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Changes in the cultural landscape and their impacts on heritage management : a study of Dutch Fort at Galle, Sri Lanka

Jinadasa, U.N.

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on Heritage Management
A Study of Dutch Fort at Galle, Sri Lanka**

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**Changes in the Cultural Landscape and their Impacts
on Heritage Management
A Study of Dutch Fort at Galle, Sri Lanka**

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Promotor

Prof. dr. Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen

Co-promotores

Dr. Amy Strecker

Dr. Till F. Sonnemann (University of Bamberg)

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Preface

“The fort is there, [but] you are not there.”

In May 2018, a high school student who lives in Galle Fort (Sri Lanka) posted a Facebook request to his friends: “what will you write for me when I die?”¹ One of his friends commented, “The fort exists; you do not exist,” which portrayed how locals perceived the long-term existence of Galle Fort, spanning nearly four centuries, from colonial times to the present.² The fortress walls were strong enough to withstand the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, which devastated the southern and eastern coasts of Sri Lanka, and was the country’s most destructive natural disaster in recorded history. Despite being a colonial edifice, the frontal view of Galle’s [Dutch] ramparts are regarded as the iconic image of Galle, symbolizing the stability, rigidity and the power of the Southerners—a testament to the fort as a “localized colonial monument” (as outlined in sub-chapter 6.1.3). In 1988, Galle Fort—at the time an old, walled seaside town with a local community—was recognized as a World Heritage city in the form of the “Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications,” a name still restricted to UNESCO’s World Heritage list and related international and bureaucratic purposes. The fort does indeed continue to exist, despite the changes inherent to any urban landscape, amid each successive phase—as a fortified town, a colonial port city, a residential-administrative centre and a World Heritage city.

This study critically assesses the changes World Heritage recognition has brought about in the fort during the past 30 years, and how these changes have affected Galle Fort as a monument; the community living in it, who perceive the fort as a *gama* (“village”); and ultimately its urban heritage management.

1 A Facebook post by Gayoth Sandeepana, 16 May 2018 (the author wished to be named).

2 A friend’s comment on a Facebook post by Gayoth Sandeepana, 16 May 2018.

GATEWAY TO “THE FORT”: FROM COLONIAL FORTIFIED CITY TO A WORLD HERITAGE CITY

The study focuses on Galle Fort, the colonial administrative-port city founded and developed by three European colonial powers in peninsular Galle, on the picturesque southern coast of Ceylon (currently Sri Lanka), with finest cinnamon, the Dutch VOC’s main trade interest. It was at the end of the 16th century that the Portuguese founded the *Fortalesa de Gale*, which was developed into a standard fortification around 1620 (Pieris 1913, 1914; Abeyasinghe 1966; Reimers 1929). The Dutch East India Company captured the fort in 1640, following by a siege in partial cooperation with King Rājasingha II of Kandy (1635–1687), who was intent on driving the Portuguese away, as they had developed territorial ambitions despite their initial trade interests (Goonewardena 1958). The VOC fortified the whole of peninsular Galle by strengthening the same fortifications that we see today. Dutch occupation made the most significant impact during the colonial phase of the fortress, still visible in its existing architecture, and offered an indication of the development of the urban landscape. *Vesting Gale* (Galle Fortress) was occupied by the British in 1796 (De Silva 1953), the last colonial power strong enough to capture the whole island, in 1815, who remained there until Ceylon’s independence in 1948.

