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Proclaiming Colonial Urban Heritage: Towards an Inclusive Heritage-interpretation for Colombo's Past

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ABSTRACT

Colombo, Sri Lanka's commercial capital is a forceful creation of European colonialists who occupied the island for over four centuries. Its urban structure displays the social fragmentation sought by the rulers. Colombo elaborates an extraordinary process of city-making, stratified with its Dutch-origin, British-reshaping, and post-colonial adaptation. Proclaiming such a contested past as an inheritance requires an inclusive heritage interpretation. The recent renovation of monumental buildings for potential market values and demolishing minor architecture do not display such a heritage interpretation. This, placing undue attention on a selected social group, is found to be further emptying the compartmentalized city. The exclusion of some sub-societies also cost possible stewardship to urban heritage. Having observed the non-sustainability of current heritage-interpretation practised in Colombo, we searched for alternative means to unify societies in time-space thus sustaining the diversity of urban spaces. Our empirical studies have established the need to integrate the inherent cultural values of the colonial-built urban fabric in heritage interpretation. The results of vibrant heritage-interpretation results have been studied through a literature survey with aims to contribute towards the development of an inclusive heritage interpretation practice to protect Colombo's colonial past sustainably.

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Introduction

Cultural heritage can best be defined as an inheritance of a particular group that proclaims its values. Some may explore the creation of heritage from relics or associations of a reconstituted past or as indicators of an evolved culture, while others may interpret its extensive use as a marketable product. In most cases, tangible remains such as artefacts, built forms or cities are proclaimed as cultural heritage for their potential marketability without paying due attention to the intangible

cultural practices that produced those tangible items. Furthermore, most of those proclaimed items are non-intentional heritage but have become protection-worthy for the messages embedded by an evolved value system. Among the most instructive examples

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for such a non-intentional heritage is the Berlin wall. This is why cultural heritage should be considered not as a product but a process. Hence protecting tangible items as frozen moments without integrating the process that made them a heritage is not useful.

Cultural heritage as an asset of cultural capital and heritage-led economic development is a meaningful way to advance both the conservation and sustainability of urban areas (Munasinghe, 2005; Throsby, 2017). Thus, heritage protection has implications on local and regional economic systems, investment, labour, consumption, infrastructure, services, ecology, social equity, and cultural activities (Nijkamp, 2012). Yet, most policymakers decode this strength of heritage incorrectly and make attempts to protect heritage as a way of boosting tourism.¹ UNESCO's Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Development (2016, p.17) notes, "What we call heritage is found in quality public spaces or in areas marked by the layers of time. Cultural expressions give people the opportunity to identify them collectively, to read the traces of history, to understand the importance of traditions for their daily life, or to enjoy beauty, harmony and artistic endeavour". Tourism-oriented heritage protection pays attention to restored romantic views of the past at the cost of its process of value stratification, and therefore may not be sustainable. In other words, any decision that affects a society should bring its evolved value system to the center of decision making. Since society's values system is best expressed in its way of proclaiming heritage, the close links between culture and sustainability become clear. This is why a particular way of proclaiming heritage could frame sustainable development in the city (Munasinghe, 2005). It is imperative to design protection measures based on the unique identity of a city to make its continuous living. Heritage users interpret its meanings to be used in different fronts and forums. The rebuilding of Warsaw to represent the rebirth of a nation-state is an instructive example for such interpretations.² This study reiterates that the particular understanding between culture and milieu should be used as

the basis to ensure that heritage interpretation addresses most, if not all, social groups that would use the city.

Colombo's built urban fabric attests to an intricate socio-cultural evolution. Its original creators, the Dutch, who practised a form of mercantile colonialism, expressed different ideas through its urban tissue from its fine-tuners, the British, who practised a form of imperialistic colonialism and rearranged the Dutch-founded city. The British crowned Colombo as the administrative hub to centralize their rule (Brohier, 1985). They dismantled the Dutch ramparts and added grand administrative buildings to display their power while keeping the ruled at a distance. The grand colonnades, arcades or well-maintained turfed lawns that wrapped those buildings fashioned a psychological barrier between the ruler and the ruled. The city has continued to be the power-centric hub even after the colonialists left and new administrative capital has been built. The central precinct of Colombo, the fort has become a place that is visited but not dwelled though it marks a turning point in Sri Lanka's urban history. Both the Dutch and the British patronized local societies to survive in the hostile landscape. These locals took over the inner city after the colonialists left and adapted it for their new urban way of life.

