

Livable Cities Newsletter



August 2013 Issue 8

Focusing on public spaces in Sri Lanka

This newsletter is used to provide updates and information to the Livable Cities Network. The theme for this edition is public spaces in Sri Lanka and provides results from a recent study of an important community gathering place. Many thanks to Udan Fernando, one of the project's lead researchers and co-author of the research report, for the photos contained in this newsletter. Please share this newsletter with your partner groups and anyone who might be interested.

Why are public spaces so important?

As cities grow larger and people have less time and fewer opportunities to spend time outdoors with others, the importance of public spaces increases. Public spaces provide an opportunity for people to exercise, to socialize, to relax, and to enjoy themselves. They allow people to see and interact with their neighbours; that process helps to build a sense of community. Public spaces also provide important opportunities for small-scale vendors and shop owners to make a living; in turn, the items for sale can contribute to the space's liveliness.

Why study public spaces?

Not all public spaces are similarly popular or well-used. Some spaces are used by few people, or only by people with high incomes, or only for a few activities such as walking and sitting. A truly great public space attracts a broad diversity of users and uses: people of different ages and sexes with various levels of income, engaged together in a variety of activities including exercise, socializing, play, and buying/selling. It is impossible to say with accuracy which places are most successful, and why, without conducting research. Good quality research on public spaces can contribute to public discussion and policymaking on the need to maintain, improve, and expand public spaces within a city.



Research in Sri Lanka

The government in Sri Lanka has been creating new public spaces as part of its 'beautification' of Colombo. Unfortunately, these public spaces are often only accessible by car. They are often located in places where there are few residences and therefore people are unable to reach these spaces on foot. In addition, there has been a lot of focus on designing spaces that might appeal to tourists, which in turn has created over-designed spaces that do not encourage a diversity of users or uses.

HealthBridge supported research in Sri Lanka that examined one particularly popular pre-existing public space, the Mount Lavinia Beach. The beach serves many of the purposes of a city-wide park, and is a good example of a highly popular and well-used public space. The purpose of this study was to provide local data to the government illustrating what makes a public space good for locals and tourists. The study was intended to demonstrate the key elements needed to create an attractive and popular public space where social interactions and connections could occur. The study team wanted to provide recommendations to the government to show how public spaces could live up to their full potential.



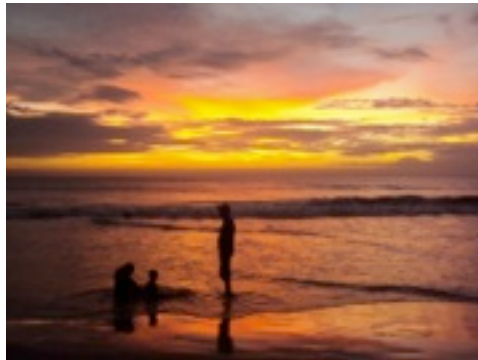
The study was conducted in collaboration with a local university, which provided an advisor and students who worked as research assistants. The study used four tools that were previously developed/adapted for use in Vietnam, Bangladesh, and India:

- ◆A *public space audit*, which looked at what amenities were available such as seating, shade, and public toilets, as well as other qualities of the space including sounds, smell, and accessibility.
- ◆An *activity audit*, which charted which activities occur, roughly how many people engage in them, and whether males and females of different age groups participate in those activities.
- ◆A *user survey*, which asked visitors to the beach about various aspects of their experience including how frequently they visit, how they arrive, why they go, what they do while there, whether they consider the beach safe, and what they would suggest to improve the beach.
- ◆An *in-depth interview guide*, which contained a number of questions to gain a deeper understanding of people's use of the public space.



Key Findings

- The beach is extremely popular among people of both sexes all ages. People engage in a wide diversity of activities. Although the middle of the day is the quietest time, the beach is never deserted, and, at peak times, it is highly used.
- Most visitors travelled from home to reach the beach.
- Walking is the main form of transport to the beach. Most daily users walk. Walking is less common among monthly users, who are more likely to arrive by bus. Few visitors arrive by car.
- The beach is important to people's quality of life. It is the only place to exercise for many visitors. It provides opportunities to socialize, relax, play, and make a living.
- Many improvements could increase the beach's usability. Visitors requested benches and seating, water taps, shelters, and public toilets. However, none of these desired amenities would change their uses of the beach. Users believed that it was important to retain the beach's essential character.



Recommendations

The research results clearly support the need to ensure that parks are within easy access of people's homes. Daily users almost always lived in close proximity to the beach. So, putting spaces on city outskirts far away from where people live, or locating them in parts of the city that are not easily accessible by walking, cycling, and public transit, will not give people the opportunity to visit regularly. Also, there are some key amenities that could improve the beach including:

- More lighting would make evening visits safer
- Emptying trash bins more regularly might help with cleanliness problems
- Additional lifeguards might improve safety
- Additional benches, shelter, taps and toilets at regular intervals would allow people to stay longer

Visitors to the beach also suggested providing opportunities for activities for a range of people such as seating and walking space for the elderly, playgrounds for children, and designated spaces for sports for young men. However, it is important to not over-ly-design a space. People should feel free to use it as they wish.

How the study will be used

The study results are already gaining media attention. Many people have expressed an interest in the findings. The research report was officially launched at the end of July. A second dissemination event is planned in the fall, after the Sinhala translation is prepared and printed. The authors plan to use the report to broaden discussion of public spaces in Sri Lanka and to inform policymaking. A presentation on the study will also be shown at Walk21 in Munich this fall.

The report, *Public Space and Quality of Life, A case study of Mount Lavinia Beach*, which contains the tools used for the research, is available on the HealthBridge website.

If you are interested in conducting similar research in your country, please contact Kristie Daniel, who will help you through the process.

Next issue...

In the next issue we will highlight NCD prevention strategies and share lessons learned from the tobacco control movement.

Interested in becoming a Livable Cities Network member?

To become part of the Livable Cities Network, e-mail Kristie Daniel, Program Director, Livable Cities at kdaniel@healthbridge.ca.



HealthBridge's Livable Cities program aims to improve health, gender equity, poverty reduction, and the environment in developing countries by focusing on how cities are planned, designed, built, and adapted.

HealthBridge's Livable Cities program works in partnership with local NGOs, academic institutions and governments in developing countries. We help local partners identify needs, develop and implement appropriate solutions, apply innovative and sustainable practices, and promote effective policies through research and action.

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