that governs planning policy in Sri Lanka implemented new planning rules that prohibited permanently occupied dwellings typically within 65m of the beach.
It was against this backdrop that the Australian planning volunteers became involved.

**The first batch of planners**
The first batch consisted of Steve Dunn, Wendy Downes, Mary Hoffman, Liz Patterson and Sam Kernaghan. They had the job of creating the relationships with local planners and gathering information so future groups would have a better understanding of the context within which they worked. The context report they produced was the first output of the project and considered the region not just as a static feature but as being subject to a number of trends and forces that needed to be considered.

Some of the key issues identified by the first batch are:

» **The enhanced role for Hambantota.** The National Plan will see the town develop into a city of up to a million people, the southern most of three national hubs and a place of international significance by virtue of a proposed port and airport. Realising this vision presents many new challenges for the town and reinforced the significance of the park area as the built up area extended to the north of the park and with it the demographic centre of Hambantota and the adjacent new town of Sibiopura ‘beautiful town’.

» **The vision for the town.** Hambantota has already been earmarked for a series of specific projects that seek to enhance the amenity of the town and reflect its enhanced role. These projects focus on the waterfront, recognizing the significance of this asset and the inappropriateness of the then existing situation where a number of rather ramshackle commercial buildings visually disconnected the sea from the town centre. The foreshore was edged by the back of those buildings. The three flagship initiatives that have been completed by the time the third batch arrived were a new market building, a bus station and the clearance of a number of beachfront structures. These not just improved the look of the place and extended the visual catchment of the harbour into the town, they also ensured the economic centre of gravity was located firmly on the foreshore, increasing its significance.

» **The proposed international airport.** The national plan envisages the development of Sri Lanka’s second international airport near Hambantota. This will undoubtedly make the region more accessible for overseas tourists given that the existing international airport, the main gateway for international tourism is approximately 5 to 6 hrs away to the north of Colombo.

» **The proposed new Sea Port.** The vision for Hambantota will also see the development of a major port to galvanize the development of the area and capitalize on the nearby shipping channels which are visible from the shore and carry a significant proportion of the world’s maritime trade. At the time of writing the port is being constructed on the site of a nearby lagoon. The choice of this lagoon for a port despite its ecological value (a RAMSAR recognised wetlands) raises innumerable concerns but it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these issues. In relation to the beach park perhaps the most important impact of the port will be the closing of the main road into Hambantota from the west and the channeling of traffic to the north of the town. This has the twin effect of forcing through traffic to by pass the town and subsequently directing Hambantota bound traffic along Main Road on the edge of Beach Park area.

**The second batch of planners**
The second batch (consisting of Rebecca Jerram, Yasmine Alliu, Jackie Holm, Paul Johnson, Georgia Vitale) continued the collaboration with local planners to formulate a vision for Hambantota that would allow the town to respond to these issues and equip it to meet these challenges in order to stay relevant to the future needs of the community. In Hambantota the principal output of the second batch was the Hambantota Urban Design Framework (UDF) based on the model used in Victoria. The team prepared the UDF after a series of detailed investigations which included;

» Consideration of strategic planning context and review of context report, prepared by batch 1.

» Site surveys—buildings and built form.

» Urban character analysis with local staff in order to share skills in how to interpret the built environment.

» A community consultation exercise at a local day post Tsunami carnival to understand how the local community saw their surroundings and understand the values they placed on it. This was conducted through the medium of Sinhala, Tamil and English and utilized a wide range of complementary consultation techniques, engaging adults and children.

» Visioning for the future of Hambantota with local staff; review of carnival consultation results.

» Identification of precincts in the park within which action
The Urban Design Framework identifies the role of the beach park as being a natural, vegetated area reserved for community use.

Vision for the beach park area
The Urban Design Framework identifies the role of the beach park as being a natural, vegetated area reserved for community use, with minimal structures and incorporating a public tsunami memorial garden area and other appropriate amenities.

Urban and Landscape Design Objectives
- To create a public open space to bring the community back to the waters edge along this precinct boundary.
- To respectfully preserve remnants of tsunami damaged structures in memorial to those who were lost, and to ensure no habitable structures are built on this land in the future.
- To protect the religious and other culturally significant buildings and places within this precinct (the existing Mosque and the Catholic, Muslim and Christian cemeteries near the beachfront).
- To encourage the development of tourist guesthouses and other facilities within this Precinct within areas nominated by the urban Council and the UDA.

