

GEO 511: Master Thesis in Political Geography

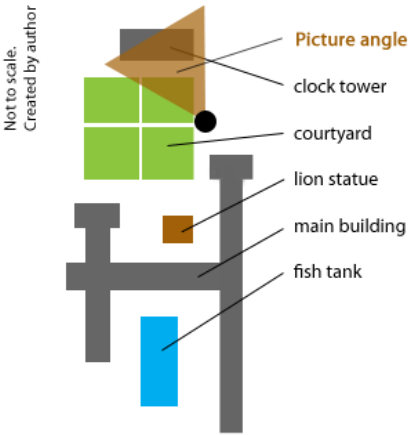


Development as spectacle: Understanding post-war urban development in Colombo, Sri Lanka

The case of Arcade Independence Square

Marc Herter

Cover photo: The clock tower building of the former colonial asylum, which is now part of the redeveloped Arcade Independence Square shopping complex. In the front lies the carefully landscaped courtyard area. In the back is Independence Square, another major tourist attraction and memorial to the country's independence from the British in 1948. (Source: author, 2015)



Arcade Independence Square
area plan

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Summary

This master's thesis is looking into the matter of urban development in a post-war setting. Drawing on Guy Debord's book titled *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994[1967]), it argues that urban development agendas are increasingly concerned with appropriating the city for consumption through world-class infrastructure. On the path to achieving rapid economic development and prosperity, nations of the Global South are looking towards Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai, whose urban development agendas based on top-down infrastructure projects, speed and spectacular architecture serve as role models that guarantee success. Having suffered through a war that had lasted for nearly three decades, the Government of Sri Lanka's strategy for peacebuilding and post-war reconciliation is concerned with transforming Colombo into a world-class city by 2030 (Department of National Planning, 2010; Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development, 2016). Wealth through economic progress, it is believed, will remedy grievances and detract from having to systematically recondition the events of the past. New and spectacularly looking infrastructure should gloss over any unwanted problems that persist in the capital city and the rest of the country. Debord (1994[1967]: #17) calls this a shift from "having to appearing". Rather than what a city *has*, it has become much more important what it *appears* to have to make it attractive for investors, people and products. I introduce a theoretical framework dubbed *development as spectacle* in order to understand post-war urban development in Sri Lanka. The spectacle, as it is further defined in this thesis, is a social relationship mediated by images and a tool of "de-politicisation and massification" (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 157). On the empirical case of Arcade Independence Square, a newly developed high-end shopping mall, I use this framework to comprehend what this kind of *touch and see* development holds for Colombo. The research questions furthermore revolve around if the promises that had been made in the conjunction of refurbishing Arcade Independence Square could be kept and what can be learnt from the empirical case with regard to future projects. This thesis illustrates that the new, government-managed shopping mall is a good example of *development as spectacle*. If it was the former government, trying to dictate a new way of life guided by consumption and economic prosperity, or the new government, desperately trying to break with the old government's initiatives, the spectacle is a tool for politics. It effectively shifts the focus away from having to tackle uncomfortable issues with regard to ethnic segregation, poverty and inequality or ethno-nationalism. The example studied shows that the shift from having to appearing is one-directional and I maintain that as long as no serious and ground-breaking changes regarding post-war accountability, democratisation and inclusion take place, *appearing* will not lead back to *having*. This insight might be of concern for future research projects in Colombo, where many more projects are planned in the near future, or subject to be studied in other similar settings around the globe. The empirical data for this thesis has been collected during eleven weeks of research in Colombo between October and December 2015. Based mostly on observation and interviews, the data for this thesis is primarily of qualitative nature.

Abbreviations

Arcade *	Arcade Independence Square
MMWD	Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
Rs	Sri Lankan Rupees **
SI	Situationist International
UDA	Urban Development Authority
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USD	United States Dollar **
WP	Western Province

Notes:

* The terms Arcade, Independence Arcade and Arcade Independence Square are used as synonyms throughout this thesis.

** The exchange rate used for currency conversion is 1 USD = 135 LKR (approx. average of 2014–2015).

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1. Introduction

With a vision in mind and a first plan of action embraced, politicians, city planners, architects, international investors, business consultants and many more are committed to radically changing how Colombo looks, smells and feels. According to them, Colombo will soon become the Dubai of South Asia: modern infrastructure, spectacular architecture and a Westernised lifestyle. Apart from the many five-star hotels, Dubai also prides itself on having the world's tallest building, the biggest theme park, the largest shopping mall – which includes the largest indoor ski venue – and a recreation of the earth's surface on reclaimed land that is even visible from space. The city itself has been turned into a theme park.

Standing tall on the coast of the Persian Gulf is one if not the most luxurious hotel in the world. When the Burj al Arab was opened in 1999, its proprietors prided themselves on it being the only seven-star hotel in the world because of its beauty and quality of service.

“The hotel is made up entirely of luxury suites, each extending over two stories. The entrance lobby is enclosed within a 66,000-gallon aquarium full of exotic tropical fish. A cascade of water shows the way up to the next floor, which opens out into a 600-foot-high atrium, revealing a view of the sail construction from the inside” (Schmid, 2009: 154).

That the building's estimated costs of USD 2 billion may never be recouped through hotel guests is secondary. What was created was a new landmark.

1.1 Redesigning cities as modern spectacles

In today's globalised world, the city has turned into an enterprise. Cities have long ago started looking beyond their own noses for innovation, recognition, and investment. Nowadays, cities around the globe find themselves repositioned “within increasingly volatile [and] financialised circuits of capital accumulation” (Brenner et al., 2012: 1), as they compete for the best talents and biggest investors in the market of the globalised economy. Attracting people and companies willing to invest in the location have become a necessity provided the city wants to grow and prosper.

Global cities such as Dubai are made up of “exhibitionary spaces” (Roy, 2011: 315) that are specifically constructed and themed for consumption. As such mechanisms are showing up in more and more areas of public life around the world, the competition increases to a level on which “only the spectacular is good enough” (Miles, 2010: 141). By using a “rhetoric of ‘growth’, ‘progress’, and ‘development’” (Gotham, 2005: 198), such cities pursue an urban development agenda that is guided by a spectacularization of the urban landscape. The rise of urban “economies of fascination” (Schmid, 2009: 152) has transformed the urban landscapes around the globe into “dream worlds” (Miles, 2010: 78).

Similar to Singapore, Macao or Shanghai, Dubai has seen massive investments over a short period of time, which had eventually transformed the cityscape from a desert town into a skyscraper city.¹ Many politicians and urban architects in the developing world, hoping to copy its basic approach to international recognition and prosperity through spectacular urban infrastructure development, consider Dubai an urban planner's Mecca.²

1.2 Post-war urban development in Sri Lanka and Colombo

Sri Lanka's post-war urban development agenda has undoubtedly been influenced by the success stories of such spectacular cities. Rebuilding the country after the war was taken up in a very literal sense, as the development focus of the Rajapaksa government lay very much with large-scale infrastructure projects. Sri Lanka's post-war urban development model is one that credits "visual justice", driven by "functional efficiency and aesthetic appeal" (Godammune, 2014: 187, 189). However, while the government³ hails the national benefits of the infrastructure boom made possible by foreign loans, the recipients of this kind of development are unevenly distributed, both from a geographic as well as an economic and social point of view. The most talked about projects are centred in and around the already booming capital Colombo and the southern provinces. As Colombo itself is about to be turned into the Singapore of South Asia, with new traffic infrastructure, public parks, shopping malls, five-star hotels, and iconic high-rise apartments from prize-winning architects, the northern and north-eastern regions are left with little but newly paved roads and government military infrastructure. The inherent consolidation of a post-war uncertainty to the state's urban development agenda is troublesome and yet it has neither stopped countries like China or Japan nor international organisations such as the World Bank from supporting it. Rather than easing tensions between the Sri Lankan government and various minority groups who still feel underrepresented on the political stage, the state's hegemonic behaviour creates new tensions and gives little evidence of change. Colombo itself, as it is stated in the national development agenda developed by the Rajapaksa government but still active today, is to be turned into a world-class, slum-free garden city by 2020 (Department of National Planning, 2010).

1.3 Research agenda

I am interested in the political economy of development and the politics of re-designing urban regions. Many people seem to be in awe of the luxurious, clean and artificial cityscapes that the designers have managed to create in Dubai or Singapore so that foreign governments are keen on reproducing them in their own countries. How this has been taken up in post-war Colombo is what I am interested in and the main topic of this thesis. The capital city is changing fast and as leading politicians, urban planners and economists pursue their visions of a world-class city in South Asia, the government is funding heaps of projects hoping to make Colombo *better*. In order to comprehend the government's post-war urban development agenda and what their vision of a globally competitive, world-class capital city consists of, I carried out an in-depth study of a recently finished major beautification project as an example of the boom in

urban development that has started after the end of the war. During my eleven-week stay in Colombo, I met with representatives from government institutions working on urban development, interviewed stakeholders in the studied development scheme, and had countless interesting talks with all kinds of people on the changing façade of Sri Lanka’s capital.

I see particular value in a political economy approach, acknowledging the linkage between political concerns and economic concerns, which aims to understand “not only what development outcomes occur but also why they occur” (ODI, 2012: 5). The people in charge of urban development in Colombo believe in the benefits of being considered a global city. They dream of the vibrancy, visual beauty and quality of life of a world-class city and are willing to implement a policy plan that aims to achieve these goals in as little time as possible. Drawing from the works of French philosopher Guy Debord and others, I term this political agenda *development as spectacle*.

1.4 Research questions

The case study of my thesis is Arcade Independence Square, a newly opened, government-owned high-end shopping mall. By studying this project, as well as what has come up elsewhere in the city, I aim to understand how the infrastructure-centred development vision of a spectacular city intermingles with the nation’s historical legacy. This leads to the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of the government’s approach to post-war urban development and what are the parameters behind the capital’s infrastructural makeover that is supposed to turn it into a world-class city?
- Using Arcade Independence Square as an example, can the government as developers fulfil the promises it has made with regard to the social and economic benefits of the project?
- What can the results from Arcade Independence Square tell us about other projects in urban development in Colombo and Sri Lanka, either completed, still ongoing or planned, and what are the social and economic consequences of such an approach to development?

1.5 Chapter overview

Chapter two introduces the theoretical framework that mainly draws on the work by the French philosopher and sociologist Guy Debord.⁴ Debord’s main contribution is the observation that after what Karl Marx had called a first downgrading of social life from being to having, we have now transitioned to a society dominated by images and spectacles, which entails a shift from “having to appearing” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #17). It is thus no longer what one has that is regarded as definitive of status in society, but what one appears to have. Masking the non-existence of desired features – whether of an object like a city, or specific persons like affluent and high-class people – is the spectacle. Debord defines the spectacle as a

social relationship mediated by images and a tool of “de-politicisation and massification” (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 157). Debord’s work was very well received among leftist political groups, artists and students, although the reception among scholars was limited. Chapter two also discusses some more recent academic studies undertaken with Debord’s work in mind and looks at the critique he had received from professionals; mainly for overgeneralising society, minimising individual agency under the hegemony of the spectacle, and a lack of empirical specificity. Other theories complement the analytical framework. If it were not for the planners’ and politicians’ total conviction of the benefits of a neoliberal city, for example, this kind of spectacular development would be unthinkable. Additionally, it is also worth looking into the top-down politics of place making or the ambiguous promises regarding the benefits to society as two integral parts of the spectacle.

Chapter three gives an overview of the contextual background. A more detailed introduction to Sri Lanka’s post-war development agenda, illustrated with some examples, helps to keep the bigger picture in mind when studying urban development in Colombo. The transformation of the capital into a beautiful garden-city is personified with Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. The former Defence Secretary and president’s brother is an illustrious and yet also important figure in urban development. Had it not been for his vision and his top-down way of handling things, Colombo would not have witnessed such a rapid transformation of its urban landscape.

Chapter four is dedicated to the methodology. The research concept – to attain a deep understanding of spectacularised post-war urban development in Colombo through Arcade – suggested an inductive and qualitative approach. This chapter highlights the methods used for data collection and analysis, as well as a reflection of the researcher’s position as a foreign student doing his research in a non-Western context and the challenges and constraints of his work.

Chapter five introduces the case study. It tells the story of Arcade Independence Square, who is visiting and what it has to offer. Rather than a literature analysis, this chapter draws mainly on empirically collected data (observations, interviews, interactions, images, plans, and media articles).

Chapter six is the main analytical part. It discusses the framework from chapter two with my empirical field data. Since Debord was often reluctant to exemplify his observations, this chapter explains why Arcade is a good example of a spectacle *at work*. This analysis also benefits from the various sub-theories that are used to complement Debord’s concept.

Chapter seven picks up the topic of spectacularising the urban landscape on the scale of city level. A further four examples of Colombo’s beautification boom are discussed, as this chapter aims to draw together the patterns of post-war urban development in Colombo and critically reflect if the developed projects work according to their own statements, meaning if the promises that had been made can be kept. In conclusion, it becomes apparent that whereas the promises that had been made initially turned out to be

little more than hot air, the hope and desire to become Asia's best city have not yet faded away. Colombo's biggest spectacles are still to come.

Annotations (Chapter 1)

- ¹ In Dubai, one can marvel at the sublime architecture of all the buildings that have been dug out of the sand over the last decades. For an introduction to the “economies of fascination”, see Schmid (2009). Smith (2014) discusses Dubai's gigantism in terms of its organisation of media spectacles. Haines (2011) looks at further practices of place branding in Dubai. For a good introduction to the basic terms of mega-cities see Yeung (2009).
- ² Apart from Dubai, other global cities that have been studied in terms of their urban development agenda and place branding strategies include Singapore (Beng Huat, 2011), Shanghai (Fong, 2001; Shin, 2012), Beijing (Fong, 2001), Macau (Ong, 2011a; Chu, 2015), Indian cities like Gurgaon (Haines, 2011), Bangalore and New Delhi (Goldman, 2011; Shatkin, 2011), Melbourne (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015), Louisiana (Gotham, 2005; Waitt, 2008), and Las Vegas (Schmid, 2009) amongst others.
- ³ Unless stated otherwise, the term ‘government’ refers to ‘the Government of Sri Lanka’.
- ⁴ For a short introduction see Trier (2007).

2. Conceptual framework

This chapter presents the conceptual framework and situates it in the broader context of political economy. In the first part, this chapter gives an introduction to the political economy of urban development before moving to the *development as spectacle* framework in the second part.

2.1 Studying cities: the political economy of urban development

Political economy is a key approach to studying international development and looks at the dynamic, contested and changing relations between politics and the economy. Political economy analysis is concerned with the beliefs that motivate a particular set of policies (ODI, 2012; Pamment, 2014). It is a combination of stakeholder analysis, analysis of winners and losers, institutional and governance analysis, historical analysis and risk assessments (Poole, 2011: 2).

2.1.1 Three relevant political economy topics

Three bigger subject areas as part of the political economy of urban development are relevant with regard to this thesis: the advent of neoliberal cities, the deficit model of development, and hegemonic nation building.

There has been a turn towards a neoliberal restructuring of the city, as funds are increasingly appropriated for making the city a vibrant and attractive place for private interest groups and capital investment (see for example Brenner et al., 2012; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Cities nowadays find themselves in an increasingly volatile environment, in which they are exposed to market forces and must compete with others for capital investment through place branding. On the one hand side, this leads to capital-intensive development being financed by the private sector, thus also placing value on managing a healthy cash-flow budget. In general, it stimulates development and leaves room for visions. On the other side, one gradually notices a privatization of public life, new class hierarchies by means of income and wealth, gentrification, and emerging insecurity and instability, as private investors might pull out more quickly than the government. The right to the city movement has come out as a result of the neoliberal turn of cities, criticising the appropriation of the city by capital.⁵

Many developing nations, Sri Lanka included, have adopted a “deficit model of development” (Perera, 2015). This means that leading figures in business and politics in Sri Lanka, and other nations of the Global South, hold that their country must make up ground in terms of development as it is believed that it has a deficit compared to other nations. Comparisons are often made with *spectacular* cities like Singapore and Dubai, a fact that can also be observed in Colombo. Central to a critical Marxist political economy analysis is *dependency theory*. Although the theory itself does no longer have that many proponents, some key aspects remain relevant today. Dos Santos (2003: 281–282) calls attention to a new form of dependence under which foreign financing becomes an integral part for funding development, as the “possibility of

generating new investments depends on the existence of financial resources in foreign currency”. This is very true in Sri Lanka, where the national debt level has soared over the past years.⁶

Hegemonic nation building also ties in with *political economy*. The governments of many emerging countries hold that there is a need to remake the nation according to their principles and that they themselves are very much capable of doing so. In Sri Lanka, this also refers to a very specific type of nation: a nation centred on the principles of the Sinhala-Buddhist people. This is coupled with a top-down production of space and an attitude of *we build your future*; a future that is built on high GDP-growth through foreign loans and investments along with ethno-nationalist politics and symbolism.

2.1.2 The spectacle as part of the political economy

Key to political economy analysis is the adoption of the linkage between political concerns and economic concerns; an actuality that is “central in determining not only what development outcomes occur, but also why they occur and what might be done to improve those outcomes” (ODI, 2012: 5). Even as political economy analysis is a tool for policy work, it is such a broad concept that offers a multiplicity of applications, also in academic research. With the conceptual and methodological wideness certainly being a restraining factor and weakness of the political economy approach as well, it nevertheless leaves academics enough freedom to work with the concept and adopt it to their context.⁷ In my case this means altering the step-by-step guide presented by Poole (2011: 3). I am in particular not concerned with proposing feasible policy options (step four) or enhancing the dialogue with the government around them (Booth et al., 2009: 5–6). Rather, I see my framework of *development as spectacle* as embedded in a larger political and economic context that cannot be downplayed if the case at hand is to be fully understood. With regard to the creation of particular spaces of consumption and a world-class city, linking political economy with issues of place branding, heritage preservation, culture, or ethno-nationalist sway helps to see the actions and motivations for spectacular development on a larger scale.

2.2 Development as spectacle

Drawing mainly on the work of Guy Debord on the society of the spectacle, this thesis develops a framework – named *development as spectacle* – in order to analyse and better understand post-war urban development in Colombo.

2.2.1 Debord and ‘The Society of the Spectacle’

Guy Debord was a French Marxist-theorist, author, director, artist and founding member of the Situationist International (SI), an artistic group that slowly turned its attention to leftist politics. Debord and the SI were concerned with the rise of consumer capitalism from the 1920s onwards, claiming that a new phase in the development of modern societies had been reached (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 167).⁸ Forecasting a decay of capitalism, Debord began to formulate his most-influential and well-known work, *The Society of the*

Spectacle, in 1967 (see Debord, 1994[1967]). His main argument revolved around how the construction and distribution of signs and images had become the consequence and ultimate objective of production in capitalism, making a society of the spectacle. Coming across his work, one could be struck by the fierceness of his wording, a fact that reveals his stance on the contemporary European capitalist society at once. In his book, which consists of 221 theses that are all engaged with the evolution and the outcome of a society of the spectacle, Guy Debord is fairly outspoken about his personal opinion, warning that “it [the book] should be read bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society” (Debord, 1994[1967]: Preface to the Third Edition; Pinder, 2009: 361).⁹

2.2.2 The spectacle

The concept of the spectacle forms the basis of Debord’s work. It is the centrepiece to his theory and is Janus-faced: on the one hand, it refers to modern-day capitalism as an institutional facility, defined by class society and a total commodification of the world. On the other hand, it has become an ideology of capitalism, which through the use of signs and images “distorts reality and cloaks the exploitative conditions of capitalism” (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 169). As Debord refrained from explicitly defining the concept of the spectacle, we are bound to zero in on the heart of the theory by approaching his work as a whole, while paying specific attention to select theses.

The spectacle is “a tool of pacification, depoliticisation, and massification that distracts and seduces people” (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 157). It is a “permanent opium war”, stupefying people and distracting them from other aspects of social life (Debord, 1994[1967]: #44; Kellner, 2003: 3). Debord writes that in modern capitalist societies, life as a whole “presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #1). As “a means of unification” (ibid: #3), the spectacle imposes unity through the targeted use of images. “The spectacle”, Debord writes, “is a social relationship mediated by images” (ibid: #4). The spectacle serves as a political tool for creating a whole society bound to its rules that is to the basic conditions of capitalism, exemplified by the consumer culture. Living in an image-dominated world in which visual categories form the basis of action and activity, people become mere spectators of the visual explosions through the ubiquitous depiction of spectacles. As the concept refers to the unification of society, its function nevertheless also regards the “concrete manufacture of alienation” (ibid: #32). Ironically seen as a main step towards personal freedom and individualisation, the consumer culture inherent to capitalism is understood by Debord as an alienation from the very elements it promises to honour. He draws a grim picture of our culture, with this freedom not applying to a society based on principles of inclusion and democratisation but a society that is obliged to consume. People are no longer free in the society of the spectacle as the hierarchical power that is integral to the spectacle evolves in society. On that score, Debord writes, that “separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle” (ibid: #25). It is the departure from the people as active actors to passive followers in society. Debord employs the metaphor of the motion picture in order to describe the society of the spectacle. When people watch a film, they are

spectators rather than acting agents, bound to let the pictures that others created influence them (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 169). Hence, the spectacle serves as a tool to pacify and depoliticise the public and unite it under the spectacle's realm, disseminated by the power of the visual. Debord even calls it “a weltanschauung that has been actualised [and] translated into the material realm” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #5).

Central to Debord's work on the spectacle is the transition of social life “from having to appearing” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #17). Based on the idea of a downgrading of social life from being to having in conjunction with the rise of the capitalist society as described by Marx (see Gotham & Krier, 2008: 168), Debord names this new stage in the development of consumer capitalism through spectacles as a shift from having to appearing. It is no longer important what one has but what one appears to have. As will be made clear later on, this idea can be applied not only to society as a whole but to all its parts; the people, the city, or a specific urban development project, for example. Referring to the “totality of the commodity world” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #49), the spectacle symbolises a replacement of human needs by a “ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs” (ibid: #51).

Above all though, the spectacle is a powerful political tool. The spectacular character of the modern capitalist society we live in is the conception of the perfection of the current economic order and the guiding principle that “ends are nothing and development is all” (ibid: #14).

“By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #24).

The power and allure of the spectacle to political actors and its possible uses as a tool of pacification, depoliticisation and massification (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 157) becomes apparent. And as Debord writes nearly twenty years later, “the spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality” (Debord, 1988: IV).¹⁰ “There remains nothing”, he states, “[...] which has not been transformed and polluted” (ibid). And in order for it to remain attractive, the spectacle must continually invent new forms of gratification and outperform others (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015: 234).

Of course, spectacles have been around since premodern times. There were the Olympics in ancient Greece, the Bread and Circuses shows in ancient Rome, or the crusades that were motivated by religion in the Middle Ages as examples of early forms of spectacles (Gotham, 2005: 227; Kellner, 2003: 1). The structural shift to a society of the spectacle, however, involved a commodification of formerly non-commodified aspects of social life, for example in the fields of urban development, leisure, or tourism (Kellner, 2003: 3; Mercer & Mayfield, 2015: 228; Pinder, 2009: 361–362). For Debord, it is not just that “the relationship to commodities is now plain to see”, but that “commodities are now all there is to see” (Gotham, 2005: 301).

Debord and the Situationists managed to provide a theoretical account of the ascendance of post-war consumer capitalism and produced a theory-driven critique thereof (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 159). As Debord further elaborates the spectacle in his book, he offers a critique of tourism, the commodification of time and shares his concerns with regard to urban planning.

Tourism, Debord says, is the “chance to go and see what has been made trite” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #168). He laments that tourism has developed as a by-product of the circulation of commodities. By homogenising space through its commodification, one allows its standardisation and mass production, thus ensuring interchangeability (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 171). Spaces of leisure, relaxation, adventure and emotion are constructed in the same way around the world for touristic consumption. Enjoyment and consumption of such spaces always carry a temporal dimension. Part of this critique also revolved around the transformation of heritage sites and old parts of cities into open-air museums for tourism (Debord, 1994[1967]: #65). By adding value to cultural assets and thus turning them into a financial resource to be tapped, so-called “heritagisation” (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 441) promotes another way of commodifying the environment.

The commodification of time into a quantified and homogenised unit has become a necessary part of the expanding leisure economy, which is specialised in selling “‘fully-equipped’ blocks of time” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #149, #152). Once time and space are both commodified it becomes possible to mass-produce leisure activities, mega-events, festivals, and more that produce an illusion of community, a sensation that had been taken away previously and is now replaced by spectacles (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015: 172). Scholars have discussed this phenomenon with regard to “McDonaldization” (Ritzer, 2000) and “Disneyfication” (Sorkin, 1992) to name two examples.

As stated before, Debord was particularly concerned with the developments in urban planning in the post-war period. He called the new state policy that focused primarily on the economic development of the city by making it more attractive to the industry a “self-destruction of the urban environment” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #174). Its negative consequences were the repurposing of city space for road infrastructure and individual motor traffic, the development of mass suburbanisation, and the creation of large shopping malls as places for consumption (ibid).

2.2.3 Working with Debord

The work of Debord and the SI has been influential in certain political and cultural circles, its influence in academia however remains limited for factors discussed above (see chapter 2.2.2).¹¹ It has nevertheless been employed and drawn from by social scientists to address strategies in capitalist urban development that placed emphasis on the visual consumption of spaces with the aim of attracting capital investment and gloss over social problems (Pinder, 2009: 357). Some scholars look at the multiplicity of spectacles (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015; Gotham & Krier, 2008). Mercer and Mayfield (2015) look at the way in which

different types of spectacles (celebrations, shopping malls, theme parks, etc.) and different technologies of spectacles (theming, controlling, etc.) have changed everyday city life. Gotham and Krier (2008) study how different types of spectacles can be contradictory and stress the importance of understanding the cultural construction of spectacles by looking at the processes and institutions involved in the creation and pervasiveness of spectacles. They reject a simplistic view on the spectacle and underscore the need to study how spectacles define individuals as consumers and how they try to influence them through an advertising and entertainment industry. Spectacles are part of a “wider and multifaceted totality”, hold Gotham and Krier (ibid: 179), one that needs employing a dialectical perspective. This means combining both macro- and micro-levels to understand how different pressure groups – governments, political organisations, economic elites, etc. – create spectacles (ibid).

