

# Can the Process of Redesigning the Built Environment Facilitate Reconciliation?

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## Abstract

*In post-conflict settings, 'reconciliation' is the catch-cry of social pressure groups, aggrieved victims and government institutions attempting to account for the past, acknowledge human suffering and transition from war to peace. At this critical juncture, can efforts to redesign the built environment contribute toward national reconciliation, and more specifically in the post-conflict context of Sri Lanka?*

*This paper presents a case study of urban development as a vehicle for reconciliation: specifically, the development of a new town plan for Mannar City in North-west Sri Lanka. The paper charts a journey of diaspora and in-country partners finding ways to meet the requirements of social and physical infrastructure for rebuilding after war and also for reconciliation outcomes. Commencing with identifying a community's priorities through an extensive visioning initiative, Mannarin Marumalarchi 2022 (the renaissance of Mannar), diaspora influence has facilitated three key agencies - Mannar Urban Council, Urban Development Authority and the National Physical Planning Department - to collaborate on preparing a people-centred town plan. This design process has presented opportunities for inclusion of marginalized groups, opening spaces for dialogue among perceived 'adversaries' and exploring the conditions necessary for a broad-based reconciliation.*

*Through this journey, many insights were gleaned about the key dimensions that undergird both social and physical infrastructure development. These include the benefits of ascribing special status to residents as the local experts, introducing them to fresh perspectives and good practice examples from elsewhere and encouraging a future orientation which in turn nurtures increased personal agency. The findings also highlight the crucial role of process as much as outcome that urban development can play in reconciling conflicted relations - with the diaspora, among diverse ethnic and religious groups, between different strata of government and also with those perceived as enemies of the state. Finally, the paper points to the effect that people-centred planning can have for both unique and positive urban and economic development as well as for the cause of national reconciliation.*

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, urban design, reconciliation, post-conflict, diaspora

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## Standpoint

As a child growing up in Kandy, Sri Lanka, in the 1960s, my experience was of a close-knit circle of family and friends inclusive of Tamil, Moor, Sinhalese, Burgher, Chinese, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. We visited one another's homes and places of worship, shared the same classrooms and playgrounds and delighted in such a richly hybrid environment. The spectre of political adversity on the horizon prompted my family to migrate to Australia. My first return trip to Sri Lanka was in 1983 where I witnessed the aftermath of what could only be described as the results of human depravity. I longed for the Sri Lanka of my childhood. Several decades later I find myself as a member of the Sri Lankan diaspora and also of a volunteer organisation, Diaspora Lanka, working in Mannar District in northern Sri Lanka. The mission of our organisation is to discover constructive rather than contentious roles for a newly unified diaspora in this post-conflict period of Sri Lanka's history. Our work has largely been based in Mannar, a district highly affected by the civil conflict and now recovering from large scale devastation both to human and built form. What follows is a snapshot of a small part of an unfolding story, of our attempts to connect with the land of our birth and seek avenues to embed reconciliation ideals into all our activities, particularly within the field of urban development.

## Introduction

Any war to peace transition is multifaceted, contextually distinct and shaped by the interplay of many factors including the circumstances in which the conflict began and ended. (Del Castillo, G., 2008) Ideally, this transition toward peace and ultimately reconciliation involves significant movement on various fronts, from violence to peace and improved security, from political exclusion to participatory systems of governance, from ethnic, religious or ideological dissent to national reconciliation and from an economy based on war priorities and damaged infrastructure to rebuilding and reconstruction especially of war-ravaged environs (Del Castillo, G., 2008:9).