By paying due attention to the urban structure that reflects Colombo's unique process of evolution, its interpretation shall position that processed image within the value system of its inheritors. Yet, the heritage interpreters in Colombo prioritize the potential market values of a few selected buildings or urban precincts and do not intend to promote the protection of its cultural values. They do not interpret Colombo as one liveable city either. As Colombo Page News Desk (2021) reports, their way of protecting outer shells to accommodate artificially grafted extrinsic values has not been sustainable either. Also, the enforced shallow interpretations have destroyed the heritage values of the protected buildings and isolated them within the city.

This paper is a result of observing the tragic consequences of short-sighted heritage

¹. An architect commissioned by World Heritage Fund as a consultant to the Heritage Protection at Galle Fort in Sri Lanka said, "When tourists come to see the Dutch fort, there should be a Dutch fort. Therefore, we should restore the Galled fort as it was during the Dutch", when he was interviewed by the author. His suggestion was to recreate those past images at the expense of post-Dutch addition.

². Warsaw was annihilated by Nazis as a way of repressing Polish resistance. Hence, its rebuilding was interpreted as a symbol for the inner strength and determination of a nation. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/30/>



interpretation in Colombo and an in-depth study of the paradigm shift in heritage interpretation. Our research first investigated the evolving heritage interpretation practices and then made attempts to fine-tune them to be more inclusive in the context of Colombo as a living city. By confronting the unprecedented challenges in the developing city and especially in renegotiating its contested heritage values, the paper may contribute to the development of a more sustainable approach to heritage protection. Qualitative research methods such as observation, participatory observation and depth-interviews were used to collect primary data after using literature surveys for secondary data collection.

Evolving heritage interpretation practices in Colombo

Undoubtedly, heritage interpretation could play a critical role in regenerating historic urban areas while sustaining a living society and engaging them in protecting the heritage values of those urban areas. The possibilities of trivialising history to inculcate reactionary, superficial or romantic views of the past should be carefully managed through truthful interpretation so that heritage protection would not become an industry that produces authenticated heritage items but provides a solid base for the future of a living city.

Yet, this has not been the case in Colombo, where the policymakers convert colonial buildings into deluxe shopping malls, city hotels and restaurants to attract high-spending tourists and locals. Perera (2021) has reported that the Urban Development Authority (UDA) is currently preparing plans to convert the Colombo fort into a tourism honeypot.³ At the same time, UDA is demolishing historic minor architecture such as shop-housing of service communities and evicting the low-income communities that occupy those spaces. The reclaimed lands are being reserved for luxury apartment buildings for short-term visitors and elitist sub-societies. This type of money-driven interpretation will not rigorously protect heritage either.

Rehabilitation of façades or selected built-envelopes, and then beautifying their surroundings with lawns, ponds, fountains, or flower beds seem to unintentionally distance some societies from their lived urban spaces. The senseless approach of converting historic buildings into museum pieces located in no-man's lands further degrades city life. Aiming at tourism, which is an extremely fragile economic base and the eviction of low-income groups, has brought negative impacts on the city's image. The Colombo fort is already a dead-space during weekends and holidays, and reserving it for tourism will only stop its evolution as a culturally diversified urban precinct. Having documented the consequences of current heritage interpretation, this study aimed at searching for alternative approaches that could strengthen Colombo's liveability while enlarging the awareness of a disowned heritage.

Colombo's attempt to popularize renovated sites as trendy places for young elites to display wasting as a way of celebrating life has brought mixed results. The single-story heritage interpretation that aims at an overrated market value converts buildings, city quarters and streetscapes into open-air museums or museum objects kept on a glittery carpet. The failure to enlarge heritage awareness among living societies has resulted in the physical distortion of heritage buildings though priorities are placed with the protection of tangible remains. The renovated urban spaces are becoming places to visit and not to dwell. There, heritage interpreters have not been able to find techniques or sophisticated means to understand the possible decoding of their meanings. As a result, their interpretation has failed to sustainably protect a heritage or to strengthen continuous living (Munasinghe, 2014).⁴ The current interpretation practices hardly engage visitors or educate them of the moral or ethical issues, social justice or sustainability of a protected historic milieu. The message that has been relayed reduces the city into more like a theme park that can be visited for fun, enjoyed and left alone.