There are still only a few examples of how the work of Debord has been used in (urban) development studies. Especially in emergent countries, spectacles have become an “index of national development” (Ong, 2011a: 213; Gotham, 2005: 198). From massive infrastructure projects to vast new city skylines and mega-events, the spectacle has become a favoured tool for projecting growth and prosperity. Shin (2012) looks at the political context in China, explaining the attraction of the power of spectacles for the Chinese government with the strategy of creating a harmonious society. In this regard, recent mega-events in China such as the Beijing Olympics are an often studied cases (for example see Abbas, 2013). The spectacle is no longer confined to iconic architecture and mega-events though, as Chu and Sanyal (2015: 399) state, but now “encompasses a widening network of ‘other’ spaces”. From studying the fantasyland Macao, where heritage is commercialised for tourist-oriented consumption, (Chu & Sanyal, 2015) to conceptualising protest organisations such as *Occupy* as counter spectacles (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015), updating Debord’s ideas with new forms of cyberspectacles (Best & Kellner, 1999) or locating the spectacle in the new age of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Mitchell, 2008), the spectacle theory has seen a wide array of applications in social sciences despite the fact that the theory and those who work with it remain marginalised.

Despite its relevance and publicity, the ideas of Debord and the SI remain marginalised within social theory and their contributions to the (academic) debate on understanding the modern capitalist society of the post-war continue to be disputed. Many scholars have labelled the SI as an artistic school (see Gotham & Krier, 2008: 158) and stressed that they had a different focus and background, thereby dismissing their theoretical work. His work has also been attacked for its ambiguous quality, being called empty in content, as the concept of the spectacle is seen as lacking empirical specificity (Gotham, 2005: 201). The spectacle has been called too powerful and all-explanatory (Chu & Sanyal, 2015: 399), speculative and prone to abstraction (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 159) and the SI have been accused of failing to “distinguish normative issues from empirical ones” (ibid: 182). Furthermore, scholars have argued that consumers of spectacles are not simply passive recipients of meanings produced by planners, politicians, advertisers, but they are actively involved in the production of meanings and may indeed use spectacles for purposes different

from what had been inscribed to them by their makers (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015: 179–180). The apparent, unrelenting personal political agenda of the SI thus stopped the theory from spreading more in academic circles.

Responding to his critics nearly twenty years later, Debord simply states:

“That modern society is a society of the spectacle now goes without saying” (Debord, 1988: III).

Debord nonetheless acknowledges the fact that it would have been quite possible to say less. However, he criticises others for not taking him seriously and employing his concept in seemingly harmless environments, quite contrary to his revolutionary spirit. Debord discards fundamental criticism regarding his theory though, no matter how plausible and justified it may be. “The most important change”, he writes, “lies in the very continuity of the spectacle” and that “[...] it means quite simply that the spectacle’s domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation moulded to its laws” (ibid). He refers to spectacular politics, spectacular justice, spectacular medicine and other examples of what he calls “media excess” (ibid). His optimism thus falls into fatalism and it seems as if he resigns to the totalitarian rule of the society of the spectacle. Whereas he distinguished between the “concentrated spectacle” of totalitarian state power and the “diffuse spectacle” of the rules of the commodity economy as two forms of spectacular power (Debord, 1994[1967]), Debord summarises them as one all-embracing “integrated spectacle” in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1988). Describing the past as impotent and the future bleak, Debord writes “as a man destined for suicide” (Blum, 2003: 66).

2.3 Development as spectacle in practice: Making of a world-class Colombo

The analytical framework I have constructed builds on Debord’s work and complements it with valuable inputs from other theories and fields of study – neoliberal cities, place branding, planning & politics, militarisation, etc. – where I find it appropriate. It is structured in three separate parts, not counting the introduction to Debord above that I see as the basis of my analysis. The trail generally follows the events in time, starting with how the Arcade was planned, before moving on to how it was implemented and how this spectacle is lived today.

In the analysis of the planning process, I look at the neoliberal influences of city building and place branding with regard to Arcade, the duality of planning and politics and the desire to attract attention through presumptuousness. I am concerned with the effects of repositioning cities around the world within a volatile environment of capital accumulation (Brenner et al., 2012: 1). Policy strategies that focus solely on economic development, aggressive urban redevelopment agendas, the need to stand out from the crowd through spectacular architecture or the hypercommodification of tourism are all topics that I will touch on. That planning is also a very political act in Sri Lanka becomes apparent when studying Arcade. Scholars have noted before that the way the task of rebuilding and further developing the nation has been taken up by the government shares many similarities with what had happened during the war and that it is in

part its continuation by other means (see A correspondent, 2013; Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015; Hyndman, 2015: 10). The ethno-nationalist undertone in urban development, a ‘no questions asked’ policy when it comes to prestige projects, as well as the influences of the country’s historical legacy are all topics that will be touched on as well. Many politicians and urban architects hold the idea that any city can copy the Singaporean model and become another economically very successful country in a short period of time. They are convinced that as long as basic conditions are met, all is possible. I refer to this strategy as *build and they will come*, as the term itself already describes the attitude very precisely: In Colombo and around the world, this dream lives on in the minds of many powerful players, the Arcade being just one example of how serious they are about making it come true (see for example Ong, 2011b).

When looking at the implementation process, I focus on three aspects: the politics of place making, the militarisation of urban development and the staging of development as a spectacular show. Place making, various scholars and groups argue, should be sociable, community-driven, context-specific and inclusive (see for example Project for Public Spaces, 2015).¹² How space was produced at Arcade through top-to-bottom place making, a notable indifference to public control and critique, shifting priorities from ideas of sustainable development versus a *splash the cash* mentality and an attempt of de-politicising the spectacle tell an interesting part of the mall’s story. The militarisation of urban development thereby goes hand in hand with the politics of place making. Hyndman (2015: 1) notes that “[s]ecurity, development, and its financing, have all become inseparable in post-war Sri Lanka”. With no more war to fight, some scholars hold that using soldiers for development works accomplishes multiple goals in one sweep: they are cheap labour, reliable and unless there is anything else to do, they are kept occupied (see for example Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015; Hyndman, 2015). By constantly praising each other and advertising the positive effects of spectacular development projects in achieving the prosperous future the people were promised, the planners, politicians and other civil servants involved in a project like Arcade make a show out of development.

How the Arcade is lived – i.e. how people use it every day – is at the basis of the third part of my analysis. For the spectacle, it is all about appearance.¹³ Furthermore it can be used as a tool for politics or as a tool for disciplining people and in the context of the Arcade, interesting questions regarding the definition and use of public space also arise. When scholars point to spectacular cities, they often mean Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai with their iconic architecture (see for example Schmid, 2009; Fong, 2001). The visual appearance is a key aspect of spectacular cities and – as Debord (1994[1967]: #4) would agree – seduces and distracts people. Spectacles may also be used for political purposes in many different ways. Spectacular mega-events for example can serve as a contemporary ailment of societal problems¹⁴. With regard to Sri Lanka and the Arcade, securitisation of development, and the indifference to any problems and issues people are having with regard to the projects that have come up, make it clear that above all, spectacles are about what they *appear* to suggest to the rest of the world – once again, Debord (1994[1967]: #17) would agree. Closely linked to securitisation are the policing of rules and behaviour. It is nonetheless also about

bringing discipline to the people through a strict enforcement of rules and an unwritten code of conduct regarding what is appraised as accepted behaviour. When looking at the everyday practises at Arcade, it is furthermore interesting to look at how this place is promoted as a public space, even though it is very exclusive. Despite the fact that it would certainly not pass as a successful public space (see for example Project for Public Spaces, 2015), it is nonetheless comparable to a new category of semi-public spaces (Light & Smith, 1998: 6) and the development thereof as a result of the neoliberal restructuring of the city. Reconnecting back to the beginning is how the Arcade as a space is eventually familiarised by its users who use it in a different way to how it was imagined by the planners and politicians.

On the whole, the three-step analytical framework at hand forms the basis of my analysis and discussion. The general themes introduced will recur and will, combined with further elements as well as with the data I collected, allow a more detailed understanding of the politics behind world-class city making in Colombo by means of the Arcade as a spectacle.

Annotations (Chapter 2)

- ⁵ For a discussion of the right to the city – as introduced by Lefebvre (1996) – what it entails and how it is linked to Lefebvre, a former colleague and close friend of Debord, see Butler (2012). For more, see also Purcell (2002), Harvey (2008) or Plyushteva (2009).
- ⁶ See the country-specific data available from the World Bank at http://data.worldbank.org/country/sri-lanka?display=graph#cp_fin (accessed 31/07/16).
- ⁷ Basically all kinds of studies concerned with a critical analysis of development may be gathered under political economy research.
- ⁸ The transformation of the cityscape of Paris during the two decades after the Second World War had been a main concern to the SI. They had lamented the destruction of the French and other European capital cities in the wake of redesigning urban centres and appropriating space for economic development. Making way for a society of the individual, consolidated by the advent of the automobile, and the dispersion of people from urban centres to the cities' outskirts, had been regarded and criticized by the SI as the work of twentieth-century Haussmanns (Pinder, 2009: 355–356). Not long after the French Revolution and the beginning of a new era of governing in Europe did the mayor of Paris commission the French architect George Eugène Haussmann to restructure the city. At that time, Paris was a booming city that was getting bigger and bigger. But behind the big boulevards, it still had many small and dark alleys where criminals were luring around and diseases spread around. Aware of the tensions in the public, the city's leaders decided to build broader boulevards to create more visibility and control over the people. Comparing maps of Paris before and after its restructuring show how

drastic those changes were. The Île-de-Palais, where the Nôtre-Dame is located, used to house many people in small houses and dark alleys. Haussmann then got this space cleared to build a garden behind the cathedral, a square in front of it, the Hôtel-Dieu next to it and next to that a new police station and the tribune of commerce and connected those administrative buildings by adding another bridge over the Seine. Such examples can still be seen throughout modern-day Paris as many boulevards and squares off the 1^{er} Arrondissement were built during this process of redesigning Paris. This concept of Haussmann's Paris was later copied by many governments and was of special interest to Albrecht Speer, Hitler's personal architect. For more on Haussmann's restructuring of Paris during the mid-19th century, see Kirkland (2013). For a detailed account of Debord's and the SI's political intentions, see Pinder (2009).

- ⁹ As his work does not carry page numbers, I directly refer to the respective thesis for citation.
- ¹⁰ Again, his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1988) does not carry page numbers but consists of a list of comments and statements he makes about his earlier work and how it has been appropriated by others.
- ¹¹ Nonetheless, Debord's work has had a significant influence on the later works by his former friend and colleague Henri Lefebvre, whose formulation of the production of space is now a standard text in urban studies and sociology (see also Chu & Sanya, 2015). Lefebvre introduced three characteristics of space: perceived, conceived and lived space (Gottdiener, 1993: 131). Perceived space is the physical, real space. Conceived space refers to the mental representation of space and how it is imagined and planned by architects and urban planners. Lived space is social space; space produced and modified through use and over time. (Elden, 2007: 110–111).
- ¹² The Biennale Spazio Pubblico (2013: 6) further lists in its *Charter of Public Space* “the commoditisation of urban sociality” as a major obstacle to the creation, management and enjoyment of good public spaces.
- ¹³ See the discussion regarding the definition of the spectacle under chapter 2.2.2.
- ¹⁴ See for example Shin (2012) on China's recent holding of the Olympic Games.

3. Contextual background

Because of the historical events of the past, linked to the nearly three decade-long war, socio-economic development had stagnated throughout Sri Lanka.¹⁵ With the armed conflict having come to an end in 2009, the government produced a new and comprehensive development agenda in relatively short time. The guiding principles were reconstructing the war-torn country and *catching up* to the rest of South Asia, which was regarded as having made a big leap forward in terms of economic development because of an otherwise relatively stable political environment. In this chapter, an introduction to Sri Lanka's post-war development agenda will be given before the focus will be shifted to the capital city. A socio-political environment that is still very much marked by the effects of the conflict also forms part of the contextual background. In Sri Lanka, a post-war situation is not equal to what one would call a post-conflict situation.

3.1 Sri Lanka's post-war development agenda

Sri Lanka's post-war development agenda was characterised by two guiding principles: physically rebuilding the nation and doing it quickly and efficiently. The Government of Sri Lanka composed an all-encompassing development masterplan, the so-called *Mabinda Chintana* (Department of National Planning, 2010), in which the country's aspirations – to become the next “Wonder of Asia”¹⁶ – were outlined. The policy framework envisaged to “implement large infrastructure development initiatives consisting of electricity generation, ports, airports, water supply and irrigation, roads and transport” amongst other things (ibid: 2). The (re-)construction of infrastructure was thus one of the government's developmental guidelines (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 1). From the new highways between Katunayake and Colombo, as well as between Colombo and Matara, to the new international airport, shipping port and convention centre in the southern district of Hambantota, large-scale infrastructure projects mushroomed after the end of the war. That such projects be implemented with speed and efficiency was of utmost importance to the government and hence stressed repeatedly. Regaining “lost *development time*” (Godammune, 2014: 191, my emphasis) – indirectly referring to what Perera (2015) calls a “deficit model of development” – and the conception that the country was “lagging behind due to the war” and thus needed to “move fast” (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 8) were constantly present in the government's narrative on developing the nation.

A closer look at the geography of Sri Lanka's post-war development agenda uncovers the regional unevenness of the distribution of infrastructure projects aimed at developing the country. Looking at both the amount of money spent and the number and scale of projects implemented, shows that the government's focus clearly lied on the southern and southwestern parts of the country, including Colombo.

3.2 Urban development in Colombo

Colombo, the booming capital city, has received special attention from urban planners, architects, economists and politicians. Many people who had been to Colombo before 2010 and were to visit the city again today would almost certainly not recognise it anymore. With new urban public spaces, traffic infrastructure, housing projects and recreational zones, the city's urban layout has changed massively and newly built high-rise towers now give the city a skyline. Even though it might not yet be as spectacular as the one in Dubai or Shanghai, there are plans being discussed that aim to change that (see chapter 7.3.3).

Colombo is a planned city. There have been six different city development plans over the past century (Dayaratne, 2010: 1; Noe, 2007: 91–92; Perera, 2008; 2009), with a seventh one being on the verge of finalisation (see table 1). In the year of 1921, there was the plan by Patrick Geddes to turn Colombo into a garden city.

1921	Garden City	Patrick Geddes
1948	Satellite towns	Patrick Abercrombie
1978	Colombo Masterplan	UNDP
1985	City of Colombo Development Plan	UDA
1996	Colombo Metropolitan Regional Structure Plan	UDA
2010	Mahinda Chintana	Department of National Planning
2016	Western Region Masterplan	Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development

The British valued a green city with parks, trees and bushes for their positive impact on the quality of life. Many trees were planted among roads, walkways, and in public parks. As Colombo was still relatively small back in the 1920ies, there were still a number of large undeveloped spaces to be found within the city. This changed rapidly with the continued growth of the city and the garden city concept was discarded soon afterwards. All that remains today of the once garden-like city is the foliage in Colombo 07, the only quarter in which the streets are still covered by trees on some street corners and small patches of greenery pop up every now and then. Vegetation for aesthetic value has its costs of upkeep and over time, most of the trees were cut down, as they had to give way to road upgrades and new infrastructure development. Nowadays this comes to the displeasure of many residents inasmuch Colombo now resembles more a concrete jungle.¹⁷ In 1948, Patrick Abercrombie developed another plan for the city that envisaged the development of different zones in the city, separated for their purpose, and the creation of satellite towns on the outskirts of Colombo. Due to increased rural-urban migration, those satellite towns went on to grow rapidly and have more or less grown together with the city of Colombo today. In 1978, the UNDP developed another master plan for Colombo and decided to move parts of the economy and political

administration out of the city. An export processing zone was created next to the airport in Katunayake and the capital was officially moved to Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte, a satellite town. Acting as an agency guiding urban development island wide, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) was established in 1978.¹⁸ The UDA later created two new plans, the City of Colombo Development Plan of 1985 and the Colombo Metropolitan Regional Structure Plan of 1996, but they had no significant impacts. As decades of unmanaged growth due to one-directional urbanisation became a major burden for the city's infrastructure, architects and urban planners have been asking repeatedly for a new plan (Locana Gunaratna, 2006: 82).

Not primarily called a city development plan, the *Mahinda Chintana* (Department of National Planning, 2010) nevertheless can be regarded as having had a major influence on Colombo's recent development agenda in the post-war period.¹⁹ Amongst other things, it set the cornerstone for the Colombo City Beautification project and was the starting point of the massive overhaul that the city was given under the Rajapaksa government.²⁰ A key role in redeveloping Colombo played the former president's brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. He was the man in charge of urban development and most projects were about implementing his vision of a world-class Colombo from 2009 until 2015 (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 3).

3.2.1 Beautifying Colombo

Under the Colombo City Beautification Project, the city's infrastructure was upgraded and public areas, such as parks, walkways or waterfronts, were improved. The road network, which is even today still unable to accommodate ever more cars, motorcycles, three-wheelers and buses, was given a massive overhaul as roads were repaved, widened, and an intricate one-way system was imposed. One of the biggest post-war urban development plans, the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project, also included a more efficient waste collection and drainage management to prevent future flooding.²¹

The visual upgrade of the city incorporated the reconstruction of damaged pavements and a rehabilitation of congested roads and intersections, the resettlement of street hawkers and the redevelopment of unattended public spaces during the war (De Wandeler, 2014: 362). After the end of the armed conflict, walls around parks and public squares were torn down and access to such places was eased, as checkpoints and security screenings that were once customary procedure disappeared. Colombo's few green open spaces were developed with an emphasis on relaxation, recreation and exercise (Efroymsen & Fernando, 2013: 5). Upgraded for the residents to gather and enjoy, these places have become very popular among the locals (see figure 3). Galle Face Green, a 500-metre long green patch next to the seafront and the only undeveloped space in the heart of the city, now is a favoured place to hang out, to fly kites or to take a stroll in the evenings. The huge Viharamahadevi Park, which used to be gated and access to it was thus very limited, now offers a large playground, jogging and cycling tracks, a botanical garden complete with a pond to ride pedalos on, and a vast amount of open space. Close-by is also the redeveloped Independence

Square area that locals and tourists alike come to enjoy. In similar vein, this beautification drive has spread out of the city centre into the suburbs and satellite towns, where many smaller parks have been created. One example is the Urban Wetland Park in Nugegoda, a bit further out of the city, where new canals for flood control were integrated with plans for a public park.²²

The preservation and conversion of historic buildings in Colombo was also part of the city's beautification plan. As stated in the country's master development guideline, the *Mabinda Chintana* (Department of National Planning, 2010: 197–198), cultural sites and heritage places – of which the city of Colombo has many (see Edirisinghe, 2014: 6386) – will be preserved and revitalised.

3.2.2 Gotabhaya Rajapaksa – Colombo's Haussmann

“I have done so much and I can tell without any fear or uncertainty that no one will be able to replace me. I challenge anyone. Try and replace my commitment, my hard work and my vision – no one can [do that].”²³

As the mind behind Colombo's urban development agenda, the city's post-war makeover remains unthinkable without Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. He has served in the military for which he is still regarded by many as a national hero, as he rose up the ranks during the war in the 1990s and was wounded in battle, before he subsequently migrated to the United States where he is said to have at one time managed a 7-Eleven store.²⁴ He is one of the former president's brothers and when he returned to Sri Lanka, he was handed the post of Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development after his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected president in 2005.²⁵ As the war continued after a ceasefire in 2006, the defence budget was raised year after year.²⁶ This also meant that more money was available for urban development, most of which was spent to implement Gotabhaya's vision of a world-class, slum-free Colombo (Perera et al., 2014: 8).

The Rajapaksas are illustrious figures and people's opinions about them are split.²⁷ Nevertheless, they are known as the people who could “get things done” (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 6). All the *development* that has come up with the new Colombo is attributed to Gotabhaya's overarching vision, his unflagging commitment and his top-down, performance-driven cessation of work. He is acclaimed for his *devotion to the countries development* and for all the great projects that have come up in Colombo.²⁸ As then-Chairman of the UDA Nimal Perera said in an interview:

“Changes began taking place after President Mahinda Rajapaksa handed over the UDA to the Ministry of Defence in 2010. Then the UDA started working under the leadership of Secretary to the Ministry Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and we were able to streamline development in the urban areas more efficiently which is actually our main responsibility.”²⁹

When the media presented one of the first beautification projects, the refurbishment of the Old Dutch Hospital in Fort, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and *his* UDA were hailed for revitalizing Colombo's attractiveness.³⁰ The redeveloped Racecourse grounds in Colombo 07 and the Floating Market in Pettah were added to his portfolio later.³¹ His marquee project however was Arcade Independence Square for which he is single-handedly credited as the project's brainchild, having "recognised the grandeur, purpose, symbolism and the potential" of the colonial building complex and former asylum.³²

"I have done a lot of work and I don't think anybody has done as much as I have after a conflict. I was able to turn Colombo into a modern city."³³

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's influence on the urban layout of the post-war capital city was that far-reaching that some scholars even linked him and his work to how George-Eugène Haussmann redesigned and renovated Paris under Napoleon III or to Robert Moses, modern New York's so-called master builder (Disanayake, 2015; Godammune, 2014 187-188).³⁴

3.3 The politics of doing research in Sri Lanka

The small island nation off the Indian coast is an interesting yet challenging place for research. An open dialogue about the tragic events that have unfolded in the historical past is still missing, as are thorough investigations and serious attempts at rehabilitation. The post-war era is still characterised by insecurity, fear and mistrust; feelings that are sustained by government actors for political reasons. This is also evident in its approach to urban development in Colombo, which is marked by militarisation and securitisation.

3.3.1 Post-war ≠ post-conflict

Sri Lanka's historical past, marked by the events of the armed conflict that lasted from the 1980ies until 2009, remains present in today's context. I experienced this several times over the course of my research. A highly politicised environment and many unresolved issues of the past, having led to grievances on all sides, make conducting research on topics, which are even only remotely concerned with the events of the historical past, difficult. That even in Colombo, a place that was not as affected by the events of the war as other parts of the country, a post-war situation is not equally a post-conflict situation presented itself in many aspects. Many people feel at unease to talk about anything that is somewhat related to politics or the government and there is a lot of suspicion and mistrust around, especially with regard to getting information on post-war urban development.

The feeling one gets when being around Colombo's urban beautification projects is influenced by what some scholars call a "politics of post-war uncertainty" (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 2). With every year after the end of the war, the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development had kept growing. Expenditure for salaries in the defence sector – an indicator of how many new people have enlisted – have increased by

1.5 from 2009 to 2014 (Ministry of Finance, 2014: 79). The actual expenditure of the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development in 2014 was even nearly twice as much as that of the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education combined (Ministry of Finance, 2014: 99).

There is a clear trend towards militarisation and securitisation of urban development. The military has been gradually involving itself in non-military activities throughout the country, ranging from farming to reconstructing infrastructure to building luxurious landmarks (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 7). Having the armed forces taking care of urban development can mean many things. First, it is cheap labour and many people would say that with no war to fight, the soldiers need something else to do. Second, it indicates the government's approach to urban development. They want things done and they want them done quickly. The armed forces are often regarded for their straightforward and efficient way of doing things, especially in countries where corruption in state institutions is also an issue. Third, it also shows that the armed forces are still needed to guarantee the safety of the people and that things are getting done the way they are supposed to be done. As Amarasuriya and Spencer (2015: 7) put it: "One characteristic of the post-war order is its instability and unpredictability". The government always implies that everything that has been built up and achieved after the war is under imminent threat of destruction by anti-government forces (ibid: 10).

What is missing is an open dialogue, a coming to terms with the past. Post-war rehabilitation is done on the basis of physically building and reconstructing the nation. The government sets its focus on economic development, hoping that a prosperous future will erase all the grievances of the past. This agenda is very much evident in Colombo and its beautification projects.

3.3.2 Colombo as research site

Colombo is by far the biggest city and de facto capital of Sri Lanka. According to the most recent census data available, the city has a core population of just over 320,000 people. Living in the Colombo district, which includes satellite towns such as the administrative capital Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte, are around 2.3 million people; the number of inhabitants of the Western Province amounts to nearly 6 million, which is almost a third of the entire population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). It is estimated that the city also has a floating population of 500,000 people who commute to their workplaces in the city on a daily basis (World Bank, 2012: 7).

Notwithstanding the development of the city as a trading hub and major port that was done under colonial rule, Colombo's history dates back long before the first colonialists arrived. Used as a trading post by Asian and Arabian traders as early as the fifth century AD (Horen, 2002: 217), the city was further developed as the main centre of economic and political activities under Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule.³⁵ Today, the city is vital to the country's economy as it not only produces 45% of the total GDP (World Bank, 2012: 1) but also connects the nation to the world through the main harbour and airport. In con-

trast to the economic development of other regions in the country, Colombo has advanced so quickly that it is outdistancing the rest of the country by ever greater margins (see World Bank, 2004). Despite the negative effects that have arisen through the unequal development of the country, affecting the periphery and the Colombo area, this trend was certainly intended by the ruling parties. Economic policies and development plans have always favoured Colombo and envisioned the city as a global hub to the world. Recent large-scale infrastructure projects in the economic sector aimed at decentralising Colombo's unique status have not taken effect.