How are such “colonial monuments” perceived in Sri Lanka? Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country (with a multi-ethnic community comprising 70% [Sinhalese] Buddhists), with the vast majority of Buddhist religious monuments dating from the 3rd century BCE onwards, and formerly ruled by Sinhalese Buddhist kings who provided royal patronage to foster Buddhism. These Buddhist monuments are much valued in the country, while they are also connected to Sinhalese Buddhist

nationalism.³ Several colonial edifices gradually gained recognition as monuments in the country after its independence, a result of the material-based national heritage practice heavily influenced by the Western schools, which treated all monuments equally over the past half-century (as outlined in sub-chapter 2.5).⁴ On the other hand, as a country with a rich heritage, all “monuments”—either local, colonial, Buddhist or ones belonging to other faiths—are generally valued in the country. Although Sri Lanka’s colonial past is generally known to its people, who have a 92% literacy rate—the highest in South Asia—it is a “bygone era” in the ordinary local sense, especially among the young, who have a 98% literacy rate, yet have never experienced colonial Ceylon (as outlined in sub-chapter 2.5).⁵

Galle Fort is generally called *Gālu Kotuwa* (Galle Fort), but also *Gāllē Ōlanda* or *Landēsi Kotuwa* (“Hollandais Fort at Galle”), largely by the previous generations, who were not used to the word “Netherlands,” but “Holland.” To the people of Galle, including the fort’s residents, it is just *Kotuwa* (“the Fort”). Despite the majority of the colonial forts in the country having been founded by the Portuguese, locals identify them as *Ōlanda Kotu*, “the Hollandais or the Dutch Forts,” as the Dutch were primarily responsible for their present forms. Although Sri Lanka has nearly 30 colonial forts (including a number of ruined ones)⁶ and many

colonial edifices, Galle Fort is unique among them in several respects. It is the only “walled town” in the country with a multi-ethnic urban community living inside the fortress walls, which is lesser known or unknown to people outside the South, who see the fort as a monument.⁷ Thus, it is a “living historic town.” It is the “best preserved” and largest colonial fortress, also being the most visited and largest colonial monument in the country, known all over Sri Lanka. Surrounded by the Indian Ocean and featuring centuries-old colonial architecture, the fort boasts rich scenic and architectural beauty. Being an urban landscape that is unique in the country, together with its community, Galle Fort has inspired not only research, but also songs, books and the award-winning Sinhala film *Pawuru Walalu* (“Walls Within,” 1997).⁸ Besides these, the fort was important to the people of Galle as an administrative centre, a capacity that is now substantially reduced.

What made Galle Fort a World Heritage city? UNESCO’s short introduction identifies the Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications as “the best example of a fortified city built by Europeans in South and South-East Asia, showing the interaction between European architectural styles and South Asian traditions.”⁹ In general, walled towns fall under UNESCO’s criterion iv, indicating outstanding architectural value (UNESCO 2018; Creighton 2007). Therefore, Galle Fort was no exception, while its Dutch colonial architecture and that particular historical phase were emphasized by the Advisory Body Evaluation of ICOMOS (1986) and the World Heritage project from the onset. Thus, neither the presence of the people inside the fortress walls nor the living space it created throughout its history exceeded the “material value” of the fortress.

3 Also called “ethno-religious nationalism,” and further outlined in sub-chapter 2.5, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism emerged as a socio-political mobilizing force in Sri Lanka from the mid-19th century to consolidate the socio-political interests of the Buddhist elites (Nuhman 2016).

4 Archaeological studies of Ceylon were initiated by the British over a century ago, having a somewhat different scope, but later aiming the preservation of monuments; this continued after independence, parallel with global developments in heritage, heavily influenced by the Venice Charter (1964).

5 The country has a 92% literacy rate, according to the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka; source: <http://www.mohe.gov.lk/index.php/about-ministry/overview> (accessed 28 February 2019). In 2017, it was 98% among 15 to 24-year-olds, according to UNESCO; source: <http://uis.unesco.org/country/LK> (accessed 28 February 2019).

