

CULTURAL CONTINUITY AS A VITAL FACTOR IN DELIVERING IDENTITY, MEMORY AND SENSE OF PLACE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PETTAH IN COLOMBO

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ABSTRACT

Most Asian cities are characterised by rapid urban metamorphosis and mostly the urban changes are based on planning mechanisms through spatial and land use methodologies and supported by globalization. In Colonial-contemporary cities, it is often seen that recent planning and development approaches undermine the cultural representation and memory of the place in their transformation process.

The study is scoped within the discussion of morphology, in relation to urban transformation and planning, in the context of urban settings (places) in Pettah, Colombo. It aims to re-examine cultural continuity in relation to the memory of a place in transforming urban settings. Methodologically, urban-cultural morphological study couples with spatial anthropology for field investigation and data transcoded into urban design planning schemata. Referring the literature on this subject area, certain parameters to measure the appropriate cultural transformation have been identified and the analysis of this situation is supported by the observations and personal communications.

The research has identified the socio physical and socio cultural relationships of transforming urban settings which are meant to be regeneration of built masses but, mostly the renovations for irreplaceable urban settings where people celebrate the sense of place.

Keywords: *Cultural Continuity; Sense of Place; Spatial Anthropology; Sustainable New World Encyclopaedia; Urban Transformation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today cities are undergoing socio-physical and economic changes as never happened before in most Asian countries and developing countries thus Sri Lanka is also not an exception. To deliver a better sort of movement for people and functions, to build up community relationships and also to make a place of remembrance, cities are specially planned. There should be a balanced built environment to maintain a certain pattern in a city and also to elaborate a slight entertainment of the city. Currently with the changes, the historic urban façades of the city are in danger of fast fading.

“Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings” (Lynch, 1960, p.1).

With historic built mass certain communities have their own relationship and way of life; a culture, which is now being disturbed. Transformation of these urban settings with historic references happens, sometimes with total negligence on some historic buildings and sometimes with total contrasting application. Due to that, the way of living of a particular community will be disturbed or their life time values will be disappeared, which allows cultural crashes.

Based on the above concerns, this study is focused on the relationship of people and their urban settings, which are transforming with the current development trends in Sri Lankan urban context where there should be a high concentration on cultural aspects to ensure particular cultural continuity to an urban setting.

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Rapid development and urbanisation disturb the cultures bonded to the built environment and also a considerable level of cultural transformation is not visible in the current development trends in local context. These situations made the research interest to find out the contribution of urban settings in emerging the city character while ensuring memory, identity and sense of place with the identification of the relationship between such urban setting and socio economic and socio cultural development. Further this research validates appropriate sustainable urban transformation assessment criteria and figures out the enhancement given by the cultural continuity on the identity and memory of a particular urban setting.

The study is scoped within the discussion of morphology, in relation to urban transformation and planning, in the context of Pettah in Colombo and aims to re-examine cultural continuity in relation to the memory of a place in transforming urban settings. The study was carried out not considering Pettah as a whole, but in five pre-identified places within the area to harness more qualitative data and information.

2. URBAN SETTINGS AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS

2.1. URBAN SETTINGS

Amos Rapoport (cited in Jagadisan and Fookes, 2010) also argues for the need to conceptualise 'environment' in general, and to consider types of environments. So that the environment or the settlement can be understood as; a) The organisation of space, time, meaning, and communication; b) A system of settings; c) The cultural landscape; d) A consisting of fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed elements.

At the very first, a space is required to form a settlement or an environment. With the time the space got developed serving its stake holders. Eventually a comprehensive settlement can be seen that delivers a meaningful understanding about the area. That expressive quality is the communication of an environment. To keep an appropriate communication with both inside and outside an environment needs a system of settings. Therefore it is clear that a system of settings physically characterises an urban setting. The social appreciation, feelings, activities and requirements equip such urban settings towards their life or the sustainability. That socio-cultural participation culturally characterises an urban setting. Physically available objects in an urban setting become components of it which support in the structuring process of urban settings.

2.1.1. COMPONENTS OF URBAN SETTINGS

With reference to Halprin's (1972) works, an urban setting is understood as a physical space generated through static or stable, temporary and movable components in a socio-economic and socio-cultural process. Therefore the research discusses urban settings through following components.

