



DEVELOPMENT AS SPECTACLE

UNDERSTANDING POST-WAR URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

Master's Thesis Presentation
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TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- With a strong focus on building new and world-class infrastructure, the government expects to **cure social ailments with its post-war urban development agenda**.
- By following a similar ***build and they will come strategy*** as its role models **Singapore or Dubai**, the government hopes that these endeavours will eventually pay off. The example from Arcade Independence Square shows that this has not yet happened though.
- Today, it has become much more important **what a city appears to be/offer** than what it actually is/offers. Debord^[1] calls this a “shift from having to appearing”.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

«DEVELOPMENT AS SPECTACLE»

- Studying cities: the political economy of urban development
 - Neoliberal restructuring of the city
 - Deficit model of development
 - Hegemonic nation building
- Guy Debord & «The Society of the Spectacle»
 - The «spectacle»
- «Development as spectacle» in practice: the making of a world-class Colombo

“By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence”.

(Debord, 1994[1967]: #24)^[1]

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the **characteristics** of the government's approach to **post-war urban development** and what are the parameters behind the capital's infrastructural makeover that is supposed to turn it into a world-class city?

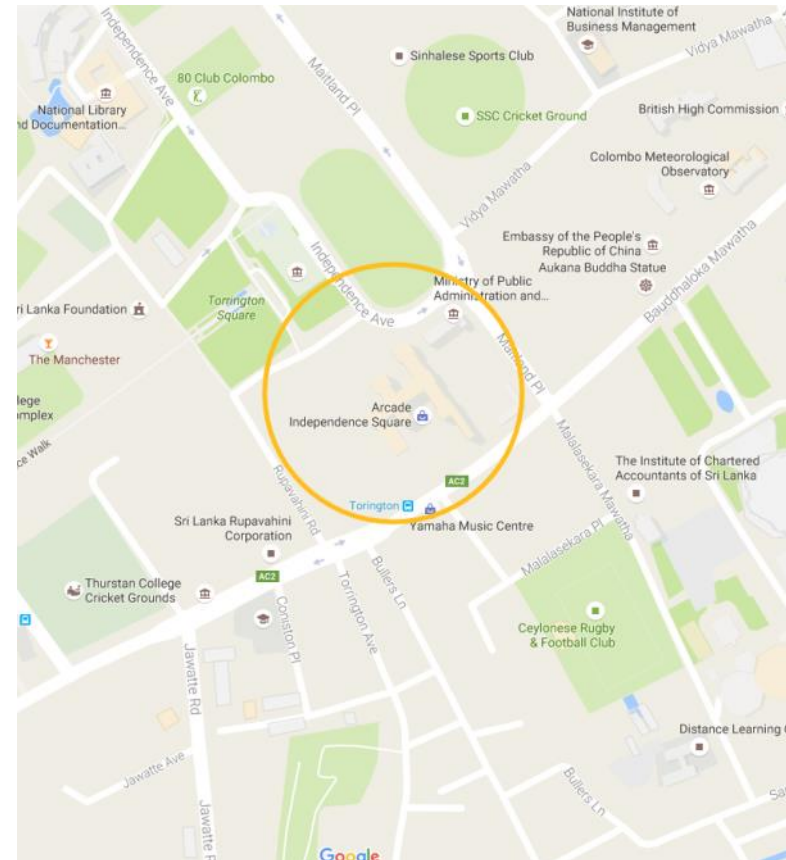
Using **Arcade Independence Square** as an example, can the government as developers **fulfil the promises** it has made with regard to the social and economic benefits of the project?

What can the **results** from Arcade Independence Square tell us about **other projects** in urban development in Colombo and Sri Lanka, either completed, still ongoing or planned, and what are the social and economic consequences of such an approach to development?

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

LOCATING RESEARCH SITE

- Colombo is the economic and political centre of the country
- «Cinnamon Gardens» (Colombo 07) is the last remnant of the colonial «garden city»
- Next to Independence Square lies Arcade, a luxurious refurbished shopping mall



CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

RECENT HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS



Sri Lankan Civil War ends in 2009



Rajapaksa Government claims victory



Infrastructure-centred post-war development projects spruce up around the island



CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

COLOMBO BEAUTIFICATION



Rehabilitated canal system, ...



