

“We can’t feel the earth beneath our feet anymore”: Dispossession and High-Rise Living in Colombo

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*“By 2020, city of Colombo will have no more shanty dwellers”
(Mahinda Chintana 2010, p. 175).*

Since 2010, post-war development and urban ‘beautification’ was the focus of the Mahinda Rajapaksa-led government of Sri Lanka. After urban development was made a subject of the Ministry of Defence in 2010, one of the first tasks of the rebranded Ministry of Defence and Urban Development was to transform Colombo into a ‘world-class city’, with the labour of thousands of military personnel at its disposal. However, Colombo has an extensive history of planning, development and dispossession. Various programmes over the years have transformed it into a city of capital and finance, while others like those during the SAARC summit in 2008¹ and housing projects in the early 1990s removed communities living by railway tracks and informal vendors on pavements in earlier attempts at gentrification.

This paper will chart the various transitions that have shaped contemporary Colombo through modalities of disciplining and controlling space, and underpinning processes which produce spatial injustices. Spatial (in)justice refers to an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice (Soja 2010). The socio-spatial dialectic is fundamental in Soja’s work: that space shapes social relations as much as social relations shape space, and recognising that the

geographies in which we live can have negative and positive consequences on practically everything people do (Soja 2010). The transformation of the city is mapped through the lives and experiences of the working-class poor in Colombo, focusing on the most recent post-war (and continuing) project to transform the built environment—the Urban Regeneration Project. This is one of the key projects launched post-war to transform Colombo into a ‘world-class city’. The lived experiences of the dispossessed during this transformation shed light on the governance of poverty and marginality.

The creation of this new city is spearheaded by two key initiatives: The Urban Regeneration Project by the Government of Sri Lanka, and the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project by the government and the World Bank. This paper will focus on the Urban Regeneration Project (URP), though those communities displaced by the World Bank project were also relocated to the same high-rise complexes established for the former. The URP aims to relocate 65,000 families to apartments built by the Urban Development Authority (UDA) on the outskirts of Colombo, in the city’s north. This means the relocation of anything between 350,000–500,000 people, based on household sizes estimated using the 2012 census. According to the

UDA, 15,769 families have already been moved.² With new funding of US\$280 million made available by the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank from 2019 onwards, the project continues. According to the UDA, 12,855 families have been moved to date under Phase 1 and 2.³ With new funding of US\$280 million made available by the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank from 2019 onwards, Phase 3 of the project continues.

The promotional material from the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development website in 2013 advertised several social and economic benefits of these new homes in the sky and the new lifestyle attached to it including: the “legal right and prestige of being an owner of a house, social recognition, a permanent address, children’s better access to proper females and youth education and recognition in the society for females for better marriage prospects” (Ministry of Defence and Urban Development 2013). These ‘benefits’ are revealing of the mind-set of the UDA and the Government towards the working-class poor. This view underpins the policy and approach of the URP, and in reality, the opposite is true, especially where education and ownership of housing is concerned. That relocation by itself will confer a higher social status, including ‘better marriage prospects’ for women echoes the most deeply held class and patriarchal prejudices that inform these policy interventions (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2014).

‘From Shanty to Home’

In examining the dispossession experienced by the working-class poor of Colombo, I draw on Peter Marcuse’s work and the two cardinal forms of spatial injustice he sets out: the involuntary confinement of a group to a limited space and allocation of resources unequally over space (Marcuse 2009). Involuntary clustering is a key element of the URP, and not every clustering is a form of spatial injustice—for example gated communities—and while life in a ‘wattle’ produces its own segregations, injustices and biases, the community clusters live together voluntarily. Under the Mahinda Rajapaksa-led government, a key goal of urban development was set out as “improving under-served settlements in the city of Colombo through private developers and liberate prime lands for commercial activities. Through this process, under-utilised urban prime land will be utilised for development and commercial purposes by private sector” (*Mahinda Chintana* p. 115). There has never been any elaboration

on what is meant by “under-utilised” though a closer reading suggests this refers to land currently unavailable for private commercial use (CPA 2014). The UDA’s own statistics accept that the communities within the Urban Regeneration Project make up 50% of Colombo’s population and occupy 10% of its land area or around 900 acres.

