Post Card From Sri Lanka
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Making our way through the dense tropical humid jungle with our clip boards and pens, we move to the side of the pathway to allow the gigantic water monitor the size of a crocodile slink past the cobras whilst monkeys screech overhead. Colourful butterflies and birds flutter amongst carnivorous tropical flowers that bloom once every ten years. A little old man parks his rickety bicycle beside us and offers chillies carefully weighed from an antique scale, whilst children with blinding smiles rush around us, enquiring what we are doing - confused by the sight of maps and laughing at my straw hat. This is yet another typical day on the field in a small interior village of Hikkaduwa - the place where I worked for five months as part of the Planning Institute of Australia’s Tsunami Reconstruction Planning Support Project in down south Sri Lanka.

I first heard about the Project in early 2005, after returning from a trip to Sri Lanka, troubled by the confronting vision of devastation caused by the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004. Having travelled extensively on the East and South Coasts of the island I found it hard to fathom the extent of the destruction to lives, homes and livelihoods of poor coastal communities. Subsequently I was determined to help in any capacity.

Two years later, again, I have just returned from Sri Lanka- but this time having contributed to the future redevelopment of Hikkaduwa- a South Coast town hit hard by the tsunami. Together with fellow Australian Town Planners Stuart Carr, Clare Hall and Clare Finlay, I worked in collaboration with local urban planning counterparts from the Sri Lanka Urban Development Authority on a Development Plan for Hikkaduwa Town, coast and surrounding inland villages. The need for this Plan has been driven largely by the national significance of Hikkaduwa as a tourist destination, and the issues the local tourism and fishing industries are currently facing as a ramification of the tsunami. The vision of the Development Plan is to restore the natural and built environment of Hikkaduwa, and foster sustainable economic development by building upon its natural assets and present economic strengths in the form of the tourism and fishing sectors.

Once a sleepy fishing village, Hikkaduwa is Sri Lanka’s oldest and most established tourist beach precinct. Renowned for its famous coral sanctuary, which has attracted tourists in droves since the 1970s, Hikkaduwa or “Hikka” as the locals call it, is considered to be a victim of its own success. Its popularity as a key surfing spot in Sri Lanka has resulted in a multitude of planning, development, social and environmental problems spurred on by the local tourist industry through lack of effective governance and compliance. Uncontrolled tourist-related developments such as informal guest houses, bars and shops built far too close to the main road, and on the actual beach itself, have contributed to urban sprawl, high traffic congestion along Galle Road, and significant environmental degradation of the beach and coral sanctuary, through encroachment on and destruction of natural dunes and vegetation.

The tsunami exacerbated many of these issues as locals sought to quickly re-establish their businesses, homes and livelihoods in the wake of the disaster, resulting in further unregulated development. Overall, over 70% of the structures in Hikkaduwa located immediately adjacent to the coastline suffered major damage from the tsunami. Many buildings within Hikkaduwa town centre suffered significant water damage. The tsunami also had a huge impact on the fishing industry, through extensive damage to the fisheries harbour and boat landings within Hikkaduwa, and a large proportion of the local fishing boats were destroyed. Much of the equipment
and associated service facilities in Hikkaduwa Harbour were beyond repair. Notably, the tsunami intensified many of the environmental problems previously existing in Hikkaduwa including further loss of mangrove areas and extensive damage to the coral reef.

The Hikkaduwa Development Plan seeks to address many of these problems through zoning, effective regulations, establishment of conservation area zones for environmentally sensitive areas, specific infrastructure projects, and place-based precinct planning. Urban consolidation strategies are pursued to encourage high density activity centres close to services such as public transport nodes, whilst the low density character of the interior jungle villages are maintained. Strict development guidelines pertaining to setbacks, heights, and building lines have been established. A new bypass road is proposed to address the issue of congestion on Galle Road, and the largely antiquated street network of smaller roads are to be further developed to facilitate the creation of minor urban centres at their juncture.

Special precincts have been identified to be the subject of more detailed planning and design, aimed towards achieving a number of socio-economic objectives. For instance, the Plan proposes to improve the livelihoods of poor local fishing families, by formalising Dodanduwa fishing village through the upgrade of the existing fishing harbour and setting aside a specific market and café area for fishing families to sell their catch. The Plan also proposes the establishment of an ice plant and interpretation centre for tourists to learn about the traditional methods of fishing in Sri Lanka.

Working on this project has been an exciting, once in a lifetime experience which has provided much personal and professional fulfilment. Of course it is also impossible to ignore the existing political situation in Sri Lanka and the resultant civil war which will have a significant bearing on the ability of the Sri Lankan Government and the Urban Development Authority to implement some of the Development Plan proposals, due primarily to a lack of resources. For instance, much of the large-scale road infrastructure projects proposed will rely on foreign investment, which itself is uncertain during times of war. Indeed for a planner this can be frustrating and at times one can question the point of working on a Plan in a country which is facing an uncertain future. However the drive of the Urban Development Authority Staff, compounded with the kindness of the locals and their humble appreciation of our contribution is heart warming- and their optimism contagious.

The post-tsunami reconstruction project is for the people of Sri Lanka who have endured so much hardship yet still have the ability to keep smiling everyday. It is my hope that sooner rather than later the existing climate of instability subsides so that the objectives of the Development Plan can be realised, to ensure that the local people of Hikkaduwa and the rest of Sri Lanka face a more certain, prosperous and most importantly peaceful future.

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