Havelock City in Colombo: An Advocacy of "New Urbanism" to inculcate a True Urban Culture

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Urbanity is characterized by the agglomeration of human beings into specific geographic locations in pursuit of collective solutions to common problems; and to achieve common aspirations. These aspirations may include security, economic opportunities, physical and social infrastructure, as well as the rich human interaction that is facilitated by the physical structuring of urban space. Thus, the density of habitations that is an inherent characteristic of urbanity facilitates the economization of urban infrastructure. Such economization facilitates the concentrated deployment of physical resources as well as the concentration of public transportation networks and the discouraging of individual vehicle usage. However, the contemporary trends of urban development that give rise to "urban sprawl" through aspects such as zoning codes and the development of suburbs appear to work against this nature of urban living. The American movement of "New Urbanism" that originated in 1980s can be seen as a reaction to such trends that threaten the survival of distinct local community cultures that depend on the primary character of urbanity.

New Urbanism can be seen as an argument for 'high density development' as opposed to the "sprawling megalopolis"[1] that characterizes contemporary urbanization (Lewis, 1961). The spread of a low density urban development over a vast area is seen to necessitate the individual vehicle usage, increase the demand for transport related land-use and also the disruption of the urban culture. Thus, New Urbanism advocates mixed-use neighbourhoods as in European cities and encourages "walk-able" neighbourhoods where vehicle usage is discouraged. Proponents of New Urbanism favour traditional neighbourhood design. They share the views of Lewis Mumford who observes medieval city design as a suitable basis for urban development and advocate a pedestrian oriented growth of urban habitations.

In view of the above, a strategy to incorporate the ideals of New Urbanism in the Sri Lankan urban context may only be practiced in mixed developments of mega scale. These may provide a suitable mix of civic activities within a sustainable neighbourhood that will reduce the dependence of residents on the automobile and create sustainable urban neighbourhoods. If proper design strategies are incorporated, these pedestrian oriented neighbourhoods may effectively separate pedestrian pathways from vehicular traffic and feature a healthy component of public spaces. Such well designed 'urban housing' in contrast to rural or suburban houses, would foster a spirit of community. Such design should reflect how the strength of an urban community is harnessed to create an environment where the urban dwellers can relate to each other. The spatial structuring of such urban habitats would create spaces that are conducive for congregation and interaction that would counteract social isolation and alienation that characterize contemporary city life.

Such spatial structuring characterizes the layout of Havelock City development in Colombo, Sri Lanka that attempts to create a self-contained neighbourhood that houses the largest agglomeration of people in a single housing development and yet combats anonymity. The architectural challenge is to enhance a neighbourhood spirit by rich interaction while ensuring a degree of privacy that is the key ingredient of healthy urban living as pointed out by Jane Jacobs. She explains the value of

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[1] Lewis Mumford uses this term to designate the modern city by comparing it with the Roman city that sprawled over a large area. Such ideas are reflected in his book, *The City in History*.

"informal relationships" between urban dwellers that allow a degree of interaction that does not allow the intrusion into the private life of each other (Jacobs, 1961). She explains this as a 'jealously guarded' virtue of urban life. Such close yet well managed social relationships could be ensured in situations where socially 'neutral' public spaces of varied scales are provided and spatially orchestrated for congregation in schemes of community habitation (Strauven, 1998). Further, the degree of sharing of common spaces could be articulated in a "hierarchy of common spaces" that Oscar Newman prescribes. Such a hierarchy is defined as public, semi-public, semi-private and private, where the number of people who share the spaces that are closer to the "private" realm could gradually reduce (Newman. 1972).

Following such structuring of common space, the Havelock City development almost equally spreads out its 1080 housing apartments into eight high-rise blocks. These blocks are located around a nine acre landscaped 'Roof Garden' that is intended to be the central congregation space for all its dwellers. This Roof Garden is located 5.35 meters above ground level and is insulated from any vehicular circulation that is confined to an internalized "ring-road" around the residential blocks. Such total pedestrianisation of the this social hub is also a strong point advocated by "New Urbanists" such as Jan Gehl who had similarly sculpted a large amount of commercial related public spaces in Denmark (Gehl, 1987). This public space or the "Central Park" of this neighbourhood is landscaped in a manner that defines different functional spaces by natural elements such as earth mounds, lakes and streams as well as vegetation. While this garden resembles parkland featuring lush vegetation it contains a playground, paved pathways with seating areas and a club house with a large swimming pool and a pool deck that integrates with its natural settings. This club house is designed to be the centre of the social life of all Havelock City dwellers as it lays emphasis on the real social needs of the Sri Lankan upper-middle income category in terms of its space allocations. Its functional spaces include a sheltered but open multi-purpose hall, a physical fitness centre, a nursery school that closely integrates with the garden, four reception halls, and a barbeque terrace that overlooks the roof garden. Thus, a pleasant walk across Sri Lanka's largest landscaped roof garden would bring any Havelock City resident to the hub of their neighbourhood social life.