This “under-utilised land” is what has been home to the working-class poor for generations and transferring the land to the private sector raises significant concerns regarding fairness and equitable allocation of resources over space. When 50% of the people live on only 10% of the land, why is even that 10% too much for them? Why are they being further densified and pushed into smaller spaces? There are many communities who live in flood-prone areas in Colombo and are badly in need of upgraded or new housing. They were not prioritised in the URP as their land is unattractive to private investors for commercial purposes or because these are reservation lands and therefore unsuitable for commercial purposes.

Another question is the over-broad definition of what is classified as a ‘public purpose’. Most of the land that is being grabbed by the State and transferred to private developers is obtained under the Land Acquisition Act for a ‘public purpose’. At the time of acquisition, there is no disclosure in the Government Gazette, as to what public purpose has been served. Sri Lankan jurisprudence has held non-disclosure of purpose to be fatal to the legality of the acquisition process⁴ and that this ‘public purpose’ must have a direct benefit to the local community (*Mendis et al. vs Perera et al*)⁵. In Colombo, it is hard to make the case for luxury apartments and high-end shopping malls on poor people’s land as a ‘public purpose’.⁶ Even though it can be argued that communities whose land is acquired get new apartments for free in exchange it is also a question of equity and due process. For example, residents in *Kompanyaveediya* [Slave Island] whose lands were acquired for a public purpose (the TATA mixed development and the Destiny Mall mixed development projects) only received new apartments in situ because of a Supreme Court judgment, and not because the developer or the UDA chose to do so originally.

The early post-war period was very revealing of the kind of ‘world-class city’ those driving the project had in mind. It was a city of discipline and order, and everything had its place. Since the beginning of these ambitious plans, each successive government has seen the urban poor as an impediment to development and growth. The object of policy-making has been a slum-

free Colombo, and not a poverty-free Colombo. There is a vision of development in which war is declared on informality where policymakers believe that upward mobility is achieved through formally entering, even involuntarily, the housing or the job market. Street hawkers and pavement vendors have been forced into permanent shops or designated trading spaces, many of which yield no business as their location is removed from foot traffic, which was their chief source of customers. Meanwhile, begging was prohibited in central Colombo from January 1, 2018 (Kanakarathna 2017).

In an interview in 2012, then defence secretary and current president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, explained his role as the chief architect of Colombo's post-war development plans. "We have started a programme to remove unauthorised constructions such as slums and relocate them into proper housing. We cannot allow these people to live under such low standards. We are building apartments for this purpose. We must give them the opportunity to live well. With that, discipline will also come to them. It is not that they don't like to live like that" (Amarasinghe 2012).

It was significant that even after a change in government in January 2015, the same development ideology and processes continued. The person tasked with continuing the urban development work, Minister Champika Ranawaka of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, a right-wing Sinhala nationalist political party, had similar ideas of discipline and order. The government from 2015 to 2019 introduced a new master plan – the Western Region Megapolis plan – and the URP was then absorbed under that, with some changes. The Megapolis master plan was developed by Singaporean planners in the early 2000s and was then modified to fit in with Minister Champika's brand of development with strong Sinhala Buddhist overtones and imagery of lotuses and ancient Sinhalese kingdoms. The UDA was delinked from the Ministry of Defence in 2015. However, the bureaucratic mind-set that the urban poor block access to land continued. For example, the housing and relocation chapter of the Western Megapolis master plan stated that relocation of the urban poor is important in order to "release the economic corridors held by them" (Western Region Megapolis Masterplan 2016).

The Megapolis master plan went beyond Gotabaya Rajapaksa's framing of the development plans by demarcating the various housing complexes for the working-class poor as a "creation of secondary cities within the city of Colombo" (Champika Ranawaka

speech at Jathika Hela Urumaya May Day rally 2018, reported in Karunaratne 2018). It is essentially segregation through housing. The communities are moved from prime property in downtown Colombo into marginal areas in the periphery, as there is no place for them or their aesthetic in a 'world-class city'. This approach was explained by Minister Ranawaka where he said, "there will be revolutionary changes in urban development in the next five years and Colombo will be free of slums by 2023. The government will bring all existing slums within the formal system and enable them to avail themselves of the basic amenities available for the rest of the city" (Karunaratne 2018).

Living it Down

"We are the people who say *ayubowan* [welcome] to the people who come to Colombo", said one community leader to me many years ago, when talking about how long his family had been living in Colombo (Interview with K. Sarath,⁷ Torrington Avenue, October 2014). The families that have been relocated to the UDA high-rise apartment complexes over the last eight years consider Colombo to be their village. It is where most of them have lived for generations, setting down roots and incrementally building their homes over time.