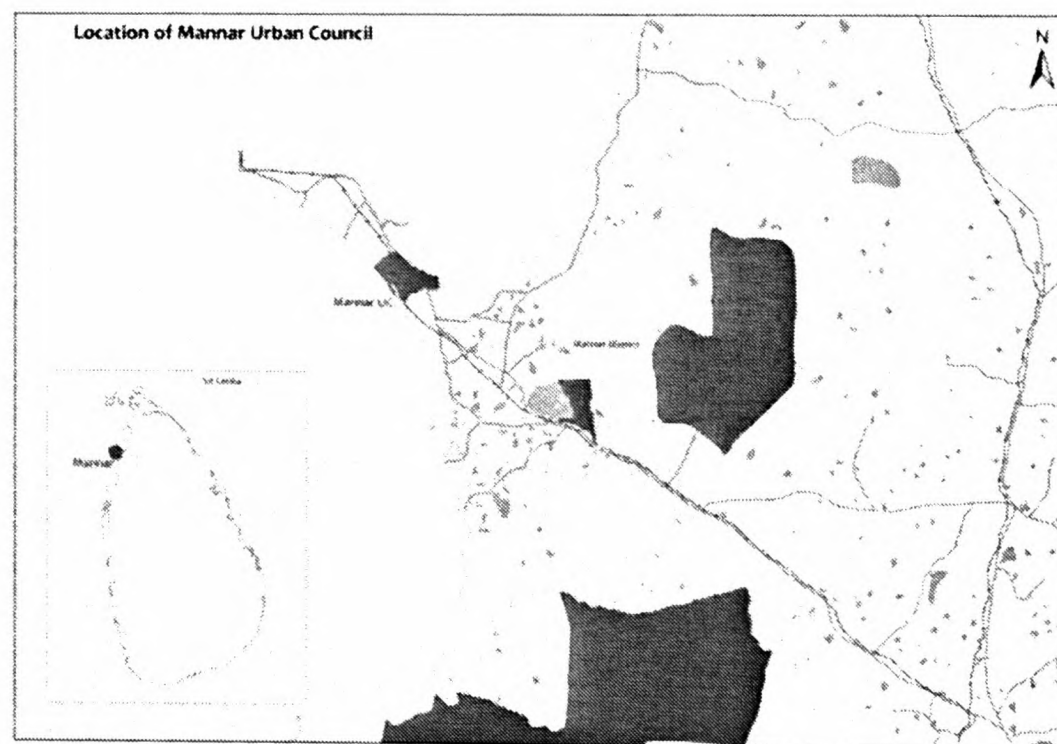
This paper seeks to examine a specific intervention in the city of Mannar in North-west Sri Lanka that attempts to shape its urban design in three ways, through - a) symbolizing renewed political goals of inclusiveness, b) diminishing wartime wounds and c) promising urban and human malleability that can potentially transform a city's built and human landscape in ways that facilitate reconciliatory ideals (Del Castillo, G., 2008:3). Through a case study of the implementation of a community visioning program, this paper will argue that efforts to redesign the built environment after conflict can advance reconciliation outcomes, and that this has created spaces for genuine dialogue and engagement at the intersection of multi-stakeholder and ethically and religiously contentious relationships. In addition, it is asserted that a seemingly unrelated act, like the process of urban design, can increase the agency of marginalized actors, the interaction of perceived 'adversaries', and the capacity for begrudging cooperation for the sake of a shared vision of the future.

As seen in jurisdictions as diverse as Belfast, Beirut and Jerusalem, socio-political conditions can have immense spatial, architectural and infrastructure implications in the form of clearly segregated areas, ghettos, dividing walls, restricted areas and street blockages. Authors like Brand (2009), del Castillo (2008) and Bollens (2009) concur that the 'material fabric of contested cities', therefore, is clearly socially shaped (Brand R., 2009:2). Attempts to capitalize on opportunities to influence people's social practices through physical settings are common in conflicted jurisdictions, stemming from a diverse range of actors for an equally diverse range of

reasons. This may include the military to better carry out surveillance, planners to rebuild damaged infrastructure or civil society organisations to create the conditions for civil repair. It is evident therefore that designers of urban centres can wield significant power to either ameliorate or (inadvertently) worsen the situation through intended (and unintended) consequences, particularly in post conflict environments. Not so evident, perhaps, is the impact that the built environment may exert on the psyche of survivors. This was brought into sharp relief by a comment made by a war affected young adult whom I interviewed in the Manthai West Division of Mannar. He stated:

I was badly affected by the war. I saw my young brother being killed.... We are surrounded by destruction – buildings scarred by bomb blasts, roads turned into rubble, churches and community centres destroyed. When they start to repair buildings and roads out there, I start to repair inside.