- **Permanent Structures** - Permanent components that boundary an urban setting, are built with more stable materials such as concrete, steel and brick with distinct characters or styles. The function and co-related activities combined to these built fabric are fixed, and they cannot be changed overnight. They are branded as two dimensional plots in figure-ground maps which show the relationship of an urban setting to its surrounding.
- **Temporary Structures** - These structures are not fixed in the setting and built out of light-weight materials. They are required to meet some functional necessities mostly for a certain period of time such as during special religious festivals, seasonal celebrations, etc.
- **Mobile Structures** - According to Rahul Mehrotra (2008) kinetic activities focus on to the gaps of the major activities accommodated in permanent and temporary structures. Most of these informal activities run on mobile structures that ease the movement of goods in place to place. In a broader perspective these mobile structures are the driving force of 'life' of an urban setting.
- **Open Spaces** - Aforesaid components of an urban setting become the basic factors to outline the voids or the open spaces in the setting. These spaces are the non-built plots of land. Either they are defined not to be built in order to keep green spaces or they are still not taken into consideration to put up buildings. The open space provides a relief to the eye in reading different building styles in an urban setting.

2.1.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF URBAN SETTINGS

Halprin (1972, p.11) explains urban settings as “...where the crowds gather and people participate in the exciting urban interrelationship which they seek as social human beings”. The particular building might be individual but its setting is very important for the reason that these buildings are values of a certain social strata. At the same time some of them are places of remembrance where they have historic backgrounds and related styles. Visiting places like parks, plazas, squares, shopping and transportation areas have to be socially organised. Jacobs (1995), Landry, Greene, Matarasso, and Bianchini (1996) discuss about the physical qualities, That are considered in this research.

- **Accessibility** - Entry points to particular study area
- **Bringing people together** - The attraction of the study area
- **Publicness** - Reasons to be hanging around and the area get crowded
- **Livability** - Social integration into particular study area
- **Safety** - Crime state of the study area
- **Comfort** - Physical and psychological ease and convenience
- **Participation** - The level of movement and activities of people
- **Responsibility** - Supply of required satisfaction throughout the area
- **Archaeological history** - The value of historic reference
- **Architectural heritage** - Importance of different built styles
- **Landscape, topography, amenities, and landmarks**
- **Attractiveness and legibility of public space**
- **Entertainment**
- **Sub-cultures**
- **Traditions of public social life, civic traditions, festival and rituals**

2.2. TRANSFORMATION OF URBAN SETTINGS

Transformation is a process performing throughout a considerable period of time. In urban studies, urban changes or the structural modifications and alterations of cities are considered as urban transformations. These amendments in the city structure caused due to the development trends worldwide. Development is a concern of all the countries to move onwards in terms of social, economic, cultural, technological approaches and etc.

- **Physical Transformation** - During the process of urban transformation physical change of the urban setting or the place becomes an important factor. That particular change elaborates the level of transformation. In its simplest idea physical transformation is the change or the advancement of the built environment that can be seen over time. Alternative systems of construction methods and alterations for the elements of the built setting can be noticed during such transformation.
- **Cultural Transformation** - The urban setting needs life in it. This liveliness is not an easy approach because it is a kind of psychological assessment of a selected place. Generally the social involvement in an urban setting shows the life. This global phenomenon is strengthened by the following statement. “Livability is not only a matter of urban form, it is also a matter of personal preference” (Neuman, 2005, p.16). Neuman shows the connection between social preference and urban setting. So it is understood that if the physical setting is transforming towards new degrees of built form, the social preference is also to be transformed to fit the new urban formation.

3. PLACE AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

3.1. PLACE

A place is a thoughtful entity characterised by cultural and human aspects of physical space. “This character consists both of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture, and colour and of more intangible cultural associations, a certain patina given by human use over time” (Trancik, 1986, p. 113). Trancik

(1986) further explains that even though a place is unique there may be physically same boundaries. Therefore the term place derives its uniqueness through its cultural content. It is the appreciation of such physical space by a group or groups of people. Relph (1976, p. 3) declares that “A place is not just the ‘where’ of something; it is the location plus everything that occupies that location seen as an integrated and meaningful phenomenon”.