³. The state Minister for Urban Development says "We identified the Colombo Fort area as a heritage city which can be developed for tourism and hospitality purposes as part of the Government's long-term vision to convert the city to a buzzing tourism city. The Colombo Fort area has many colonial buildings and lands on which hotels can be constructed. This is, however, not an immediate thing but a concept." (cited in Perera, 2021.)

⁴. Refer Munasinghe (2014) for an inquiry of losing the city-identity as a result of tourist-oriented restoration in Colombo. A meal in one of those restaurants cost more than the monthly income of many locals whose minimum wage is around USD 50 per month. [https://www.ministryofcrab.com/colombo/the-old-dutch-hospital/\(n.d.\)](https://www.ministryofcrab.com/colombo/the-old-dutch-hospital/(n.d.))



Among the best directions to understand heritage interpretation is given in Tinden's dictum (1957); through interpretation, understanding: through understanding, appreciation: through appreciation, protection. As such, interpretation should be able to frame sustainable protection of heritage. This, focusing on educational aspects of interpretation, could also contribute to the change of attitudes to colonial-built urban fabric as an inheritance of the present-day society, and not just the reminders of an era of suppression. Having conducted empirical research, Uzzel (1998) concludes that interpretation cannot always guarantee this attitude change. Yet, an open-ended interpretation that invites visitors to engage in a constructive dialogue with the interpreted heritage could mark a turning point in enlarging awareness. Unfortunately, Colombo does not see the requirement of facilitating such a dialogue to change perceptions of the colonial past but to inflate the market values of those urban spaces thus inadvertently privatizing the city's public spaces. Their heritage interpretation, hinting that the restored spaces are not for every city dweller, shapes a new form of suppression.

The unyielding interpretations given to the colonial built spaces resemble the explanatory notes displayed in front of the artefacts exhibited in museums, providing raw data of their age or patrons or styles, in short, intrinsic values. It is disturbing to see how such interpretations of lived spaces have failed to comprehend the nexus between knowledge and information. The restored historic buildings may promote tourism and attract high-spending locals, but for a short time. As it has been established, such groups may find another location to spend their money as soon as the excitement of the restored built space is over.⁵ Most renters already find it extremely difficult to even pay their rents, and the UDA is in the process of leasing the management of some of those malls to a private conglomeration that would eventually make these spaces more exclusive and expensive.⁶ In addition, those well-maintained spaces have become psychologically inaccessible pockets within the city for most locals as they were

during the colonial rule. Heritage interpretation in Colombo has been taking steps to reserve the city for a selected group of users.

Heritage interpretation, today, is considered as a powerful tool to imply the dissemination of new knowledge thus facilitating constructive dialogue with a past. Such an interpretation will not only attract investments but also ensure the sustainable development of the city (Nocca, 2017; Slavin, 2011). By incorporating the transformation of various beliefs and ideologies along with the agents of such transformations, interpretation could facilitate an attitude change within a larger context. This could not only promote social cohesion by improving accessibility to and liveability in those spaces but may also garner greater socio-economic benefits for societies by linking historic areas with the city and region, physically and psychologically (Kangas et al., 2017). As UNESCO's Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Development (2016, p.23) notes, "Safeguarding cultural heritage and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions, while fostering values and behaviours that reject violence and build tolerance, are instrumental to the social cohesion of societies, peace-building and the sustainability of cities". Yet, Colombo seems to be fragmenting the society further based on their affordability. Turner (2015) also asserts that strengthening social sustainability is crucial for the continuity of a historic city. The heritage interpretation practiced in Colombo, failing to fall in line with such assertions, reduces social groups with less buying power into a service-provider and not the joint owners of the city. The possible tensions created within the society may not support continuous living in the city or strengthen the city's images as an inheritance.

It is clear that heritage interpretation could change the attitudes of those who live in the city and of those who visit it. Colombo's heritage interpretation practices seem to change attitudes negatively by promoting historic urban space as a place for the rich, and as such, disinherit a past. Most shops, restaurants, cafes, etc. in the restored buildings are owned by celebrities to lure young adults by making them trendy places. They sell either product of foreign origin or highly-priced local

⁵. Our interviews show that about 55%-65% visitors do not engage in transactions in these luxury shopping malls.