In order for urban precincts in such situations to have the best chances of nurturing dispositions of peace and reconciliation, firstly there must be acknowledgement that the built environment in a post-conflict environment “reflects and shapes the struggle over identity, memory, and belonging” (del Castillo, G., 2008:3). Secondly, it is necessary to garner a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political dynamics of the contested city, and thirdly that this be done through as broad a search as possible, cutting across factional limitations of all sorts; gender, ethnic, religious or ideological. Perhaps the most formidable challenge of post-conflict reconstruction is the reintegration of groups marginalized during years of conflict into the productive, civil and institutional life of the country. These groups include not only former combatants and war-disabled people, but often large numbers of returning refugees and internally displaced persons (del Castillo, G., 2008:3). This reintegration of marginalized groups can begin when spaces are unlocked that enable them to voice their concerns as well as their perspectives on how their place, imbued with identity, memory and sense of belonging, will be developed. But is there scope for such outcomes within existing government frameworks?



Map of Mannar Urban Council

To date, the Government of Sri Lanka’s economic recovery strategy, as a key plank of its reconciliation approach, has somehow failed to win ‘hearts and minds’ particularly of the Tamil population of this northern region. The Government’s emphasis on infrastructure development in the form of roads, rail networks, electricity, water supply, education and job stimulus programs was badly needed. However, critical elements like a military victory and the stark reality that the war claimed over two hundred thousand lives from all ethnic communities–

Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese, (Vimalarajah L., Cheran R., 2010:5) —must be factored into deliberations about social and physical rebuilding. Government displays of infrastructure development, of 'providing for', simply confirmed the 'victim' status of the aggrieved and compounded feelings that Tamil people were not only being left out of the development process, but more importantly, out of the creation of a new national imagination. In the Sri Lankan context where minority groups struggle to come to terms with identity, place and role in a recast political landscape, and regard this as a greater priority for government attention than infrastructure development, more informed conceptual frameworks around reconstruction are required. In order to ameliorate the chances of effective recovery and rebuilding, spaces must be identified to enhance multiple stakeholder engagement, spaces that are more impartial and less encumbered by the 'baggage of sectarian affiliation'. (Brand, R, 2009a)

The search for a suitable device to budge this stalemate, of government intentions and activity at odds with aggrieved parties' desires, culminated in choosing a simple community visioning initiative as the proposed intervention for Mannar City. This tool was chosen because it was often adopted by municipal councils in Australia at the commencement of an electoral cycle as a means of identifying a people's mandate for civic priorities. And Mannar Urban Council was indeed at this stage. It was also a means by which diverse interests and agendas could be negotiated, debated and refined through robust interaction at many levels. The proposal was first put to a focus group in Colombo, Sri Lanka, comprising professionals from diverse sectors and ethnicities, before being presented to government and community leaders in Mannar. The primary methods of inquiry were to be four village cluster meetings, a questionnaire of closed and open questions and a large interactive community forum. The initial aim was to understand and document the future aspirations of local people for their beloved city and ways this could be realized. Interpreters and translators were engaged as all proceedings were held in the Tamil language, native to this area. I also scoured published government plans and policy documents, local laws and regulations and incorporated them into the planning process.

### **Trial site of Mannar**

The Mannar urban precinct within the Mannar District in North-west Sri Lanka provided an ideal context for the intervention. The city was in the midst of a town planning process being conducted by the Urban Development Authority (UDA), which was also tasked with developing a further fifty. Mannar's strategic geographical location made it a significant player in Asian geopolitics, particularly in reference to the Indian subcontinent and China. In addition, Talaimannar in the western-most tip of the Mannar Island, only 30 kilometres from the Indian shores and as such the closest point to India, has become strategic in terms of trade, tourism and security arrangements between the two countries. This District is one of five in the Northern Province that was severely affected by the civil war which ended in 2009. In this post-conflict period, the Government's strategy, through its National Physical Planning Policy and National Physical Plan 2030, was to re-establish the North as a hub of thriving business and social activity as part of a national thrust to develop the entire country. Ironically, these government objectives would become the basis for providing hope of a prosperous future during the community visioning process.

Through involvement with Diaspora Lanka's work in Mannar, diaspora members negotiated a role in the urban development proceedings to advocate for a more consultative and future oriented town plan during our many fruitful and open discussions with the UDA. Over time, Diaspora Lanka had gained the support of senior members of the Planning Institute of Australia as our advisors who then introduced its members to a town planner from the National Physical

Planning Department (NPPD) in Colombo who has significantly helped with town planning advice as well as negotiating with government agencies. In the space of a year much had been achieved and learnt about linking town planning with social imperatives of reconciliation and increasing stakeholder agency. Diaspora Lanka's project of community rebuilding in Mannar was ambitious; to produce a people-centred plan with high levels of community participation, improve the planning credentials of the Mannar Urban Council (UC), create a future-oriented plan aligned with central government aspirations and finally to cultivate an approach to town planning that addressed political exclusion, various forms of dissent as well as damage to infrastructure. The ongoing challenge was to keep intact the connection between physical and social imperatives, of a plan for a built environment which was shaped by reconciliatory ideals.