6 Nelson (1984) identifies 24 Dutch forts (which were mainly developed by the Dutch) and groups them into four categories, according to their locations: the Western Group (Colombo, Kalutara, Negambo, Hanwella, Kalpitiya); Southern Group (Galle, Matara, Star Fort-Matara, Tangalle, Katuwana); Northern Group (Jaffna, Hammenhiel, Elephant Pass, Pas Beschutter, Pas Pyl, Poonaryn, Mullaittivu, Point Pedro,

Kankasanturai, Manner, Arippe); and Eastern Coast (Batticaloa, Fort Frederick-Trincomalee, Ostenburg) (Nelson 1984). Apart from this, Katuwana and Hakmana are also identified as fortified stockades (Nelson 1984). A few of these forts no longer exist, while a few survive only in ruins. In addition, there are also ruins of Dutch forts on Delft Island (in northern Sri Lanka) and Rathnapura.

7 Matara Fort at Matara, the second largest coastal city in Southern Province and located next to Galle, is also inhabited to a certain extent; however, it is not completely walled.

8 The film, directed by Prasanna Vithanage, focuses on a traditional post-colonial Roman Catholic family lived in Galle Fort.

9 Available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/451> (accessed 28 February 2019).

WORLD HERITAGE RECOGNITION AND CHANGING HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPES

Cities are built by people, inhabited by people and changed by people, unless they are changed by natural hazards or gradual natural processes. As Lynch states, cities are in a continuous process of change, which results in a different succession of phases, and there is no final result (Lynch 1960, 2). Change is a process inherent to the city, much like to everything. However, “change” in a World Heritage-recognized historic city is not very welcome in most cases. Laws, policies and the institutional interests of national governments strongly aim to preserve the historic value or rather a significant historic phase of the landscape in order to maintain the prestigious World Heritage status, which is directly linked to the economic benefits associated with global tourism. In a way, this can be identified as a strong effort to arrest the inherently dynamic nature of the city, and thus poses a challenge. The challenge is much more complex due to the contradictory nature of development needs and the conservation priorities of historic cities (Imon 2008). As preservation often conflicts with the will of the numerous users and the builders who use, inhabit, build up and constantly shape the city, the phenomenon also leads to contested historic cities. Similarly, the scenario has negatively affected the communities of World Heritage-listed walled towns in a number of cases, as these have been used and exploited by different groups over the centuries (Creighton 2007; Bruce and Creighton 2006).

Although the World Heritage programme principally aims at preservation, the World Heritage recognition of historic cities has mostly garnered criticism; Asia is no exception (Logan 1995; Simpson 2008; Winter 2010; Dearborn and Stallmeyer 2009; Manfredini 2013). World Heritage listing is associated with a number of uncontrollable and interconnected indirect impacts on historic cities and their residents, resulting in positive and negative changes that affect each other. While negative impacts include globalization, gentrification, foreign direct investments or land grab, commercialization, urban regeneration and the displacement of traditional urban communities by threats to local culture, on the

contrary, the same factors also contribute to uplifting the local economy and improving safety and infrastructure while preserving the historic charm of the cities. Furthermore, some of these impacts are common to global cities from East to West, like New York, Toronto, Berlin, Shanghai and Tokyo, while they similarly affect World Heritage-listed global cities such as (historic parts of) Amsterdam and Beijing, indicating that these impacts are common effects of urbanization (Zukin, Kasinitz, and Chen 2016; González Martínez 2016). However, each historic city faces these challenges—driven also by internal factors and impacts—within its own context, a common scenario from East to West.

Although the preservation of historic cities has been a concern of UNESCO and affiliated institutions since the initiation of the World Heritage programme, the historic city is seen as a “collection of monuments” at the initial stage, while urban conservation is viewed with a material-based approach. The change in the heritage paradigms from material-based approaches to value-based and people-centred approaches have resulted in seeing the historic city as a dynamic entity and a “living organism.” The scope of urban conservation is thus broadened from monuments and sites to the entire built environment, including its intangible dimensions, within a landscape-based approach (Bandarin and Oers 2012; Veldpaus, Pereira Roders, and Colenbrander 2013). Parallel to this, participatory management was adopted by World Heritage programme; this also changed the approaches to managing dynamic historic cities by integrating the aspirations of the urban community, while the UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) saw urban culture as a driving force of the historic city. Despite developments towards the best practices of urban conservation on global level, the process is progressing slowly at the country level, especially in South Asia, where historic cities are still managed in a conventional way, despite facing unique challenges within each local context.

