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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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Summary

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

This study has dealt with the World Heritage recognition of Galle Fort (“Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications,” 1988), a colonial fortified town in Sri Lanka, within the scope of the modern discourse on urban heritage conservation that underscores maintaining the balance between material preservation and fulfilling the aspirations of the urban community. The main research question explores two major aspects of the “changes” caused by the 30-year World Heritage project in Galle Fort: how it affected the local urban community, who had created a *gama* (“village”)—a typical social and territorial unit—within the Dutch colonial walls, and how it affected the historic city as a “living monument.”

The research findings, based on both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods, including SPSS and GIS techniques, shows Galle Fort’s change is drastic and constant in every respect—its buildings, demography, economy, urban culture and way of life: a strong testimony to how World Heritage affects the historic city as a monument and its urban community in both positive and negative ways. The research argues that the material preservation goals (or the preservation of the colonial architecture and landscape) of the experts are only partially fulfilled at Galle Fort, while the socio-cultural values of the fort’s residential urban community have sharply declined, which has not been afforded sufficient attention under local heritage practices. The research shows that common and unavoidable impacts of the World Heritage recognition of historic cities—global tourism, foreign direct investments, gentrification and foreignization of land, real estate pressures, tourism-oriented commercialization and continuous

urban regeneration—are clearly visible at Galle Fort, as at a number of other World Heritage-listed historic cities in Asia. This study has critically analyzed how these impacts directly affect the residential community and historic city, both positively and negatively, indicating the complex nature of urban heritage management.

The research argues that in spite of the best practices of participatory and people-centred approaches developed and promoted at the international level, they are slow to be implemented at the local level. This study has shown that urban materiality and the urban community that creates or uses this materiality, as well as its memories, cannot be separated from one another, a fact that should be reflected in urban heritage conservation. It has critically analyzed the unique challenges of urban heritage management in the South Asian context—the conflicting interests of community aspirations and preservation goals, perceptions of justice in legislative application and political agendas—and thereby indicates that urban heritage management is complex, challenging and also entails a sacrifice, as it is practically difficult to fulfil both the aspirations of the community and the experts, much less all the stakeholders, while also achieving the ideal “expert preservation” goals. While the research highlights the idea that World Heritage recognition of a historic city should optimistically be seen as a new phase, it strongly emphasizes that Galle Fort requires a well-balanced urban preservation approach that gives equal importance to fulfilling the aspirations of the “current urban community” and preserving the “former colonial landscape.”