### **Urban development and community visioning**

In November, 2011, Diaspora Lanka members approached the Chairman and Councillors of the Mannar Urban Council, together with other government officials, community leaders and local technical experts to offer the idea of undertaking a community visioning program. The selling pitch was that the process would identify residents' aspirations and development priorities for their city and also provide a mandate and direction for the work of the newly elected Council, the first in thirty years. Although clearly not *au fait* with the practice of community engagement, and after much discussion and debate, the UC reluctantly decided to give community visioning a go. The Mannarin Marumalarchi 2022 (Renaissance of Mannar) Community Visioning Program (MM22)<sup>39</sup> was conducted over a three-week period prior to the Christmas of 2011 and comprised of three research processes - village workshops and a large community forum for qualitative data and a questionnaire for a quantitative result.



Fig. 2: Village cluster workshop – small group exercise  
Source: author

The efficiency of the apparatus of government became obvious as it came into play. After the consent of the Government Agent of Mannar, the Divisional Secretary summonsed her Grama Niladharis, or village heads, to organise four 'village sector workshops', bringing together residents from villages in four distinct geographic locations of the city. All were well attended with a cross section of participants. Each focused on two primary questions. The first was, "What do you think will happen to Mannar in the next ten years?" and resulted in a spiral of negativity about the future. A litany of woes emerged, based both in reality and imagination, and concluded that the place would become an untidy 'messed up' town, with bad internal roads and poor electricity supplies, environmentally degraded, with out-dated public facilities

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<sup>39</sup> Liyanage, Jeremy (2012) Mannarin Marumalarchi 2022: The people's plan (unpublished)

and services, and few recreational facilities. It was suggested that natural disasters such as tsunamis, rising sea levels and floods would lead to their destruction.

The workshop facilitator was alarmed by the extent of the participants' negativity and boldly challenged them by asking why they chose to continue living in Mannar given their miserable future prospects. He openly provoked them to sell up and leave immediately if they were so convinced by their assessment. Some were shocked, others laughed while still others appeared to seriously ponder the challenge.

However, when the second question was asked, "What would you like Mannar to be in the next ten years?" it produced a remarkably different mindset. The answers both in pictorial and verbal forms were positive, strategic and forward-looking as they posed realistic solutions to the many setbacks they faced. In a short period of time they had moved from an ostensible victim mentality to what could best be described as an emerging sense of their own agency. There was a palpable feeling of confidence and being 'in control' of their future that was not apparent earlier. It demonstrated that even in the space of a few hours, future-based scenario making had sufficiently distanced them from the difficulties of the present and the traumas of the past, and signalling *future* as the one dimension that could nurture hope.



Fig. 3: Community forum – small groups setting priorities  
Source: author

Next, the Community Forum brought together a wide cross-section of Mannar residents in a constructive dialogue. Although there was much pressure from the Steering Committee to segregate the crowd into heads of departments and professionals and hold a separate meeting for the residents, it was finally decided to create a space for combined robust conversations among the different strata of Mannar society. Contrary to the expectations of the organisers that 'uneducated people' would not speak in the presence of the more senior and educated ones, in many groups these very people were the outspoken ones, even undertaking to be the spokespersons of their smaller groups in the combined plenary sessions. The Vicar general of the Mannar Catholic Diocese later commented,

This is the first time I have been at a gathering in Mannar at which there has been such a broad representation of people from different walks of life - rich and poor, Muslims and Catholics, educated and uneducated, women and men, the elite crowd from Sinnakada [elite residential area] and ordinary residents from rural areas.

The result of the community visioning activities was that a more impartial space had indeed been created by a diverse range of participants and based on the notion that they had a stake in a shared vision of a desirable future for their city, and along with that, a clear role in securing it. Spaces for such a multi-stakeholder intersection presented profound opportunities for aggrieved actors, whether Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim representatives, within government agencies at central, provincial and local levels, rank and file workers and residents, religious leaders and representatives, to fight it out. The outcome was what seemed like a momentary transcending of past grievances, from a struggle 'against' to a struggling together 'for' that desirable future.