RELEVANCE AND MOTIVATION

Within a broader context, this study contributes to the critical debates on the historic urban landscape

change associated with World Heritage recognition, a global heritage concern at the country level, by critically analysing how a developing South Asian nation—in the lower-middle income category—manages a colonial historic city amid its own economic, political, cultural and ethnic imperatives. The study contributes to the modern discourse of “people” as the focus of urban heritage. This research broadens the scholarship on the diverse nature of historic urban landscape change and its challenges in the South Asian context, each unique in many aspects.

On a national level, this research aims to find solutions to a practical professional issue that has existed since the 2010s, which is elaborated separately below, under “Motivation.” The study is a critical assessment of local heritage laws, policies and practices dealing with urban heritage. It emphasizes the importance of participatory management and people-centred approaches, which the country’s urban heritage management practices have so far lacked. Therefore, I hope that this research will contribute to creating a more sustainable urban heritage management policy, aimed at adopting global best practices for managing historic cities, within the country’s own context. In addition, the study created a GIS database, complete with photographs, describing nearly 500 buildings in Galle Fort (2016), which will benefit comparative studies by future researchers.

Although Galle Fort’s colonial history, architecture and maritime archaeology have been extensively studied, research on the challenges of urban heritage management associated with landscape change is comparatively scarce. The topic has only gained academic attention because of three works—by Boxem and Führen (2012), Sanjeevani (2012) and Samarawickrema (2012)—focusing on the World Heritage project at Galle Fort. While the first one looks at it from the point of view of heritage experts, the latter works have highlighted the views of the fort community. This study includes the views of both the community and heritage practitioners, as well as other stakeholders, and thus I try to provide a balanced view while considering the complex factors behind the changes in the urban landscape at the international, national and local levels, from laws and policies to the (national and local) political agendas. Thus, the work analyses the heritage practices of the historic city as a complex process with interconnected factors

at different levels and influenced by various powers, which can neither be taken out of that context, nor researched independently.

My personal interest and professional background as a researcher attached to the Sri Lanka Department of Archaeology—the country’s national heritage institution—were the motivation behind this research. The specific idea for Galle Fort as a subject of interest was triggered by my official work visit to the fort in early 2013 to follow up on UNESCO’s concerns for the Galle Harbour Development Project regarding the fort and its buffer zone. Being a non-Southerner who was seeing the fort’s residential (and also business) quarters after a long period, I was fascinated by its uniqueness, which cannot be found anywhere else in the island. I remarked to my colleague from Galle, “I am sure you are very happy to work in this beautiful place.” To my surprise, she replied, “I wish I could get a transfer,” and then explained the conflicting interests and tense interactions between heritage institutions and the community in preserving the privately-owned buildings that comprise the majority of the fort. Such conflicts are not very common for local heritage professionals,¹⁰ as the majority of the archaeological sites and monuments in Sri Lanka have state ownership due to the powerful colonial heritage legislations coupled with a strong institutional structure. As Wijesuriya—a former Assistant Archaeology Commissioner—clearly points out, “Sri Lanka is a country with deep-rooted conventional conservation practices which have been heavily influenced by the Western school for more than a century and which are backed by a strong legislative and institutional framework” (Wijesuriya 2007, 88).

The scenario revealed the challenges faced by the Department of Archaeology in managing the country’s only “World Heritage-listed colonial town” (together with other partner heritage institutions),¹¹

10 However, there are a few exceptions, as two prominent examples show. The urban community living around the ancient ramparts of the former Kingdom of Kotte, currently the official capital of the country, have had conflicts with the Department of Archaeology over preserving the ramparts, which mostly run through private properties. The Department of Archaeology has also had a serious conflict with the (Buddhist) temple authorities of the World Heritage-recognized Golden Temple of Dambulla in 2017 over conservation and intrusive developments, which also became a major concern for UNESCO.