A survey of community settlements in 2012 by the Colombo Municipal Council and the Sevanatha Urban Resource Centre in fact showed that 54% of settlements in Colombo fall into the category of 'upgraded' and a further 39% fall into the category of 'fully upgraded'. Only 5.9% fall into the category 'underserved' and 0.3% 'extremely poor' (Profile of Underserved Settlements in the City of Colombo 2012). This data is testament to the years of investment that communities have been making on their homes over time to bring it to a state of being 'permanently upgraded' – which means having a permanent wall, roof and floor. It is also testament to the investment and support of the State and local government over the years to improve the infrastructure through water, sanitation and electricity, provisioning and paving roads. People have also been registered to vote for years from that address, pay rates and taxes, and have a diverse paper trail that they meticulously keep in files and boxes to show their connection to the land and their house. While not all have security of tenure, and been living on State or private land for decades, it is this recognition on paper – through municipal council green cards, water and electricity bills – by the authorities, from which communities derive legitimacy

over their land rights, and which makes them confident to invest significantly in their home and community (Perera, Uyangoda & Tegal 2017).

Labelling them as ‘slum and shanty dwellers’ or even ‘encroachers’ renders invisible their history in the city, and their decades long political bargaining that has provided for various service provisioning. Sri Lankan housing policies from the early 1980s such as the Million Housing Programme and other housing programmes through the National Housing Development Authority have had the objective of making people homeowners, and to aspire to one’s own home is an idea that is widely shared. Displaced people spent their hard-earned money over the years on constructing and improving their housing; and many who lost their homes had 2 or 3 storey houses. Many women who have worked in the Middle East all their life, have no savings to show for their hard work, as all the money had been invested in their house.

Almost overnight, these decades of history, investment and incremental progress are erased by a development policy that labelled all of them as ‘underserved’, ‘encroachers’, ‘squatters’, etc. A powerful state narrative dominated the development space, and it became the accepted version. Television advertisements, interviews and speeches by key Government figures portrayed a dismal living environment, one that was derelict and affected by floods and mosquito-borne diseases, and riddled with drugs and crime, and that the government has stepped in to uplift the lives of these communities. This makes the forced relocations justifiable to the public. Little is revealed about the true nature of the communities – that Colombo has never had sprawling slums like Mumbai or Dhaka, that many have some housing document to prove their occupation of the land, and that they are not living in derelict environments.

Gautam Bhan, writing about the world-class city making process in Delhi and the criminalisation of the poor, observes, “The figure of an encroacher establishes a foundation on the basis of which the poor can be seen as unworthy of legal and constitutional protection. As national citizens, they cannot, under argument, be denied a claim to constitutionally enshrined rights. Indeed, this has been the basis for demands of equity and inclusion articulated by social movements since Indian Independence. Therefore, in order, ethically, to justify denying a national citizen his text-based rights, it becomes necessary to make the informal settler into an ‘improper’ citizen” (Bhan 2009).

Government documents refer to the communities as ‘underserved’ and there has not been any explanation as to its definition. These labels enable dispossession of communities with little pushback from Colombo’s middle and upper class, who believe this is a housing project that is beneficial to the ‘slum and shanty dwellers.’ While there are some communities in Colombo that need significant upgrading to their housing, most of the selected communities for the URP did not fall into that category. Colombo’s working-class communities are not only ethnically diverse but also income diverse. This diversity makes it difficult to label them all under one broad category such as ‘urban poor’ or ‘working class poor’ or even ‘income poor’ as is often the practice when writing about them. There are many who do not identify with any of those categories; and to whom these classifications do not apply. Development policies fail to understand people’s own aspirations, needs, biases and prejudices. Planners assume that by relocating a mix of people from various parts of Colombo, into large housing complexes, with new apartments and ‘western style’ toilets, they will live happily ever after.

Between 2012-2014 most communities were forcibly evicted from their homes by the military. After the change in government in 2015, the forcible evictions stopped, but communities continued to be moved to the high-rises with very little choice in the process. Official documents were initially available only in Sinhala, and sometimes in English, and never in Tamil. People were asked to sign many documents, but they do not have copies of them. Even when communities wanted time to look over documents or have a lawyer look at the documents (at their own expense), this has been denied time and time again, and people are forced into signing documents then and there. There are no secure grievance redress mechanisms in place; and communities continue to deal with an Urban Development Authority that has former senior military officers in key roles in the URP; and civilian staff who are incapable of treating common people with dignity and decency (Perera 2018). In the relocation process, even until July 2019, the first sign that people had that they were to be moved was when authorities came and spray painted a number on their front door or wall – with no explanation.