In retrospect, the community visioning project, designed and adopted without any tradition of local community visioning, had contributed to ensuring larger more impartial spaces for dialogue, devoid of sectarian spoiling but *not* of healthy disagreement and debate.<sup>40</sup> The results of the visioning exercise by a broad section of the Mannar community spawned the formation of subcommittees around priority themes, one of which was *town planning*, as a response to residents' disenchantment with living in a 'messed up' town. Coincidentally and fortuitously, the central government had just commenced the process of developing a new town plan for Mannar, thus enabling the aspirations as well as the disquiet of local residents and officers to feed into a legitimate government process of urban development. This happy coincidence opened up yet larger social spaces for advancing reconciliation. The initial evidence from this interventionist measure indeed reinforced that the process of designing the built environment can play a critical role in the somewhat nebulous terrain of reconciliation in a post-conflict environment, both in terms of process, of constructing the built environment through robust dialogue, and outcome, of achieving a built environment that meets diverse needs and expectations.

### **A community articulates its future**

The overall messages from the workshops, forum and survey were clear and articulated the following set of objectives for both informing this urban development framework and guiding the creation of a resilient city form:

- 1) Visioning Mannar's future into the present: future growth and development based on proper urban design guidelines; investment opportunities that deliver for the people; infrastructure that serves the future needs of Mannar City
- 2) Designing a people-centred, well-planned town at a human scale: urban design which enhances inter-ethnic and religious harmony and interaction; affordable places to live with diverse housing options; local intermodal transport hub to national road and rail connection
- 3) Preserving the natural environment through green strategies: dense and liveable urban ecosystems
- 4) Low-carbon buildings that are efficient and generate energy; a city well adapted to climate change and the mitigation of floods, drought and rising sea levels

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<sup>40</sup> Donovan, Jenny (2013) *Designing to heal: Planning and urban design response to disaster and conflict*, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, p142

- 5) Creating an attractive and safe city: a strong sense of place with active street edges; good quality public space that is diverse, adaptable, accessible and safe; healthy city environment that will increase the health and wellbeing of city users
- 6) Celebrating a unique and rich heritage: stimulating and culturally inspired architecture and urban design; town precincts which retain distinctive identities; cultural and recreational spaces for celebration and relaxation.<sup>41</sup>