Actions
To develop a Master Plan for a community beachside park incorporating the following elements:
- The ‘Hambantota Tsunami Memorial Garden’—a natural and vegetated public gathering renewal of life in the location of the original UC (Urban Council) Quarters.
- Establishment of 326 trees, to represent the number of families which were directly impacted by the tsunami and to educate the community about plants and the coastal environment.
- Incorporation of minor structures to provide for leisure opportunities such as picnic areas, seating, lighting and coastal walkways linking this area with the centre of Hambantota Township.
- Removal of 80% of existing damages structures, and filling holes in the ground which are a hazard to public safety.

NOTE: the concept of constructing a Memorial garden somewhere within this Precinct relies upon some of the previous structures remaining in situ as testimony to the lives once lived here. The purpose is not to clear the area, but rather to develop a natural park among these ruins and allow people to reflect and once more enjoy the area.

However perhaps the most important but difficult to gauge contribution made by batches 1 and 2 was the cultivation of relationships with the local community. By the time of my visit, as part of batch three, our work was easier than it might otherwise have been because of the efforts made to minimize potential misunderstandings and the good relationships that were fostered between the local planners and the volunteers. This enabled the local planners to improve their English skills and gain experience of how Australian planners work. We also benefited from the feedback from the two batches, transmitted through PIA and Australian Volunteers International that enabled us to better understand how planning was undertaken in Sri Lanka. We also benefited greatly by association with the previous batches who were very fondly remembered.

Developing the Beach Park Concept
The context within which the beach park concept was developed was very clearly articulated by the two reports described above. Added to which the tireless enthusiasm of the local planners, Mohammed Yahiri, Ms JKP Prabashini and Ms BG Rahninie, the project manager in Sri Lanka, Hamantha Jayasundera and the inspiring nature of the place provided the ideal circumstances within which to formulate a plan for the beach park. The proposals seek to ensure that a park can be created on much of this land in a way that can protect and enhance the
Hambantota will become a centre of national importance, a tourist destination and an economic engine for the country.

areas exceptional landscape values, blend seamlessly with current developments, provide a respectful memorial to the victims of the Tsunami and balance the competing economic, social and ecological objectives that are embodied in the vision for Hambantota.

It has often been said that to get the right answer you need to ask the right question. In keeping with this view the plan was prepared after appropriate consideration of the strategic planning vision for the town, site investigations and discussions with a range of key stakeholders to refine and develop the brief. This revealed the key issues the plan needed to address. This understanding, in turn allowed us to identify and focus our attention on the key challenges and make sure our interventions were focused and relevant.

Key Issues
Some of the key contextual issues that have influenced the design development of the Beachside Park:

- **The Strategic Planning Context:** As identified above, Hambantota will become the hub of a centre of national importance, a tourist destination and an economic engine for the country. A key issue will be to balance the diverse objectives embodied within these plans and ensure economic and physical growth does not cause irreparable environmental damage or reduce the liveability of the city for its citizens.

- **The Impact of the Tsunami:** Another key issue will be to deal with the devastation caused by the Tsunami and provide a respectful memorial to those who lost their lives or livelihoods or lost loved ones.

- **Climatic extremes:** Hambantota is very hot and dry, lying only 6 degrees north of the equator and in Sri Lanka’s dry zone. The area is also frequently subject to hot winds. This often makes staying outside in full sun quite unpleasant. Also, Sri Lanka’s position with no other landmass to the south until Antarctica means that waves approaching this coast have a very long reach. This and the angle of repose of the beach sand results in the beach in Hambantota usually being unswimmable because of the size of the waves and the strong undertow.

- **Community needs and values:** The community require a wider range of recreational assets and opportunities. Of particular relevance here is the lack of safe and convenient access to the recreational and aesthetic benefits of the waters edge. The site already has significant meaning to the community and is subject to a range of pressures and forces that need to be considered to ensure that the plans are meaningful to the entire community and robust enough to withstand the challenges of the environment.

Some of the key ways the area is valued and used include:
- As a memorial
- As a home
- As a functioning fishing port
- As a social place used for walking, relaxing, courting and playing games
- As an aesthetic and environmental asset
- As a setting for important religious buildings and spaces, representing three of Sri Lanka’s four principal faiths.
- As a commercial opportunity along main road.