Colombo is a city of diversity and a place of opposites. Whereas the southwestern and central regions of Sri Lanka are foremost Sinhala-dominated, the capital's residents comprise of a fairly even ethnic mix.³⁶ Newfound prosperity in the Western Province has improved the living conditions for many Sri Lankans (World Bank, 2004: E2) and has further led to increased rural-urban migration. Not everyone can afford to live in one of the many new luxury apartment complexes that have come up all over the city though. Non-permanent squatter settlements are adjoining garden mansions of Colombo 07 or the modern office high-rises of Colombo 01.³⁷ Even though it is estimated that around half of the core city's population lives in underserved settlements (Sevanatha, 2000), these settlements often are small in size and only consist of some fifty housing units.³⁸ The situation cannot be compared to other South Asian cities such as Mumbai or Dhaka, where underserved settlements have grown so massively due to the high rate of urbanisation that population-wise they could be considered a city on their own.³⁹

The everyday presence of extremes also makes Colombo an interesting place for research. Whereas the city has always been interesting for urban planners, architects, and economists, the multifaceted capital has not attracted that much interest from social scientists. Because of the events of the past, many researchers from the field of social sciences are drawn to either the north or northeast, where they look into the aftermath of the war, or to the south or southeast, where they study the events after the tsunami (see for example Hyndman, 2007; Lee, 2008; Yamada et al., 2006). Studies undertaken on issues within the Colombo area mostly focus on the politics of the urban poor (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015), housing and resettlement (Perera et al 2014; Perera 2015), and other poverty-related issues such as health vulnerability (Noe, 2004). Nonetheless, it is interesting to study how, when people from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds all converge in Colombo, try to make best use of the city's conditions. For example, I once met with another researcher a day after an international symposium to discuss our works. I suddenly became aware once again of the unequal yet interesting place that Colombo is, a fact that one gets used to very quickly and stops reflecting about, when we met at an outlet of a local coffee chain. While I was waiting for my friend to show up, I was observing the bustling street life outside through the big windows, when I witnessed how a street hawker was chased away by the shop's security guard. The hawker was made to move to the other side of the street, as the security guard did not want to let him pass through the car park. It was early afternoon on another hot and sunny day as a mother in her limousine, who had just picked up her kids from a nearby private school, pulled in at that moment for a coffee and some cold

juice. Not more than a little anecdote, it nevertheless shows how Colombo is a place of many worlds that are connected all the same.

Annotations (Chapter 3)

- 15 See the country-specific data available from the World Bank at http://data.worldbank.org/country/sri-lanka?display=graph#cp_fin (accessed 31/07/16).
- 16 Statement by then-UDA chairman Nimal Perera at a business meeting in November 2012. Krrish Square in Sri Lanka, *Business Today*, November 2012, <http://www.businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=7660> (accessed 31/07/16)
- 17 Colombo – once a garden city turning into a concrete jungle, *Daily News*, 2 June 2005, <http://archives.dailynews.lk/2005/06/02/fea06.htm> (accessed 31/07/16)
- 18 See the UDA Act No. 41 of 1978. Accessible online: <http://www.uda.lk/knowledge.html> (accessed 31/07/16)
- 19 One must admit that keeping track of the myriad of master plans for city development is quite a laborious task. There are so many ministries, departments, units and divisions drawing up plans irrespective of the each other that it seems not even they are completely aware of what is going on.
- 20 Colombo, a modern city in the making, *Daily News*, 5 November 2015, <http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=2013/07/22/business/colombo-modern-city-making> (accessed 31/07/16)
- 21 Colombo building a world-class city, *Business Today*, December 2012, <http://businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=7297> (accessed 31/07/16)
- 22 Urban Wetland Park opened for public, Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, 13 January 2013, [http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Urban Wetland Park opened for public 20130112 03](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Urban+Wetland+Park+opened+for+public+20130112+03) (accessed 31/07/16)
- 23 No one will be able to replace me – Gotabhaya, *Daily Mirror*, 12 February 2015, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/63501/no-one-will-be-able-to-replace-me-gotabaya> (accessed 31/07/16)
- 24 A war as strange as fiction, *The Economist*, 7 June 2007, <http://www.economist.com/node/9299003> (accessed 31/07/16)

- ²⁵ His work title might be misleading. Under the Rajapaksa period, urban development and the military came under the purview of one joint ministry, which was headed by Mahinda Rajapaksa who, as president of the country, was also the head of the armed forces. In practice however, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was the director of urban development and Colombo was his *playground*.
- ²⁶ See the annual reports of the Ministry of Finance <<http://www.treasury.gov.lk/web/guest/publications/annual-report>> (accessed 31/07/16) and the country-specific data available from the World Bank at <http://data.worldbank.org/country/sri-lanka?display=graph#cp_fin> (accessed 31/07/16).
- ²⁷ Feared by many and deified by some, rumour also has it that *Gota*, as he is called among his supporters, was not only the brain behind Colombo's makeover but also the man who won the war for the government. (see for example *The Independent*, 14 November 2013, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/hero-or-war-criminal-sri-lankan-leader-mahinda-rajapaksa-under-pressure-8940591.html>> [accessed 31/07/16]). Accused of serious war crimes during his military career, corruption and ill management of business during his time as Chairman of Mihin Lanka Airways (see for example *The Hindu*, 24 April 2015, <<http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/gotabaya-rajapaksa-appears-before-antigraft-body/article7134953.ece>> [accessed 31/07/16]) and the so-called *white van abductions* of political opponents (see for example *Tamil Guardian*, 17 January 2015, <<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=13499>> [accessed 31/07/16] or *Al Jazeera*, 18 January 2015, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2015/01/sri-lanka-gotabhaya-rajapaksa-probed-over-killings-201511864815373261.html>> [accessed 31/07/16]), Gotabhaya Rajapaksa remains in the political spotlight.
- ²⁸ Colombo makes one's way, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 20 January 2013, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Colombo%20Makes%20One%27s%20Way_20130120_01> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ²⁹ Floating Market adds charm to the city, *Sunday Observer*, 15 June 2014, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2014/06/15/fea08.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ³⁰ Dutch Hospital celebrates 1st anniversary, Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, 12 March 2012, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Dutch_Hospital_celebrates_1st_anniversary_20121203_11> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ³¹ Modernized Colombo Racecourse open for public, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 21 October 2012,

- <[http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Modernized Colombo Racecourse open for public 2012 1021_02](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Modernized_Colombo_Racecourse_open_for_public_2012_1021_02)> (accessed 31/07/16) ; Floating Market adds charm to the city, *Sunday Observer*, 15 June 2014, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2014/06/15/fea08.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ³² Arcade then and now: Far from the madding crowd, *Sunday Times*, 20 July 2014, <<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/140720/plus/arcade-then-and-now-far-from-the-madding-crowd-107423.html>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ³³ “I am a very religious person; the truth will prevail”: Gotabhaya, *Daily FT*, 21 May 2015, <<http://www.ft.lk/article/423001/FT-EXCLUSIVE--%E2%80%9CI-am-a-very-religious-person--the-truth-will-prevail%E2%80%9D--Gotabaya>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ³⁴ For an interesting commentary on “Gotabhaya the Great” the article by Shah (2009) is worth reading.
- ³⁵ For a more detailed description of the historical development of Colombo, see Perera (1999; 2016) and Horen (2002).
- ³⁶ This is summarised very well by Amarasuriya and Spencer and is thus worth quoting as a whole:
- “The overall population distribution by ethnicity is Sinhala 75%, Sri Lanka Tamil 11%, Muslim 9%. Most Sinhala are Buddhists, but with a minority of Christians; most Tamils are Hindu, but again with a minority of Christians; Muslims have been classified as an ethnic group (or *race* in colonial nomenclature) since the nineteenth century. While the larger Colombo District is 77% Sinhala, in line with the national average, Colombo municipality is only 25% Sinhala, with Muslims (40%) and Sri Lankan Tamils (31%) the biggest ethnic component of the population. In contrast, some of the suburbs which have grown since the 1970s are much more ethnically homogeneous; Maharagama is 96% Sinhala, Homagama is 98% Sinhala, Kesbewa is 97% Sinhala. The same is true for religious affiliation: Buddhists are less than 20% of the population in Colombo municipality but over 90% in many of the suburban districts” (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 2).
- ³⁷ Colombo is divided into 15 numbered domains that function as the postal code areas. In this thesis I almost exclusively refer to Colombo 01, which is where the old Dutch Fort was located and thus called Colombo Fort, and Colombo 07, also called Cinnamon Gardens, which is the only remnant of the former *garden city concept* (see chapter 3.2) with a lot of foliage and trees covering the walkways.
- ³⁸ These are the latest official numbers. The next study is expected sometime in 2017 with 2015 data.
- ³⁹ Independence Square and adjacent area open for public, Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, 12 April 2011, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20111204_01> (accessed 31/07/16)

4. Methodology

Formulating post-war urban development in Colombo as spectacle-driven implied a certain way of operationalising and adapting my framework to my case. This chapter is focusing on briefly formulating my research concept, on discussing my methodological approach that arose from the previous, and on reflecting on my positionality as a socially situated researcher. As Jensen and Glasmeier formulate well, situating yourself is about the awareness of relevant issues as well as of your position as a researcher:

“Being socially situated means that our research springs from real-world problems and a preoccupation with the implications of our findings for real life, but it does not tie us to one type of research design.” (2010: 90)

This thesis is very much concerned with relevant and actual research on the implications of world-class city making in Colombo. As this field still is relatively unexplored, especially with regard to this geographical region and the constitution of my framework, tying me to a given type of research design would not have given me enough openness with regard to my methodical procedure.

4.1 Research concept

I conceptualise Colombo’s development boom that resulted in many beautification projects with the intention of transforming it into a world-class city as *development as spectacle*. I seek to understand the visions and ideas behind Colombo’s post-war urban development approach by means of studying Arcade Independence Square, how this had been implemented and what the everyday implications of this are. What had started as an explorative study on post-war urban development in Colombo, turned into a detailed and multi-faceted analysis of one specific project of world-class city making and beautification. Such a procedure calls for a qualitative approach. As Marsh and Furlong (2002) point out, a qualitative approach is used when interpreting and understanding your topic is the central point of your study. I approach my topic from a constructivist, interpretative point of view, hence putting comprehension rather than hypothesis falsification in the centre of my thesis.

Developing an in-depth understanding of how my case study, as a prime example of the city’s beautification projects, came into being was a main precondition for tackling my research questions. My research strategy was to construct my analytical framework, labelled *development as spectacle*, based on my definition of the spectacle alongside my plan to follow the three stages of planning the spectacle, implementing the spectacle and living the spectacle.⁴⁰ Approaching my topic in this fashion allowed me to remain both open to new insights from before unexpected angles and flexible enough to circumvent or overcome unforeseen challenges. Such a strategy postulated working up the recent history of post-war beautification and urban development, talking to the planners and architects from the government, as well as trying to get as much information about the implementation by the armed forces and speaking to the people who now

make this place come to life. Broadening the picture by including the public remained an important aspect throughout my research and meant talking to visitors and city residents as well as looking for information in the media. As my case study remains only one example of a trend in development that is intensifying, my goal became quite naturally to understand the bigger consequences of what can be observed from my case study. That is the reason why I will reflect on other projects in Colombo that are yet to be completed or are even still in the planning phase. My plan is also to open up this field for more research, thus leading the way for others who are interested in the politics of world-class city making.

4.2 Methodological approach

The various methods I used for data collection were more or less given by my research design and my research questions. Attaining a comprehensive picture of the issue studied, several methods proved effective in getting information depending on the context and type of data to be acquired.

4.2.1 Defining the methods for my field research

Fieldwork was the most important aspect of data collection, especially since I was working on a topic in a foreign context. I spent a total of eleven weeks in Colombo for my research project and as an intern to a Sri Lankan NGO. This gave me enough time to get accustomed to the local context and develop a thorough understanding of post-war urban development in Colombo. The dimension and diversity of the subject instantly called for a triangular approach; one that purposefully combines different research perspectives and methods (Flick, 2007: 136). Following up on my research concept, this meant combining field observation with different ways of interviewing, complemented with media analysis, literature research and various everyday encounters and talks on the subject.

The first stage of my fieldwork was about accustoming myself to the context and getting an overview of the issue at hand. First talks and very open discussions were held with friends and colleagues. As specific contacts were still lacking, field observation proved distinctively helpful during this initial phase as it required little to no prior background knowledge and served as a good tool for exploration (see Hauser-Schäublin, 2008; Kearns, 2000; Spittler, 2001; Watson & Till, 2010). After narrowing down my research topic, it was important to make contact with potentially relevant actors whom I was to be introduced to. Simultaneously, literature research became more specific and the idea to work with information from the local media came up as well. Planned and informal interviews were not held until in the later stages of the project. Episodic interviews were conducted with various stakeholders from the government and the private sector. This type of interviewing was particularly useful as it allowed for a more open and general discussion on a pre-defined topic without drifting off too far. It allowed a guideline with central questions that were a helpful backing during the interviews, while personal narrations were also encouraged and included as part of the data collection progress (Flick, 2011a: 274). Expert interviews were conducted with people who possessed detailed information on certain issues and could provide a more objective account

of some facts (Bogner & Menz, 2002: 37). Experts, for example a city historian or a senior external observer, offered another point of view on much discussed issues that was often helpful to have. Under the principle of a triangulation of my methods (Flick, 2011b), expert interviews complemented my field observations and stakeholder interviews successfully.

4.2.2 Choosing and accessing the field

I approached and entered the field on different levels and through many paths. At the very beginning stood an exploration phase during which I visited several of Colombo's beautification projects and held first talks with friends and work colleagues. With some background information and pictures from my last visit already in hand, discussions about post-war city beautification were always specific and stayed with the topic. Three projects came forward repeatedly during our initial discussions: the Old Dutch Hospital, Racecourse and Arcade Independence Square. I visited all of them several times over and collected a lot of information on each of the projects. For my in-depth analysis however, I eventually decided to go forward with the Arcade.⁴¹ There were different reasons for choosing Arcade over the others, most of which link to what Patton (1990: 169–171) terms “deviant case sampling”. This method focuses on unusual cases that stand out – as successes or failures – and are thus rich in information (ibid).

The Independence Arcade sets itself apart from other projects because of sheer size in numbers and its unique visual appearance. It is all about superlatives: bigger, better, and more expensive. As the city's most recent beautification project, it outshines similar earlier developments such as the adjoining Racecourse in Colombo 07 or the Old Dutch Hospital in Colombo 01 (see figures 4 and 5). The Arcade is what one talks about when asked about city beautification projects. Compared to the Racecourse, which is located in close proximity and shines in the same pure and white light inherent to colonial heritage preservation in the city, Arcade Independence Square stands out due to its geographical size, determined through the large garden area and the unique sense of place visitors get whenever they enter this space. In contrast to the Old Dutch Hospital, which offers a similar kind of experience but is – as the name suggests – a remnant of the Dutch colonial period, Independence Arcade outnumbers its predecessor in every numerical aspect: more shops, more restaurants, and more venues for entertainment.

My first physical entry to the field was already in the first week and I revisited the place every so often; however, accessing the data and consequently the people who make this place come to life, started far away from the Arcade itself.

4.2.3 Data collection and data analysis

Data collection started basically on the day I had arrived and involved all sorts of information. My portfolio of data is very diverse and extensive. I started out by amassing newspaper articles on the city's beautification projects in order to learn more about them. This media database grew over time and now includes over 200 articles that were gathered from newspapers and online media. The database was later on ex-

tended to include social media and photographic material as well. My real entry point to the people behind Arcade Independence Square, however, came through contacts in the UDA. It was also the UDA who could provide me with a list of shop owners who I then contacted. Apart from bringing up my topic and asking people what they knew and thought about it whenever I had met someone, snowball or chain sampling (Patton, 1990: 176) also proved to be efficient. As Patton (*ibid*) states, the process begins by asking well-situated people what they knew and who they thought one should talk to. In this way, the snowball continually gets bigger as more and more people are potentially included. For my study, this meant that in the end, I had well-established contacts in the UDA, the National Archives, the universities of Colombo and Moratuwa, different embassies, in academics and among local researchers, as well as among the stakeholders in Arcade and other projects and many private sector companies. I managed to meet a lot of people for formal interviews that lasted up to two hours but nevertheless, a large portion of my information also came through countless talks and encounters with a dynamic group of people, from the urban poor who cannot make any direct use of what has been constructed to the upper-class people who rejoice in the government's dedication to beautifying the city. Apart from my everyday personal experiences and interview and observation notes, I also collected planning documents, photographic documentation of the restoration processes, as well as all other bits of information I picked up, be it ever so small. Qualitative research is often about open-mindedness and to take it as it comes; as a sponge, the researcher soaks up whatever material is given to him (Brüsemeister, 2008: 47).

Data analysis was done alongside the development and refinement of my analytical framework. Having a good structure and tagging system was vital and strongly simplified data analysis. With a preliminary structure in mind, I assigned the information I had collected with where I wanted to use it. As I neither did do quantitative analysis nor could I record interviews, I did not see any particular use in employing an intricate coding system. Field notes, newspaper articles, social media posts and other written material were categorised according to what plan, project or bigger thematic they belonged to. Here, I was very much geared to the structure of my analytical framework.

4.3 Positionality, challenges, and limitations

Since doing research is never encapsulated from its environment, an important yet often overlooked part of it is reflecting the implications of his or her own position as researcher. Keeping this in the back of one's mind is important in academic work, especially so when one finds oneself doing research in a different social, cultural and political environment. By shedding light on the progress of one's research, the attained knowledge can be situated as an outcome of a particular cultural, political and/or economic context in time and space. As such, "reflexivity becomes a necessary part of the writing" (Jensen & Glasmeier, 2010: 83). It is not only about looking 'outward' on what your field constitutes of but also about looking 'inward' on how this affects oneself personally as a researcher (*ibid*). In my case, it is about the role I played – actively or passively, volitionally or inadvertently – as a master student doing research in a new

and to a certain degree foreign environment. It is about how I acted upon others, about my association with local and foreign institutions, about what challenges arose out of it, and how I tried to eventually overcome them. Because as Jensen and Glasmeier put it:

“By being explicit about our personal, material, institutional, and geopolitical position as researchers and our historical and/or cultural situatedness, we can enhance the quality and policy-relevance of our research” (2010: 90).

Thinking about limitations also means reflecting on the quality criteria of qualitative research. Steinke's seven criteria for qualitative research (2008: 319 – 331) should be shortly addressed in conclusion. The first criterion regards traceability of the research progress. As qualitative research does not raise a claim on testability as results cannot be easily reproduced due to the composition of its data, documentation of the research progress, previous knowledge and assumptions, and methods used for data collection and analysis is key and allows other to fully understand and determine the value of the study. In this thesis, I have been open regarding the use of my methods and the general approach that I have taken. This regards, secondly, a full account of the process and a critical reflection thereof, asking if the approach as a whole was appropriate? I have partly reflected on that already and, coalescing with the first point, it will be brought up again. A third criterion is related to the empirical basis. Is the chosen theory adequate to explaining what has been found? Can new things be discovered? The theory needs to be formulated in a way to leave enough space for uncovering new things. I am confident that I have done so and that I have also given sufficient arguments in favour of my theoretical framework. Fourth, the limitations of the afore developed theory need to be identified. What context does it apply to? This was also part of the work on my theory and has been highlighted. A fifth criterion affects the theory's coherence. Is the theory free of discrepancies? Have unclear questions been addressed? Again, this has been discussed with regard to my framework. The sixth point affects the relevance of the research questions and the theory. It should allow room for making a contribution to the research field that the overall study can be embedded in. I have argued several times for the relevance of both the general topic of world-class city making, as well as how insights from the ground in Colombo can add to the scientific debate. The seventh and last point regards the researcher's positionality. I have rearranged the points mentioned by Steinke (*ibid*) according to personal choice and assessment with regard to my own research though.

4.3.1 European white male without local language skills

My visual nature, which was instantly associated with social and cultural foreignness, undoubtedly and significantly influenced my research progress. Sometimes this worked to my advantage, but it was often a challenge that I had to deal with, especially when combined with my lack of local language skills. Meetings and discussions with civil servants and shopkeepers went surprisingly well, as most of them were fluent in English, but the everyday business and on-site talks proved difficult to impossible.⁴² Yet language was a minor challenge compared to the implications of my whiteness, which as mentioned before often worked

to my advantage. When Abbott (2006: 337) laments that “whiteness and its political implications remain unexplored in related geographical literature”, he means that scholars are too often indifferent to the factor of their appearance having an influence on what kind of data they can get and from whom. Many *faux pas* that I may have made on fieldwork, e. g. asking inept questions or information that is considered awkward to ask for especially with regard to the still keyed up political context, were instantly forgiven by reason of my foreignness. Another consequence was that I realised how my key informants from the government and the shop owners in particular felt much more comfortable when dealing with me alone. People from the government often assumed that I was unaware of the tense post-conflict situation and its implications on daily life, thus feeling much more at ease to talk freely and openly. The importance of gender is not to be undervalued either, a fact that when coupled with my formal appearance had led to myself being able to acquire deep insights and confidential data on my topic. My relationship with shop owners was similar in many ways and I immediately became aware of how they all felt unburdened when talking to me. Knowing that an invisible and insuperable barrier because of my foreignness in appearance, behaviour and understanding is always present to a certain extent when doing research in a different cultural setting, thinking about its implications remains all one can do.

4.3.2 Association with the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)

My fieldwork stay was combined with an internship at the Centre for Poverty Analysis.⁴³ CEPA is an independent, Sri Lankan think-tank that aims to endorse discussions around a better understanding of poverty-related development issues.⁴⁴ The staff comprises of many talented local and international researchers who all work on development-related topics, such as housing and resettlement, public transportation and inclusive public spaces, and democratisation and land rights. In 2015, CEPA’s research thematic was about re-imagining infrastructure and urban development. It was in this regard that its annual symposium, which I also took active part in, was organised. As a non-governmental organisation with the guiding principle of poverty being an injustice to be overcome, CEPA aims to take a more active role in policy discussions and increase its influence on the government’s decision making processes regarding post-war development in Sri Lanka.

Being associated with CEPA had many advantages. I received conceptual support regarding the structure and approach of my study throughout my stay and was able to profit fully from their knowledge, especially regarding the local context.⁴⁵ Most importantly however, I could avail myself of their extensive network of contacts. It was my colleagues at CEPA, for example, who had first introduced me to the UDA. I quickly realised how important a good and extensive network was and how getting access to people and information was otherwise much more difficult without someone or something to draw on. I profited immensely from CEPA being a renowned NGO: Not only could they organise a symposium and attract high-profile guests, but also did they introduce me directly to the Chairman of the UDA, whom they knew well. Having met the person in charge at the very top greatly facilitated getting contacts, making appoint-

ments and getting information from other government divisions. Working your way down, while saying that you have met with the Chairman before who has given his approval and shown interest, turned out to be much simpler and fruitful than trying to get access from below. Especially since such ministries have a highly complex and somewhat perplexing organisational structure meaning that with whomever you might initiate contact seems to be the wrong person. Furthermore, CEPA also provided me with a place to work at, which was fortunately very close to my research site in Colombo 07. This pool of knowledge aided my work and me tremendously as I was introduced to the bigger picture of infrastructure and urban development in Sri Lanka, what it meant to be working for an NGO in this context, and what other projects they were working on.

Nevertheless, being part of CEPA also had its disadvantages and sometimes showed to be unfavourable with regard to making contacts and getting information. This applied especially to private sector companies and stakeholders at the Independence Arcade. They were wary of my connection to CEPA and did not want to be associated with them in any way, as they most likely feared some sort of backlash from the UDA as their proprietor. This is due to the fact that CEPA, despite also working with the government on some projects, does not refrain from criticising government policies. In such situations, it was important to point out my position as only an intern to CEPA but full university-backed master student.

4.3.3 The challenges of doing research

Conducting research in a setting like Colombo as a master student came with numerous difficulties. I have already touched on the challenges linked with my otherness in matters of culture, language and looks, and on the implications of my internship with CEPA.⁴⁶ Furthermore, three specific challenges will be mentioned that were of particular importance as I was facing them time and time again.

First, the militarisation and securitisation of urban space took some time getting used to. Even though most people feel very safe in Colombo and nowadays there seems to be no reason for having to feel otherwise, a heavy military presence throughout the city indicates that some people in the government apparently judge threats to internal security as still very much real. Public surveillance is ubiquitous, specifically on public space. The city's beautification projects are guarded twenty-four-seven and policed with precision by members of the armed forces, the police or private security. I clearly stood out from the crowd at Arcade and elsewhere, as the city is yet to be taken by the tourist masses that flock in ever-increasing numbers to Sri Lanka. Since I visited my research site on a weekly basis and often stayed longer than what might have been considered usual for shopping or sightseeing, I sometimes felt uncomfortable and being watched. This was the case at Arcade in particular, where the private security guards were wary of my presence. I was never spoken to by any of them though, not even when a similar behaviour by a Sri Lankan would have immediately raised his attention and made him tell that person off for stepping on the grass, for example.⁴⁷

Second, the somewhat different way of doing things was also something I had to get accustomed to at first. This regarded how I could get information, who I could talk to or meet and what kind of data I was eventually able to get. In order to get your contacts and make yourself known, networking was very important. It was always helpful to have someone introduce you to others, thus letting that person also know that I am a *good person* with valid interests. With regard to meeting people, another complication arose repeatedly though. That many people did not plan things ahead for more than two days, coupled with the fact that people often changed their minds as arrangements were often seen as non-binding, made coordination sometimes a little tricky and time-consuming. Getting information from government institutions, such as from the National Archives for example, also fit into this category.⁴⁸

Third, many contact requests remained unanswered. I contacted well over double the amount of people I eventually managed to talk to; more than half of them never responded though. This was the case when I tried to initiate contact myself over the phone or by e-mail. It included other scholars, students, local historians, journalists, and even private sector companies. Having a broad network and a few people one could rely on was of central importance.

4.3.4 Navigating the field: overcoming research challenges in practice

A major part of doing research on a daily basis concerned dealing with the practical challenges and trying to overcome them. Responding to the three specific challenges above, I learnt that adapting to the new environment took time but eventually proved to be crucial with regard to the success of my project.

Concerning the pervasive surveillance of inner city public space, being present and spending enough time at such spaces while also being cautious helped to ease off potentially uncomfortable situations. I felt much more comfortable on my tenth visit than on my first, as the security forces also got used to seeing me stroll around during off-peak hours. Whenever I felt that a situation might get too tense and uncomfortable, I chose to leave and come back only after a couple of days. Despite its special ambience, my research site did start to feel a bit familiar, especially after having talked to many stakeholders and having been shown around. The inconvenience with the security staff remained tense and uncomfortable throughout though. When I eventually got permission to enter a Navy compound and talk to the representative of the armed forces in charge, I felt an estranged climate and uneasiness on both sides. One can definitely sense that the whole topic remains highly political and people feel very ambiguous about it. My colleagues from CEPA confirmed my suspicions as they are also facing a lot of scrutiny from the government.

As to the everyday challenges of getting things done the way I wanted them done, time eventually turned out to be the solution. Knowing what kind of information you are realistically able to get in the amount of time given, always needed to be present in your mind, even if it meant rethinking and restructuring your initial plans.