⁶. The leasee of the Colombo Arcade says, "It is our intention to develop this arcade complex into a luxury shopping mall. The highest

quality hotels are also included in the plan." (cited in Colombo Page, 2021)



products, yet the involvement of celebrities promote those young adults to consider that hanging out in those malls as a way of showing that they are also members of that high society. This is similar to the new-rich collecting so-called antiques and exhibiting them to show that they had a past. Most of the visitors have no interest in knowing the cultural inheritance or its significance to sociocultural evolution that took place in Colombo but just to consume an exotic space and to boast about that consumption.⁷ Their visiting could be a short term affair because they do not develop any attachment to the proclaimed heritage. The failure to articulate theoretical assumptions in interpretations with aims to assemble stewardship for heritage may further fragment the urban society and make more dead urban spaces in Colombo.

As McGuire (1985) says the theory of attitudes comprise cognitive, affective and behavioural elements. Heritage interpreters address the cognitive dimension of interpretation. Thus, heritage interpretation should enhance people's knowledge to understand the status-quo of their city to encourage dwelling. If emotional and behavioural considerations are essential to attitude formation and change, any interpretation that excludes those dimensions is less likely to be effective in making the city liveable. Such behavioural dimensions are not being integrated with heritage interpretation or urban conservation in Colombo. As a result, heritage interpreters have not been able to exploit the potentials of protecting the cultural significance of colonial-built urban fabric as a way of underpinning the liveability and marketability of urban space. The non-inclusive interpretation has failed to continue uses or programmes designated to those protected buildings.

Most crucially, this approach does not acknowledge the cultural significance of colonial rule that is evident in all social groups. The heritage interpretation of the remains of an era of subjugation seems to have been constructed as if there were a dispassionate interest in what is a highly emotional subject. Restoring them to attract high-spending visitors could be as superficial as building visitors to a theme park that hardly diversifies a city culture. The colonialists installed an elitist social group

to take over the ruling machine after independence. They were educated and groomed within the value systems of the colonialists. They moved into the urban spaces fashioned by their masters after independence. Today, they are being replaced by a new rich with political clout and wealth. This globally-exposed new social class seems to have developed a value system that is hardly grounded within their own geographical or cultural roots. Heritage interpreters in Colombo seem to be playing for the new rich for their buying power and intention to spend to show off. There is no interest among decision-makers to unify post-independent sub-societies or to calm down the tensions between the city and its surroundings. Since the change of attitudes and emotions evolve along with time, particularly in a global hub like Colombo, it is important to comprehend diversifying actions and various human qualities such as affection, conscience, humanity and comparison of its urban society. The undue attention on short-term place marketing by catering to the new rich has not been sustainable. Colombo requires a heritage interpretation process to strengthen the city's continuity as a living space.

Heritage interpretation in time and place

Cities become popular places of dwelling when the dwellers can identify themselves with the city or orientate themselves within the city. A lived city like Colombo is culturally diverse and as such, is able to present many clues for its dwellers to construct an identity and orientation if the evolved city milieu is interpreted and presented to those dwellers without any prejudices. The heritage interpretation in time and place could facilitate continuous dwelling in the city. On the contrary, a heritage interpretation that does not respond to time and place, ignoring the needs of dwellers, would become meaningless.

Heritage interpretation is a socio-cultural process, and its nexus to time and places is a socio-cultural phenomenon. As Staiff (2017) notes making of meanings cannot escape its distinct socio-cultural dimension, especially when they are attached to heritage places, whose meanings change over time. For example, the appalling living quarters of the

⁷. Most visitors, locals as well as foreigners, said that the restored buildings were "nice" or "interesting". They did not show any

commitment to understand the cultural significance of them as an inheritance.



working class could eventually become a trendy living area, or a restaurant that served tasteless fillings during a war or a famine could become the most-sought place for a meal. Conversion of prisons or concentration camps into hotels or cultural centres is a pointer to understand how time changes place meanings and how places accrue values. Hence, heritage interpretation should be open-ended to comprehend such changes in time and place. Lowenthal (1990) notes three levels of analysis to understand historic objects: memories, historical records and artefacts. It is a fact that some declared heritage items move from one level to another while some exist in all three levels at the same time. A war site, for example, may bring unpleasant memories to some while an enjoyable victory to others. Some other groups may even consider those sites as a historical record or an artefact.⁸ A colonial-built city is not different from this either, and not all colonial-built places have pleasant memories but excellent lessons for the present and future. Heritage interpretation should inquire about the existing level/s of analysis of heritage places before presenting their meanings to be useful.