Immediately adjacent to this elevated parkland are eight public foyers that relate to each residential block. The second level of each such block is kept as a "void deck" that spatially opens out to the Roof Garden. These sheltered but open spaces act as a veranda for each residential block where the toddlers and senior citizens among its residence could relate to the activity in the garden and enjoy its foliage while remaining in the protective shade of their own building. Thus, special care is taken to cater for these two user categories by incorporating a senior citizens' corner and a properly equipped kiddies' play area. Further, these sheltered spaces of relaxation and congregation are also provided with fixed equipment that facilitates fitness exercises. Thus, each of these verandas would become ancillary semi-public spaces that relates to the main public space which is the vast Roof Garden. This may resemble the spatial structuring of the Greek "Agora" analysed by Richard Sennett where the some could remain as spectators in the public realm, while others may choose a more active role (Sennett, 1994).

Access into the semi-private space of the Level-2 Entrance Lobby which is adjacent to the above mentioned semi-public veranda is exclusively for the residents of the block. This follows the same practice as the Level-1 Entrance Lobby at ground level, where access is controlled by key card. Further into the residential block, the number of people sharing each residential lift lobby reduces as the number of units in each floor plate is limited to 6 apartments.

Thus, one may observe a gradation of public spaces that gradually reduces the number of people who share them. This helps to combat anonymity in an agglomeration of people in a development of this scale. Further, the close integration of public spaces of vast and intimate scale with the residential development indicates a strong adherence to the principles of "New Urbanism". The ideals of New Urbanism which are equated to the "traditional European city model" by Leon Krier should be focused upon in visualizing the lifestyle that could be generated by the spatial structure of Havelock City. Most significant characteristics of life in European cities occur in their public spaces. These spaces are areas of assembly, points for meeting and congregation, places for conversation and protest, venues for festivities and music etc. Thus, they become places that are full of functional and symbolic values where residents may enjoy rich human interaction. The project would advance a prototype of spatial structuring that advocates to foster greater collective use of common spaces that would create a model urban neighbourhood. Thus, residents of such a development would identify with public space as part of their everyday lives and assign new value to the public character of urban spaces.

Further, Havelock City would become a trail blazer in creating a self-contained neighbourhood in the true sense of the word as it would be integrated with one of the largest commercial developments. While being secured as an exclusive residential enclave or a "gated community" that enhances community spirit among residents, it would have its gateway to the outside world through a series of spaces charged with high commercial energy and entertainment activities. This would relate to another point advocated by New Urbanism which strives to replicate the lifestyles of a European City that is the discouraging of vehicular transport. Thus, through projects of such orientation, one may find hope in the eradication of the evils of 'urban sprawl' that is vehemently opposed by New Urbanists.

Thus, one may reflect upon the characteristics of Havelock City that support the aspirations of two main founders of the Congress for New Urbanism[2]. Dunay *et al* (2003) have compiled a thirteen item list on the 'elements of new urbanism'. This list advocates the following elements that are strongly prevalent in the scheme:

- Neighbourhood to have an identifiable centre
- Most dwellings within quick walk from this centre
- Variety of dwelling types that accommodate old and the young, families and singles, rich and the poor.
- Shops and offices at the edge of the neighbourhood to supply the needs of dwellers
- An elementary school to be within walking distance for children
- A small playground accessible to every dwelling at close proximity.
- The streets within the neighbourhood to form a connected network
- Narrow and shaded streets that encourage slow traffic and pedestrian usage

When translated into a high-rise development one may find how such virtues of an urban neighbourhood are ingrained into the Havelock City scheme through its mix of activities and the spatial structuring. However, this is only in regard to urban community building at micro level. When analyzing the macro scale benefits that the scheme would ensure, the most striking

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[2] The husband and wife team of Town Planners, Andres Dunay and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk were two founders of the Chicago based Congress for New Urbanism (founded in 1993). They advance their belief that the "heart of New Urbanism is in the design of neighbourhoods".

contribution made by such schemes is the prevention of urban decay that would result from the rapid "urban sprawl" that appears to threaten Colombo.

As pointed out by many authors the urban degeneration that engulfed many cities could be attributed to the suburbanization that deprived the cities of established residential neighbourhoods. Their affluent residents who contributed to the city authorities through taxes had previously helped to enhance the city infrastructure development. Further, the buying power of such residents nourished the urban retail sector while the entertainment sector also profited from their presence in mass. Although the flight of such residents to the quieter suburbs had not necessarily created "inner city areas" in Colombo as in the American cities observed by Newman (1972); it had given rise to a haphazard commercial development that gradually erodes the civic life of the city. A major contribution offered by projects such as Havelock City is the retention of such residential neighbourhoods within city limits to enrich its public realm. In this process it inculcates a truly urban culture to the Sri Lankan in which mutual urban coexistence is advocated through the shared use of public space that becomes the arena for the urban culture and ritual. While such spaces become central to the lives of all its residents spatial structuring would ensure total privacy of their personal domains, thus making it a viable prototype of a healthy urban community.

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