3.1.1. IDENTITY OF A PLACE

An identity is a sort of recognition. The physical components of an object render its identity. Generally the term ‘identity of’ speaks out the bounded system of aforesaid physical components where the term ‘identity with’ always relates to other similar objects. “We recognise the identities of people, plants, places and even nations” (Relph, 1976, p.45). When the identity of a place is taken into consideration there are physical components but people look at it differently. There are different cultural groups who search certain qualities. They may see many of the components but they define a place with their experience, feeling and attitude.

3.1.2. MEMORY OF A PLACE

Once a person has experienced a place some characteristics of that place is autonomously recorded in his mind. That can be either a special physical component that exist in the particular location or a significant activity or a function that is special in the particular location. Moreover, some people see some places in their day to day activities. For an example a person who travels to his work place may see some places every day. At this instance unconsciously his eyes may follow particular built environments and they are recorded in his mind. The important factor is when he is about to recall a place some characteristics may come into his mind very quickly. That is the identity of place he has absorbed during his experience. Each and every experience makes a memory with the time pass. This memory of a place is a significant factor in finding out one’s own location (Lynch, 1960; Relph, 1976).

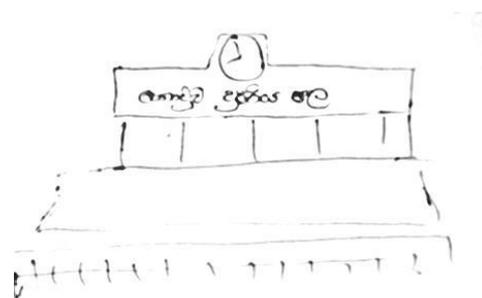


Figure 1: Imagery of Pettah - A Sudden Recall of Built Environment, Sketch by a Participant in the Research

3.1.3. SENSE OF A PLACE

How people experience places becomes an important area to be pondered. As Relph (1976, p.8) reveals “Yet, however we feel or know or explain space, there is nearly always some associated sense or concept of place”. The human dimension is also matters in the experience of a place. Tuan (as cited in Relph, 1976) treats this idea with the statement “...that provide the fundamental dimensions of left and right, above and below, in front of and behind, within reach and beyond reach, within hearing and beyond hearing, within sight and beyond sight” (p.9). Knowledge and attitudes are different from one person to another. Therefore they become subjective. So the individual experiences should be accompanied with an elementary understanding of the context of the place as a group of all relevant cultures to appraise the ‘sense’ of a place.

Kevin Lynch (1960) says that the visual sensation of colour, shape, motion, or polarisation of light, as well as other senses such as smell, sound, touch, kinesthesia, sense of gravity and perhaps of electric or magnetic fields are different kinds of indications to structure and identify the environment. He further articulates that the recognition of a place or an object must have a meaning for the observer whether practical or expressive.

According to Gordon Cullen (1995, p.11) colours, textures and scales are very significant characteristics of places that people experience. Then they get the impressions of the architectural styles of the built environment. Finally they relate themselves into it; emerge a personality.

3.2. CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Culture is a very broad area which has no single definition. Generally culture is described as a combination of cultivated human behaviours over time. Burnett Tylor, a 19th century anthropologist represented the cultural evolutionism states “Culture, or civilisation, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1929).

Landry *et al.* (1996) come up with a building related definition for culture. In fact a culture is a kind of way of life which is also an art of living. To support the living systems a reference is needed. Therefore one’s experience of a place and time becomes a memory and these several memories or experiences get together where the people are getting together. So the continuation of this similar kind of experience is building specified because Landry *et al.* mention that culture is about a lived experience of a place; the reference of physical context. A place is defined with the presence of built environment. The psychological relationship to the place can give an idea of its own future, because an identical activity pattern or a way of life is attached to that particular place.

The culture is a vague term at all because it can be either related to smaller social groups with all most same activity patterns and living styles or at the same time to a whole nation consists of a huge number of such social groups that depict a distinct character or many among other regions. So the main component of the culture is the human being because his behavioural patterns or any other human related aspects are taken into consideration under the term ‘culture’. For this research culture is a collective of several sub-cultures and a sub-culture defines as an identical group of people with similar ways of living. Social involvement in the place is an essential factor in urban design, because the places are for people. Kevin Lynch (1984, p.48) advocates, “*We must see any place as a social, biological, and physical whole, if we mean to understand it completely*”.

4. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

4.1. THEORETICAL POSITION

Throughout the formation of a city there are major concrete developments to shelter different types of activities and functions. So the people who involved in such activities are very familiar to this built environment and there is their own identity of “place”. With the urbanisation there are more job opportunities and therefore people tend to come into these developing areas. In earlier built environments in urban areas there were well-planned master thought to facilitate the city and people. So that the people who built up relationships with the city those days, are the social-roots in generating cultures based on built environments. But in the present situation, most of the urban built forms are covering by the new additions to them and also by the new buildings coming up. Further it is worst in terms of large hoardings and light weight trucks as mobile structures appear closer to the roads that disable one’s sight towards built environment. So now the issue is those massive structures are getting hidden in the city and therefore the value of them is being neglected or missed by the present generation. The glory of the building gets damaged along with this negligence and ill-treatment.

But on the other hand it is acceptable that there can be an urban transformation towards urban sustainability in the long run. Though it causes the disappearance of some parts of built environments, the identity and the memory retain with some celebrative characteristics. Preserving an iconic building is not that much easy because it has to be thought of its surrounding and response from the society. Anyhow, socio-economic forces cannot be restricted. Urban settings are commercially active in general. Therefore, selling – buying activities become dynamic features. So the tactful approach in selling methodologies followed by almost all the sellers is being closer to the society. Temporary structures and mobile structures enable such

approach in urban settings. Therefore identity of place, memory of place and sense of place through the built environment degrade eventually.

A place that faces these issues needs a regeneration to pick up the continuity of the culture. The patterns of the urban space have high impacts on the community and the culture. Therefore, both physical and psychological rhythms and patterns are very considerable factors of a place to the people to keep a reminder of a “space” and sense it.

4.2. SELECTION OF CASE STUDY

The study is focused on urban settings, which are being transformed and already transformed. General appreciation of a place in terms of identity, memory and sense of place is the major concern of this research. But it is a perceptible factor that the current development is biased only on physical aspect of transformation. Pettah in Colombo; the busiest commercial area of the country, which has historic backgrounds was selected as a case to support this research.

4.2.1. PETTAH

Before Colombo becoming the commercial capital of the country, Pettah area was characterised as an administrative zone. Eventually Pettah got developed with compressed trade and other commercial activity concerns.

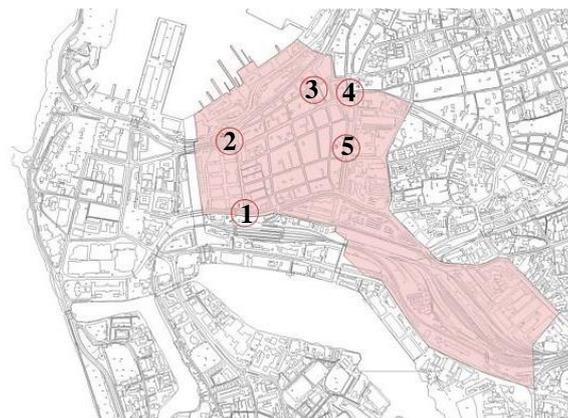


Figure 2: Pettah and its Surroundings
Source: Survey Department of Sri Lanka

Pettah is highlighted in this map of Colombo and the circled areas are the selected places for the study.

- 1) Malwaththa Road entrance from Olcott Mawatha
- 2) Khan Clock Tower
- 3) St. John’s Fish Market converting into a Gold Market
- 4) Gaswork Junction with Bell Tower
- 5) Bodhiraja Mawatha

During the preliminary studies on this research there were 10 interviews conducted by the author as pilot surveys to identify the major aspects of public considerations.

When the culture is considered, it is divided into two main streams. They are Locals and Strangers. The big picture which is available is a combination of these two particular communities and their activities responding to the built environment. This is where the issue comes in because, today whole Pettah is considered as a shopping area. Therefore many people attracted to Pettah. The only identity that people have today is Pettah is full of shops, which is very true but, at the same time there are lots of interesting and historically valued places in the same setting. With the development, the owners of these buildings have modified their property to meet a maximum commercial arrangement rather than appreciating such important buildings.