There are several issues that face people post-relocation, and the key among them is housing debt. Each household has to pay one million rupees (now increased to 1.2 million rupees under the AIIB funding) for the new apartments, repayable over 20 to 30 years. As most earn a daily wage this is a huge burden in

addition to increased utility and maintenance bills. This payment has to be made irrespective of whether people owned their previous homes – for which they received no compensation. The justification made by the State is that the cost of each apartment is actually much more (this figure has ranged from seven million rupees until 2015, and then subsequently revised to five million rupees) and that the flats are given to the people at a reduced rate, absorbing the value of their previous home. For those who can prove that their home is worth more than the flat on paper the UDA states they will pay the difference. There has never been an assessment of payment capacity of the households and whether they could afford to pay these various monthly bills, particularly accounting for a loss of, or change in, livelihood. Planners imagine a regular and steady monthly income, which is rarely the case for the working-class poor.

All this is on top of a decreased income as many people, especially those who worked in the informal sector lost their income generating activity in the relocation process. The distance to schools and places of work have increased, adding additional travel expenses. Communities were not relocated together, breaking care and kinship networks and creating an environment where complete strangers were now living next door to each other. This reconfiguration of the built environment also made it an insecure environment for people to live in, particularly women and children, as strangers now roamed free in the public spaces and no one knew whether they lived in the building or not. Perhaps what is most devastating about the spatiality of the apartments is that there is no ability for residents to incrementally expand, improve, extend, build as their needs and aspirations change and grow with time. If families get bigger, they have to enter the housing market, instead of building on what is already theirs, as they have done for decades.

Less than ten years later, some of these buildings have become vertical slums, with reports of crime and drug-related issues. For communities who pride themselves in having secure neighbourhoods, this has come as a shock. Lifts are broken most of the time and the UDA does not fix them for months (complexes have 12-14 floors and range from 500 apartments to 1200 apartments). This further decreases the mobility of disabled persons and older residents who are not allocated ground floor apartments. There are no fire alarms or sprinkler systems and the fire hoses that are installed on every floor are actually inadequate for a big fire as one complex found

in 2018 (Perera 2018). While the move to the high-rises has been a positive development for some, it is mostly those who did not have security of tenure or lived in flood-prone or difficult environments that have benefited.

The idea of discipline and controlling space is highly prevalent in the administration and day-to-day dealings with communities under the URP. At planning level, architects and planners decide how best space should be organised in the complexes, with little or no idea of how communities lived before, and how they used space. Furthermore, it is evident that those who planned the early complexes had not lived in apartments themselves. A 400 square foot house that spanned two floors is not the same as a 400 square foot apartment. This is something that planners still fail to understand. When people complain of lack of space, authorities respond that people lived in smaller houses before, not understanding that the space configuration was different and that communities also had more space because of the common areas in their neighbourhood, which they do not have in the complexes.

In the new complexes built after 2016, apartment sizes have been increased to 500 square feet but the balcony has been removed. The authorities did not want the buildings to look ugly from the outside, from people hanging out their laundry to dry. This means that people can only dry their clothes in the public corridors, an additional burden on women. There are no adequate and secure play areas for children where parents can observe them from within their home. So, children are restricted to playing in the corridor just outside their apartment. In 2017, in an attempt to keep the lifts clean, some UDA building administrators banned gas cylinders and garbage bags from the lifts. There are no common garbage bins on the ground floor so people have to bring their individual garbage down only when the trucks turn up – and there is no designated time of day for this. This means that a majority of women spend their days listening for the garbage trucks and then carrying the garbage down several flights of stairs. In the older complex, people have been receiving astronomical water bills over the years. For example, some receive bills around 10,000 rupees a month and are forced to pay them no matter how much they plead with authorities. It is an issue to do with water meters that the UDA admits to but has not fixed. As some families have experienced, the UDA ensures that people make the payment by threatening to disconnect their water connection. When this extraordinarily high-water

bill was raised with the former UDA chairman in 2018, his response was “Are you sure they don’t have a bottled water business inside their flat?” (Interview with Jagath Munasinghe, 09 July 2018).