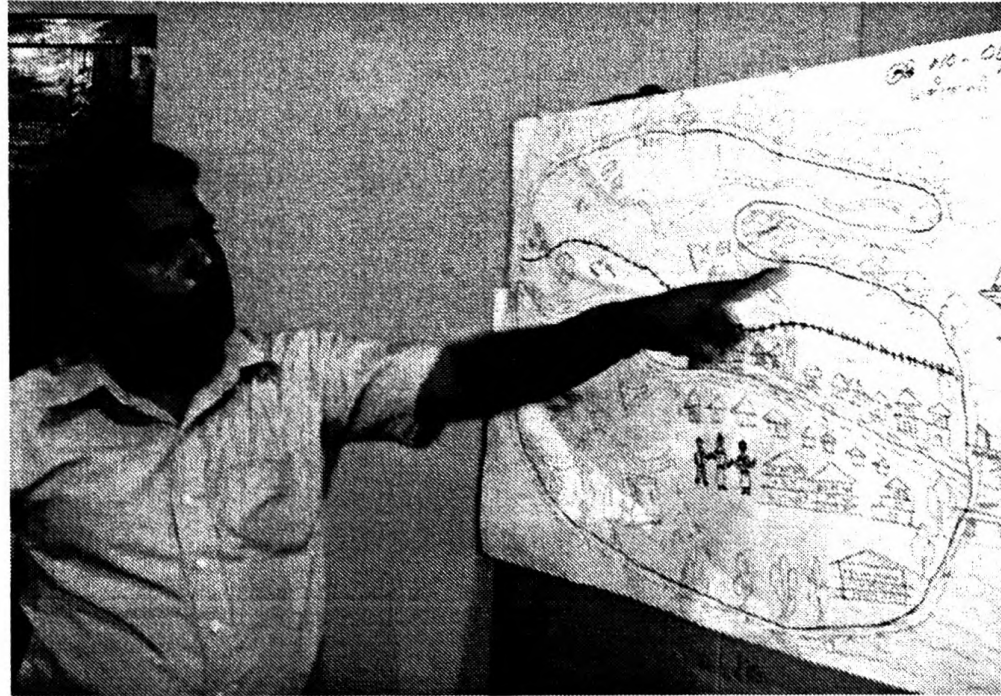


Fig 4: Village cluster workshop – group feedback  
Source: author

What remained was a sense of resoluteness among participants to forge ahead and reclaim the reigns of Mannar's future development, to speak in its defence, and start to embrace the future. Raucous, and at times heated, discussion, moments of humour and displays of good will characterized the sessions in which over five hundred people contributed to negotiating a ten-year vision for their city. The urban development process had surprisingly become a vehicle for increased personal agency and the opening up the possibility of experiencing moments of reconciliation. One participant, a member of the Mannar Citizen's Committee remarked,

At the very beginning of the workshops, people were not motivated; they thought that with the government's interference nothing could be done according to their wishes. They were negative about every development plan that had been put forward. After the workshop everybody had hope for the future. Their thinking pattern had changed. This was an eye opener for them, that they had been given an opportunity to think and plan their future.

### **Providing future direction**

Back in Australia, a National Director of the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) assisted Diaspora Lanka to host a meeting of interested planners to provide advice on next steps for the urban development work in Mannar. Many participants came with previous planning experience in Sri Lanka so understood the context well. An incremental approach was recommended, identifying stand-alone projects that could be presented for funding, for example, a bus station, fort restoration or reconfiguration of the town centre. They suggested developing an underlying project framework to understand how the parts connected to the whole, and also an investment

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<sup>41</sup> Liyanage, J. (2012) Mannarin Marumalarchi 2022: The people's plan, pp. 9-12

logic map which identified capacity to deliver and the likely level of capital, resources, and investment that could be sourced.

More specifically, they asked members of Diaspora Lanka to follow up on five tasks; a) articulate the problems, for example, chronic transport congestion, sanitation, roads, drainage, b) identify the unique strengths of the area which could lead to the building of Mannar's identity, pride and relevance, possibly as an education town, trade centre or tourist destination, c) invite key people onto a project steering committee and see how much could be realistically levered from stakeholders, d) identify the mechanism to deliver on a vision of resilience, with strategies which would favour microloans over large capital aid funding so that local efforts are strengthened, supported by international commitments, and finally, e) establish a solid business case which ticks off on the question of whether the content of what is being developed is sound and reasonable, based on natural strengths and opportunities for local people that government and external investors can bring to the table, and cognizant of projected population growth.



Fig. 5: Residents and local experts provide feedback on UDA's draft plan  
Source: author

Diaspora Lanka representatives returned three months later in mid-2012 on their next trip to Sri Lanka. They, in conjunction with the Urban Council, arranged for the UDA to present initial town planning concepts to the people of Mannar which was followed up by a series of consultation workshops to provide feedback from local residents and technical officers on the planning concepts. The subsequent Urban Planning Report was distributed widely.<sup>42</sup> Critical issues, unique features and stand-alone projects were identified and a Mannar Planning Committee convened. To continue to enhance the planning capacity of the UC, a training session was held to be better informed of the regulatory powers that the UC had at its discretion. In late 2012, the urban development activity continued with the Urban Council leadership further enlightened about the planning process at a meeting with UDA Directors, the NPPD Director General and the Minister for Industry and Commerce in Colombo. Back in Mannar, Diaspora Lanka coordinated a land use survey of the town engaging and training 22 young adults for the task with intensive

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<sup>42</sup> Ponnuthurai, P. & Liyanage, J. (2012) Mannar town plan: community consultation workshops report, (unpublished)

support from UDA and NPPD officers. And the work continues. At the request of the UDA, Diaspora Lanka and PIA have gathered a group of 10 Australian planning professionals—town planners, urban designers, landscape architects and social planners—to come to Sri Lanka to assist with more detailed development of two projects identified in the town plan; the rehabilitation of a traditional *kulam* (pond) as a recreational reserve and the redesigning of the Mannar foreshore area. Emphasis will be placed on developing a business case for various projects to attract local and foreign investment, building in sufficient controls to ensure maximum local benefit and backward integration. The UDA hopes to gazette the Mannar Town Plan by the end of 2013.



