Colonialism on Spatial Transformation: A Socio-Spatial Analysis of the Outdoor Transitional Spaces of Sri Lankan House [†]

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Abstract: Sri Lanka, under the British from the early 19th century to 1948, saw a rapid growth in urban areas and the emergence of metropolitan bourgeoisie. Increasing demand for housing was met through housing schemes and private houses on smaller plots. Previous colonials, the Portuguese and the Dutch, adapted and continued the traditional house forms where outdoor transitional spaces such as verandas and courtyards remained as an integral part responding to climate and socio-cultural needs. However, the British period saw the advent of two noteworthy types of housing—a smaller re-adapted traditional house and an imported version of an all-enclosed house. This study evaluates the shift in socio-spatial role of the outdoor transitional spaces of single-unit houses from pre-colonial time up to independence using graphical analysis of the plan form combined with interviews on use of space.

Keywords: colonialism; outdoor transitional spaces; socio-spatial analysis; Sri Lanka; urban house

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1. Introduction

Paul Oliver's extensive studies on vernacular architecture and Rapoport's research on environmental behaviour studies highlight that the social structure, traditions, and daily lives of a particular culture are represented in its arrangement of the domestic space, housing forms and settlement patterns [1–3]. This research takes it further by arguing that the above socio-cultural differences are embodied in outdoor transitional spaces of houses in countries and regions where they are widely used. In Sri Lankan pre-colonial house, outdoor transitional spaces such as verandas and courtyards played a major role in spatial organization (zoning), movement patterns, creating thresholds and as a space for living and social interaction [4,5]. This supported the premise brought forward by architectural historians that traditional Sri Lankan people lived around the house and not in the house (Nimal de Silva, personal interview, 18 January 2021).

2. Materials, Methods and Results

Urban areas started developing in Sri Lanka under the colonial rule starting from Portuguese in early 16th century. It was carried forward by the Dutch from the mid-17th century and a rapid growth was witnessed in urban areas under the British rule from early 19th century until 1948. The last period saw the emergence of a new social class, the metropolitan bourgeoisie. There was an increasing demand for housing for this group which was met through housing schemes and private houses on smaller plots. The preferred house type was single-unit and detached. Previous colonials, the Portuguese and the Dutch, adapted and continued the traditional house forms where outdoor transitional spaces remained as an integral part responding to climate and socio-cultural needs. The British period saw the advent of two noteworthy types of housing; a smaller re-adapted traditional house to fit on a reduced plot size and an imported version of a practical, all-enclosed house suitable for European living patterns called the PWD (Public Works

Department) house [6] (p. 122). This study evaluates the shift in socio-spatial role of the outdoor transitional spaces from pre-colonial to independence, through graphical analysis of the plan form combined with interviews on use of space. Space Syntax methods are used to generate J-Graphs to evaluate the spaces in terms of zoning, movement patterns, spatial hierarchy, connectivity, and topology of space [7,8].

Investigations revealed the following:

1. Outdoor transitional spaces played a major role as thresholds and contributed to spatial hierarchy and zoning in pre-colonial and colonial influenced traditional house forms.
2. Semi-outdoor living spaces are mostly on rings making people pass through them. They have high connectivity and are well used, generating social interaction within the house as well as with the neighbourhoods.
3. Imported house types did not have any liveable semi-outdoor spaces thus, offering new living patterns. Introduction of dead-end outdoor transitional spaces with no designated activity is also noted here.

3. Conclusions

It is true that the social structure changed with the emergence of new social groups affecting the living styles to a certain extent. The colonial presence influenced traditional house types so that they had layouts which reflected Western prototypes with the addition of semi-outdoor living spaces. Imported house types which became popular during British period with no semi-outdoor living areas did not provide the space to follow the existing socio-cultural norms of the country. The initial premise that Sri Lankan people live around the house is not represented there. Nevertheless, these colonial layouts were accepted and celebrated by the locals as popular urban typologies. The new social group subsequently adapted their living styles to suit the house rather than the house reflecting the living patterns. It became a symbol to identify with the Western-influenced group of bourgeoisies at that time. However, the question remains about the way forward for Sri Lankan urban house, and that will be explored through further research.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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