The ‘New Normal’

It was in this backdrop that communities faced the COVID-19 pandemic and curfew that was imposed for over two months from March 2020 onwards. Where overcrowding inside apartments and lack of green and public space was already a problem, social distancing and even twenty seconds of hand washing is a luxury. Days of resilience did not even extend to a week for some households as people were cutting back on the number of meals consumed a day. Most of these households depend on a daily wage income, and with no prior warning regarding curfew or any adequate social protection mechanisms in place, people’s basic needs were not met for days. Some buildings complained of being guarded by military or police who were preventing people from leaving their flats. While mobile grocery or food vehicles did not materialise in the first few weeks, people stated that even if they came, they had no money to buy anything. At the mercy of political parties or private charities, and employers and friends elsewhere, people scraped through during the curfew period.

While curfew was continuing, the UDA began constructing new apartment complexes under the AIIB financing. The language has now shifted to the continuation of the ‘good work’ started by the current president when he was Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. The pandemic has highlighted the public health argument for improved

housing. Sri Lanka has had a long history of community centred, people-led housing projects, starting with the Million Housing Programme and extending to the various urban low-rise housing projects of the National Housing Development Authority (Maqsood et al. 2019). Globally the experience of high-rise complexes for the urban poor has been a failure. Despite its own housing experience and research available on the global experience, the Government of Sri Lanka continues to impose this URP high-rise model on the working class poor, especially when in situ upgrading and upgrading led by the community themselves has been the recommended approach by housing experts, including in the draft National Housing Policy of Sri Lanka 2017.

The title of this paper, “we can’t feel the earth beneath our feet anymore” was said by a woman when I interviewed her in one of the older 400 square foot apartments. It captures the spatial injustice and disconnect with the built environment experienced by the working-class poor of Colombo. The idea of a ‘world-class city’ is equally appealing to them as it promises a different life that is perhaps more aligned with changing aspirations, particularly of young people. Their identity is intrinsically linked to the land they occupy and development policies therefore must have spatial justice at the heart of all planning processes. This requires not only a change in mind-set but also in procedure: whether it be master plans or land acquisition, a multi-disciplinary and consultative processes must take place, and it cannot be tokenistic or cosmetic. People mostly say that they are open to sacrifices in the name of development as long as they are treated fairly. Unfortunately, it is not too long before reality dawns that they neither have a place in this new ‘world-class city’ nor the simple pleasure of feeling the earth beneath their feet.

Notes

* Iromi Perera is a Colombo-based researcher and activist. She works on land rights and spatial justice, with a focus on development and dispossession in post war Sri Lanka. Parts of this article are based on research supported by the ‘Rebuilding kinship and care after dislocation: Lahore and Colombo compared’ project, funded by the British Academy and Global Research Challenges Fund’s Cities and Infrastructure Programme. A version of this paper was first presented at the Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison USA in October 2019.

1 Ahead of the SAARC summit that was held in Colombo on 27 July 2008, over 1500 families living in around 350 houses were evicted. They were given a week’s notice by

the Ministry of Defence to vacate their homes, citing security reasons as well as overall city clean up ahead of the summit. See Cader, S, 2008, “Cast Out”, *The Nation*, 20 July.

2 Presentation by Priyantha Godegama, Project Director at the AIIB-URP project launch on July 4, 2019.

3 Social media post on the UDA Facebook page on May 15, 2020 - <https://www.facebook.com/1176203269090372/posts/3359439807433363/>

4 In *Manel Fernando & Anr. vs. D. M. Jayarathne, Minister of Agriculture and Lands*, Justice Mark Fernando held that “The minister cannot order the issue of a Section 2 notice unless he has a public purpose in mind. Is there

any valid reason why he should withhold this from the owners who may be affected? Section 2(2) requires the notice to state that one or more acts may be done in order to investigate the suitability of that land for that public purpose: obviously that public purpose cannot be an undisclosed one. This implies that the purpose must be disclosed. From a practical point of view, if an officer acting under Section 2(3)(f) does not know the public purpose, he cannot fulfil his duty of ascertaining whether any particular land is suitable for that purpose”.

5 *Mendis et al. vs. Perera et al.* SC (FR) No. 352/2007 or the ‘Waters Edge’ judgement states “Apart from creation of a handful of low level jobs, what is notably lacking

from this list, and from any of the statements submitted in evidence by the UDA in this regard, however, is any significant benefit of a sufficiently direct nature to the community of People of the Battaramulla area”.

6 For detailed analysis of post-war land acquisition for a public purpose, including in Colombo, see Perera, I 2020, *Land Acquisition for a Public Purpose in post-war Sri Lanka*, Law & Society Trust, Colombo.

7 Name changed.

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