Fig. 6: Rehabilitation and Landscaping of Waterhole for dual purposes of effective drainage and as a leisure precinct

Source: UDA Mannar Town Plan

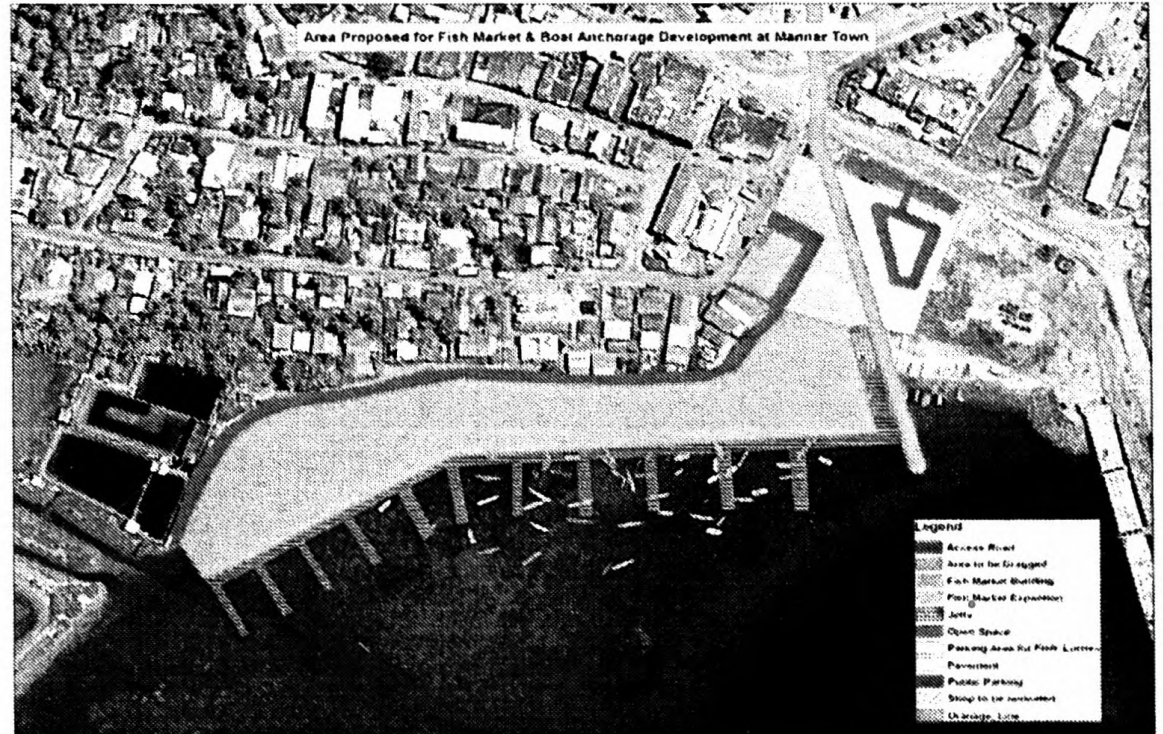


Fig 7: Redevelopment of foreshore area as a commercial and leisure precinct to include the redevelopment of the fisheries harbour, jetty with anchorage for 300 boats, modern fish market, restaurants and cafes and walkways

Source: Source: UDA Mannar Town Plan Concepts

## Conclusion

In Mannar District, post-war conditions have created opportunities for grassroots input and sustainable community development practice to be incorporated into urban planning approaches. Much groundwork has been done by Diaspora Lanka to establish the preconditions for a people-centred, reconciliation-inspired planning process. This has positioned Mannar as an ideal trial site not only to apply planning innovations but also to explore how the task of urban development could be utilised for reconciliation outcomes. A major discovery has been that efforts of redesigning the built environment in a post conflict context can be a positive sphere of activity that advances reconciliatory purposes, particularly if more impartial spaces for dialogue and common purpose are created, allowing dissenting voices to be heard, acknowledged and grappled with. Through this intervention in Mannar, it was realized that the act of urban design did in fact address the issues of the inclusion of marginalized actors, engagement of perceived 'adversaries', and capacity to open up spaces for even begrudging cooperation. Although it is acknowledged that such interventions are vulnerable and not conclusive, these moments of reconciliation that can arise from common activity, like urban design, can contribute towards a more enduring reconciliatory ideal. More importantly, the implication here is not only that the urban design process can advance reconciliation, but that if one fails to acknowledge the relationship between design and reconciliation, the reconciliation process is set back even

further. The process of urban design, therefore, should not be regarded as an optional extra for reconciliation but an essential ingredient.

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