4.3. FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS

During the study on components of selected places, 10 pilot surveys were carried out to figure out the special key aspects of particular places. Both Physical and Cultural characteristics are supported by the observations and photographic surveys. Police records data were collected from the Pettah Police Station. Both formal and informal interviews (30) strengthen the socio-cultural position behind the selected places. The questionnaire and the imagery survey sessions were conducted on 2 days for 400 people. After the pilot surveys, the questionnaire and the imagery survey were carried out among 200 people per day at selected 5 places (40 people each). There were 2 complete rounds from place 1 to place 5 interviewing 20 people at each place to cover 200 people. After the interviewing sessions on day 1, thorough observation, photographic and personal communication sessions were carried out for continuous 12 days and again the interviewing sessions for the remaining 200 people were carried on the 14th day following the day 1 process.

4.4. ANALYSIS

1) The links of identity, memory and sense of place with the components of urban settings, physical characteristics and cultural characteristics.

- a) Identity of a place emerges with the components of that place. Permanent structures become the most important built component because most of the times a static building or couple of buildings cast an identity to the particular setting. Sometimes temporary structures also create an identity of a certain place.
- b) Memory and sense of place directly link with the physical characteristics of that place but the components also have a considerable weightage - Spatial Anthropology analysis.
- c) Identity, memory and sense of place become more strong and meaningful with the cultural characteristics - Social Anthropology analysis.

This analysis contains a lot of data in tables with particular photographic surveys of each selected place (place 1 to 5) and based on those analysed data and information, the research proceeded to the analysis part 2; figure out the sustainability of each place. At this point the research links with Kevin Lynch's (1984) good city form theory to evaluate the sustainability of the particular places and the research has found that the 5 performance dimensions of good city form theory can be related with the twenty data variables which were used in the analysis part 1 as components of urban settings, physical characteristics of urban settings and cultural characteristics of urban settings. Therefore the following data analysis supports the research to consider the sustainability of the study areas.

2) Assessment on Kevin Lynch's Performance dimensions - evaluation chart

Table 1: Place Sustainability Evaluation Criteria for Pettah, Colombo

Performance dimension	Data Variable	Comments for the Places				
		Place 1	Place 2	Place 3	Place 4	Place 5
VITALITY	Safety	Enabled	Enabled	Partial	Enabled	Enabled
	Comfort	Satisfied	Satisfied	No	Barely	No
	Subcultures	Dynamic	Frozen	Regular	Dynamic	Dynamic
	Traditions	Dynamic	Unique	Absent	Dynamic	Dynamic
SENSE	Permanent structures	Average 3 floors	Average 2 floors	Average 3 floors	Average 4 floors	Single story
	Temporary structures	Many	Few	Many	Many	Many
	Mobile structures	Many	Few	Few	Many	Absent
	Open spaces	Few and busy	Few	Many	Few and Busy	No
	Legibility	Satisfied	Satisfied	Barely	No	Satisfied
	Entertainment	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent

Performance dimension	Data Variable	Comments for the Places				
		Place 1	Place 2	Place 3	Place 4	Place 5
FIT	Publicness	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
	Liveability	Satisfied	Barely	Barely	Satisfied	Satisfied
	Fitness	Pleased	Dis-Pleased	Dis-Pleased	Pleased	Barely pleased
ACCESS	Accessibility	High	High	High	High	High
	Bringing people together	High	Low	High	High	High
	Archaeological history	Not available	available	Not available	available	Not available
	Architectural heritage	Disapp-aring	Remai-ning	Conver-ting	Remai-ning	No
	Landscape Landmarks	Highly available	Highly available	available	available	Highly available
CONTROL	Participation Responsibility	High Satisfied	Low Barely	High No	High Satisfied	High Satisfied

Comments for the each place on the respective data variables are given ‘colour grading’ as follows.

- Good 100%
- Average 50%
- Poor Nil

With the above table the research analyses the sustainability through several charts and graphs. Above grading is offered to come to a numerical state for the qualities of the listed factors and each performance dimension is given one or more data variables. Therefore to clarify the content of a performance dimension, aforesaid colour grading is used. Therefore to clarify the quality of vitality of a place there are 4 data variables to be concerned. According to the colour grading system, vitality is clarified by the total sum of percentage for 4 data variables divided by 4 (the average percentage is used). Likewise all the 5 performance dimensions for each place are clarified and analysed data elaborated with a main graph and several charts and graphs. Finally the research evaluates the sustainability of Pettah with the average percentages of performance dimensions calculated for 5 particular places.