11 Galle Heritage Foundation and Urban Development Authority.

though the department has successfully managed the country's monumental heritage for more than 100 years. Furthermore, the protection of Galle Fort has drawn much national media attention in recent years due to the large-scale development projects led by the government in its buffer zone, about which UNESCO has expressed its concern.¹² The interests of the Dutch organization NUFFIC, which generously funded the project, has also contributed to the aims of this study, and prompted me to design the research in ways that would be beneficial to my organization and to the country as a whole.

AIMS, OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

Although urban landscapes are continually changing, there are strong reasons behind substantial changes, both human and natural. One particular example of human impact is the state-led urban renewals of Singapore, which changed the city-state from a colony with slums and squatters into a cosmopolitan city ranked among the top ten most liveable cities in Asia (Kong 2011). Galle Fort, a walled seaside town with ordinary locals and dilapidated colonial buildings, has gradually turned into a cosmopolitan city, tourist hotspot and prime real estate zone within three decades of its World Heritage recognition. While these developments have brought changes to the lives of members of the fort community, they have also brought challenges in preserving the fort's "colonial landscape" due to the increasing conflicts of interest between the community and heritage management institutions.

The research aims to answer the following main questions:

- i. What changes (in the built environment and in demographic, commercial and cultural patterns) have occurred at Galle Fort so far since the initiation of the World Heritage project?
- ii. Why do these impacts seem irreconcilable with the established guidelines for heritage management in Sri Lanka as a developing nation?
- iii. How can a more equitable solution with

greater consensus between stakeholders, be developed for Galle Fort?

The above-mentioned changes in Galle Fort since 1988, the conflicting interests of the stakeholders of the historic town and heritage laws (policies and practice) are the key areas analysed in this study, all of which bear interconnected factors and consequences affecting each other. The first area entails a temporal comparison to identify these changes, mainly focusing on two factors of the urban landscape—material heritage and the urban community over the past 30 years. The second area identifies the challenges to the state-led heritage management practices of the historic city, specifically through the positive and negative effects these changes have wrought on material heritage and the community. Finally, the study provides recommendations for an equitable heritage management solution for the fort, with greater focus on its community.

The research goals are achieved with multidisciplinary methods, using both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods and techniques, including GIS and SPSS. The quantitative data methods focus on the changes in land use. The ideas of stakeholders are identified through qualitative methods, with special attention to the voices of the community and heritage officers. In providing a balanced view, the work also incorporates the ideas of heritage policymakers and the other professionals engaged in development activities, including architects and lawyers. The research uses a wide range of data collection methods, including interviews, questionnaires and participant observation, as well as data sets, such as historic maps, aerial photographs, survey maps, recent drone images, documentation of buildings of Galle Fort, decisions of World Heritage Committee, local heritage laws, management policy documents of Galle Fort, decisions of state heritage meetings, decisions of community meetings, newspaper articles on critical heritage decisions, letters exchanged between heritage institutions and decisions on illegal developments.

In addition, I have produced a short documentary (20 minutes), *Another Story of Galle Fort: A UNESCO World Heritage City*, focusing on the gentrification of Galle Fort and based on anecdote 1 in chapter 6. I thought that a documentary was the best way to portray the strong emotional attachment

¹² The matter is further discussed and illustrated via three short cases in sub-chapter 7.7.

the residents feel towards their landscape, which I experienced throughout four years on and off at Galle Fort, but found difficult to put into words in a thesis. Furthermore, I wanted to bring the research to a wider audience through this, and thus made it available on YouTube.¹³

SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

I stress that this research is not to judge World Heritage, but rather to see its interconnected impacts over the community and historic urban landscape of Galle Fort in a balanced view which are substantially influenced by local heritage laws, policies and practice. Being the same impact can affect both positively and negatively, the study identifies the complex nature and the challenges of urban heritage management. Rather than seeing the dark side of World Heritage, the study focuses on how Sri Lanka can manage Galle Fort positively and sustainably through identifying the strengths, failures and challenges of managing the historic city over the past 30 years through the results of changes spread visibly over its landscape and remain as experiences and memories of the community. I hope the study will also be a voice for the fort's historic urban landscape, being the voice of its contemporary community.

Most of the land use changes shown in the study were observed and recorded from 2015 to January 2019. The interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2018; however, people also spoke about their memories of the landscape from several decades prior. As an independent researcher who lived in Galle Fort for more than one year between 2015 and 2018 and contacted the community often, I realized that their views are affected by new experiences amid a regenerating landscape. Similarly, the views of heritage officers, the officers themselves, heritage policies and practices also changed during this period. I tried my best to include these changes in the research, and thus I identify everything as continuous, interconnected processes rather than static and independent phenomena. Thus, the findings of this research are strongly related to this particular period in the long, continuing journey of

Galle Fort. Heritage management constantly brings new issues and challenges, while heritage paradigms also change with time. Thus, I hope Galle Fort will face new challenges in the future; however, there are always lessons we could take from the past, as "history repeats itself."

The overview of the structure of the book is discussed below:

The first chapter is an introductory chapter focusing on the historical background of Galle Fort, its current condition, the fort's World Heritage recognition (1988) and the progress of the World Heritage project over the past 30 years. These factors are discussed in the context of colonial, post-colonial and post-independent policies and agendas in order to identify how they have affected Galle Fort (as a colonial port city, fortified town and a monument) and its enduring community.

The second chapter discusses the conceptual framework of the study, namely, the concept of cultural landscape, the ideas of World Heritage and the dynamic historic city and current urban heritage management. It discusses how the shift in heritage paradigms has shifted the focus of managing a historic urban landscape towards a participatory and people-centred approaches.

The third chapter focuses on the multidisciplinary methods that I propose to use in answering the main research questions, and explains why each method is proposed to achieve each specific goal. (Dutch) colonial architecture and the living community of the fort are the two main focuses of this study, analysed respectively by quantitative and qualitative methods.

The fourth chapter is both a background and discussion chapter that focuses on the institutional and legal framework of the management of Galle Fort at the international, national and local levels. It critically analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the key heritage management institutions with reference to their respective laws and institutional policy documents, parallel with the recommendations of the World Heritage Committee.

¹³ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pp7y8tDFsM>.

The fifth chapter focuses on the “material heritage” of urban landscapes in order to identify to what extent the preservation of the “colonial landscape” has been successful so far, this being the aim of the heritage institutions. It is based on an extensive analysis of the functional and architectural changes of nearly 500 buildings at Galle Fort, mainly townhouses under private ownership, from the initiation of the World Heritage project until 2016.

The sixth chapter focuses mainly on the “human element” of the urban landscape by discussing the drastic socio-economic changes of Galle Fort with special reference to “sense of place” and community feelings. It analyses the outcomes of World Heritage recognition, such as foreign direct investments, gentrification and commercialization, from a balanced perspective, focusing on both their positive and negative effects on community and heritage management.

The seventh chapter analyses the challenges and issues of managing the changes of historic urban landscape of Galle Fort amid the conditions described in the previous two chapters. Thus, this chapter mainly deals with the legislative application in the World Heritage city based on the laws and policies discussed in chapter four and the views of stakeholders and government sources. It also identifies conflicts of interests between the urban community and the heritage institutions.

The eighth chapter concludes the book while also providing recommendations for an equitable heritage preservation solution at Galle Fort, with equal importance given to both the community and the monument.