Regarding the difficulties of getting information and contacts, introducing me as European master student usually worked better than presenting myself as an intern to a local NGO. There were also cases in which it helped to be from the other side but they were rare. In practice, very few people wanted to be associated with an NGO, primarily not the shopkeepers who were stakeholders in a government-owned project and feared reprimands. Being introduced to people from higher up in a bureau, division, or ministry also proved very helpful and saved a lot of time. Getting to others was quite easy when one had already talked to the chairperson or CEO beforehand and came on his recommendation. Generally, the more people you knew the better.⁴⁹ Once again, good networking skills definitely helped getting what I wanted.

4.3.5 Limitations of my study

As usual, limitations arise because of each of the selected methods also has its shortcomings as well as due to the different context and personal background. With regard to methodological limitations, two points need to be stressed. First, whereas the episodic interviewing style worked well and without any major issues, selecting experts for expert interviews was difficult. Here, the position of the expert needs to be questioned and one must ask for what reason this person is considered an expert. Expert knowledge furthermore is far from unbiased, as they also have personal opinions and affiliations or sympathy with groups one may not know about (Bogner & Menz, 2002). As to the limitations due to the situational context, other implications arise. In addition to my own positionality, the likings and intentions of my informants should not be understated. Especially in a highly politicised context such as this, people may not always speak freely and share their sincere opinion on things. Regarding media analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the national press is mostly state-controlled and even so-called free newspapers are eventually monitored by the government. Articles need to be read with a critical eye. Sometimes though, they make it very easy for you to realise that what is published on government projects is only positive in content and the subliminal political propaganda occasionally becomes just too apparent.⁵⁰

By limiting the scope of my project and focusing on a specific example in order to understand post-war urban development in Colombo as spectacle-driven, I nevertheless want to open up the field for more research as well.

Annotations (Chapter 4)

⁴⁰ See chapter 2.

⁴¹ Along with other developments, the other two projects will be picked up and discussed as further examples in chapter 7.2.

⁴² I was working alone on most of my fieldwork and site visits and was only rarely and upon request accompanied by work colleagues who helped me with translation.

⁴³ Hereafter referred to as CEPA.

⁴⁴ For more information, go to their official website on <<http://www.cepa.lk/>>.

⁴⁵ Not ignoring the fact that they had also arranged official matters and paid for my student visa.

⁴⁶ Another example of how the people at CEPA also struggle to make their voices heard regarded a conversation I had about the work they were doing on housing projects in the conflict-affected northern part of Sri Lanka. The team at CEPA who aims to have more policy work out influencing decision making processes in politics were told off by the ministry, which did not enjoy being monitored and reprimanded by NGOs. Unless they could provide the minister with a one-page summary – he would not read more than that – on how to solve poverty for good, their inputs were not welcome.

⁴⁷ This had definitely something to do with the fact that I was regarded as a tourist bringing money to the country. I also found out later that none of the security guards did actually know any English, so confronting me logically would not have helped anyway.

⁴⁸ Whenever you encountered bureaucracy, it took five times the amount of time to get things done. Getting access to and acquiring information from the National Archives was usually a painstaking process. From the registration procedure to the several checklists you had to fill your name in when entering rooms or the amount of people you had to buddy talk into helping you, working through the archives was a unique kind of experience. It always seemed that they did in fact not really want you to look at all those things, as if you could have found something touchy.

⁴⁹ Knowing in this regard does not even mean knowing that person well. Many people say they know each other but have only been introduced once already, thus knowing each other from sight or by name.

⁵⁰ One fine example regards a letter from a young boy, which had been sent to Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and subsequently, been posted online. In what had allegedly been written by the child, the mega projects were felicitated and Gotabhaya was praised for his work. Travelling to Sri Lanka from England, the kid wrote that whereas England had many world-class facilities, his expectations when going to Sri Lanka were low, but “thanks to your [Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s] vision you have changed mine and now I can see the light of our country”. (*Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 29 October 2014, <[http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=A letter to Secretary Defence 20141027 05](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=A%20letter%20to%20Secretary%20Defence%2020141027%2005)> (accessed 31/07/16))

5. Introducing Arcade Independence Square

Being the first beautiful and luxurious mall offering the best in shopping and dining in Colombo, Arcade Independence Square, a restored colonial relic, is one of the newest and most noticeable additions to the capital's growing list of post-war city beautification projects. As former Governor of Ceylon, Sir William Gregory, is cited saying in his memoirs in 1875: “[t]he building will be a credit to the Colony [...] [and] one of the future ornaments of this city”.⁵¹ This chapter will introduce Arcade Independence Square and tell its history from former mental hospital to its redevelopment as an exclusive location for high-end shopping and entertainment. Providing a background for the discussion later on, I highlight what makes Arcade Independence Square stand out and what a typical day spent at the mall looks like.

5.1 Creating Arcade Independence Square: from asylum to shopping mall

Declared open in July 2014 after the completion of the restoration works, the former colonial asylum building complex, now called Arcade Independence Square, has been converted into a unique place for shopping, dining, and entertainment. The UDA, together with the hands of the Sri Lankan Navy, put a lot of effort into restoring the dilapidated buildings to their former state.

The main complex and the smaller clock tower building date back to the British era and had been constructed in the late 19th century. It was back in 1875, when then-Governor of Ceylon, Sir William Gregory, had had the idea to construct a new asylum for the lunatic as the already existing facilities had been getting overcrowded. Even at that time, this building had had a very controversial character as debates had been going on regarding the design and cost of the plan, which had included a lot of decorative green space around it. The construction had come to an end not until thirteen years later, when the successor of Governor Gregory, James Longdon, had finally declared the ‘Jawatte Lunatic Asylum’ open in 1888. The newly constructed asylum’s 400 rooms had soon been all taken and by 1926, all patients had been transferred to another asylum in the city. The building had served many different purposes afterwards, housing the University College, Radio Ceylon, and later many government departments. It was still housing the Auditor General’s Department, when the UDA decided to restore the premises and transform it into a place for shopping, dining and entertainment in 2012.⁵²

The idea to have the old asylum complex transformed into a location for shopping and entertainment stemmed in part from the success of a similar but much smaller project, the Dutch Hospital Shopping Precinct.⁵³ Along with the development goals envisioned in the *Mabinda Chintana* (Department of National Planning, 2010: 197), to develop historically important places and monuments as major tourist attractions together with the private sector partnerships, creating a space where people would consume and thus spend money was seen as guarantee of a safe return on investment. Refurbishing the former Auditor General’s Department building became the UDA’s biggest project and a way to showcase what is possible in Colombo. For Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Arcade Independence Square was the project he wanted to be

remembered with, and the UDA was to spare no expense for making it truly magnificent. A small team of architects was sent to France in order to get some inspiration on how to restore and conserve old buildings. The mood and atmosphere of the boulevards of Paris, the lavish and well-kept gardens of Versailles, and the mixture of old interiors and new boutiques at Galeries Lafayette were to guide the redecoration of Arcade Independence Square. In collaboration with the Department of Archaeology, a redevelopment plan was prepared that would pay respect to the historical significance of the building. Ensuring that some kind of colonial ambiance inherent to the complex was kept, a conservative redecoration plan was elaborated. The building's interior was to be rebuilt with the former health resort's layout of a simple, yet elegant design in mind that would spread once again peacefulness and relaxation through its corridors. In a similar fashion, the outside area was to spark sensation and a whiff of perfection. A lot of attention was also paid to landscaping the garden area and the layout of the marbled pathways.

Full restoration of Arcade Independence Square was accomplished in just two years and most work was done by the civil engineers of the Sri Lankan Naval Forces. As the UDA was under the purview of the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development during the Rajapaksa period, it was not surprising that the contract had been given to the Armed Forces. Not only were the Armed Forces less costly to contract, but because of their reputation and experience with previous development projects, they were seen as totally capable of mastering such a task. When one visits Arcade Independence Square today, one will not be disappointed by the result of the restoration process; the former asylum building complex has been turned into a splendid-looking location for shopping and entertainment. Implementation of this project will have cost Rs. 800 million (approx. USD 6 million) although lower figures are cited as well. Arcade Independence Square was declared open 13 July 2014 by then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother and former Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

The allocation of shop spaces to interested parties through lease agreements was overseen and done by the UDA. The proposed composition for allocation of shop spaces according to the UDA was 50% retail shops, 30% restaurants and pubs, and 20% textile and fashion stores. All shops at Arcade – 31 in the main building and an additional nine in the clock tower building – were offered for lease to the highest bidder. The interested parties were asked to tender for the shop spaces they desired and whichever party offered the highest base price for the respective shop was most certainly given the rights to an initial lease period of ten years. The UDA reserved the right to offer some spaces specifically to preferred candidates though. Shop spaces were allocated according to the UDA's ideas of a suitable layout, which saw the two gourmet restaurants as main anchor tenants and were thus located at the centre. Smaller retail and fashion stores were located upstairs and in the buildings wings. Interested bidders and potential shopkeepers respectively were informed about the amount of money to be paid in the bidding document. The UDA's Project Management Division had calculated an initial base price, bid security and monthly rental per square foot for each shop according to its floor area and location within the buildings.⁵⁴ The bidding document also includes a list of general conditions and an account of the responsibilities of the UDA as proprietor and

manager of the premises. Amongst other things, it states that “[t]he existing building will be conserved by the UDA to preserve its architectural character” and that any construction by the shopkeepers should, after prior approval is given from the UDA, “[...] respond to the historical character of the building”.⁵⁵

5.2 Visiting Arcade Independence Square

Standing proud in the city’s most spruced-up neighbourhood lies Arcade Independence Square, Colombo’s latest attraction. The beautifully arranged outside garden with seating areas and an aquarium covers nearly two acres and invites people to stroll and hang out. The mall itself offers 40,000 square feet of retail space with many stores, restaurants and bars, and has even got a spa and a cinema. While there are not many visitors during the day, the place really comes to life in the evenings, especially on Friday and Saturday nights, when tourists, Sri Lankan expats and locals meet at this newly opened shopping arcade. While not being the first shopping mall in Colombo – five others that may be counted are Majestic City, Liberty Plaza, Crescat Boulevard, ODEL and House of Fashion – it is generally agreed that Arcade is truly the most exclusive and best looking of them all. As Arcade Independence Square targets a customer base different to the other, rather faceless shopping malls in the city that resemble much more chaotic night markets than purposefully laid out shopping malls, it promises to fulfil a unique requirement in the country by offering more expensive international brands and high-end cuisine to a growing middle- and upper-class (see also figures 6 to 17).

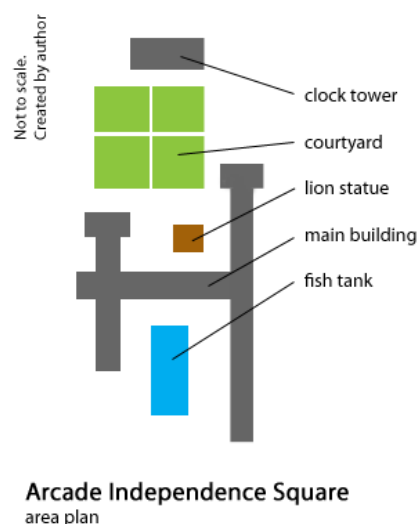


Figure 1: Arcade Independence Square area plan (Source: created by author)

5.2.1 Location and surroundings

Arcade Independence Square is located in the heart of Colombo 07, one of the city’s better off neighbourhoods. This quarter lies very much in the centre of Colombo and is the last remnant of the garden city concept⁵⁶ with trees shading the pedestrian walkways and many green areas, including the city’s largest park (see figure 5). Formerly known as Cinnamon Gardens, Colombo 07 is part residential part recreational district and also houses the University of Colombo campus, offices of many international organisations including the United Nations regional head office and various embassies. Even though Colombo does not seem to have a typical city centre, Colombo 07’s Town Hall and the adjoining Viharamahadevi Park⁵⁷ have become a point of intersection in the daily lives of the city’s residents. It is where people

change buses, pass through in their cars or on their motorbikes because of the city's intricate unidirectional traffic system, but also where many people go to work, enjoy their leisure time or reside.

Under the beautification plans of the government, Colombo 07 has changed a lot. The area around Town Hall and Viharamahadevi Park, as well as the Independence Square surroundings have been upgraded and improved for the use and enjoyment of the general public. The city's only large open green space now is a popular getaway with the local residents wishing to take a break from the hustle and bustle of life in the capital city. With many new facilities and beautiful landscaping, this park invites everyone, from families with their children playing on the playground to joggers or cyclists lapping the premises on the newly constructed tracks to young couples seeking some togetherness. Adjacent to Viharamahadevi Park lie the public library, the National Museum and another new landmark, the Nelum Pokuna Mahinda Rajapaksa Theatre. The latter is a recently opened, state of the art performance venue. The giant construction, which was inspired by a lotus flower, stands out against its surrounding buildings, indicating that world-class performance shows also need world-class architecture. Further to the south of the park, the museum and the theatre, lies the University of Colombo campus and contiguous to it is the Independence Square area.

Aligned with the Nelum Pokuna Theatre and Independence Avenue, is the memorial hall commemorating Sri Lanka's independence from the British back in 1948. Under the Independence Square Development Project, the area around the temple-like structure standing as a monument of freedom for the nation has been significantly upgraded. The urban design concept for the project, "to create a lively open green space with activities to promote more public use [and] give due respect to the Independence Hall"⁵⁸, included an ample network of pedestrian walkways, jogging and cycling tracks and open green spaces. It was eventually declared open by Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in 2011.⁵⁹ Many of the walkways also connect the Independence Square memorial to other development projects under the city's beautification plan, which have been implemented later on. To the east of Independence Square lies the refurbished Racecourse, while Arcade Independence Square is just a short hop from the memorial hall to the south. Another landmark in Colombo 07 is the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, another location for conventions or performances. Similarly to the Nelum Pokuna Theatre, it was also a joint venture with the Chinese government, with funding, materials and workers having been partly brought from China.⁶⁰

Along some of the main road arteries in Colombo 07 are also the head offices of many government institutions, international organisations, and embassy compounds. What is left are some quiet side streets for residential use. However, because of Colombo 07 being undoubtedly not only the most visually attractive neighbourhood due to foliage shading the walkways from the heat during the day and from thunderstorms in the evenings, but also one of the city's happening places, living in Colombo 07 is something only the well-to-do people can afford. The neighbourhood is gentrifying quickly and new luxury apartment complexes are spurting up all over the area.

Regarding accessibility, Arcade Independence Square can be reached easily by private or public transport, offering free parking to its customers as it borders one of the city's main artery road, Bauddhaloka Mawatha. Because of its proximity to Independence Square, another major tourist spot in the city, getting a three-wheeler taxi for the trip is also quite simple.

5.2.2 Arcade Independence Square today: what does it have to offer?

Open to visitors seven days a week, Arcade Independence Square offers the pleasures of shopping high-end fashion and well-known retail brands, dining in award-winning restaurants and enjoying entertainment on demand. Advertised on the official website as a place where you can find “everything you need under one roof”⁶¹, the former asylum now houses twenty-three shops, eleven restaurants and food stalls, a cinema and a spa on a total store area of 40,000 square feet.

Most of the shops clearly target middle- and upper-class customers who want to shop the latest dresses from Europe or Asia, branded apparel of well-known international fashion chains or the newest in consumer electronics. In spite of a lower purchasing power due to lower wages and living costs compared to Western nations, prices for many items resemble what one would pay for in Europe or North America. A new smartphone will cost you just about Rs. 100,000 (= USD 690), whereas prices for branded apparel start at Rs. 2,000 for a shirt going upwards, with dresses costing you soon Rs. 20,000 or more. Table 2 (see Annex I) lists all stores at Arcade.

Regarding food, there is something for every budget and taste. There is a food court with small food stalls offering reasonably priced snacks for take away, as well as a fast food burger joint for quick meals. For special occasions, there are even two gourmet restaurants with award-winning menu creations to indulge oneself in. Table 3 (see Annex I) lists all food outlets and restaurants at Arcade.

5.2.3 Arcade Independence Square in the media

At around the time the Arcade opened to the public, it received quite a lot of media attention. Newspapers journalists seemed to be competing with each other for whichever article praised the project the most and many Sri Lankans also turned to social media to manifest their delight over the new landmark. One article read, “[t]he newly opened Arcade Independence Square is in one word – beautiful. [...] It’s easy to see that this will become a thriving, vibrant spot in Colombo”.⁶² Another one titled, “Colombo has become more spacious, greener and more beautiful” as the “new member with ample space for classy shopping and relaxation in the middle of the Colombo city” was given a warm welcome.⁶³ The use of language suggests that the media were full of praise, already calling Arcade the “latest ‘hang out’ in the city”⁶⁴ or even “one of the grandest and trendiest shopping and entertainment arcades in the Asian region”⁶⁵. Credit was paid to the people behind the project for “turning an abandoned historic building into a hip shopping and dining venue”⁶⁶. “It’s no wonder”, one journalist wrote, “that vehicles passing by slow their pace to take a better look at the Independence Arcade. Restored to perfection, the complex commands attention

[...].⁶⁷ The articles were filled with adjectives describing the superlative, from “a novel concept [which is] breathtaking”⁶⁸ to “a masterpiece etched with the glory of a nation with a proud heritage”⁶⁹. Furthermore, it is especially young Sri Lankans who are often keen to share many aspects of their daily lives over the internet, who also turn to social media platforms to communicate their thoughts and experiences. Arcade Independence Square’s official Facebook page has over 85,000 so-called likes and is one of the most frequently checked-in places on social media platform Foursquare. Comments frequently regard the beautiful design of the revamped building complex and how people love to hang out at this place. Some people also use it to complain about the high prices and the rudeness of the security though.

5.2.4 A day at Arcade Independence Square

The visual beauty of the restored buildings and the garden, a fine taste of colonial ambiance, and the exclusivity of the experience offered – from shopping to dining to entertainment – make Arcade Independence Square stand out in the city. The full experience of the place however is only available to the wealthy few provided with the proper amount of money to spare. The capital’s diverse and multicultural population hardly is reflected in the folk gathering at the place. Drawing from my extensive mapping and observation data and the various encounters with people in this space, this chapter merges bits of information collected from various visits during mornings, middays, afternoons and evenings over an eleven-week period to *a day at the Arcade*.

For most people who work in one of the many stores in the arcade, a typical day starts at nine o’clock, when most of them open their business to the customers. Mornings however usually are not that busy and there are only a few people around. The weather in Colombo can become quite strenuous as a strong morning sun, together with all-year round high levels of humidity, can make being outside uncomfortable quickly. While there are usually a few people sitting outside and enjoying a sunny morning, by eleven o’clock on a sunny day at the latest, the outside area is deserted. There is hardly any shade at all and whoever does not have to be outside at that time normally prefers to stay in the coolness. The building itself is open, meaning that windows and doors are kept open during the day, and not air-conditioned. Nevertheless, even on very hot and sunny days, it never gets uncomfortable inside and there is always a little chill to be found in the many small corridors. Since many establishments such as the restaurants and the cinema remain closed during the mornings, it is quite common to find oneself – as a visitor – being outnumbered by the maintenance and security staff going up and down, especially during the weekdays. Most maintenance work is therefore done during the morning. From meticulously cutting the grass by hand to cleaning the fishpond and wiping the dust off the white walls of the outside, the maintenance team from the Sri Lankan Naval Forces ensures that the building looks as good as new every day. At noon, when restaurants open for lunch, students from the nearby university and business people working in the area come by to eat. Afterwards, it quiets down yet again, as the strong early-afternoon heat still makes one feel unpleasant when outside.

Introducing Arcade Independence Square

Because of a large amount of the high-end stores' customer base having to work on weekdays, combined with hot and humid tropical weather especially in Colombo, it is not until late afternoon that the place comes to life. It is at this time when visitors from the nearby Independence Square start flocking to the arcade and groups of tourists pay a visit on their guided city tour. Whereas the fast food joint and the cinema's afternoon shows are popular among the young adults, others enjoy high tea at the tea lounge or a drink at the bar. It is also the busiest time for the hired private security guards who police the outside area and make sure that people behave appropriately. They run after small children crossing the not-to-be-stepped-on English lawn, stop teenagers from climbing the lion statue for a somewhat more special selfie and keep away unwanted hawkers and beggars.

The fact that Arcade Independence Square has certainly become a new sight-seeing spot is confirmed by the amount of visitors one can observe taking pictures. Whether it is a group photo in front of the lion statue in the courtyard, a self-portrait in the garden or simply a snapshot of the marvellous building, hardly anyone visits the place without taking one or the other picture. The place is popular with students coming from the nearby university wanting to take a break, with bridal pairs who would like to have their wedding pictures taken with this setting in the background, and even with families, whose children enjoy the see-through glass of the walkable outdoor fish tank. During the day or in the evenings, surprisingly most visitors to Arcade Independence Square are from around town. It is nevertheless still one of the city's spots where foreigners are frequently spotted, yet the majority of the visitors are either local Sri Lankans or Sri Lankan tourists from other parts of the country.

In the evenings, when the sun sets and a relaxing breeze goes through the garden, people come and enjoy their time after work. On weekends and holidays, restaurants fill up soon and the outside area is crowded with people enjoying a snack from the small joints in the food court. There are also many events taking place at the Arcade and most of them take place late afternoon and during the evening. Since most people are usually up and about bright and early, with the sun rising at six in the morning and the chilled weather inviting the residents to make the most of the day in the early hours, people habitually also go to bed early. This means that the restaurants and bars at Arcade close at eleven p.m. and movie screenings always finish before midnight, when the Arcade is locked and a day ends.

For some people, however, their work shift has just started. While the Navy personnel take care of the structural maintenance of the building, a private cleaning company is doing the actual cleaning of the floors, shops and restaurants. The cleaning staff is present throughout the whole day, when the outside area and the separate washrooms are swept and washed. During the night shift however, which runs from seven p.m. until seven a.m., the fourteen cleaning ladies tidy up the interiors and make sure that the wooden floors shine again in the mornings, when the arcade once again opens its doors at 9 a.m..

Annotations (Chapter 5)

- ⁵¹ See the official website of Arcade Independence Square at
<<http://www.arcadeindependencesquare.com/about.php>>
- ⁵² This information was gathered from Hulugalle (1963), the UDA, the plaque in the clock tower building at Arcade Independence Square telling the *legend* and the newspaper article Jawatte Lunatic Asylum: the forgotten relict of the colonial era, *The Island*, 18 May 2013,
<http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=79331>
(accessed 31/07/16).
- ⁵³ See also chapter 7.2.
- ⁵⁴ For an idea of how much money we are talking about, see chapter 6.3 and especially endnote .
- ⁵⁵ I hereby refer to points 9.1.6 and 9.2.1 in the bidding document. See also chapter 6.1.2 for more information.
- ⁵⁶ Colombo – once a garden city turning into a concrete jungle, *Daily News*, 2 June 2005,
<<http://archives.dailynews.lk/2005/06/02/fea06.htm>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁵⁷ Formerly known as Victoria Park.
- ⁵⁸ Some of this information has been gathered from presentations of the UDA in 2012 about the Independence Square Development Project that I was able to obtain from an informant.
- ⁵⁹ Independence Square and adjacent area open for public, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 12 April 2011, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20111204_01> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶⁰ See also the information available on the official website at
<<http://www.bmich.lk/?pg=pressroom&content=pressrelease&prID=10>> (accessed 31/07/16).
- ⁶¹ See the official website of Arcade Independence Square at
<<http://www.arcadeindependencesquare.com/about.php>> (accessed 31/07/16).
- ⁶² Arcade Independence Square, *Daily Mirror*, 21 July 2014,
<<http://life.dailymirror.lk/article/9050/arcade-independence-square>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶³ An added spark of colour to Colombo, *Sunday Observer*, 13 July 2014,
<<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2014/07/13/fea10.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16)

- ⁶⁴ Arcade Independence Square: A Modern Renaissance of Colonial Grandeur, *Sri Lankan Airlines Magazine*, August 2014, <<http://serendib.btoptions.lk/article.php?id=1439&issueId=56#page>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶⁵ An Arcade in the City, *Sunday Leader*, 22 July 2014, <<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2014/07/20/an-arcade-in-the-city/>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶⁶ Work on the Old Auditor Generals Dept. nearing completion, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 12 March 2014, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Work_on_the_Old_Auditor_Generals_Dept_nearing_completion_20140312_09> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶⁷ Arcade Independence Square: Revival Of Colonial Grandeur, *Explore Sri Lanka*, August 2014, <<http://exploresrilanka.lk/2014/08/arcade-independence-square-revival-colonial-grandeur/>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶⁸ Ornament of the City, *Ceylon Today*, 20 July 2014, <<http://www.ceylontoday.lk/64-68611-news-detail-ornament-of-the-city.html>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁶⁹ An Arcade in the City, *Sunday Leader*, 22 July 2014, <<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2014/07/20/an-arcade-in-the-city/>> (accessed 31/07/16)

6. Arcade Independence Square: A new spectacle in the city

The analysis and discussion in this chapter look at the planning process, the implementation stage and the everyday practices at Arcade through the eyes of the *development as spectacle* framework previously introduced in chapter 2. It will become apparent that the Arcade, as a high-end shopping mall, is a textbook example of a spectacle, with a beautiful façade suggesting prosperity to the outside while the mechanics in the inside are broken and corrupt.

6.1 Planning the spectacle

At the very beginning of the project stood the planning phase, which is also the first part of my analysis. I will look at neoliberal planning practices, the interaction between planning and politics and the conviction of *build and they will come* as part of my *development as spectacle* framework.

6.1.1 Neoliberal city making

Cities across the globe are being repositioned as places for profit making through neoliberal modes of urban development. Colombo is a good example thereof as a lot of development money has flowed into large-scale infrastructure projects aimed at turning Colombo into a world-class city.⁷⁰ One characteristic of such a transformation is the hypercommodification of urban land and other necessities such as housing or public space (Brenner et al., 2012: 2). As a result, local and regional economies of a city start to be exposed to global competitive forces (Brenner & Theodore, 2002: 371).

It is thought that there is a global market for competitive cities that serves as a place for connecting investors with potential target locations and in order for a city to make progress and develop, it needs to be able to attract enough investors who finance development by investing in the local economy.

