

Sustainability vs Asian Urbanization: Lessons through Space Making at Pola in Sri Lanka

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Sustainability is inextricably linked with the urban and will therefore inevitably rely on the life journeys of millions that live in those cities. Further, Mayor of NYC, Bill de Blasio, marking the opening of the summit 'Urban Resilience Summit 2017,' said "Cities are at the forefront of local solutions to the global problems of climate change and inequality". World Urbanization Prospects report, "Today, 54 per-cent of the world's population live in urban areas," and "...[will] increase to 66 per-cent by 2050... [adding] another 2.5 billion people to urban..., with close to 90 percent of the increase concentrated in Asia and Africa..."

However, if Asia (and Africa) is leading the trend of urbanization globally, it is in Asia (and Africa) that the experiments to achieve a sustainable urban future should take place. Cities and the 'life journeys' of diverse urban populations in the global West and South differ in their character, composition, aspirations and soul. Hence, imported spatial-solutions to achieve sustainability makes little to no sense. Perera (2013), argues that "[to understand the Asian city and development] ...the vast terrain of ordinary actors and spaces which are currently left out should be reflected in academic debates and policy decisions, and the local thinking processes that constitute these spaces need to be acknowledged, enabled, and critiqued." Hence the historical and colonial process of importing urban solutions from the global West to solve urban issues in the global south is problematic though the slippery term 'sustainability' continues to mask and justify importation.

Exploring the link between sustainability—a Western discourse—and Asian urbanism is an emerging path of inquiry, this paper will first develop a broader understanding of 'sustainability' through a literary survey across sustainability studies, development, urban planning, and draw empirical evidence from social production of space, from an everyday perspective; It aims to show sustainability as something embedded in local ways of development and urbanization as opposed to bureaucratically imported solutions. It will examine the Pola (periodic market in Sri Lanka) focusing on everyday practices of sustainability in 'space making' both physically and socially in contrast to similar operations in a Pola re-developed by the state in the view of achieving urban modernity and sustainability. Building on the author's lived-in experience and ethnographic explorations of Pola as support staff to a Pola vendor for 3-months, the paper seeks anew understanding of sustainable-urban-future for fast growing Sri Lankan cities that brings everyday practices of sustainability into the realm of policy making and spatial planning. By creating room for ways in which sustainability is understood and practiced locally the national policies and programs can gain more mileage and authenticity compared to what can be achieved through mere importation of policy and urban solutions.

Keywords: Urban development, Sustainability, Sri Lanka, Ethnography, Social Production of Space, Informality, Markets

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