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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toward sustainable development: Lessons from vernacular settlements of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

From modern urban perspectives, indigenous housing practices are regarded as undeveloped, backward, and require improvements. They may be valid for measuring on the basis of standards alien to the communities. However, these perceptions have obfuscated the appreciation and potential adoption of holistic, culturally relevant, and traditionally tested approaches to planning and housing that have sustained communities for centuries.

Sri Lankan indigenous settlements have been founded on principles and understanding acquired through the wisdom of Buddhism. For the Sri Lankan indigenous, sustainability has been an intrinsic accompaniment to everyday life, unlike articulated modern discourses. However, these traditions exert minimal benefits to recent housing practices, and researchers are looking elsewhere to develop mechanisms to infuse sustainability as a recently discovered issue of significance.

The present study examines the principles underlying several indigenous settlements in Sri Lanka through close observations supported by documented evidence and demonstrates their validity and appropriateness for contemporary planning practices. This study argues that approaches to sustainability should be generated holistically from within rather than from the outside and offers several propositions that can redirect the contemporary housing and planning practices.

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1. Introduction

Traditional vernacular settlements are those formed by the people living and working in them by employing the wisdom, knowledge, and practices handed down from generation to

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generation. They are often well-adapted to the geographical terrain, the society inhabiting the land, and their environmental contexts. The use of available materials and technologies and the employment of labor from within the settlements invariably contribute to sustainability. These characteristics have been inherent in such settlements even before the modern world coined the term sustainability. However, in current discussions on sustainability, the emphasis is on the invention of technologies, systems, and other means, ignoring what traditional vernacular settlements have practiced. This phenomenon is ironic because by ignoring the vast repository of knowledge and systems of vernacular settlements, we are missing out on resourceful understanding that can be meaningfully engaged in sustainable development. Vernacular settlements cannot be reinvented in the place of contemporary settlements. However, the fundamentals of their practices can help in rethinking the production and maintenance of modern settlements. Furthermore, a large part of earth's inhabitants still live in such vernacular settlements, and lessons can be learned for new settlements and the continuation of the existing settlements themselves, which seem abandoned under the influence of modernization.

Sri Lanka, which is located south of India in the Indian Ocean, is a small island of 22 million inhabitants, whose ancestors lived in such sustainable vernacular settlements. History shows that the island was rich in fauna and flora and produced a settlement system that sustained themselves in harmony with Nature, land, terrain and cyclical weather patterns. The country has been known as the “Granary of the East,” producing paddies aplenty without harming the land and the environment. In the past, its people lived prosperous lives in small peasant hamlets, achieving what its present population appears unable to achieve.

In this context, this study examines the principles underlying the indigenous settlements in Sri Lanka through personal close observations that are supported by documented evidence and demonstrates their validity and appropriateness for contemporary planning practice. The study aims to uncover the principles of the most meaningful practices. It argues that approaches to sustainability should be generated holistically from within rather than from the outside, particularly when they are abundantly available in vernacular communities. This study finally offers several propositions that can redirect the contemporary housing and planning practices, such that traditional knowledge and wisdom can be fruitfully re-employed.

2. Traditional vernacular settlements: a review

Many scholars have studied and theorized on vernacular settlements. Among them, [Alexander \(1979\)](#), [Knapp \(1989\)](#), and [Oliver \(1997\)](#) showed how vernacular settlements are culturally meaningful and kinder to the environment. [Tulistyantovo \(2010\)](#) reiterated that traditional vernacular settlements are humane and came into being through wisdom accumulated over centuries and have exhibited worldviews, foresights, and methods that are unavailable to the educated modern man. The demise of tradition as the basis of living in the contemporary world has eradicated traces of sustainable

approaches to farming, construction, production, and consumption. Most indigenous communities cannot manage their natural resources for making even a meagre living last long. Many have also looked at the sustainability of the vernacular from ideas and practices, such as cultural compatibility ([Rapoport, 1969](#)), ecological design and energy efficiency ([Foruzanmehr, 2015a](#)), materials and technologies ([Dayaratne, 2013](#)), and even individual buildings of exceptional qualities from around the world ([Weber and Yannas, 2014](#)). However, not much has been studied in terms of holistic approaches to settlement planning ([Gokman, 2002](#)). [Asquith and Vellinga \(2006\)](#) and [Vellinga \(2013\)](#) argued that research that explicitly demonstrates the relevance of vernacular knowledge and skills in contemporary settlements is inadequate.

The wisdom of indigenous communities in understanding the world as a unified interdependent system is clear in the now famous speech of the Red Indian tribal leader, Seattle, in 1854.¹

“The air is precious to the Redman, for all things share the same breath—the beast, the tree, the man. They all share the same breath... For whatever happens to the beasts soon happen to Man. All things are connected... Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth. Man did not weave the web of life. He is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does it to himself... Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.”

Ceylon Daily News, Friday, June 15, 1979

Many other native notions about interconnectedness of the natural and manmade worlds and how these can be employed in creating healthy habitats exist within many vernacular societies ([Weber and Yannas, 2014](#)). Unfortunately, the advent of modernism, industrialization, and large-scale housing and planning had marginalized these as primitive, irrelevant, and incompatible with modern ways of living. Nevertheless, at the end of the 18th century, theories, such as “organic architecture” proposed by Frank Lloyd Wright, attempted to rekindle similar ideas by advocating the integration of a building to the surrounding Nature.

Current interest in sustainability is concerned with articulating ways of “managing economic growth,” such that the “quality of life” of future generations is ensured; however, the focus is on energy production and use. Sustainable settlement allows all its citizens to meet their own needs and enhance their well-being without damaging the natural world or endangering the living conditions of other people now or in the future ([Girardet, 1999](#)). Although primarily linked to development and economics, environment has now taken the center stage, and architects have re-oriented its emphasis toward environmental degradation and resource depletion through the building industry, in which architecture and planning play a central role ([Steel, 1997](#)). In pursuit of this, modern developments are now

¹Scholars often contest the authenticity of this statement. However, sentiments and ideas expressed in this are reminiscent of those often held by the indigenous people; thus, ignoring the value of the statement is difficult.

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