“A place like Arcade is required. Otherwise the city will not be attractive”

– UDA project manager, 22 October 2015

The Arcade serves exactly this purpose, as I was informed by the UDA. Unless there are places like Arcade that stand out from the rest of the city owing to its spectacular appearance, neither foreign investors nor other potential money sources would know about the city and in the eyes of many politicians, urban planners and economists, no investments mean no world-class city. The argument goes that spectacles like Arcade can benefit cities economically by “increasing extra-local exposure” (Gotham, 2005: 199).

This competition to attract investments is called place branding. The main goal is to market the city in order to associate it with positive images. One practice of city branding is promoting fuzzy concepts such as ‘liveability’ and ‘vibrancy’ as characteristics of the new urban environment (Mercer & Mayfield, 2015: 529).

“Colombo has become more spacious, greener and more beautiful. The regeneration of the city from its former state to the new has transformed the entire city profile completely with huge value addition to the properties. [...] It is not just beauty but beauty for a cause. [...] They [Arcade and other recently developed places] are icons of the city and have the potential of being of high commercial value.”

– *Sunday Observer*, 13 July 2014

The Arcade has received a lot of positive media attention and its implementation has been hailed as a big success. Especially in Colombo, where most newspaper companies are either state-owned or state-monitored, a lot of media attention was one way of advertising the place. With limited free press however, it is unsurprising that there are few to none articles being published in newspapers that attack the concept behind Arcade.

Place branding is also considered by many as “a panacea for economic and social ailments” (Kovacs & Musterd, 2013: 100) and how much money is spent on infrastructure projects, events and other place branding activities often does not seem to be of any concern. Colombo’s urban rebranding as a global hub for capital, tourism and investment has already consumed significant public resources (Perera et al., 2014: 15). Nonetheless, it is argued that the spectacle needs to be self-sustaining.

The motto at Arcade can be described as *preservation through commodification*. Although a lot of money had been spent on redeveloping it and making it look spectacular, getting a return on that investment was always important to the UDA as project managers.

“We thought of having a shopping mall in Arcade because we have spent a lot of money and needed an income. The aim was to also develop tourism in that area. We wanted to create a tourist destination in Colombo City and get money back like this”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

Development costs were to be recovered from Arcade, as the transformation into a shopping mall with many shops and restaurants, whose owners would pay rent, promised a return on investment. This fact was highly advertised in the months before and after the opening.⁷¹

Developing Arcade into a place for shopping and entertainment was part of a wider transformation of Colombo into a “seductive landscape of consumption” (A correspondent, 2013: 26). Cities are being rebranded as places to be consumed (Miles, 2010: 1) and shopping has become a cultural activity, “what we do when we go out[,] how we satisfy our need to socialise” (Zukin, 2005: 7).

6.1.2 Planning and politics

In Sri Lanka, politics influences planning in two major ways: On the one hand, the government repeatedly stresses that the country lags behind others because of the events it had to deal with in the past (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 5). On the other hand, development is also about prestige and local politicians want to raise a monument in their name.

The conviction of having fallen behind others in the race of becoming a world-class city meant that things needed to move fast. And for development to move fast there was no time to be wasted with neither detailed assessments about the impacts of the project, such as Arcade, nor any kind of critical dialogue regarding its necessity.

“We had a feasibility study and according to that, we worked out the rental an all that. There is a separate committee – the UDA evaluation committee – that did the evaluation and all that. They calculated the base price and the monthly rental”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

The new chairman of the UDA countered these claims though and clearly stated that “there was no feasibility study for Arcade”.

In this vein, the planners did not have any financial restrictions. It was all about speed and efficiency. The ultimate result mattered.

“We did not have a fixed budget. The first estimate was Rs. 400 million [approx. USD 3 million] for the basic construction without landscaping etc. It finally doubled”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

The public as well as the future tenants were kept out of the planning process. It remains unclear how much they each knew about the plans and the costs of Arcade. Newspaper articles cited different figures about the costs of the project, from Rs. 300 million to Rs. 550 million⁷², whereas interested tenants could only select and bid for shops.

“We didn’t have anything to do with the plan, it was all already done. All we did was select the shop”

– tenant⁷³ D, 12 November 2015

The UDA really did not want anybody to interfere with their and Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s project. The plans for the shopping mall were drawn up by the UDA and according to their ideas of what a shopping mall should constitute of.

The UDA's lack of experience in planning commercial centres and the fact that they did not want any help with it – as they were convinced of being perfectly capable of realising this dream themselves – point to a shortage of professionalism that can be an indication of the relative unimportance of whether or not the project is actually economically successful.

Arcade Independence Square, in many ways similar to other luxurious shopping malls around the globe, has an interesting concept regarding shop allocation. Most ground floor space is used up by restaurants, food stalls and bars, whereas the actual shops are located on the first floor. The argumentation goes that having the restaurants on the ground floor allows for outside seating but since most of them only fully open for dinner, the ground floor area looks dull during most of the day. Especially since they have milk glass that clouds the view on the interior, and the many windows – aimed at boosting window shopping – have the contrary effect of keeping people away as there is nothing to see.

The UDA's main concern was preserving the historical value of the building. Even though there are around 250 historic buildings in Colombo (Edirisinghe, 2014: 6386), only a handful receive this kind of special attention. Using the example of the Arcade, the “paradoxical roles of heritage” (Chu, 2015: 441) as a moral anchor for local identity and as a resource for generating income come to surface.

“Due to misuse and lack of maintenance and also haphazard development, this important part of the city lost its importance and grandeur. [...] Colombo is now a much cleaner, greener, safer and more people friendly city than it ever was”

– Ministry of Defence and Urban Development

The general importance and defined goal of heritage conservation is quoted whenever questions regarding the reconstruction of Arcade arise. It is used to justify why the shopping mall lacks key infrastructure facilities and always places the responsibility for mistakes in planning on other factors or institutions.⁷⁴

“Since the buildings are protected, we cannot do anything without the approval of the Department of Archaeology”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

The bidding document lists several bans with regard to constructions. Amongst other things, it states that ...

... masonry and concrete work is not allowed, neither internal nor external. (9.1.1)

... any type of structure shall not be constructed on landscape areas. (9.1.2)

... all allottees should obey the conservation requirements of the existing building and every construction should respond to the historical character of the building. (9.1.6)

... signage should be integrated to the building design and it should not visually obstruct or undermine the historic significance of the building. For signage prior approval of UDA shall be obtained. Signage could only be displayed at corridors. (9.1.8)

With so many limitations, the question regarding the main purpose of redecorating Arcade Independence Square comes to mind. As one person explained:

“The UDA wanted to preserve the historic value of the building and not add too much contemporary stuff. Initially they didn’t want to put up the signboards. We told them that if you wanted to promote this as a shopping mall, you need to be able to promote your shops”

– tenant E, 16 November 2015

Whereas this is certainly true, it is nonetheless interesting how many exceptions were made to this rule.⁷⁵ Arcade was Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s prestige project. As former Defence Secretary and highest in command at the UDA, he could allocate the necessary financial capital to make it truly spectacular. It was also his word that stood above all rules and regulations.

“Before the pond, we had decided to put a timber deck but the Secretary of Defence wanted to have a glass deck with a fish tank”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

One such exception regards the Arcade’s outside aquarium. Exceptionally expensive, prone to failure but certainly one of the main attractions, the large fish tank with 200 rare breed of fish, each having cost Rs. 65,000, was entirely his idea (see figure 18).⁷⁶ Even though getting a return on investment and turning Arcade into a profitable asset was of utmost importance, nothing could challenge the words and visions of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

Shop owners, however, seem to understand this approach and clearly also see the benefits in it.

“I understand that a lot was ordered by the former president’s brother and his word was final. So much power concentrated in one place was needed to do a thing like this [Arcade]”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

The implementation of such a big project in this short period of time would certainly not have been possible had it not been for the top-down approach typified by Gotabhaya Rajapaksa himself. Before the implementation, the building needed to be cleared and government institutions housed in the former asylum had to be moved. It remains questionable if a private sector company could have achieved a similar result in this time period, especially since workers from the public sector – usually very privileged and looked after – needed to move their workspaces.

The spectacular monument that Arcade is would not be complete if it were not for the ethno-nationalist undertone that the symbolism suggests. Lion statues are found everywhere in Sri Lanka and are carefully erected around each new development project that has come up over the past few years. Lions are supposed to symbolise strength and should represent the volition of the Sinhalese people. They appear as victory monuments guarding peace and prosperity that the Sinhalese people needed to work so hard for; an opinion that is not shared by neglected minorities but nevertheless efficiently broadcast by the pro-Sinhalese government. Unsurprisingly, there is also a massive statue of a lion family in the courtyard of Arcade.

“The lion statue was the idea of the Secretary of Defence. He wanted to have lions. The lion stands for the Sinhalese people”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

The lion statue is a people magnet and whoever has his photograph taken with it, from young children to elderly couples, feels national pride by posing in front of a symbol of Sri Lanka and its unity (see figure 19). In this regard, it is interesting how the government balances carefully between celebrating national pride, claiming Buddhist high ground, and re-enacting and celebrating colonial grandeur.

6.1.3 Build and they will come

The belief that anything is possible, from turning Colombo into another Singapore or making Arcade the trendiest shopping mall in Asia, accompanied the planning process all along. The UDA promised that Arcade was going to be very successful.⁷⁷

“The opportunity is amazing: it is the only colonial building in Asia turned into a shopping mall”

– tenant A, 9 November 2015

Future tenants were allured with big promises, letting them partake in a unique opportunity to change the face of the city and be part of its future from the very first moment.

“Dutch Hospital was the most successful project of the UDA and they thought whatever they did thereafter would be as successful. Arcade can become a destination on its own because of its sheer size, I thought”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

However, there is no certainty that constructing spectacles can leverage capital investments or bring about a change in consumer behaviour.⁷⁸ The plans for Arcade nevertheless went ahead. It was believed that as long as the basic preconditions are fulfilled, the rest – i.e. a better life for everyone through economic progress and material affluence – will follow automatically. In this regard, the preconditions were understood as a modern city infrastructure, liberal economic policies and a high quality of life through an attrac-

tive urban life for the new middle class. That is why there had been a lot of optimism when they had set off to literally build the future for Colombo and Sri Lanka, true to the motto that *if we build, they will come*.

6.2 Implementing the spectacle

Part two of my analysis will look at the politics of place making, the militarisation of urban development and how the government staged such development projects as *the* path to a prosperous future.

6.2.1 Politics of place making

The difference between how space is *conceived* by the planners and how it is *perceived* by the people who use it is very much apparent in the politics of place making. Whereas the planners saw an opportunity for economic development and a way to display the city as glamorous, vibrant, and both forward-looking and traditional, most people realised that it was nothing more than another prestige project and monument to a big figure.

The implementation of the redevelopment plans followed the same principles of top-down decision making as the planning process. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and the UDA, a very hierarchical organisation, dictated everything. From the special demands of the former Defence Secretary to the strict regulations regarding the use of the building, everything was dictated from above. Other parties, such as the tenants, were not involved in any way. They were given the information about the layout and the restrictions of the Arcade only with the bidding document, which also stated that ...

... a 25% service charge needed to be paid on top of the monthly rental for maintaining the common areas and the general upkeep of the building. (8.6)

... permanent constructions of any kind inside or outside would not be tolerated. (9.1.2)

... prior approval of the UDA must be obtained for any kind of construction or alteration within the given shop space. (9.1.3)

... the space will only be given to the successful bidders upon completion of the restoration works. (9.2.2)

... the locations of the washrooms demarcated in the plans could not be changed or redesigned. (9.1.14)

... approval of the UDA must be obtained even for the furniture used in the dining areas of restaurants. (9.1.4)

... and that no company or subsidiary thereof could be given more than one space, with shop leases given for a first period of ten years. (7.0)

What these examples show is that place making was very top-down, design-driven, one-dimensional and project-focused. Exactly the contrary of what the Project for Public Spaces (2015) lists as what this process should consist of, such as community-driven, context-specific and inclusive.

There exists an attitude that the government is the only player who is able to create and guide progress and development. Especially people inside the UDA had a lot of respect for the way things were done under Gotabhaya's rule.

“I guess if not, we could not have seen [...] the Arcade, Racecourse or for that matter the Water's Edge Diyatha Uyana [UDA-owned hotel], which to my mind is reflective of the performance-based internal culture that exists at the UDA. It must be also mentioned that it demonstrates the strong and purposeful leadership that the organisation is being driven with lately, not forgetting the talent that exists at the institution – be it the town planners, architects, quantity surveyors or the construction engineers”

– *Daily FT*, 12 August 2014

A lot of people at the UDA still speak very highly of the former way of “getting things done”.⁷⁹ That the former government could just “make people go there [Arcade]” as they controlled the media, advertising, tourist boards amongst other things, is seen as lacking nowadays by many employees.

Driving these development initiatives are a multitude of government ministries, divisions and bureaus. High levels of bureaucracy and an institutional maze make the whole project also more resistant to control and critique from outside. However, no one really is in charge and accountable for when things go wrong. There is the Ministry of Megapolis, the National Physical Planning Department, the Department of Urban Development, the Ministry of Housing and Construction, the National Housing Development Agency, amongst other ministries, departments and bureaus, which, as it eventually turns out, are all working on the same thing, that is drawing up plans for tomorrow's Colombo. Cloaking the mechanisms behind the spectacle, it all comes down the visual appearance and the self-praise that Debord (1994[1967]: #24) refers to.

6.2.2 Militarisation of urban development

The army's involvement in the refurbishment of Arcade as well as the militaristic behaviour illustrate a militarisation of urban development in Sri Lanka. During the Rajapaksa period, the UDA was brought under the purview of the Ministry of Defence, a move interpreted as an intention of limiting the exercise of democratic rights regarding development projects (Perera et al., 2014: 12).⁸⁰ With military spending having gone up even after the end of the war (Hyndman, 2015: 1), soldiers have become the new devel-

opment workers, “trusted as both economic engines and political protection” (ibid: 4). With no more war to fight, the number of soldiers nevertheless increased and using them for development projects accomplished multiple goals in one go. The government profited from cheap labour and special arrangements made the armed forces more effective as they could get everything implemented quickly. The armed forces were not only needed to secure newfound peace that the government always saw under serious threat from anti-government forces, but they were also seen as the only ones being able to finally bring prosperity to the country.

“We are truly proud of our heroic Armed Forces who not only freed us from terrorism but are now doing so much, apart from offering us security, to beautify earlier neglected lands and restoring old buildings to their former glory - we really owe them all a debt of gratitude.”⁸¹

– *Sunday Observer*, 30 March 2014

The work at Arcade was carried out by civil engineers of the Sri Lankan Navy. The close ties between the military and the regime, as well as the military hierarchy that allowed for quick, efficient and top-down decision making were reasons for why the military has been gradually involving itself in non-military activities after the war. Whereas this involvement was welcomed by many Sinhalese politicians and the media, stating that “[...] tri-forces have immensely contributed to the social development of the country”⁸², it was a burden for the tenants and hindered the development of Arcade as a shopping mall.

“During reconstruction it was a high-security zone because the president’s brother visited from time to time. We needed to get special permission every time we wanted to come and unloading was very difficult as well. [...] We could not enter the premises without prior permission, we could not park our cars inside. There was a lot of arguing”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

However, tenants also acknowledged certain benefits of having the armed forces take care of a project of this size.

“Especially with the Dutch Hospital [the first colonial building turned shopping mall, see also chapter 7.2.1], which was occupied by the army, you needed the head of the armed forces [referring to Gotabhaya Rajapaksa] telling them: “Listen, we need this for tourism. Get out!” If a civilian tourist minister had said that we needed this for tourism, they [armed forces] would never have left.”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

Security and development have become inseparable in post-war urban development in Sri Lanka and the top-down, militaristic and performance-driven way of doing things illustrates the significance that was placed on implementing development projects aimed at making Colombo a spectacular city without delay.

6.2.3 The staging of development

The developers of Arcade did not refrain from making sublime promises about the expected success of the development and forecasting a bright future. For their effectiveness and volition with regard to implementing the project, they were every so often praised in the media.

“It’s the dawn of a new era of transformation, as the capital city of Colombo develops to become the wonder city of Asia. Today, as Arcade Independence Square is unveiled, an iconic landmark is added to Sri Lanka’s spectacular landscape. We proudly welcome this phenomenon as a new beginning. A beacon of hope for new Sri Lanka”

– *Arcade Independence Square official website*, as of July 2014⁸³

The powerful words that call Arcade a “dawn of a new era” and “an iconic landmark” to the city’s “spectacular landscape” really speak for themselves. It is not only hailed as the kind of spectacular development it is from an architectural, historical or economic perspective, but also even called a “beacon of hope” for the country.

“The inspiration for these iconic creations stemmed from the desire to create “Expressions of Freedom”, which would present a tangible real-life experience to the multitude of people residing and visiting the capital city of Colombo. Spreading out from the capital, this philosophy of modern city planning and development will embrace the entirety of Sri Lanka, transforming a once ‘island nation’ into one of the most pulsating and dynamic countries in Asia”

– *Arcade Independence Square official website*, as of July 2014

Expressions like “beacon of hope” and “expressions of freedom” indicate a political undertone to the statement. It is a reference to the events of the historical past, a statement to their voting public saying that the government would have liked to let its people have this kind of luxury before, had it not been for anti-government forces who were trying to stop others from enjoying this kind of life.

Acclamation for the government’s commitment to making Colombo a great city comes from the government as well as the media.

“The restoration and rejuvenation of this historic building is a testament to the Government’s commitment to creating more spaces for the public to use and enjoy. Similar rejuvenation projects such as the Dutch Hospital, Racecourse Complex and former Auditor General’s Building in Colombo have seen these historic sites transform to some of the most popular public spaces in the country”

– Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Galle Dutch Hospital official website

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa celebrates his developments, which really are “tangible real-life experience[s]”⁸⁴ and the media follows suit.

“The newly opened Arcade Independence Square is in one word – beautiful. [...] There’s a certain lavishness in the green lawns against the white buildings, and flowers are plentiful with the occasional tree here and there. One centre of attraction is a huge sculpture of lions resting, three handsome maned ones and two lionesses basking in the sunshine. The other is a large pond scattered with fish, with a fountain peeking out at one end. It’s covered in a transparent walkway that is suspended over the water and makes for a delightful stroll. The outdoor seating area is perfect, partly in the shade and partly shining in the glorious sun. The seating area is perfect too, very old-fashioned white garden chairs on one patio and modern seats near the food court. It’s easy to see that this will become a thriving, vibrant spot in Colombo, similarly to how well Racecourse has done.”

– *Daily Mirror*, 21 July 2014

Whereas some articles focus on the architectural features and the elaborate landscaping, others laud the people behind the project for making it look simply spectacular.

“It’s no wonder that vehicles passing by slow their pace to take a better look at the Independence Arcade. Restored to perfection, the complex commands attention, the dapper white wash elevating the colonial architecture to a heightened elegance. [...] Over a period of two years, Army and Navy personnel brought the overwhelming task of the building’s restoration to a successful completion”

– *Explore Sri Lanka*, August 2014

In this regard, credit frequently also goes to the armed forces for their efforts. This connects back to the top-down approach to place making and the militarisation of urban development and the conviction that only the government, together with the armed forces, can successfully guide development and progress.

“With the construction, management and maintenance in the capable hands of the Army and Navy, the complex has flourished to become a spectacular landmark in the city”

– *Sri Lankan Airlines Magazine*, August 2014

Consequently, it is no surprise that everyone thought that the newly opened Arcade would soon become a hit. The spectacle was advertised in such a way that most shop owners just could not resist this opportunity of being part of something visionary with this kind of dimension.

“Everyone came because we all thought it was going to be a good shopping mall. UDA promised us that this would be a hit”

– tenant D, 12 November 2015

6.3 Living the spectacle

Studying how the spectacle is lived through everyday practices is the objective of the third part of the analysis. With the spectacle having been planned and built, this part is concerned with how various groups, from the tenants to the local visitors, use this space. This analysis holds that for the government, it is all about the visual appearance, as they only worry about the look of the building. While the Arcade was advertised as a public space, as mentioned before, the space is highly exclusive with the visitors not representing the diverse scope of the local population.⁸⁵ The strict enforcement of rules and an enactment of accepted behaviour further reinforce this aspect, as the government is secretly trying to discipline its people. Clearly, the spectacle is a tool for politics and the indifference to problems and issues – whereof there are many – on the part of the new government affirms that there are political power struggles held at the expenses of the people.

6.3.1 The importance of the visual appearance

How the building looks day and night is of utmost importance to the UDA as mall managers. The shopping mall itself, catering almost exclusively to middle- and upper-class customers, is located along one of the main road arteries in and out of Colombo and being passed daily by many people living in the suburban areas of the city on their way to and from work. A clean and beautiful Colombo, administered by the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development and the UDA, was something they enjoyed (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015: 8).⁸⁶ In more and more cities, mechanisms of staging and consumption are showing up (Schmid, 2009: 1).⁸⁷

Regarding ornamentation, the UDA will not back down from their position that the decorative features, whose costs have to be borne by the tenants, are not up for debate.

“We have used a lot of outdoor lighting. Without it, the building would not look nice. That is why the electricity bill [to be fully covered by the tenants] is so high.”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

Nor will they consider reconstructing the courtyard and removing the enormously expensive fish tank that only causes trouble.⁸⁸

“I told the UDA to break the tank and they exclaimed dissatisfaction. But think of it, I told them, you are spending so much money that you are bleeding. Give us that space! Let us make it to a pizza.”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

The UDA take up a different stance on the topic of the fish tank though. They say that since they have spent so much money for building it, they do not see why they should now remove it again.

“It is one of the largest outdoor glass decks in the world. In my opinion, removing the fish tank from that area is not a solution. A lot of people are coming to see that. Especially small children enjoy watching the fish, above all at night when the aquarium is beautifully lit.”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

Obsessed with the visual appearance of Arcade it becomes apparent that the UDA are not mall managers. Even though tenants expressed their satisfaction with how splendid the building and its surroundings look like and that tourists have told them that they had never seen such a beautiful shopping mall before, many people still do not know what Arcade Independence Square is.

“People think Arcade Independence Square is a sight-seeing spot but it is a shopping mall.”

– tenant D, 12 November 2015

This is determined by the way the government has been advertising this place, as discussed before in chapters 6.1 and 6.2. Furthermore, the signage and maps posted by the managers are insufficient, outdated and perfectly well hidden behind window shutters and concrete posts. This also regards the official website, which has not been updated since 2014 and still lists shops that have already moved out or discount offers that have expired a long time ago. Many tenants and government representatives however have been saying that they have a general feeling of being five years ahead of time, linking back to the conception of if we build, the people will come sometime – albeit rather later than sooner.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of concept and common strategy on the tenant side as well. A lack of cooperation and the fact that the tenants, some of which are big competitors, do not stick together as a group when it comes to issues that they are facing all together weakens their bargaining power at the negotiation table with the UDA. Whereas each individual tenant is trying to make the best out of a situation defined by a management that cares mostly for the appearance of the mall and less for if it works as what many people would think it is supposed to be at its core, strategies diverge. There are those tenants who operate their small fashion stores as a hobby and do not need a specific amount of sales each month.⁸⁹ Then there are those tenants, mostly small- to medium-sized businesses, who cannot operate their stores at a loss. They are the ones who also complain the most but often without success, as the third group, which in fact only considers of a few tenants but they have by far rented the most shop space, does not care to support them. For a third group of tenants, representing big business conglomerates in Sri Lanka and acting as franchisers to many international brands, the economic viability of their stores, clearly limited due to the operator’s inexperience as mall managers and sole focus on visual appearance of the Arcade, is of second-

ary concern. They have the financial means to operate their businesses at Arcade as flagship stores and may not care so much about profits of their specific stores at Arcade. Most of them believe that seeing their brand being present at such a beautiful and well-known place like Arcade is as much about advertising and being in the minds of the people as being part of the economic progress of the country as it is about generating profit at Arcade in particular.

6.3.2 The question of public space: exclusivity vs. familiarisation of space

The Arcade is officially seen as a public space, even though it is not recognised as such by many people whose conception of what a public place constitutes of rather differs from the ideas of the government. The importance of public spaces for a city's liveability, as getaways from daily life and for creating a sense of community, civic identity and culture has been acknowledged by many scholars and organisations (Anam, 2014: 15; Petrescu, 2007; Project for Public Spaces, 2015). "A great public space", as Efrogmson and Fernando (2013: 8) write, "is one that attracts a wide range of people who engage in a large number of different activities". However, while the local government advertises its world-class facilities like Arcade as public places, they are designed to cater to a very specific class of people, built and designed for a new middle-class (A correspondent, 2013: 23; Fernandes, 2004: 2421–2422). This part of the beautification plan of Colombo, which sees the transformation of historic building into places for consumption, is influenced by the "growing commodification of previously non-commodified realms of social life" (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 184). The rise of the consumer society, along with the construction of shopping malls and theme parks, has changed the way people define and judge public space. Nowadays, public spaces are constantly evaluated among each other, because if there is one thing that the consumer and entertainment industry has taught the people, it is that they should expect to be entertained in desirable, stimulating, safe and vibrant environments such as shopping malls or theme parks (Light & Smith, 1998: 6). The debate about public space elucidates that the government's conception of public places differs very much from that of various scholars and organisations.⁹⁰

"The intention of the UDA was to create areas for the general public. As a public space, we want to get everybody to this location."

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

Arcade Independence Square nevertheless is a very exclusive space, surrounded by an invisible barrier that segregates people among class, income and lifestyle. Mostly well-to-do locals, Sri Lankan expats on holiday and foreign tourists, make up the scope of the visitors. The thesis that the UDA has built the food court especially for the low-income people – since they acknowledge that the prices in the restaurants are so high that a "normal person cannot dine in those places" – does not hold up against the everyday experience of the place.⁹¹

The question of whether or not the Arcade is public space is also reflected in the way the place is managed by the UDA, which clearly sees it as such. The tenants however, who nevertheless pay entirely for the upkeep of the building, see this in a different way.

“This is not a public space; we are paying rent and service charge to maintain this place and therefore it is not public”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

Since their main concern as business operators is making profit, they understandably do not so much care about if the Arcade is an inclusive and open space for everyone to enjoy.⁹²

“We want the spending crowd, not the tourists who come as backpackers. The UDA also needs to do something about the low-income people hanging around, only taking pictures. Security should be stricter. The car park is full, not with customers but with sightseeing people. The wash-rooms have also become public toilets, frequented by a lot of people who pass by on their way to and from work. They should give priority to our customers.”