Colonial built fabric was not conceived as a monument. Proclaiming it as a heritage in the post-independent era for recording an era of socio-cultural evolution shows its transformation in time and place. The continuous use of such built fabric has accrued new values and new meanings, undoubtedly characterizing the urban landscapes in Colombo. Its flawless urban landscape that composes various spaces to accommodate the evolved needs of today's societies is a result of dismantling the ramparts. Yet, the urban structure and monumental public buildings still display the significance of the fort. The arcades and other such semi-public urban spaces that enveloped its monumental buildings have been successfully adapted by post-colonial societies. Moreover, minor architecture has evolved around some dominating urban structures and in the immediate surrounding of the fort, displaying the making of true cultural diversity. It is important to continuously facilitate different strata of the post-colonial society to ensure the sustainability of city life in Colombo. An interpretation that does not respect time and

place seems to be costing possible stewardship, and as such, an unsecured or an unclaimed urban space.

Heritage interpretation shall not be limited to raw data such as what it was, who built it or when it was built, or in other words to intrinsic values such as age, style or builder (Munasinghe, 2018). It should attempt to trigger a dialogue with the present-day society that is expected to decode those interpretations (Staiff, 2017). It is not astute to place priorities with one period over another either. Colombo does not place priorities on a period but certainly on selected buildings to make heritage-protecting a lucrative business. The attempts to make Colombo fort an urban district dedicated to the hospitality industry will be the apex of such short-sighted heritage interpretation. This selective means of interpretation is no different from the obsolete conservation attempts in the past that aimed at addressing a wealthy intellectual minority. The danger of interpretation that disregards the timely meanings of heritage values is reflected by the bankruptcy of renovated buildings and their dead spaces. This inappropriate interpretation is closely followed by alien land use planning that compartmentalizes the city physically and makes it unliveable psychologically (Silberstein & Maser, 2013).

Heritage is invariably subject to multiple and sometimes even controverting interpretations, thus emphasizing their time-place dictum. Living societies come to grips with the meanings within their comfort zones, shaped by their time-place disposition. The most comprehensive heritage interpretation will encourage visitors to inquire about the making of that living space and its continuous dwelling. This is why heritage interpretation that integrates the concept of time-place could support dwelling in those heritage cities. Our way of interpreting a heritage should be an attempt to present the stratification of the past along with the reasons for that particular process of stratification. Once this evolutionary process of the urban landscape is understood as a reflection of a particular socio-cultural evolution, heritage interpreters could easily make historic spaces more liveable and comfortable.

⁸. Uzzel (1998) coined a new term, *hot interpretation* for interpreting the inheritance of a war.



Cities go through an unprecedentedly rapid transformation. City managers are also continuously challenged to keep them attractive to the living societies and newcomers. Undoubtedly, socio-economic changes that were unthinkable at the beginning of this millennium, have taken place, particularly in the cities of the developing world. This is why dwellers should be presented with clues to construct an identity to facilitate the transformation of a fragmented society, deliberated by colonialists. An evolved urban landscape presents an excellent means to support constructing such an identity. Heritage values are required to be interpreted so that the living societies, as well as visitors, are encouraged to investigate the links between the city's past, present and future. This, respecting their timely socio-cultural values, personal memories, or collective representations with place identities could change their attitudes to the inherited past. Enhanced heritage awareness will certainly make local societies realise that they have a role in protecting their inheritance, thus promoting a sense of belongingness within the city. The most demanding role heritage interpretation could play in a post-colonial city is promoting the engagement of its living society and ensuring that the city is protected for its people and not further distancing them from their living city as Lawless (2015) finds in Melaka.

The most damaging mistake possibly caused by interpretation is disconnecting past, present and future, thereby converting historic cities into dead monuments, similar to museum objects with which visitors are hardly engaged. At the same time, such efforts compartmentalize cities and further fragment their societies. Heritage interpretation that fails to connect the historic urban fabric to ongoing processes of living could also trigger intentional or non-intentional destruction. All historic moments are parts of a larger process, and as such all cities, built fabric, monuments, plazas and minor architecture signify the footsteps of continuous socio-cultural evolution. The timely changes of historic built fabric are similar to the patina on certain metal surfaces; patina is the present-day existence of that surface and not a different layer. The existence of a particular

component of an urban landscape should be interpreted with much wider ramifications than those that are typically represented. One may search for heritage presentations that could be interpreted differently in time and place, and for an interpretation that brings more enthusiasm to heritage protection. This type of open-ended interpretation in time and place could frame sustainable uses in protected heritage sites.