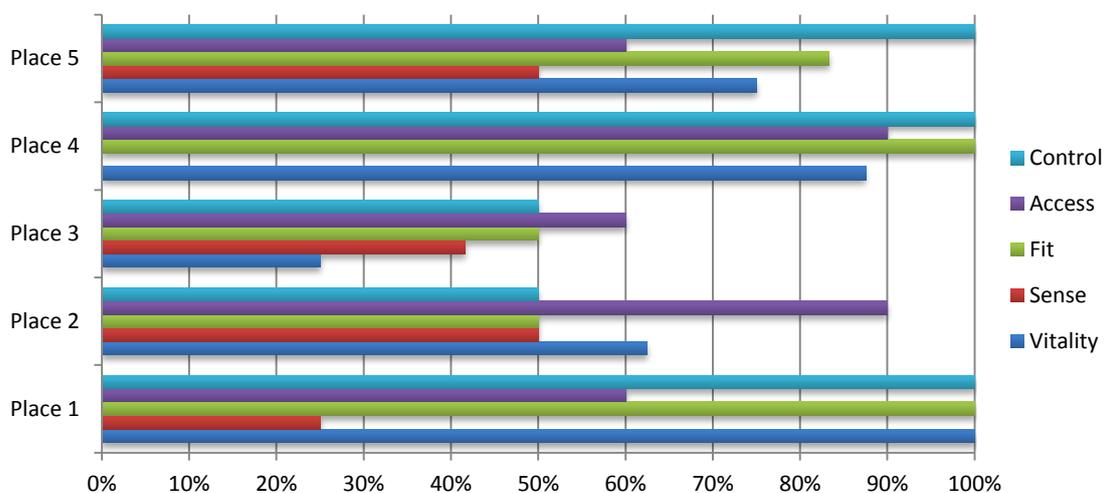


Figure 3: Place Sustainability Evaluation among Selected 5 Places

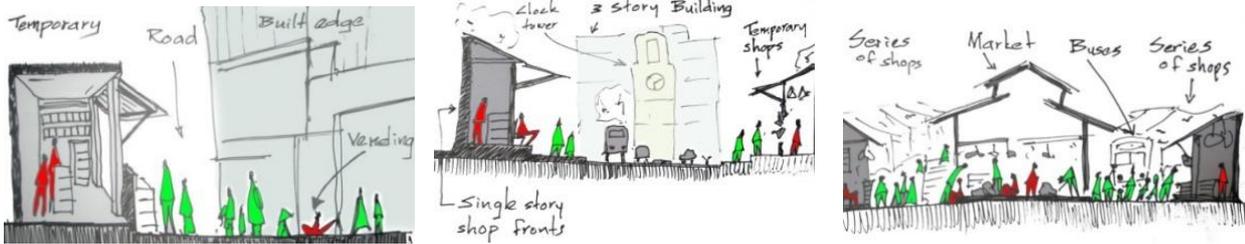


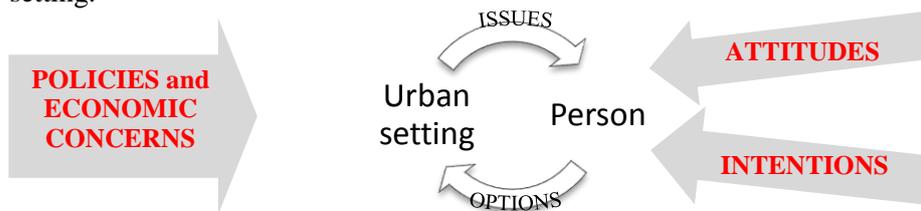
Figure 4: Some of the Cross Sections to Elaborate the Characteristics of Functioning in Pettah, Colombo

4.5 FINDINGS

- a) During the development process a change in the urban setting leads to the changes in its social behaviour.



- b) Social participation always figures out options to face issues come out from the particular urban setting.



- c) Considered urban setting is always personalising.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Responding to the capitalist urbanisation a rapid development is visible in Pettah area based on economic concerns. Generally each and every floor inch becomes valuable for the merchants for their profits. Therefore they all are expanding their selling area to catch the maximum consumer rates. Currently Pettah is over densed and responding to the overflowing business activities and space needs, the government is proposing vertical development. Being familiar to the countries in all over the world, it is a clear fact that a physical development can be achieved through buildings in city planning. But the corresponding cultural or the social transformation and the provision of the cultural existence become a vital consideration due to the fact that urban settings or the places are for people. Therefore the stakeholding sub cultures and other users and relevant people should be considered as key to achieve sustainable urbanisation.