Despite the many layers of overlapping meaning, the site of the beach park remains relatively underutilised and from most viewpoints there is little to emphasise the areas past contribution to the identity of the town or its contribution to the wellbeing of its citizens.

**Key Challenges**
If the concept is to enable the park to play its role in meeting people’s needs and provide a catalyst for regeneration, with minimal cost and intrusion, it needs to identify and focus on the challenges that are critical to unlocking the potential of the area. These are:

- To protect and enhance the sites intrinsic value, the things that make it special and unique and use these as a starting point for the development of the concept.
- To realise the potential of the park to contribute to the community’s wellbeing by offering a wide range of complementary attractions and assets.
- To realise the potential of the park to attract visitors, from Sri Lanka as well as overseas by creating an internationally recognised beachside park that provides an icon for Sri Lanka to complement those that already exist.
- To provide the infrastructure and assets to allow people to conveniently access the entire length of the park and enjoy its benefits whilst minimising intrusion in sensitive areas.
- To provide a respectful memorial for those who died in the Tsunami and document its impact.
- To minimise maintenance requirements to avoid diverting scarce resources from elsewhere.
- To minimise risk for park visitors.
- To seamlessly blend the beachside park with foreshore open space improvements.
Summary of proposals

Currently being constructed in the town centre.

To create a place all the local stakeholders can identify with and be proud of.

Having established the issues surrounding the development of the park we undertook a site analysis. This explored the relationship between people and place, and the ability of the park to provide the settings within which people can meet their needs, as far as we could understand them. This and a summary of the UDF for the park area were presented back to the community through a questionnaire delivered in Singhala to every household in the immediate vicinity (300 in total) who were asked, effectively, is the vision and our understanding of the park site correct? The results are described below.
As the results show, there was a remarkable degree of support for all components of the vision. Having confirmed our analysis with the community and key stakeholders, we were then in a position to confidently prepare, test and refine a co-ordinated suite of proposals. This was done as a collaborative venture, through many workshops and meetings with a wide variety of stakeholders. This allowed observations of one person to be explored and reinforced by others and the resulting ideas being developed and articulated by the planning volunteer team. As such whilst the pen behind the drawings and the written articulation is consistent throughout the plan, the seeds of the ideas are drawn from many sources.

The proposals
In essence the concept envisages two nodes of development, one at the northern and one at the southern end of the park. This would create magnets or 'honeypots' to draw people through the park and provide the infrastructure to handle those people where it is most appropriate and minimising their impact on sensitive areas whilst still allowing them to experience the sites assets. The two nodes are designed to reflect the local architecture whilst creating distinctive and memorable icons. The principal way this will be achieved was by framing views to the water as people arrived at the park, creating an attractive gateway experience. The southern node also provides a setting for the economic activities such as selling fruit and curd (a delicious type of buffalo yoghurt). This presently occurs in the buildings earmarked for demolition on the foreshore because they block views to the water.

Sketch of the Southern node
The nodes are connected by a high quality, accessible promenade that facilitates walking, cycling, sitting in comfort and is designed to enhance the landscape, rather than intrude upon it. The path evokes the pattern left by a receding wave and utilises the two colours of the local sands. The path is edged by clusters of arelia (frangipani) trees that offer shade to seats and provide seasonal change giving the promenade an olfactory presence as well as a visual one. The trees provide an intimate contrast with the taller Pol (coconut palms) that characterise the areas more distant to the promenade. Along this promenade are a range of complementary assets, optimising the appeal of the park and its ability to relate to the community's needs, such as kiosks, nature reserves and recreational opportunities.

Sketch of promenade
One of the main features of the concept for the promenade is a 'remembrance line'. This is a line of Tsunami debris, such as beach glass, ceramics, shells, bits of wood and plastic to be embedded along the length of the promenade in a manner to evoke a line left on a beach after a wave recedes, the combination of things of the land and things of the sea providing testament to the impact of the Tsunami.
A further challenge was to provide a memorial park that respectfully remembered the impact the Tsunami without overwhelming the area or diminishing its ability to meet other needs. The way the plan envisaged that this would be achieved was by clearing the bulk of the area, making it safe and planting it with indigenous grasses and groundcovers. The houses and buildings that were in the area would be remembered by planting flowering plants to define the outlines of the structures. The plants selected would flower in late December so that at this time of year, the time of the Tsunami, the outlines of the houses destroyed by the Tsunami would be revealed and its impact on the community would be most evident.

Memorial park most of year

Memorial park in late december