Colombo's heritage interpretation is planned under the theme of city beautification.⁹ Converting the historic urban fabric into amusement parks for high-spending time-travellers, the authorities are planning to build a Colonial Williamsburg in the Colombo fort. Their continuous failure to integrate public, professional or visitors' views seems to have missed shaping more constructive land-use planning in the colonial-built city (Silberstein & Maser, 2013). The policymakers do not use the available extensive range of communication skills or smart technologies to engage social groups in planning sustainable development. A critical aspect of community engagement is that different social groups, as well as individuals, hold different values in their city. It may reveal how to use lands with a heritage value sustainably. As it has been argued, land-use planning shaped by cultural, political and personal experiences and perspectives of living societies is the most sustainable type (Appleton, 2013). Since the city is culturally diverse, land-use planners cannot expect just one view but an array of views, sometimes even conflicting. Also, accommodating such contrasting views should be considered as a core value of a city that is a proclaimed heritage.

Hosagrahar (2016) notes the importance of building awareness, consensus, and capacity of a diverse cross-section of stakeholders for inclusive, empowered and effective participation in managing their urban heritage forms for socio-culturally defined sustainability. An interpretation that pegs down a heritage within time and place will help to facilitate dwelling. Uzzel (1998) has established that the dimensions which serve to define social identity have strong links to place identity. He has used four dimensions for this investigation: distinctiveness, as this emphasizes

⁹. City beautification has been labelled as a 'pet projects' of a powerful politician. As a result, it was not maintained when that particular politician had lost power, allowing their eventual destruction

through negligence. UDA, under the guidance of this politician who returned to power, is now implementing more non-sustainable projects.



uniqueness; continuity which emphasizes stable links with the past; self-efficacy, which emphasizes control and competence; and self-esteem, which engenders a sense of pride and self-respect. This emphasizes how people and activities play a major role in creating a city's identity. Therefore, heritage interpretation in time and place would support dwelling in the city. As Zukin (2012) notes a heritage city should support a desirable number and a choice of users or a long-term resident population to avoid their death through gentrification and touristification. This could be possible if a heritage interpretation process unifies possible interpreted meanings within the forte of those who are addressed through such processes.¹⁰ It is important to determine the priorities of those who are addressed through interpretation based on the cultural significance of the heritage that is being protected. The restoration of those historic buildings were not discussed at public forums as UDA has not practiced any mechanism to integrate public or professional views in the decision making process. Its top-down decision making process used for the heritage interpretation would erode the diversity of the city and weaken the connections with city's present-day and future connections.¹¹

Heritage interpretation is not immune from contradictions. Its deep connections with the conservation movement and the continuous shaping of the concept of heritage should be paid due attention. The timely evolution of the concept of heritage itself shows that heritage is a process and cannot be protected as frozen moments of the past. What is most fitting is a comprehensive heritage interpretation in time and place, thus recording the existing values along with the protected heritage. Also, heritage interpretation should deal with environmental responsibility in economic development. It is important to note that the failure to assess why heritage should be interpreted within time and place has caused various negative impressions of the past. This is similar to the attempts made to demolish historic buildings in Paris after the French Revolution. The decree issued by the new state, reinterpreting them as a heritage of the French, finally saved what is today

considered as a World Heritage. This is an excellent example of the strength of interpreting heritage in time and place, and precedence that Colombo can follow for its colonial heritage.

Interpretation for a wider audience

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken in social psychology to determine the criteria which are central to the social identity process (Breakwell, 2014). It is important to note that heritage interpretation could learn from these how to address a wider audience, including those who live in the city as well as those who visit it. It should be stressed that the dwellers and visitors may develop various attachments to heritage cities, expressing their own social identity. It is important to emphasize that a heritage city is not just an exhibit to reconstruct memories or events but a place where someone can reconcile with his/ her cultural meanings to comfortably dwell. Hence, its interpretation shall focus on strengthening such reconciliation rather than presenting heritage cities as passive warehouses of memories. A city like Pompeii, where timely evolution was terminated, could be presented as a frozen moment of history not only for what it had been but also for how its life was ended. This is not the case of a living city like Colombo, where its living patterns continues thus adding more layers to its urban images. Hence heritage interpretation in living cities should be more informative than a symbolic representation of one by-gone era. There are many lessons to learn from the failed attempts to reconstruct past images for tourism that have caused the degradation of city life. It must be noted that once a city has lost its living society, it would not be a city anymore, and therefore heritage interpretation shall make all efforts to encourage dwelling in the city.