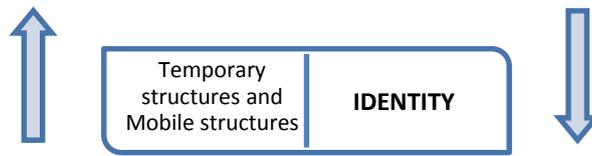
Therefore an identity of a place should be provided enabling people to make memories over that. To welcome more people to achieve publicness and the livability, the particular place should have been planned in a sensible way. The live wire of any given place is the participation of people. It is a global phenomenon.

The research revealed the following potentials during the study.

1. The increase in the number of Permanent structures and the Open spaces of an urban setting has a potential increase in its identity.



2. The increase in the number of Temporary structures and the Mobile structures of an urban setting has a potential decrease in its identity.



3. The high potential of identity of an urban setting creates more opportunities to keep memories.



4. The quality increasement of spatial anthropology increases the sensibility of the particulr urban setting.

Pettah is currently loosing its identity mainly due to increase of temporary structures and overflowing of temporary commercial and selling activities without any place reference. The permanent structures are being covered by the temporary structures and mobile structures. Therefore the building façade is not visible at most cases and street front is not well defined causing problems of the orientation and identity of the place. This makes a situation that one can not experience the place with physical bearings to the place. Further all the open spaces and also some of the pavements of very crowded areas are being filled with mobile structures, temporary expansions of shop fronts and moving vendors. But still people’s identity Pettah is as a large shopping area with a lot of crowd. It is an identity that arises because of the social participation. Therefore, the existence of the sub cultures and their activities have increased the level of identity.



The existence of sub cultures was re-interpreted as the cultural continuity in the body text. So cultural continuity delivers the identity of a place. In the same momentum people have soaked an idea of publicness relevent to the area. It becomes an memory of the place depicted by the participation or the existense of people. In further details the research found that some of the areas are ethnically significant. For an example the Main Street is full of shops and near the Jami-ul Alfar Mosque situated in a lane from the Main Street, where the Muslim population is comparatively high. So the people have a memory of the majority Muslims there. Further these Muslims are constructing an attachment to the original mosque which was built in 1909 facing the Main Street. This situation portrays that the cultural continuity delivers a memory of the place which is identifiable.



Both the above two outcomes reinforced by the existence of sub cultures and their activities. Therefore Pettah must have a sensible environment. But the research found that the built environment of Pettah is not very comfortable and the projected sustainability chart for Pettah has a low percentage for its sensibility.

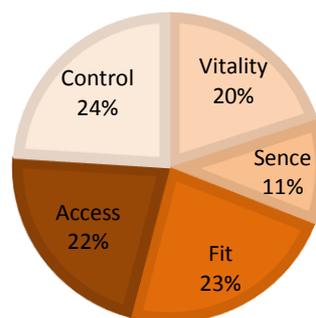


Figure 5: Projected Sustainability of Pettah along with its Urbanisation

Here the vitality, fitness and control are social concerns that Pettah is responsible for its stakeholders. There are lots of accessibilities to places in this area as a whole. Even though the physical built environment creates very less sensibility for Pettah, the publicness has become an outstanding factor that has been addressed by the business activities of the area. This presence of human activities generates the sensibility of the area. People who come to the area feel dynamic human activities. Therefore the cultural continuity delivers a sense of place for people to relate themselves with others and their activities. Generally on Sunday evenings and other special holidays more than two third of the shops are closed and Pettah has very low crowds, because the built environment has no potential of attracting people. Only the existence of sub cultures and related activities catch the social participation.

Therefore the cultural continuity of Pettah becomes a vital factor in delivering its identity, memory and sensibility because the personalisation of the area stands over the physical transformation and ensures cultural existence with alterations and options in human activities and behaviour. But to respond the issues regarding the urbanisation of the area these sub-cultures also transform slightly in the long run.

Based on the findings of this research about Pettah, further researches can be carried out specially on the social behaviours responding to the urban changes in city development, personalisation of urban settings over time and the importance of informal characteristics caused by the urban transformation towards sustainability.

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