Getting out from behind the desk in Colombo City

From June 2011 to December 2012, the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) assisted the National Physical Planning Department (NPPD) to undertake regional planning, through a partnership with the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development (DP&CD), and Institute of Town Planners Sri Lanka (ITPSSL). The Regional Planning in Sri Lanka project was funded by AusAID through the Asia-Pacific Sector Linkages Program. Anne Donovan and Katherine Davis supported this activity by volunteering their time and expertise and through introduction of new modes of professional development, including the walks described in this article.

Get Walking

Once the laughter stopped, we took the opportunity to explain why it could be a good idea for a team of planners to embark on an Urban Walk in Colombo City. However, our explanation didn’t go far, and the laughter restarted from the Sri Lankan team, this time revolving around jokes to put on their placards. Planners rarely have an opportunity to get out from behind their desks, and it was clear from this reaction that walks as a mode of learning are not the norm in Sri Lanka, although some had heard about being used in other countries.

Colombo City is undergoing resurgence. Large parts of the CBD are slowly being re-opened to the public, although security forces maintain a visible presence. The area is home to grand colonial architecture, new modern buildings and a busy working harbour, and offers a fascinating backdrop for an urban walk to study.

In the Regional Plan for the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, Jaffna is identified as a Metro City given the logistical challenges to travel to the Northern Province, we proposed a walking tour through the Fort area of Colombo, which closely resembles parts of Jaffna. The walk would offer an opportunity to our Sri Lankan colleagues to learn from and experience the changes that are occurring in Colombo, so they can apply its learning to the development of the Northern Province Physical Plan.

With hard-earned support from the Institute of Town Planners Sri Lanka and senior managers at National Physical Planning Department, we held our first walk in early September. This was followed by three more walks between September and December, following a similar process and incorporation of feedback from participants in previous walks.

Pre-walk briefing

We began with a pre-walk briefing, including a presentation on walkability, using local examples from outside the office. This engaged our local colleagues, and elicited some good discussion on how the streets of Colombo more often than not have been designed along with private vehicles in mind, with little thought for pedestrian or bicycle movement.

Before we set out for the Walk, we encouraged the team to look at everyday sights through planners eyes. We emphasised the need for critical thinking, as opposed to criticism, and lateral thinking of how Metro Cities could be planned in the future for Sri Lanka. To bring some structure to our observation, we introduced the tools for the walk: a Walkability Score Card, an Urban Design questionnaire and a Public Realm Assessment.

Out and about

We started our walk at the Galle Face Green and it wasn’t long before the first contentious issue was raised. Juliet Coombes, the walk leader questioned the Government’s Declared Areas, suggesting that they should support a mix of uses rather than the current plans for hotel development. There were mixed views in the group and, after some discussion within the team, one of the Sri Lankan planners spoke up. In an environment where people do not often offer an opinion, this was encouraging.

We slowly made our way up and round the Lighthouse into Fort District. This District has been closed off due to the high security zone, and barriers are now being relaxed following the end of the war. There is a very busy main road dissecting the Districts, but little pedestrian and vehicle traffic on side streets. The members of our group had not visited this area for many years, due to security barriers, and it seems that people are now used to going about their daily lives without interacting with this area of town.

Our second last stop was the café on the fourth floor of the Grand Oriental Hotel, with spectacular views over the Port. This is one of the few places where you can get a sense that you are in a Port City. With plans to remake the harbour to accommodate large cruise ships, the possibilities for redevelopment in this area are almost unlimited. However, many of our team had difficulty imagining the area as anything other than its current form, indicating that the many years of exclusion have had a significant impact on perspectives of residents and planners alike.

We concluded the three-hour walk at the former Dutch Hospital (recently renovated to house a series of shops and eating establishments) and jointly conducted an Urban Design Analysis. We generally agreed that the space was a good start but a poor response to the environment, with the concrete furniture and lack of greenery rendering it unusable during most of the hot sunny day. We were interested to hear that no member of our group had previously visited this site, with a perception that it was designed for tourists. They were surprised to see that the space was being used by young professional Sri Lankans as an after-work meeting place, challenging their notions of who is using the new spaces and places in the capital.

Post-walk discussion

The walk generated much discussion the next day at work, and it was fantastic to hear the pros and cons of places and spaces in their capital city being debated. We held a formal post-walk discussion, and the team provided valuable feedback on the walk, including topics and structure and activities. This helped us pick on elements that we had missed — the importance of the shade of the tree for tuk tuk drivers was a classic example.

Keep on walking

The walk route was modified, based on participant’s feedback, and further walks incorporated representatives from agencies with an interest in planning and development, including the National Building and Research Organisation and the Tourism Investment Board. Each of the four walks provided a forum for Sri Lankan planners to partake in a new mode of learning and professional development and to study and engage with their own city.

For us as Australian planners, organising and participating in the Metro City Walk was a valuable learning experience. It was a great opportunity to demonstrate a cheap and effective learning methodology, and to develop tools tailored for local application in the form of the Urban Design Analysis, Walkability Scorecard and Urban Realm Assessment.

The experience also highlighted too that we cannot take for granted our freedom in being able to laterally think, critically engage and provide analysis of the world around us. We hope that we have been able to share our enthusiasm and passion for getting out and about and seeing things differently and that alternatives to classroom learning are encouraged in Sri Lanka.

Anne Donovan is a regional and strategic planner with interests in social planning and community engagement. Katherine Davis is an environmental and development planner with interests in post-emergency planning, disaster risk reduction and capacity development.

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