The best point of departure for heritage interpretation in a living city is inquiring how societies engage in place-making in relation to those proclaimed historic spaces. It is vital to understand how they orientate themselves within the city and identify themselves with the city. This would help heritage interpreters to find the present-day value system, thus incorporating a larger audience. Such

¹⁰. Refer Uzzel (1998) for a comprehensive analysis of several unifying heritage interpretation techniques.

¹¹. Many foreign visitors, when questioned, noted that the cultural diversity and the living society is a part of the heritage, and the Colombo fort would lose its value if converted into a tourist quarter.



interpretation should also engage working classes and low-income groups in addition to elitist groups and visitors as agents of continuously making that city a heritage. A holistic approach to conservation based on such heritage interpretation that includes a wider community as a part of the inheritance could also frame sustainable development of the city by reiterating a socio-culturally defined carrying capacity (Munasinghe, 2005).

It is important to find a contextual recipe for prioritizing heritage values to make living societies *at home*. This, by informing societies how they could acquire knowledge in framing the future of their city, would shape stewardship to heritage. The traditional approach to heritage interpretation seems to suggest that meaning and significance is self-evident from the object itself. It may be the case for a museum exhibit, but not essential for a historic city with a living society. It is important to find more open-ended interpretations to address a wider community. Colombo needs to move away from this traditional approach to address a more diversified audience. Some of the meanings embedded in the colonial built fabric are contradictory. Their interpretation should address those who have lived there for generations, those who have moved there recently as well as those who visit the city regularly in addition to those who visit the city as a tourist. The current approaches in Colombo seem to be further glossing the meanings of colonial-built urban fabric by covering them with extrinsic touristic value. The locals are being demoted to a passive audience though they are a product of the same evolutionary process that has shaped their city. Such interpretation that addresses a wider society would assert that their city is a cultural product in the making. Heritage interpretation in the city should contribute to the knowledge construction of locals as well as that of visitors to engage both parties in its protection for continuous occupation of urban spaces and making them true cultural diversities. Hence, interpretation of heritage values of colonial-built urban fabric shall make a positive contribution to the continuous engagement of all significant social groups.

Visiting a heritage city is a social experience as all cities are founded as places of congregation. Colombo has evolved along with the changing relationships between rulers and the ruled. Those monumental buildings as

well as other modest structures of the colonial era attest to the city's evolution as a public space shared by many social groups. Thus, interpreting a few selected buildings or a declared urban quarter for their potential market values is more like reversing the progress of a city designated as the commercial capital of a country. The dynamic relationships between the interpreted heritage, various visitor groups, and meanings generated through their interaction have been well documented by Uzzel (1998). He states that visitors do not necessarily understand the meanings of heritage places by reading exhibition panels but by interacting with each other and with those who live in that place. On the other hand, as Blud (1990) notes the engagement of visitors, through interpretation, could frame better protection to heritage. Shaping a heritage interpretation that promotes group visits and interaction between visitors and interpreted heritage, in which the living societies are a part, could lead to understanding the evolved heritage values and facilitating sustainable protection. However, this idea of engaging visitors seems to have been misread by heritage interpreters who promote the inclusion of so-called period activities thus converting heritage sites into amusement parks, where the living society is demoted to a mere service provider. Promoting the protection of heritage values should be placed ahead of visitors through correct interpretation yet engaging them as a part and parcel of that interpretation. The most crucial role for the interpreter is to facilitate visitors to discover heritage values and their shaping and then to come to an understanding of the continuity of a past, place and a living society.

Interpretation may focus more on passive public actions as for the behavioural dimension. There should be sufficient room for the public to engage in any action as a consequence of their learning experience through their emotional connections to heritage cities. Heritage interpretation should present choices for diverse social groups to proclaim their inherited past positively to get involved with its protection. As a result, the local societies may not become passive victims of their past or fatalistically remain victims of a processed future. They can actively get involved in designing the future of their cities while integrating tourism and other potential



markets to sustain the socio-economics of their protected inheritance. As such, heritage interpretation could result in re-securing urban spaces for locals and then for visitors (Oevermann & Gantner, 2019). This is imperative in a colonial city, where heritage interpretation could transfer the ownership of the city back to the post-colonial society.