– tenant A, 9 November 2015

However, as Goheen (1998: 493) states, “the meaning of public space cannot be read from plans or policies but only understood by paying attention to the contests over the use and enjoyment of these places”. The visitors’ opinions are split over the question of public place and allowed use of the space.

“We come to Independence Square quite often to enjoy nature and we usually visit Arcade too. Security needs to be there; otherwise this place won’t be safe to visit, especially for families.”

– visiting family, 29 October 2015

“Arcade looks very nice and I sometimes come here with my friends to hang out and take some pictures. The prices are very high though and we can’t afford to buy a lot. It seems like the shop owners don’t really care though. I think they some of them don’t like being so close to university and having all the students come. On one occasion, we also got chased away by security for taking pictures in the garden.”

– student, 9 November 2015

“Whenever I pass Arcade, it feels dead, deprived of activities and life. The government should rather have spent this money on improving Galle Face Green or other places. Normal people cannot go there; it is a waste of public money.”

– visitor/passersby, 19 November 2015

Some see it as an extension of the larger public recreation area around Independence Square and agree with different rules of behaviour and even welcome its policing through the presence of security guards. Others however are more sceptical, saying that there is no life in Arcade with unaffordable prices and aggressive security destroying all the fun. By referring to Galle Face Green or Mount Lavinia Beach, they state that one would not have had to spend that amount of money in order to create a welcome space for the public to enjoy and relax at. With regard to the familiarisation of space, as it has been indicated already, people use Arcade in a different way that it was imagined. Tenants complain of a lack of customers and that people mostly only come to have a look and take some pictures. The picture taking has also come to the minds of the UDA, which have now implemented a charge for the use of professional video and photo cameras, hoping to compensate their loss of income due to the precarious financial situation of many shops. To both the UDA and the tenants it is a vicious circle: fewer customers mean less income and the fact that some are even unable to pay the rent. In turn, a strict management in the UDA offices have already made their threats to unpaying parties come true and had cut water and electricity supply indefinitely unless the bills were paid. No electricity however forced the tenants to keep their businesses closed and meant that they could not easily earn what they owed.

Yet another distinctive feature of Arcade is how people's behaviour changes when they physically enter the premises. Even though the area is neither physically walled nor fenced, one becomes instantly aware psychologically of the moment one *enters* the place. By doing participant observation, I noticed for example that when a family strolls from the lawns of the park at Independence Square over to Arcade, the children who used to run around freely and chant just a minute ago are instantly being taken by hand and calmed down by their parents.⁹³ Even though this is just one example, the arcade is – in a lot of people's minds – as much a public place as a zoo is: you may go there and have a look, but it comes at a price. Then there is also this special aura surrounding Arcade that is reflected in the people's behaviour and is both passively and actively – if needed – policed by security guards that are on-site twenty-four hours a day.

6.3.3 Disciplining people

“Arcade Independence Square is a well-disciplined building.”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

The policing of rules and accepted behaviour at Arcade are indicative of the government's aspiration to bringing discipline to the people. This is reflected in the way people's behaviour instantly and quite unknowingly changes when they enter the grounds at Arcade, as discussed before.⁹⁴ But it is not only about the written and unwritten rules regarding keeping quiet, not stepping on the grass or not running around, but also about what people are allowed to consume in this exclusive place of consumption. Under the watchful eyes of the military, one is bound to enjoy the place the way the designers imagined it to be (Goddammune, 2014: 190).⁹⁵

With the use of redesigned spaces for the public, the government tries to dictate a certain way of life. One point of contention regards a ban on the sale of alcohol to customers sitting outside. Even though the bars and restaurants were specifically located on the ground floor in order to give them access to the large marbled courtyard, letting them serve guests outside if the weather permits, the gastronomic establishments must refrain from serving their guests alcoholic beverages.⁹⁶ The official statement holds that the sale of alcohol is forbidden in all public areas unless they are covered, meaning that people from the streets cannot see inside.⁹⁷ As it is impossible to see the area dedicated to bars and restaurants from the streets, the unofficial yet well-known argumentation differs from what the government says. The Sri Lankan government, made up in part by a large group of Sinhala-Buddhist hardliners and religious monks, does not want their people to drink since a good Buddhist should not drink.⁹⁸

“The UDA put restrictions on us: we cannot sell alcohol outside and we cannot have bands outside either. One Navy guy was saying there are lions [referring to the lion statue] in the courtyard and lions on our flag and you are disrespecting the Sri Lankan flag – stupid argument. Also that it is a public space and you cannot serve alcohol there. But I mean this is not a public space because we are paying rent and service charge to maintain this place. As a friend of mine told me last night: Arcade feels as if it was managed by security guards. There is too many of them and your encounters are way too frequent. There is always this stupid restrictive almost militaristic attitude towards Arcade.”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

This example shows that the government is aiming for a re-regulation of urban civil society. It is about social control (see Brenner & Theodore, 2002: 372) and clouding the attempts at dictating a way of life through advertising the spectacular Arcade as a new “expression of freedom” and “a beacon of hope for new Sri Lanka”.⁹⁹ The production of urban space “entails much more than just planning the material space of the city; it involves producing and reproducing all aspects of urban life” (Purcell, 2002: 102).

6.3.4 Securitisation, indifference and the spectacle as a tool for politics

From the securitisation of space to the government’s indifference to problems at Arcade and the feeling many stakeholders get that the UDA is no longer taking this project seriously illustrate how above all, the shopping mall has become a tool for politics.

Using fear as a tool, constantly reminding the people about the threat of the resurgence of anti-government forces, the government legitimises security measures that will guard this newfound prosperity (Chu & Sanyal, 2015: 6). In earlier times, many emperors and kings of modern states made use of spectacles as part of their rituals of governance and power (Kellner, 2003: 1). Administering the people the *spectacle drug* – referred to by Debord as the “permanent opium war” (1994[1967]: #44) – became a productive use for social control.

The management of Arcade lies with the UDA, which handed out the maintenance part to the Navy's civil engineers and hired security guards to patrol the area. All three aspects are points of contention. Tenants criticise the UDA for their inactivity and lack of concept regarding business management. Having the military roam around is starting to disturb more and more people. A lot of people also complain about the private security guards. The security company contracted with policing Arcade is called 'Rakna Arakshaka Lanka Ltd.' and is government-owned. The company, which has close ties to the former Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, is known for employing retired soldiers.¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹ This means that the same soldiers who used to fight in the war are now in charge of security at Arcade. It is no wonder some people feel a certain uneasiness and do not wish to be around soldiers who had been taught to suspect a whole ethnic category of trying to disrupt the state. Problems such as these have been mentioned repeatedly but hardly anything has changed since the opening in 2014.

By negating the truth about the financial state of the spectacle, by blaming the tenants for all problems and by not discussing even the most pressing issues, the government and the UDA show a certain indifference to how well (or how badly) Arcade Independence Square is performing. Even though the UDA officially states that they have improved the management of Arcade and collected over Rs. 1 million in profits per month, various sources told me that the Arcade is running at a loss of Rs. 3 million to 5 million per month.¹⁰² The UDA blame the shopkeepers, some of which are unable to pay their rents on time, for the situation they are in. The tenants, however, see the fault with the UDA and their ineffective management and the fact that they suspended many services that they are technically in charge of (e. g. advertisement). The project itself is never being questioned though, neither from the government nor from the shopkeeper's side.

“Definitely there are people in Sri Lanka who want to buy what we sell. We have some footfall but we can count the customers who actually do buy something with one hand.”

– tenant C, 11 November 2015

One big issue is that there is no real profit to be made at Arcade. Revenues have plummeted 70–90% since the beginning and there is no change in sight. Tenants see the problem lying with the people at the UDA, who simply are not mall managers.

“What I told the UDA was that you are charging us a rent that is reflective of a better service from you and your security guards to us and the people who should be coming here. If you do not permit us to make revenue here, this whole place is going to die. We could not put up posters or serve wine outside. The way this place was handled did not allow economic activity.”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

The high amount of monthly rental (including service charge and electricity) is an issue on which opinions differ.¹⁰³ The UDA holds that they included the base prices, the rental and the service charge to be paid in

the bidding document and when the tenants had signed, they had agreed to comply with these instructions and conditions.

“They had all the details before they purchased the shop. They even knew about the Rs. 6 million one time, non-refundable fee. They have seen the document; they have signed the document. Now they cannot blame us.”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

Whereas most of the tenants agree, they have expected a footfall ten times as high as it is today, exactly how it had been promised to them by the UDA in the first place. Since the UDA practically stopped advertising Arcade, it is another task the tenants now have to do on their own and they ask themselves why they are still paying a management fee.

“The UDA promised us that they do the marketing part and that they get the customers.”

– tenant A, 9 November 2015

There is still some kind of media presence for the Arcade yet mostly not because of an ad campaign from the UDA but because of negative advertising linked with gossip about the real cost of Arcade and that everyone practically knows how bad the businesses are doing. When the first shops had to close already not even a year after the inauguration, it also sent a signal to new investors and interested parties: think twice before you come to Arcade.

“All the media gossip and critical articles are affecting our businesses negatively. I even witnessed instances when customers came into the shop and said they had heard I was not doing very well because there are no people around and Arcade is mostly empty.”

– tenant D, 12 November 2015

Another issue regards the fact that still hardly any tourists come to Arcade and those who do only do so in order to take some pictures. There are three main reasons for this. First, with the UDA having stopped advertising Arcade as a shopping mall almost completely, most of the people do not know about it. Second, not even the hotel staff knows about Arcade and what it is. Having asked around at the city's five-star hotels, I was always guided to other places like ODEL, House of Fashions, Crescat Boulevard or Liberty Plaza. Third, Colombo still is not particularly interesting for them to see, at least not according to many tour operators who do not include it into their itineraries. What is true is that many tourist buses stop over at Independence Square to let their guests walk around the Independence memorial and take some pictures before they head off again.¹⁰⁴ One reason for why they do not stop at Arcade – apart from the practical challenge of organising a shopping tour with a mixed group of people – is that tour organisers often ask for a commission fee. The shop owners at Arcade are aware of that but cannot come to a common agreement if such a fee should be paid and by whom. Nevertheless, one company that runs the

Arcade's main competitor is paying commission to bring people to their mall rather than Arcade. Interestingly, this company also operates a couple of stores at Arcade and thus indirectly pays tour operators to keep customers away. Such actions once again put into question how much some parties really want this mall to succeed and be more than just an exquisite show room for their products.

In general, however, shop owners do not even stick together themselves in order to uplift the critical state of Arcade. Examples like the one above indicate that there is a lack of cooperation between the tenants. The monthly meetings are only being attended by a few. I was told that one Friday, only three out of fifteen or so were present to discuss plans about advertisement, events, the situation with the high rents and other questions regarding the future of the place.

“I am proactive and everyone else you have spoken to is no-active. That is “Welcome to Sri Lanka”. No one helps each other. If you complain you should come for a meeting, but they do not. The problem is that I am the only one who is being passionate here.”

– tenant F, 17 November 2015

The government on the other hand does not seem to be too much interested in the tenant's problems. All they care about is collecting the rents as they see themselves as victims, blamed by the shop owners for their unfavourable situation.

“The tenants do not pay their bills. That is the main problem. They say they do not have enough profit but earlier they used to pay. With the change of the government, they no longer pay up. They could leave their shops and go but they neither do that. Our problem is that we have to recover the money we have spent.”

– UDA architect, 30 November 2015

Whereas the previous government had sometimes turned a blind eye to the fact that because of the high rents, shops were not able to pay the full amount on time during so-called bad months¹⁰⁵, the tone of the management section at the UDA has changed now. This time around, the government is being serious about collecting rents.

“Currently, I am putting a lot of pressure on the shopkeepers. I tell them to pay up, otherwise we will come and seal your shop. I am serious, we have already cut the water and electricity supply to some who would not pay.”

– UDA project manager, 3 December 2015

Even though it seems unlikely that the government seals the shops of fallible tenants as they have a contract that gives them a ten-year deal on the shop – for which they nonetheless needed to pay an average base price of Rs. 4.7 million (approx. USD 35,000) that is non-refundable – instances of cutting water and

electricity to the shops did occur. One word describes this way of managing Arcade and the relationship to the tenants best: recklessness.

Arcade Independence Square has been used as a tool for politics by both the previous government, which had planned and implemented the project, and the current government that is now in charge of managing the mall. For the Rajapaksa government, it was one of the most important urban development projects and most certainly the figurehead of the capital's beautification scheme. They had spared no expense and its inauguration was celebrated accordingly.¹⁰⁶ That the former presidents still visits Arcade from time to time shows that Arcade is very much associated with the former government (see figure 20).

For the tenants, however, the association of Arcade with the former government has its drawbacks, as there is a general feeling that the (new) UDA is not being serious about this project anymore, reflected in the way things are being dealt with and an indifference to the problems that are around at Arcade as described above.

“I do not really know if the current government, as this [Arcade] was done by the previous one, is still being serious about this place. The UDA had promised us a lot but honestly, they are not doing their homework.”

– tenant E, 16 November 2015

“I believe if Gotabhaya was still in power today, he would have done a better job in managing and promoting this place because it is his *baby*.”

– tenant E, 16 November 2015

Many tenants share the opinion that the previous government would have done a better job, especially with the visionary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa in charge. One just cannot shake the feeling that the new government is deliberately letting the Arcade bleed, using it as an example to showcase what the previous government's excessive spending on urban beautification and spectacular architecture has led to. Some figures about the costs of Arcade were also publicised by government ministers during speeches in order to speak against the previous government's projects and initiatives.¹⁰⁷ It seems that the previous government's spectacle has become the new government's counter-spectacle.

Annotations (Chapter 6)

⁷⁰ Colombo - soon a world class city, *Sunday Observer*, 3 June 2012, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2012/06/03/fea10.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16); Colombo Building A World Class City, *Business Today*, July 2012, <<http://businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=7297>> (accessed 31/07/16); Full Text of the Speech delivered by Secretary Defence at Business Today Top 25

Companies Awards Ceremony on 20th November 2014 at the Hilton Hotel in Colombo, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 21 November 2014,

<http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Speech_for_Business_Today_Top_25_Companies_Awards_Ceremony_20141120> (accessed 31/07/16)

- ⁷¹ President opens Arcade Independence Square, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 14 July 2014, <<http://www.news.lk/news/politics/item/1679-president-opens-arcade-independence-square>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁷² President Opens “Arcade Independence Square”, *President’s Media Division*, 14 July 2014, <http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca201407/20140714president_opens_arcade.htm> (accessed 31/07/16); President opens Independence Arcade Square-video, *GoldFM News*, 14 July 2014, <<http://www.hirunews.lk/goldfmnews/87364/president-opens-independence-arcade-square-video>> (accessed 31/07/16); Ornament of the City, *Ceylon Today*, 20 July 2014, <<http://www.ceylontoday.lk/64-68611-news-detail-ornament-of-the-city.html>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁷³ Tenant hereafter refers to shop owners as well as restaurant owners of Arcade and their representatives (if shop is owned by a big company/conglomerate) respectively.
- ⁷⁴ See chapter 6.3.
- ⁷⁵ In the bidding document under point 9.2.1, the main purpose of renovating this building, namely that “the existing building will be conserved by the UDA to preserve its architectural character” is clearly stated.
- ⁷⁶ Apparently, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa had got himself a fish tank at home after his personal doctor had told him that having fish could ease off stress. Rumour has it that he had built a shark tank, with some leaked pictures on the internet confirming this, whose inhabitants were not only fed retail fish food. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa himself has been accused of pulling the strings behind some unsolved *white van abductions* of political opponents during the reign of his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa as president. See *Tamil Guardian*, 17 January 2015, <<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=13499>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁷⁷ The success of Singapore as a fishing village turned global city within half a century still haunts the Sri Lankan government, whose majority of members believe that had it not been for the war, Sri Lanka could have become what Singapore is today.

“If not for the drawbacks we experienced before 2009, the strategic location of Sri Lanka in general and the City of Colombo in particular, located in close proximity to vital international marine transportation routes, would have grown dramatically as the key commercial hub of Asia.”

– *Sunday Observer*, 15 June 2014

See Floating market adds charm to the city, *Sunday Observer* (reposted on the official website of the *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*), 15 June 2014,

<<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2014/06/15/fea08.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16) or

<http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Floating_market_adds_charm_to_the_city_20140615_02>

(accessed 31/07/16)

- ⁷⁸ Ong (2011a) shows how a billion dollar project that included constructing the Petronas Towers failed to convert Kuala Lumpur into an Asian Silicon Valley. With the advent of the Indian IT corridor, Malaysia also tried to grab a piece. This is another example for there being no certainty that if you build, they will come.
- ⁷⁹ A government minister spoke very highly of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s methods at a news conference quite recently. He said that the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa era was without argument the golden era of urban development and “a fact everyone accepts in unison”. (Daily Mirror, 16 May 2016, <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/109583/We-need-Gota-like-officials-Gammanpila#sthash.wF6HIT0m.dpuf>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁸⁰ The new government has reorganised the structure of the Ministry of Defence and the UDA has been moved to the newly established Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development.
- ⁸¹ Colombo and suburbs - transformation swift and awe-inspiring, *Sunday Observer*, 30 March 2014, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2014/03/30/fea01.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁸² We do whatever possible for National Development - Defence Secretary, *Department of Government Information*, 12 October 2014, <<http://www.news.lk/news/business/item/10232-we-do-whatever-possible-for-national-development-defence-secretary>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ⁸³ The Arcade’s website has not been updated since 2014. See also chapter for a closer account and discussion of the shopping mall’s webpage.
- ⁸⁴ See the official website of Arcade Independence Square at <<http://www.arcadeindependencesquare.com/about.php>> (accessed 31/07/16).
- ⁸⁵ See also chapter 3.3.2.

⁸⁶ This was back in 2014, when the UDA was part of the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. As stated previously, this has changed with the new government in 2015 and the UDA is now associated with the new founded Ministry of Western Region Development.

⁸⁷ Schmid (2009) and Haines (2011) look at how an economy of fascination and with a focus on place branding has created hopes and desire in Dubai, Las Vegas and Gurgaon, three cities that are organised around image building and worldwide media spectacles.

⁸⁸ Since the fish tank was Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's personal wish, it had to be built. But it has caused a lot of trouble so far, most of which are linked to the construction of the aquarium and whose costs once again are entirely covered by the tenants even though they have no participation in the decision making regarding what happens with the tank.

During a public discussion with the new chairman of the UDA, it was revealed that each fish of which there are 200 – special breed koi from Japan – cost Rs. 65'000. Since the fish tank, lying in the centre of the southern courtyard, is directly exposed to the sun, the water in it heats up quickly during a clear and sunny day as the glass creates a greenhouse effect, heating up the pool. This has two major consequences: first, the water gets too warm for the fish and second, condensation on the glass from within the tank clouds the view on the fish thus rendering its purpose useless. That is why the tank needs to be air-conditioned, further consuming a lot of energy. When the glass needed to be replaced last year because of manufacturing errors, it cost another Rs. 35 million.

⁸⁹ This is not to say that they are not interested in making a profit of course. It is simply the fact that some tenants are that well-off that they can operate their business solely as way of spending leisure time.

⁹⁰ One could hold on to the argumentation that the definition of a public space as defined by Western organisations as an inclusive, open, comfortable and sociable meeting place for a city's residents and others, which offers a range of activities and possibilities of enjoying the freedom that they are given (Project for Public Spaces, 2015) is Eurocentric. The Sri Lankan sense of publicness and the conception of what a (good) public place consists of may differ from what we think of in the Western world. This claim is quite far-reaching and difficult to counter. I nevertheless assume that the local culture has been in contact with the Western world for such a long time – nowadays even more so due to globalisation – that Colombo's many residents very much share the ideas of international organisations and think-tanks on what the characteristics of a (good) public place are. My experience from fieldwork further supports this thesis.

⁹¹ The food court consists of several stalls that offer reasonably priced food – mostly snacks and short-eats – to customers on-the-go. It is quite popular among the younger crowd – especially among stu-

dents from the nearby university – who come to have an ice-cream or some fruit juice. The prices are still above average and many people prefer to buy the same item in a local supermarket or from a street vendor for half the price but nevertheless consume it in the outside seating area of Arcade, where picknick is allowed.

- ⁹² One cannot blame them for thinking that way. Proposed, planned and marketed as a high-end shopping mall, it is quite straightforward that its tenants demand nothing more than what it is supposed to be from their point of view: an exclusive place for consumption because that is what they are selling, how they make money.
- ⁹³ I also heard from other people that friends of theirs had told them that they would like to go to the Arcade with their family and show their children the fish tank, which as they had heard must look beautiful, but they did not know if they had to pay an entrance fee and buy a ticket.
- ⁹⁴ See chapter 6.3.2.
- ⁹⁵ Similarly, as the Viharamahadevi Park was given an overhaul, playing cricket on the grass was no longer allowed since new jogging and cycling tracks around the park area were created and flying cricket balls might put the cyclists or joggers in danger.
- ⁹⁶ Live music is also not allowed outside unless a company rents the courtyard for an event for which special permission from the UDA is needed.
- ⁹⁷ These regulations come from the Department of Excise and apply to all areas of public importance in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, it is okay to serve alcohol at the Dutch Hospital because of its layout, as the main courtyard area is secluded from the streets surrounding it. Many families nevertheless stroll around the Dutch Hospital and it is not unusual to see parents enjoy a glass of wine or some beers when they eat out with their children.
- ⁹⁸ The fifth Buddhist precept revolves around refraining from drinking fermented and distilled intoxicants as that distorts one's mind and may lead to carelessness. Especially in Theravada Buddhism, the most dominant form of Buddhism in the south and south-east Asian region, this is more often than not interpreted as an advice to abstain completely from drinking alcohol. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism and Buddhist monks have a lot of influence with many of the latter sitting in parliament as well. There is a Ministry of Buddhasasana and a Department of Buddhist Affairs, whose vision it is "to create a society adhering to Buddhist principals". And the Department of Excise, collaborating with the Department of Buddhist Affairs, sees to the fact that no alcohol is sold on Buddhist holidays and its consumption is banned from public places completely.

See The Fifth Buddhist Precept, Barbara O'Brien, *about religion*,
<<http://buddhism.about.com/od/theprecepts/a/fifthprecept.htm>> (accessed 31/07/16).

For more information, also go to the official websites of...

- the Ministry of Buddhasasana at <<http://mbra.gov.lk/en/>>,
- the Department of Buddhist Affairs at
<<http://www.buddhistdept.gov.lk/web/index.php?lang=en>>, and
- the Department of Excise at <<http://www.excise.gov.lk/web/>> (all accessed on 31/07/16).

⁹⁹ See the official website of Arcade Independence Square at
<<http://www.arcadeindependencesquare.com/about.php>> (accessed 31/07/16).

¹⁰⁰ RALL is undertaking missions both in Sri Lanka as well as around the world. They have floating armories in pirate-infested waters around Somalia but also secure various government buildings in Sri Lanka.

¹⁰¹ People also refer to them as Gotabhaya's private army. See for example *LankaNews*, 5 August 2012, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20121208192152/http://www.lankaenews.com/English/news.php?id=13057>> (accessed 31/07/16).

¹⁰² This opinion is shared by the tenants and furthermore confirmed by my personal observations. In the light of the UDA's behaviour, it quite simply makes more sense.

¹⁰³ The monthly rental per square foot ranges from Rs. 150 to Rs. 220 and does not yet include 25% service charge plus electricity, which are to be paid extra. The average shop size (incl. restaurants) is 1,000 square feet, for which the total monthly bill to the UDA would amount to Rs. 285,000.

¹⁰⁴ What does happen quite often is that tour busses do stop at Arcade to let their people use the washrooms in the adjacent building since they are one of the only public washrooms in the city and are free of charge. A full coach with fifty or so tourists taking a quick stop at the public washrooms before heading off to the airport late at night is not a rare sight. The costs for the upkeep (cleaning, maintenance) is nevertheless fully paid for by the shopkeepers.

¹⁰⁵ The good months are often April and May, when the Sinhalese and Tamils celebrate New Year and people go on holiday, and the Christmas months November and December. The so-called bad months refer to when business is usually lowest, most often during the rainy season from September to December.

¹⁰⁶ The one-day opening ceremony is supposed to have cost the government Rs. 26 million as the country's most famous musicians and dance groups were booked for a spectacular celebration that was even broadcast live on television.

¹⁰⁷ For example the speech held by the Minister of Megapolis and Western Region Development Champika Ranawaka in commemoration of the World Habitat Day on October 5th 2015.

7. Colombo: a spectacular city?

Major global cities not only form the central nodes in the distributional network of information, goods and people, but they are also “the disseminators and mediators of cultural and economic globalisation” (Schmid, 2009: 1). This chapter draws together my findings from Arcade, after having introduced more post-war beautification projects in Colombo in order to situate the case study in a larger urban and political setting. By looking at the spectacles that are yet to come, this chapter ends on a high note, stating that even though the recent urban redevelopment agenda was shaped by and large by the Rajapaksa government, it is the new government that continues the ambition of becoming South Asia’s wonder city on a new scale with the biggest projects yet.

7.1 Spectacularising the urban landscape

“Thus, with three decades of war behind it and the country at peace, it is finally possible to realise Colombo's true potential.”¹⁰⁸

– *Business Today*, December 2012

It is not just the Arcade, which has changed Colombo’s cityscape. As part of the various urban development programmes that have been implemented since 2009, many initiatives have been taken to modernise and spectacularise the urban landscape. The underlying pattern is often very similar: desperate by the fact that there is not as much private investment as the government has hoped, it takes developing Colombo into a world city into its own hands, having to take up ever bigger loans from institutions (e. g. World Bank, Asian Development Bank) or from other nations (e. g. China, Japan). From foreign-financed theatres to luxury apartments by world-famous architects, Colombo wants it all and it wants it now (see figures 22 to 29).