Improved walkways and green spaces



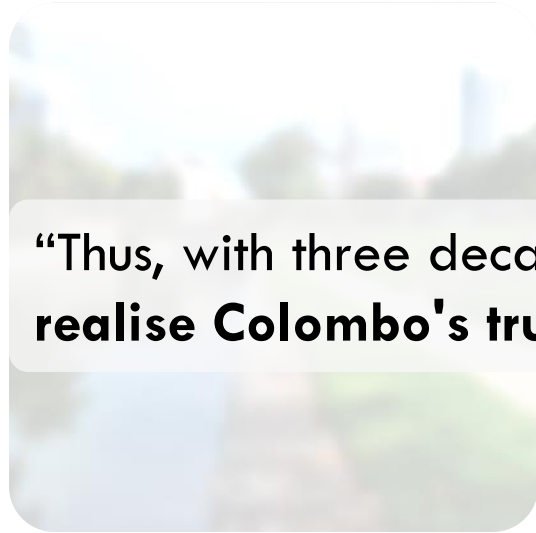
Colombo's post-war master builder



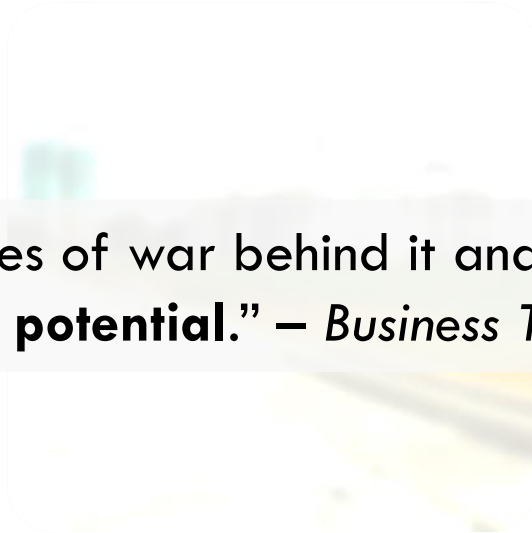
Refurbished colonial buildings

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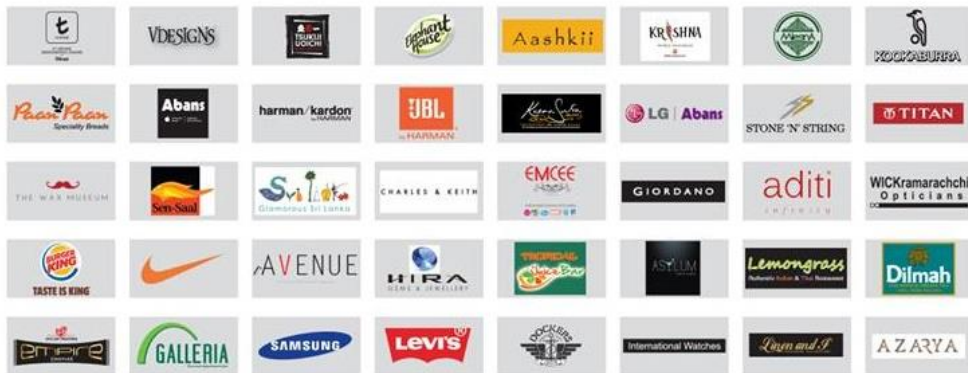
Refurbished colonial buildings

“Thus, with three decades of war behind it and the country at peace, it is **finally possible to realise Colombo's true potential.**” – *Business Today*, December 2012

ARCADE INDEPENDENCE SQUARE

«ASIA'S TRENDIEST SHOPPING MALL»

- Former asylum turned government building turned shopping mall
- Poster child for spectacular, post-war urban development
- 40 shops in total, offering the latest in fashion and retail as well as dining



«DEVELOPMENT AS SPECTACLE» IN PRACTICE

LESSONS LEARNT FROM ARCADE

- Three-level analysis
 - Planning the spectacle

“A place like Arcade is required. Otherwise the city will not be attractive”

– UDA project manager, 22 October 2015

“The opportunity is amazing: it is the only colonial building in Asia turned into a shopping mall”

– tenant A, 9 November 2015

«DEVELOPMENT AS SPECTACLE» IN PRACTICE

LESSONS LEARNT FROM ARCADE

- Three-level analysis
 - Planning the spectacle
 - Implementing the spectacle

“We are truly proud of our heroic Armed Forces who not only freed us from terrorism but are now doing so much, apart from offering us security, to beautify earlier neglected lands and restoring old buildings to their former glory - we really owe them all a debt of gratitude”

— *Sunday Observer*, 30 March 2014

“Everyone came because we all thought it was going to be a good shopping mall. UDA promised us that this would be a hit”

— tenant D, 12 November 2015

«DEVELOPMENT AS SPECTACLE» IN PRACTICE

LESSONS LEARNT FROM ARCADE

- Three-level analysis
 - Planning the spectacle
 - Implementing the spectacle
 - Living the spectacle

“Currently, I am putting a lot of pressure on the shopkeepers. I tell them to pay up, otherwise we will come and seal your shop. I am serious, we have already cut the water and electricity supply to some who would not pay.”

– UDA project manager, 3 December 2015

«DEVELOPMENT AS SPECTACLE» IN PRACTICE

LESSONS LEARNT FROM ARCADE

- Three-level analysis
 - Planning the spectacle
 - Implementing the spectacle
 - Living the spectacle
- Example: the fish tank
 - walk-on fish tank with see-through glass
 - 200 rare breed fish, Rs. 65,000 (CHF 480) each

“Before the pond, we had decided to put a timber deck but the Secretary of Defence wanted to have a glass deck with a fish tank”

— UDA architect, 30 November 2015



OUTLOOK

On the basis of studying Arcade Independence Square, this study shows that all glitz and glamour surrounding the new high-end shopping mall is just the façade, expensively **covering up larger and still unsolved issues in the Sri Lankan society.**

What was created was a **white elephant.**

Despite calls for inclusive development, the government has not changed its stance with regard to its spectacle-driven urban development strategy. The new **Megapolis project** envisions Colombo as the next «**Wonder of Asia**» by 2030.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

We need to **re-think** how we imagine and design cities.

Are we not **accomplices** to the rise of a spectacular urbanism through the ways we portray and think of cities?

When reflecting on the cities of tomorrow, we need to be critically ask ourselves who we are designing it for. What **kind of city** do we want?