Today, social empowerment through interpretation to frame culturally sustainable development of the historic city has been discussed in many forums. By proclaiming the colonial-built city a heritage through interpretation, it would be possible to promote societies to occupy urban spaces while lobbying for new avenues to make healthy revenue. In other words, a heritage interpretation that promotes such inherent values as cultural significance over such intrinsic values as age or style or such extrinsic values as touristic or market could ensure better protection for the proclaimed heritage and a more sustainable living for local societies.

Conclusion: towards a unifying interpretation

It is clear that Colombo's attention on market value has chosen to only protect grand built forms and city quarters with such buildings. This heritage interpretation aimed at addressing a minority fails to unify sub-societies. Convincing political authorities and the public that colonial heritage should be protected in a country where most cultural heritage sites are indicators of pre-colonial evolution of the country's majority, the Sinhalese-Buddhists, has never been easy. The Antiquities Ordinance 1940 that has been used in Sri Lanka for heritage protection emphasizes the age value of tangible remains. The revisions of the ordinance and other recent legal frameworks have not brought any improvements to widen this age value. The declaration of the ramparts in Galle, a fortified city built by the Dutch, was the first attempt to identify the colonial-built heritage. The implementation of the ordinance that thwarts any development within 400 meters of a declared heritage could protect the entire Galle Fort and its surroundings too. Later, this was extended to list buildings in other cities that are more than 100 years old as protected buildings. However, minor architecture was never listed. This filtering process that renders protection for a few selected buildings also further fractures society.

Heritage-interpretation, instead, should strengthen the liveability of the city by unifying all sub-societies in time, and place. It should also attempt to protect tangible heritage as well as intangible processes. Heritage interpretation, as such, could facilitate the continuous evolution of the city as a place of life by fine-tuning the city's embedded identity. In time and place, heritage interpretation could be more than just descriptive or prescriptive to present alternative scenarios through urban guides and urban briefs to ensure the continuity of the city's image to accommodate its future generations. It is important to fine-tune a basis to develop such heritage interpretations in time and place so that societies could make more informed decisions with regards to the future of their heritage city.

Understanding what is inherently diverse about a heritage city could frame the rationale for its interpretation, and such interpretation could facilitate complete protection to the heritage city. Heritage interpretation aims at various receivers, and therefore, understanding their value system is also essential. The supposed virtue of heritage interpretation lies in its tendency to draw attention to and stress the differences rather than the similarities between people, events and places. For some, colonial-built heritage may be an inheritance that can be proudly proclaimed, while for others it may be a reminder of prejudice and ill-treatment. It is not a secret that such conflicts and various fragmentations are experienced everywhere. This often arises out of ignorance, prejudice, insecurity and a lack of individual pride as well as collective identity and confidence. Heritage interpretation could facilitate healing such past wounds by promoting a new phase of compassion among social groups.

As heritage cities could be interpreted as places devoid of anachronistic and anti-democratic to construct a positive social identity and a sense of place, it is easier to promote place-making in the city. This is not to suggest that interpretation could falsely construct an image that each and every social group has been equal or similar or their role in making the particular city heritage is similar, but it certainly may help to encourage different groups to respect each other, finding their common issues and continuously transforming their living space. It is vital to strike a delicate



balance to ensure an inclusive development strategy for such heritage cities for the benefit of societies and individuals, while at the same time safeguarding its heritage values, cultural diversity, integrity and the identity of present and future communities.

Our contention is to make heritage interpretation more inclusive and open-ended thus leaving the users to interpret them for their social interaction. The heritage protection plans could adopt a policy to include living societies and visitors in their interpretation, leaving the reception of those messages open. Such open-ended interpretation could support a dweller to positively identify and orientate him or her within the city not only as an individual but also as a member of a group. It is this identity and orientation that convert cities into places of life. This can construct positive attributes of the place being perceived to rub off onto the person. It is often suggested in the rhetoric of interpretive philosophy that interpretation contributes to a person's sense of place. The absence of research in interpretation has meant that such an assertion has to be tested. Urban identity theories stress the social value to be gained by people who perceive their city as unique and special. This uniqueness may eventually convert into a sense of pride and a sense of identity. Heritage sites, once inclusively interpreted, will not just enhance a person's sense of pride but more about that person's cultural identity and diversity. This is why heritage interpretation should focus on those intangible components of a lived city. Interpretation is in danger of falling into the same trap: images that move before eyes, without leaving much of an impression on the retina and even less on the brain. Finally, heritage interpretation should be a force for change and should be powerful as those forces which it has been designed to counter.

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