“As Sri Lanka strives to become the Wonder of Asia, those in the corporate world have a special responsibility to help the nation achieve its economic potential.”¹⁰⁹

– Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, *Daily Mirror*, 21 November 2014

Most development initiatives are being taken and funded by the government. With the help of loans, the state finances beautification projects such as Arcade Independence Square, areas for leisure and entertainment like the refurbished Viharamahadevi Park or the Nelum Pokuna theatre, and upgrades to infrastructure around the city. Having recognised the potential for tourism in the country, the government also took the lead in making the necessary infrastructure available. They also invest in five-star hotels and luxury apartments, trying hard to attract more investors from the private sector.¹¹⁰ Despite the fact that some investors could be won, making Colombo a world-class city remains an affair of the state.¹¹¹

7.2 More of Colombo's beautification projects

In an attempt to lift the focus off the Arcade in some ways, I am shortly introducing four other beautification projects that stand out: The Old Dutch Hospital and the old Racecourse have both been turned into similar spaces for consumption to Arcade. The Floating Market and the Urban Wetland Park are the newest additions and the former in particular can be considered a failure.

7.2.1 The Old Dutch Hospital

The Old Dutch Hospital is one of the oldest buildings in Colombo, dating back to the early times of the Dutch period in the 17th century. The premises were used by the Sri Lankan Army during the war and the building had taken some serious damage during the Central Bank bombing in 1996 but was eventually refurbished and redeveloped under the Colombo city beautification plan. The restoration and transformation of the Dutch Hospital into a shopping complex was executed by the Sri Lankan Navy.

The Dutch Hospital was transformed into a hotspot for dining, entertainment and shopping and can be considered the UDA's first bigger urban development project. Compared to Arcade, it is nevertheless relatively small, housing six restaurants, three shops and a spa. Nonetheless, it has become popular among both locals and tourists because of its proximity to the financial district and to many of the city's five-star hotels. Because of its success, which is attributed to the vision and volition of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, many similar projects – such as Arcade Independence Square – were proposed and implemented thereafter.

“The renovation of the colonial hospice and its transformation to a tourist attraction was a brain-child of Secretary Defence who has taken the initiative to renovate and restore historically important colonial building of Colombo to their former glory. Within a short period of time the 'Dutch Hospital' has become a popular shopping and dining location among the tourists and locals alike.”¹¹²

– Statement by the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development

Compared to all the other state-run business enterprises under the beautification plan, the Dutch Hospital is certainly doing best in economic terms, mainly because of its location and the mixture of restaurants and shops.

7.2.2 Racecourse

The Colombo Racecourse, a former horse racing ground with a grandstand that now houses restaurants and shops, is another one of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's beautification projects. It had been built as a ground for horse racing during the British period at the end of the 19th century but was later used as a temporary airstrip during the Second World War. The building complex, which is located in close proximity to Arcade Independence Square, was redeveloped by members of the Sri Lankan Army to become the coun-

try's first International Rugby Union ground in 2012, before a substantial part of the main grandstand building was converted into a place for shopping and dining.¹¹³

Today, many shop owners are facing similar problems to the ones tenants face at Arcade. For one thing, there are groups that hold stakes in both Arcade and Racecourse. For another, the Racecourse attracts even fewer people in terms of shopping and dining than Arcade and is being frequented by tourists even less. As it was refurbished to be in line with Arcade design-wise, the large white grandstand building now stands like another *white elephant* in the concrete jungle of Colombo.¹¹⁴

7.2.3 Floating Market & Wetland Park

Inspired by the large and hugely popular floating market in Bangkok, the government set to recreate the model in Colombo in an attempt to further increase tourism and economic development. "Starting from the floating market in Thailand and then spanning now into Sri Lanka", the Ministry of Mass Media writes on its website, "the Pettah Development project is becoming a great eye-catcher for the tourism industry which is gradually expanding in the island".¹¹⁵ The multi-purpose complex, advertised as "a showpiece market in the heart of Colombo city[,] expected to attract local and foreign visitors", can house 100 stalls that float on several larger platforms on the Beira Lake.¹¹⁶ The project aimed at giving Pettah, the city's busy, loud and dirty district that is located close to the Fort area, a visual upgrade and provide street hawkers, who had to be moved for the construction of the project, a new place for pursuing their business.

The Floating Market, whose construction was also in the hands of the Sri Lankan Army and Navy, was declared open in 2014 and was advertised as "offer[ing] people a unique shopping and dining experience in a beautiful setting".¹¹⁷ It was welcomed as a "place for everyone", standing against the posh development projects like Arcade, Dutch Hospital or Racecourse, and it was lauded that Colombo finally had "a happening hangout space at such affordable prices".¹¹⁸

A more recent look at the Floating Market, which is supposed to have cost around Rs. 1 billion (approx. USD 7.4 million) according to the UDA Chairman Ranjith Fernando, shows that most of the nearly 100 stalls are closed and with no customers around, the market has become a place for illegal activities. The shop owners blame the UDA, whose representatives have let them down since the takeover of the new government in 2015; evidence of yet another spectacle of the previous government that is now employed as counter spectacle by those in charge. The problems surrounding the Floating Market are numerous.¹¹⁹ For one, the high monthly rents of up to Rs. 4,500 per shop are not only more than what most shopkeepers earn but also infinitely more than what they paid before, as most of them were resettled street hawkers who did not pay anything for the space they had occupied. There is the fact that shops cannot be locked at night, leaving the shopkeepers no other choice than packing up or sleeping inside their shops as their merchandise could be stolen otherwise. And then, there is the terrible smell of the algae-infested Beira

Lake, another problem that has arisen recently, as vendors claim that the previous government had dispatched Navy officials to check the water quality of the lake.¹²⁰ “The Floating Market as it is cannot be continued”, stated UDA Chairman Ranjith Fernando in an interview with a newspaper journalist.¹²¹

The recently finished Urban Wetland Park, situated in the outskirts of Colombo, is another beautification project and deserves to be mentioned specifically because of one distinct feature, a retired battle tank sitting in one corner of the park, which sums up one aspect of the government’s attitude to urban development (see figure 21). The former war machine constantly reminds the visitors that the peace and quiet they can now enjoy in the park was only made possible through a hard-fought victory in the war. The military is once again credited as the only agent capable of not only bringing peace but also prosperity to the country.¹²² It is for their “untiring effort and commitment in making Colombo a green, clean and people-friendly world-class city [that] has brought unimaginable changes” to the benefits of the nation and its citizens.¹²³ The Rs. 80 million park, whose five-acre area spans around one of the city’s main floodwater canals, now also offers the public a recreational zone with jogging tracks, a large garden and a floating restaurant, which are all provided by courtesy of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa and the armed forces.¹²⁴

7.3 Concluding remarks: Colombo’s spectacular post-war urban agenda

What all those projects have in common is an urge to stand out, to be spectacular. From the Dutch Hospital redevelopment project in 2011 to Arcade in 2014, the government has dedicated a lot of resources for turning Colombo into a spectacular city, constantly trying to outperform their previous projects in terms of size, glamour and the amount of money spent. The narrative has not changed over time and neither have the means of achieving the vision of a world-class Colombo city. The people in charge of urban development have a strong belief in the economic and social benefits that come with a redesigned and massively upgraded city. Whereas the government plans such projects according to their vision, the skill and muscle of the armed forces are the tools of achieving the goal of a wonder city of Asia.

The government has committed to developing Colombo into one of the top six destinations in the world to live in (Edirisinghe, 2014: 6390). In an inventory of world-cities, Colombo still ranks nearly lowest in the category of cities with minimal evidence of world city formation (Hall, 2006: 271). The government’s commitment to an urban development model characterised by speed and spectacle however is untiring. The revitalisation of heritage buildings into (semi-)public spaces for consumption is a key element in realising this vision of a world-class Colombo and serves as a tool for branding the city in “the arena of global competitiveness” (Edirisinghe, 2014: 6390).

The Arcade and other smaller projects (see chapter 7.2) are the materialisations of an urban development agenda that places attention-seeking visual spectacles above social justice. Colombo is not only a city in which more than half the population still lives in underserved settlements but also the capital of a country that still has not overcome the events of the historical past and the reasons that had led to them. The

post-war order in Sri Lanka is defined by unpredictability, uncertainty and a militarisation of development and governance (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015; Hyndman, 2015). Rather than de-escalation and a consolidation of inclusivity and democratisation in political practice, ethno-nationalist politics and stigmatisation of people with a social or ethnic status different to the Sinhala middle-class as dangerous and backward have reigned during the Rajapaksa period.

7.3.1 Lessons from Arcade: not the reverse spectacle

According to Debord (1994[1967]: #17), the advent of the society of the spectacle entailed a shift of social life from “having to appearing”. Regardless of the troubling socio-political and economic realities that lie behind the recent changes in Colombo’s infrastructure development (A correspondent, 2013: 22), the Arcade has to shine as an “expression of freedom” and “a beacon of hope for [a] new Sri Lanka”.¹²⁵ Neither Arcade, nor the other projects (see chapter 7.2) have lived up to their expectations.¹²⁶ The promises of a glamorous and thriving future for the Arcade could not be kept, dreams were shattered and hopes were disappointed. Today, the Arcade is running at a loss, all parties are unhappy yet nothing seems to change. There is no coordination on the tenant’s side, as opinions on what the Arcade should be differ. Different backgrounds and other affiliations of some of the shop owners inhibit cooperation and keep a mutual solution locked in a stalemate kind of situation. Not even the touristic potential could be exhausted. Tour operators sell pre-defined travel arrangements that include dinner at the hotels and occasionally a city roundtrip by coach, offloading their guests at a few spots like Independence Square or Town Hall so that some photographs can be taken. Not only is Colombo little more than a stopover on many pre-arranged tours, but also do tourists hardly care for consumer electronics, sports goods or branded apparel that they can acquire in their home country without having to travel to Sri Lanka. The reason for Arcade running at a loss not only lies with the predicted but unfulfilled number of tourist visits to the mall but also with the fact that the vast majority of the population cannot afford to consume there. In a country with a per capita income of USD 3,440, it is no surprise that only a few people can afford goods with prices that are on a European level.¹²⁷ On the other hand, the government shows little signs of wanting to change the overall discontent with the situation. If the Arcade fails alongside all the other projects that were implemented by the Rajapaksa-regime, it is a sign that the previous government had failed to live up to their promises and it can be used as a political statement to publicly break away from them. What remained relevant throughout this study was the question if the transition from having to appearing, as described before in chapter 2.2.2, can be reversed; meaning if appearing can lead to having? In the case of Arcade and the post-war urban development projects in Colombo that I referred to as *development as spectacle*, I have come to the conclusion that it cannot. In this regard, studies of urban development in Colombo and other cities are yet to show proof that this shift can be bilinear.

7.3.2 The dream of a spectacular urbanism

Dubai, Shanghai or Singapore as role models for Colombo's urban development vision exemplify not only the benefits but also the negative consequences of more economically oriented decision making, themed urban landscapes, the commodification of previously non-commodified areas of social life and a strategy of *build and they will come*. The government, however, is reluctant to acknowledge the unwanted costs, such as segregation, rapid financialisation of land and forced displacement (see A correspondent, 2013). In the eyes of many, Dubai has lost its appeal as a city with triumphal architecture and irresistible consumption made possible by massive loans, cheap imported labour and a disregard for human rights and ecological sustainability (Haines, 2011; Schmid, 2009; Smith, 2014). Nonetheless, cities such as Dubai, Shanghai or Singapore have a certain appeal to urban planners and politicians. People in the Sri Lankan government not only look up to the spectacular cityscape of Shanghai and Singapore, characterised by iconic architecture and skyscrapers as far as the eye can see, but also fancy the idea that since this remarkable success has in both cases been made possible by a single political party all along, it can be a desire for mimicry (Beng Huat, 2011; Fong, 2001; Shin, 2012).

The spectacle is a tool of pacification, depoliticisation and massification (Gotham & Krier, 2008: 157). In a sense, many people would say it is what the country needs after the events of the past. However, with the function of the spectacle working through distraction and seduction (*ibid*), it remains highly uncertain if this is the way to go.

7.3.3 The spectacles that are yet to come

Regardless of whether or not the recently opened urban rejuvenation projects like Arcade and others actually turn profitable or can be considered successful, the government's ambitious development agenda for Colombo and the country as a whole continues.¹²⁸ While there are dozens of projects from small in size to gargantuan being planned and implemented at the moment, three in particular deserve to be mentioned (see also figure 30 to 32).

The Lotus Tower will be Colombo's most iconic construction and the country's new landmark. When it opens as scheduled in October 2017, the broadcast tower, spiralling at 350 metres, will be South Asia's tallest building. It is conceptualised as the new city centre and is supposed to become the new hub of public transport, leisure and work. Apart from serving as the broadcast station for the national radio and television services, the building will host a huge shopping mall, a casino, a city hotel, a conference centre, a revolving restaurant high up overlooking Colombo, an Ayurvedic garden and an observation deck at 250 metres above ground level.¹²⁹ As the name suggests, the building's design is inspired by a lotus flower, which is a symbol for purity and spiritual awakening in Buddhism. So when the Lotus Tower, which is being funded and built by the Chinese, lights up Colombo's night sky with the proposed light show, it also spreads the image of a Sinhala-Buddhist nation across South Asia and the globe. This Sri Lanka is not (yet)

a united nation and the non-Buddhist society is often overlooked as a minority with regard to political decision making.

The Colombo Port City is a planned offshore city that is to be built on reclaimed land between the Colombo port and the Galle Face Green. The massive 223-hectare project was launched in 2014 and is another example of *development as spectacle*. The project, which was drawn up by the Rajapaksa and the Chinese governments, was halted back in 2015 after the change of government but is now to be continued.¹³⁰ The USD 1.5 billion investment has drawn many controversies when some details about the Sino-Sri Lankan agreement were leaked, such as the 20 hectares of land that are to be given to the Chinese on a freehold basis upon completion, the fact that the Port City was to become a no-fly zone and that Chinese naval ships and submarines could always dock at the harbour without prior approval of the Sri Lankan government.¹³¹ When finished, the new city will consist of apartment buildings, shopping malls, hotels, a 3.5 kilometre beach, and there are even plans for a Formula One racetrack.¹³² Initially conceptualised as a single yet colossal project, the Port City now has been integrated into the newest and biggest development concept thus far, the Western Region Megapolis (see Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development, 2016).

The Megapolis is the key to “virtually every national development goal”, from self-sufficiency in agricultural products to reducing unemployment and increasing exports.¹³³ The first ideas for a Colombo Megapolis, envisioning the whole Western Region as one large metropolis, dates back to 2004, when then-UNP leader (and now prime minister) Ranil Wickremesinghe presented the plans drawn up with the help of Singaporean firm to “make Colombo the best city in South Asia”.¹³⁴ The Megapolis plan envisages Colombo and the Western Province to grow from 5.8 million in 2015 to 8.4 million by 2030, with experts from Singapore having identified key aspects for development such as housing, transportation, social services and science and technology.¹³⁵

Due to the high costs of many projects that were implemented by the former government, projects such as Arcade have received a lot of criticism from the current government and the new Minister of Megapolis, Champika Ranawaka, amongst others.¹³⁶ According to him, the Megapolis project, however, is expected to cost around USD 300 billion, compared to around USD 6 million each for Arcade, Racecourse and Dutch Hospital.¹³⁷ While the real outcomes of such a gargantuan project are yet to be seen and more research in this area will be welcome and needed in the coming years, the project already shows two things. First, despite the promises of a change, the urban development agenda with the new government has only gone further into the direction of spectacular development as even bigger projects have been announced. Second, development in Sri Lanka remains strongly influenced by politics and the World Bank amongst others has no issues with financing it.¹³⁸ Similarly to Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, people call Champika Ranawaka a *control freak* with a fondness for mega-projects. It is reported that he had expressed concerns about the scope of his portfolio being restricted and his fears only wore off after having seen the true

scale and significance of the Megapolis project that stands way above anything that Gotabhaya Rajapaksa has ever done.¹³⁹ If this is not troubling enough yet, let us quickly recapitulate a statement by the Megapolis project manager Ajitha da Costa. Da Costa stated in an interview with a newspaper journalist about the costs of the proposed monorail system – regardless of its necessity – that loans for the project “will be provided at very concessionary rates by the Japanese with a repayment period of about 50 years, *which makes it almost free*”.¹⁴⁰ It is because of such developments that studying the political economy of urban development in Colombo remains interesting and relevant not only today, but also for the years to come. What cannot be shaken off is the notion that Colombo, like other cities following this kind of urban development model, is stuck in a „hypermarket of hope and desire“ (Haines, 2011: 178).

In order to complete the circuit and come back to the initial example of the world’s most luxurious hotel in Dubai (see chapter 1.1), the similarities between the two cityscapes – Colombo and Dubai – become ever more apparent. Projects like Arcade Independence Square were only the beginning. But according to some planners, not even the Lotus Tower, the Port City or the Megapolis project are marking the end. Colombo’s aspirations are higher. It does not only want to be *like* Dubai (or Singapore); it wants to *be* Dubai (or Singapore)¹⁴¹.

7.3.4 Conclusion and outlook

In conclusion, it is helpful to once more take a quick look at the research questions that have worked as the guidelines for this thesis (see chapter 1.4). Regarding the first question, the government’s approach to post-war urban development projects has been presented and likened to being driven by the idea of becoming a world-class city. Regardless of the different context, the amount of time and money and other prices that cities, such as Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai have had to pay, leading politicians, planners and economists believe a infrastructure-centred path to economic development to be the cure to a lot of social issues still present in the country. As to the second question regarding Arcade Independence Square, the empirical data gathered for and presented in this thesis suggests that the promises that had been made in conjunction with transforming the former colonial asylum into a high-end shopping mall could not be kept. By enabling a supply of luxurious commodities for which there was hardly any demand in the first place, the government’s strategy of *build and they will come* has not paid off. By looking at the whole process – from *planning* to *implementing* to *living* the Arcade (see chapters 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3) – the outcome, however, is less surprising and put into context. The Arcade is more than an unprofitable shopping mall; it is what Debord (1994[1967]) calls a “spectacle”, a tool for politics. Whether it is in the hands of the old government, trying to dictate and produce a new and de-politicised way of life guided by economic progress and increased consumption of commodities, or the new government, using the Arcade as a flagship to break with the former leaders’ initiatives, the newly decorated luxurious mall is a good example *development as spectacle*. This kind of urban development agenda is affirmed by the increasing number of other spectacles in the city, be it other high-end consumption areas, the highest tower in South Asia, or a complete new

district built on reclaimed land from the sea. What these examples from Colombo – with regard to the third question – show quite clearly is the shift from “having to appearing” (Debord, 1994[1967]: #17): *development as spectacle* is not as much about what the city *has* to offer as it is about what it *appears* to offer. As this study has shown on the basis of Arcade Independence Square, all this glitz and glamour is just the façade, quite expensively covering up larger and still unsolved issues in the Sri Lankan society.

This thesis has given a first introduction to the spectacularization of the capital’s cityscape. Only time and more research on these topics will tell where to and how far this *touch and see* development will actually lead Colombo and its idols. Interesting questions for future research projects revolve both around the changing political context and the dozens of new projects that are still to come over the next ten years. Future research may draw on the *development as spectacle* framework developed in this thesis and may be of both qualitative and quantitative nature. New studies of how these new development initiatives change the city and its people and in what way, as well as where the flow of money is coming from and what it is able to achieve statistically will deepen our understanding of spectacular urban development visions.

Annotations (Chapter 7)

¹⁰⁸ Colombo building a world-class city, *Business Today*, December 2012,

<<http://businesstoday.lk/article.php?article=7297>> (accessed 31/07/16)

¹⁰⁹ Gota urges pvt sector to take development initiatives in pursuit of ‘Wonder of Asia’, *Daily Mirror*, 21

November 2014, <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/57179/gota-urges-pvt-sector-to-take-development-initiatives-in-pursuit-of-wonder-of-asia>> (accessed 31/07/16)

¹¹⁰ The Hyatt Colombo, an investment of more than Rs. 20 billion, is an example of how the government – by means of a privately-owned but state-controlled company – tried to set a good example but failed. Crises of mismanagement, corruption and theft surround the five-star hotel, whose opening ceremony is being rescheduled repeatedly after it was supposed to have opened back in 2013.

See for example Int’l hotel brand Hyatt Regency enters Sri Lanka, *Daily News*, 20 July 2012,

<<http://www.dailymirror.lk/20456/intl-hotel-brand-hyatt-regency-enters-sri-lanka>> (accessed

31/07/16); Sri Lanka Hyatt Grand hotel project to raise US\$75mn from syndicated loan, *Economy Next*, 30 June 2015,

<[http://www.economynext.com/Sri_Lanka_Hyatt_Grand_hotel_project_to_raise_US\\$75mn_from_syndicated_loan-3-2227-7.html](http://www.economynext.com/Sri_Lanka_Hyatt_Grand_hotel_project_to_raise_US$75mn_from_syndicated_loan-3-2227-7.html)> (accessed 31/07/16)

¹¹¹ Three particular projects are worth mentioning. Two by Indian developers, which are the Krrish Square, a set of four multi-purpose skyscrapers that are up to 420 metres tall, and ITC Colombo One, a luxury hotel and residences. The third one is another luxury hotel by Chinese hotel company Shangri

La Hotels and Resorts. All three projects are located on prime real estate land within Colombo, which is still held by the government, but a 99-year lease has been given to the respective companies each time.

- ¹¹² 'Dutch Hospital' celebrates 1st anniversary, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Dutch_Hospital_celebrates_1st_anniversary_20121203_11> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹³ The Colombo Racecourse: A new beginning without horses, *Sri Lankan Airlines Magazine*, December 2012, <<http://www.serendib.btoptions.lk/article.php?issue=36&id=925#page>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹⁴ The term *white elephant* refers to “a possession that is useless or troublesome, especially one that is expensive to maintain or difficult to dispose of” and is derived from the story that “the kings of Siam gave such animals as a gift to courtiers they disliked, in order to ruin the recipient by the great expense incurred in maintaining the animal”. Source: *Oxford Dictionaries*, online at <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/white+elephant>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹⁵ Investment opportunities open for Pettah floating market...!, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 18 March 2014, <http://www.development.lk/news_details-7-1267.html> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹⁶ Bastian road project nearing completion, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 10 October 2013, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Bastian_Road_Project_nearing_completion_20131010_03> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹⁷ Floating Market declared open, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 26 August 2014, <http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Floating_Market_declared_open_20140825_03> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹⁸ Floating Market opens in Pettah, *Colombo City Guide*, 23 October 2014, <<http://www.colombocityguide.com/floating-market-opens-in-pettah/>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹¹⁹ The Floating Market has sunk, vendors and UDA agree, *Sunday Times*, 24 April 2016, <<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/160424/news/the-floating-market-has-sunk-vendors-and-uda-agree-190868.html>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹²⁰ Floating Market: the stink hole of Pettah, *Daily News*, 27 April 2016, <<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=2016/04/27/features/79918>> (accessed 31/07/16)

- ¹²¹ The Floating Market has sunk, vendors and UDA agree, *Sunday Times*, 24 April 2016, <<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/160424/news/the-floating-market-has-sunk-vendors-and-uda-agree-190868.html>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹²² The wetland wonder at Nuggedoda, *Sunday Observer*, 27 January 2013, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2013/01/27/spe01.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹²³ Thousands through the 'Wetland Park', *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 15 January 2013, <[http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Thousands through the Wetland Park 20130113 05](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Thousands+through+the+Wetland+Park+20130113+05)> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹²⁴ 'Urban Wetland Park' opened for public, *Ministry of Defence and Urban Development*, 13 January 2013, <[http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Urban Wetland Park opened for public 20130112 03](http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=Urban+Wetland+Park+opened+for+public+20130112+03)> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹²⁵ See the official website of Arcade Independence Square at <<http://www.arcadeindependencesquare.com/about.php>> (accessed 31/07/16).
- ¹²⁶ Except maybe for the Dutch Hospital, which can be considered a success in purely economic terms. Regarding exclusivity, securitisation, coordination and sustainable management, the Arcade's smaller brother is in no way different to the other projects.
- ¹²⁷ The World Bank data for 2014 shows that the per capita income in the European Union lies at USD 35'750, more than ten times higher. World Bank (2014): <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD/countries/LK-8S-XN-XT-EU?display=graph>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹²⁸ One has to be careful with putting successful on a level with profitable, insinuating that only if it is profitable can it be successful. For a public recreational space such as a park, this market logic does not lead very far, as it supplies many services like relaxation or recreation that cannot be measured in terms of money. In the complicated case of Arcade Independence Square, which most people and I would primarily call a shopping mall, an economic benefit-cost-analysis can very well determine its success; even though it is acknowledged that it also serves other purposes on which, as stated before, no monetary value can be placed upon.
- ¹²⁹ Express train from BIA to Colombo soon, *Department of Government Information*, 24 December 2012, <<http://www.news.lk/news/business/item/5298-express-train-from-bia-to-colombo-soon>> (accessed 31/07/16)

- ¹³⁰ Sri Lanka approves Chinese port project to avoid 'misunderstanding' with Beijing, *The Guardian*, 6 February 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/06/sri-lanka-approves-chinese-port-project-to-avoid-misunderstanding-with-beijing>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³¹ Colombo Port City Suspension Creates Uncertainty For Foreign Investors, *Sunday Leader*, 29 March 2015, <<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2015/03/29/colombo-port-city-suspension-creates-uncertainty-for-foreign-investors/>> (accessed 31/07/16); Port City agreement to be revised, *Daily News*, 6 November 2015, <<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=local/port-city-agreement-be-revised>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³² Formula One Track To Be Built On Planned 'New Port City' Colombo, *Sunday Leader*, 9 January 2011, <<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/01/09/formula-one-track-to-be-built-on-planned-%E2%80%98new-port-city%E2%80%99-colombo/>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³³ Mega questions over the Megapolis master plan, *Daily FT*, 28 January 2016, <<http://www.ft.lk/article/521518/Mega-questions-over-the-Megapolis-master-plan>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³⁴ UNP unveils megapolis plan for western region, *Sunday Times*, 18 September 2011, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110918/News/nws_19.html> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³⁵ Megapolis Plan for the Western Province, *Opportunity Sri Lanka*, 11 September 2015, <<http://opportunitiesrilanka.com/megapolis-plan-for-the-western-province/>> (accessed 31/07/16); Recreating the new urban complex, *Sunday Observer*, 29 November 2015, <<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2015/11/29/fea04.asp>> (accessed 31/07/16); Megapolis: What you need to know, *Daily FT*, 7 December 2015, <<http://www.ft.lk/article/504721/Megapolis--What-you-need-to-know>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³⁶ Public participation must in urban development: Patali, *Daily Mirror*, 19 October 2015, <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/91727/public-participation-must-in-urban-development-patali.html>> (accessed 31/07/16) and Ranawaka's speech on behalf of the World Habitat Day on 5 October 2015.
- ¹³⁷ In fact: Why India is excited about Sri Lanka's new Ministry of Megapolis, *The Indian Express*, 16 September 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/in-fact-why-india-is-excited-about-sri-lankas-new-ministry-of-megapolis/>> (accessed 31/07/16)
- ¹³⁸ Megapolis to transform Lanka's landscape by 2030, *Daily News*, 6 November 2015, <<http://www.dailynews.lk/?q=business/megapolis-transform-lanka-s-landscape-2030>> (accessed 31/07/16)
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¹³⁹ In fact: Why India is excited about Sri Lanka's new Ministry of Megapolis, *The Indian Express*, 16 September 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/in-fact-why-india-is-excited-about-sri-lankas-new-ministry-of-megapolis/>> (accessed 31/07/16)

¹⁴⁰ Visions for Colombo, *Daily FT*, 7 December 2015, <<http://www.ft.lk/article/504709/Visions-for-Colombo>> (accessed 31/07/16); my emphasis added

¹⁴¹ See also endnote .

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Annex I Tables

Table 2: List of shops at Arcade (excluding restaurants) (Source: UDA, own presentation)

Aashkii		Sri Lankan designer fashion
Aditi		Designer fashion
Apple / Harman Kardon		Consumer electronics
Azarya		High-end designer fashion
Charles & Keith		Branded apparel
Crocs		Branded apparel
Dilma Tea Boutique		Tea shop
Dockers	(Galleria)	Branded apparel
EMECC		Toy store
Empire Cinema		State of the art cinema
French Connection		Branded apparel
Glamorous Sri Lanka		Tea, gems & jewellery, handicrafts
Hira Gem & Jewellery		Gems & jewellery
International Watches	(Galleria)	Branded watches
Kookaburra		Sports brand specialised in cricket equipment
L'Avenue / Linen and I		High-end designer fashion
Levi's	(Galleria)	Branded apparel
LG / Philips		Consumer electronics
Mlesna Tea Boutique		Tea shop
Nike	(Galleria)	Branded apparel
Samsung		Consumer electronics
Stone 'n' String		Gems & jewellery
Titan Watches		Branded watches
Tommy Hilfiger		Branded apparel
V-Designs		High-end designer fashion
Wax Museum		Spa and beauty salon
Wickramarachchi Opticians		Optician

Notes: Galleria is a large store that offers a multiplicity of brands.

Closed shops are marked in grey.

Table 3: List of restaurants at Arcade

(Source: UDA, own presentation)

Asylum Restaurant & Bar		Gourmet restaurant
Burger King		Fast food joint
Dilma T-Lounge		Tea lounge
Elephant House	(Food court)	Ice cream stall
Kaema Sutra Restaurant		Gourmet restaurant
Krishna	(Food court)	Fast food joint
Lemongrass	(Food court)	Fast food joint
PaanPaan	(Food court)	Fast food joint
Sen-Saal	(Food court)	Fast food joint
Toby's Estate		Coffee bar
Tropical Juice Bar	(Food court)	Fast food joint
Tsukiji Uoichi		Gourmet restaurant

Notes: The food court is managed by the UDA.

Closed restaurants are marked in grey.

Annex II Maps



Figure 2: Political map of Sri Lanka

(Source: UN Cartographic Section, 2008; highlight added)

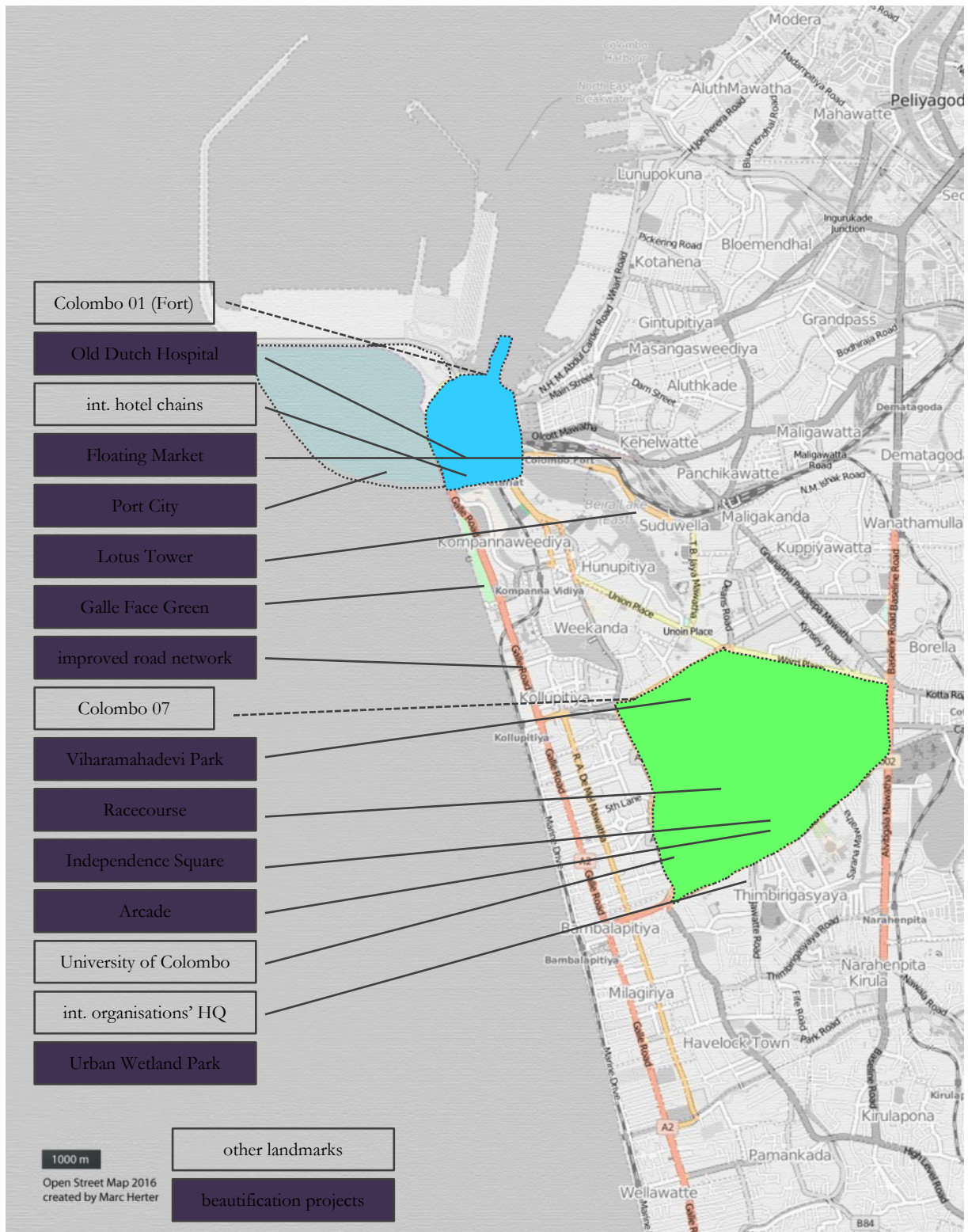


Figure 3: Map of Colombo's beautification projects

(Source: Open Street Map, own illustration)

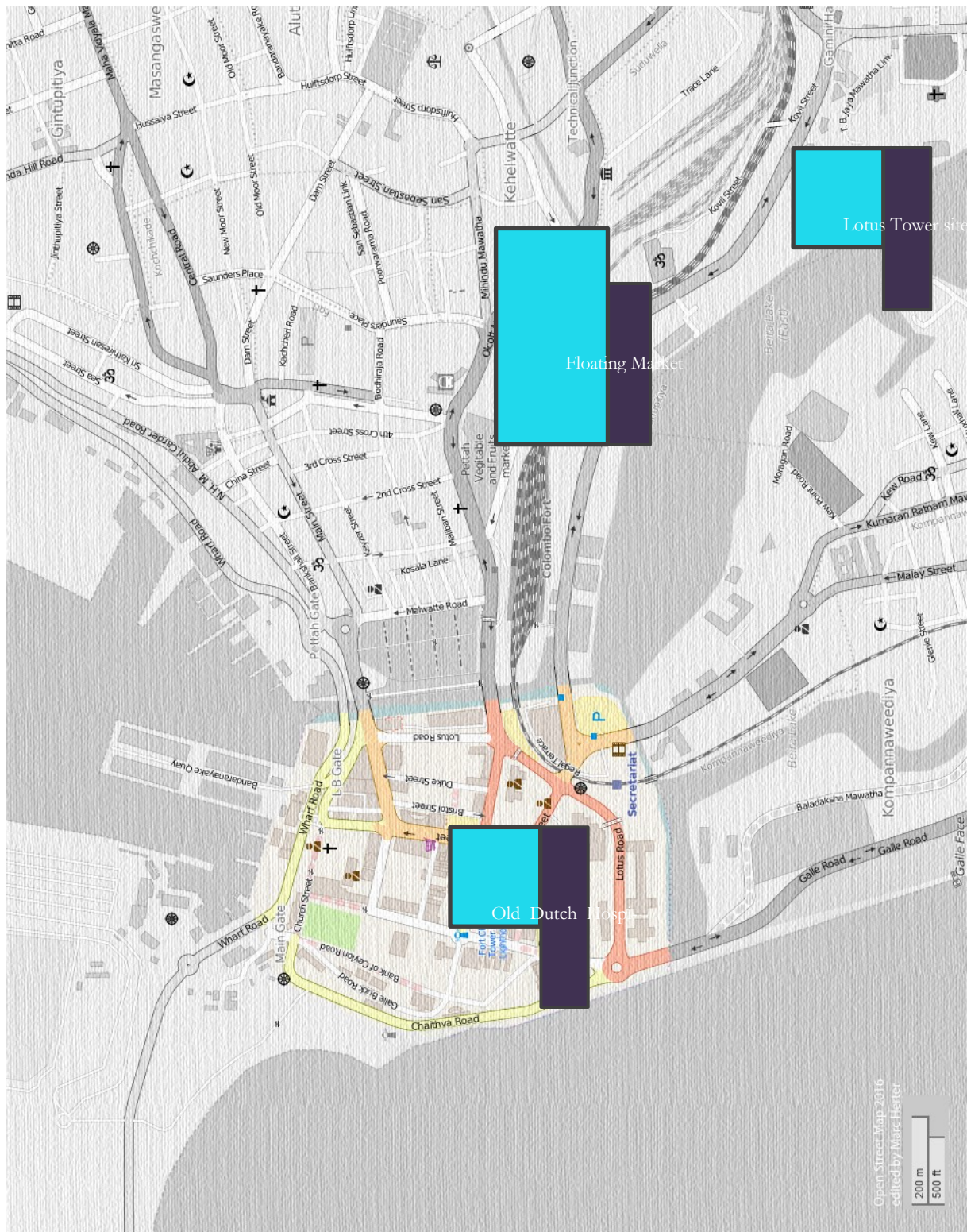


Figure 4: Map of Colombo 01 (Fort)

(Source: Open Street Map, own presentation)

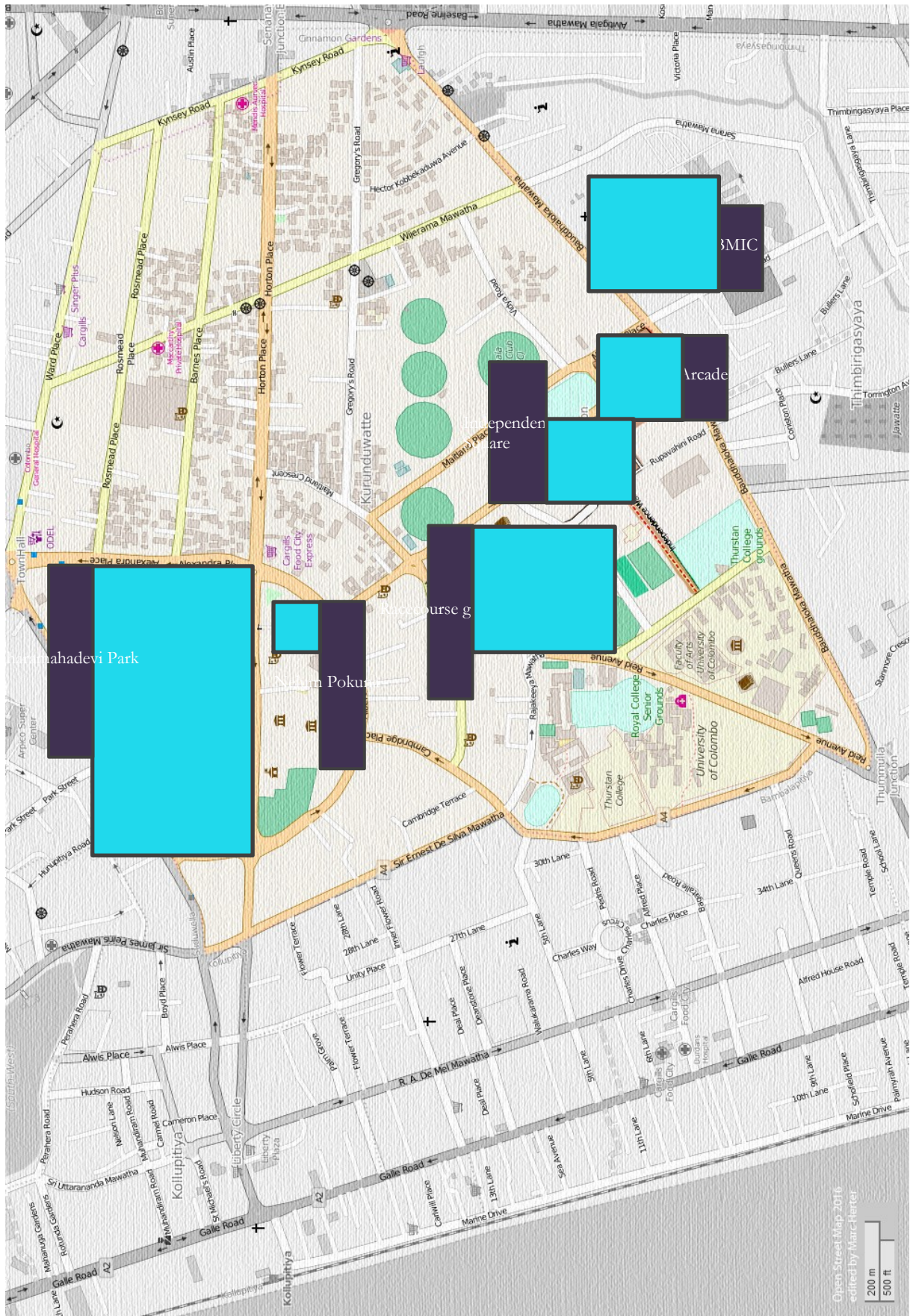


Figure 5: Map of Colombo 07 (Cinnamon Gardens)

(Source: Open Street Map, own presentation)

Annex III Tables



Figure 6: The building was overgrown before reconstruction (Source: UDA, 2014)



Figure 7: The outside courtyard before reconstruction (Source: UDA, 2014)



Figure 8: Auditor General's Department Building before reconstruction (Source: UDA, 2014)



Figure 9: The building complex was dilapidated (Source: UDA, 2014)



Figure 10: "The tree is holy so we left it" (UDA architect, 30 November 2015) (Source: UDA, 2014)



Figure 11: The tree is still there but the surroundings have changed (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 12: Arcade courtyard: deserted during the day because of the heat (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 13: Arcade's former WP Council building with clock tower (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 14: Upstairs hallway in Arcade: classic wooden decoration (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 15: View into the courtyard: open doors provide natural air conditioning (Source: author, 2015)

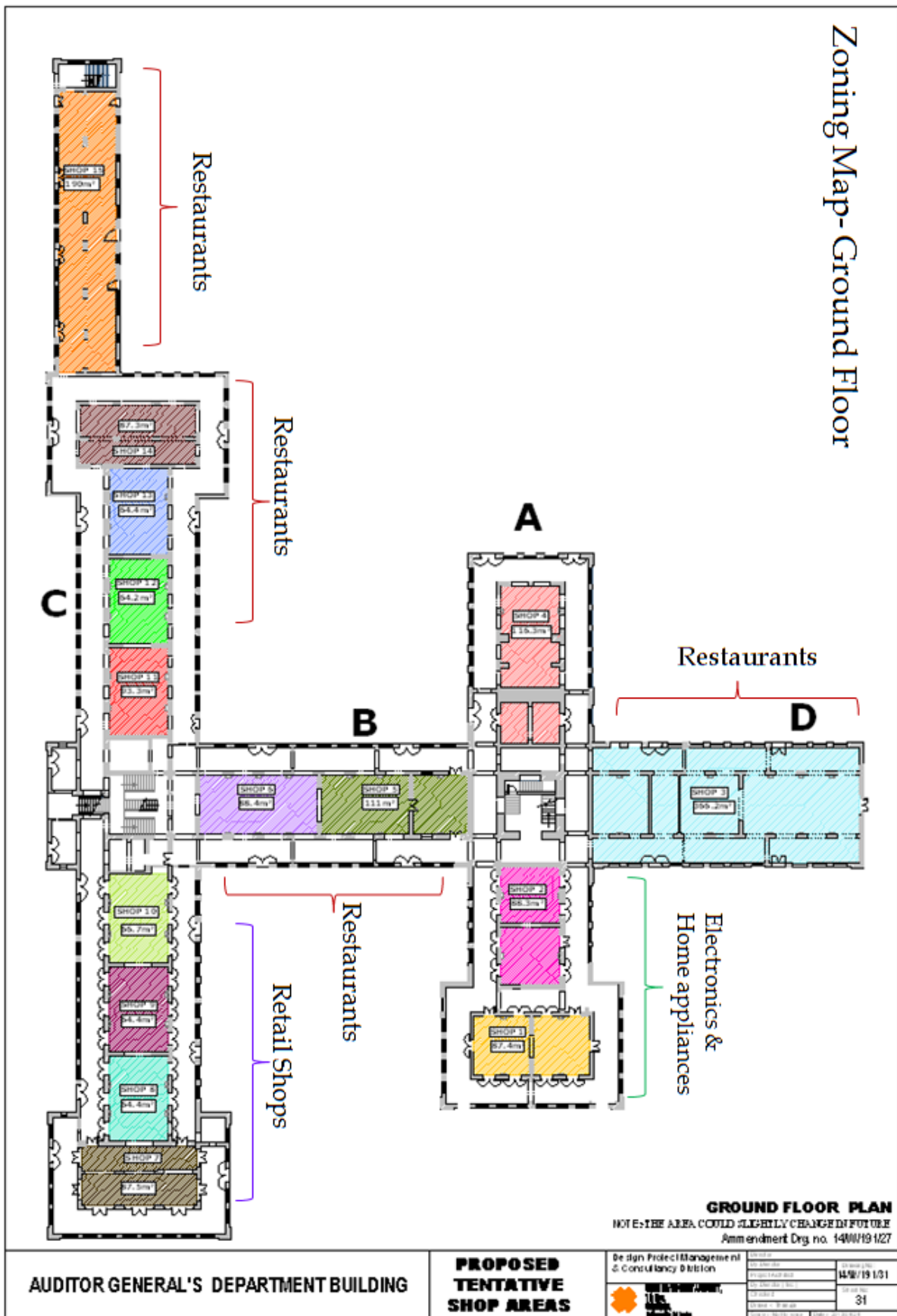


Figure 16: Arcade main building ground floor zoning map

(Source: UDA, 2014)

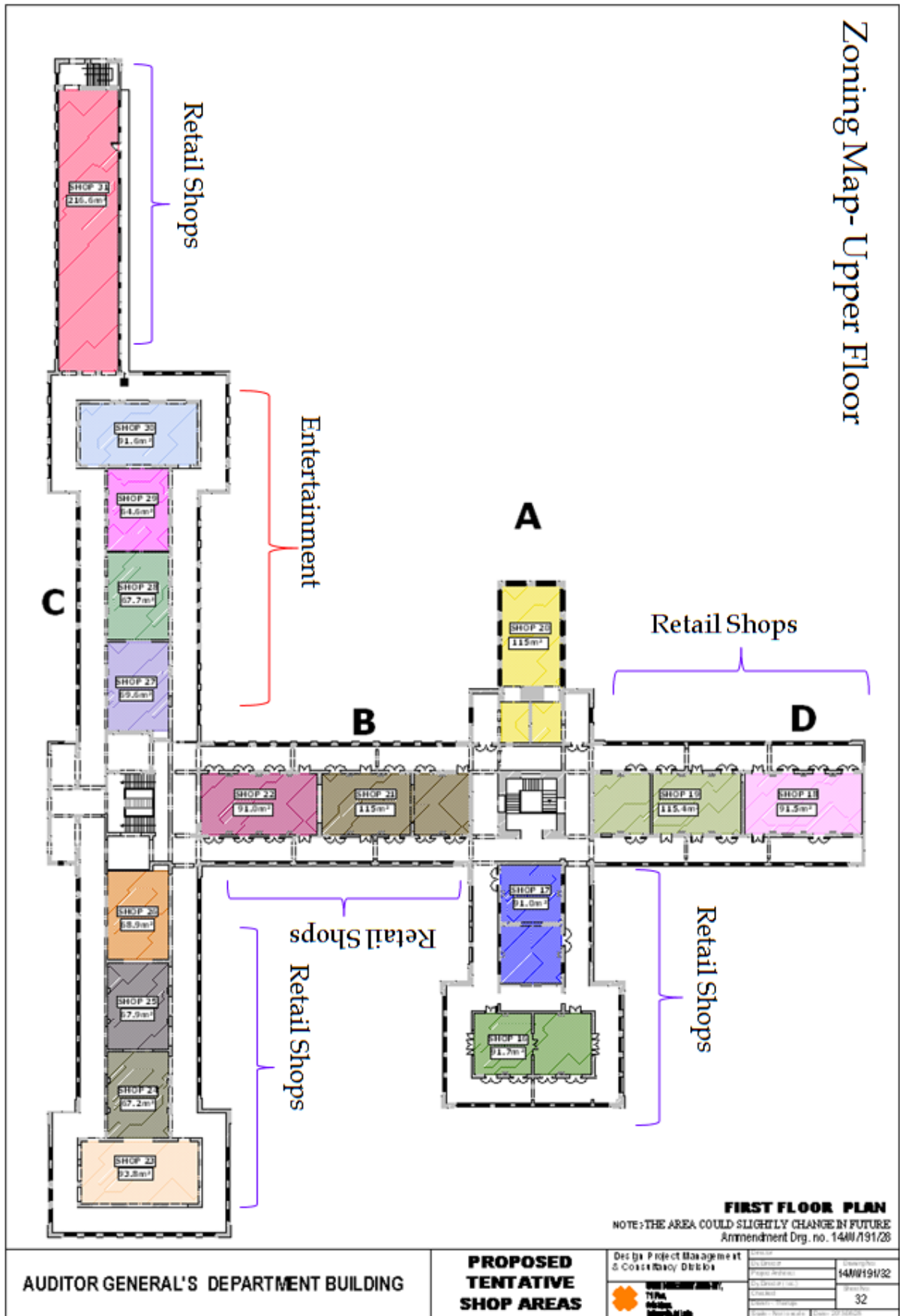




Figure 18: Visitors walk on the fish tank at Arcade (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 19: Lion statues are ubiquitous and an exquisite one is found at Arcade (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 20: Twitter post of former president (Source: Twitter, 2015, screenshot by author)



Figure 21: Battle tank at Urban Wetland Park (Source: Sri Lanka Visit Guide, 2015)



Figure 22: Old Dutch Hospital courtyard (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 23: Colombo Racecourse ground on game day (Source: author, 2015)



Figure 24: Floating Market
(Source: author, 2015)



Figure 25: Entrance to Arcade
(Source: author, 2015)



Figure 26: Viharamahadevi Park and Colombo Town Hall
(Source: author, 2015)

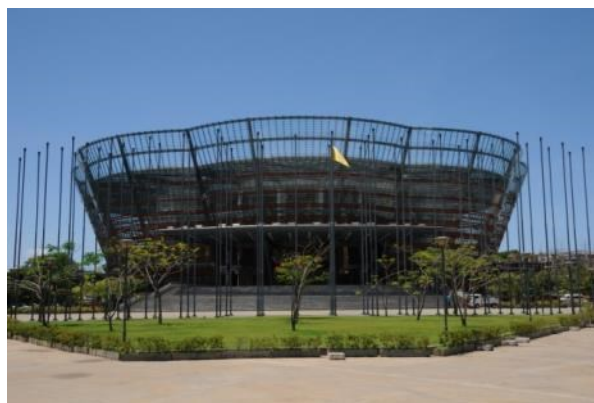


Figure 27: Nelum Pokuna Mahinda Rajapaksa Theatre
(Source: author, 2015)



Figure 28: Independence Square and memorial with Buddhist flag
(Source: author, 2015)



Figure 29: Bandanaraike Memorial and Conference Hall (BMICH)
(Source: eDirectory.lk, 2015)



Figure 30: Animation of Colombo Port City (Source: China Harbour Engineering Corporation, 2015)



Figure 31: Animation of Colombo Lotus Tower (Source: Athavaneng.com, 2015)



Figure 32: Visualisation of Colombo Megapolis 2030 (Source: MMWD, 2016)

Annex IV List of interviews

The following table lists the dates and designations of some of the interviews that took place between October and December 2015. Only formal interviews that are specifically mentioned in the thesis are listed.

Table 4: Interview reference list

22 October 2015	UDA chairman
06 November 2015	UDA project manager
09 November 2015	tenant A
10 November 2015	tenant B
11 November 2015	tenant C
11 November 2015	tour operator
12 November 2015	tenant D
16 November 2015	tenant E
17 November 2015	tenant F
30 November 2015	UDA architect
06 December 2015	UDA project manager
10 December 2015	Arcade staff

Annex V Personal declaration

I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is the result of my own, independent work. All external sources are explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

Marc Herter, __ / __ / 2016