

# City as a Performative Place: Asala Perahara and the Spatial Dynamics of Kandy

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## Abstract

*Traditional cities are dynamically re-enacted through regular performances and rituals. Kandy city is described within this performative phenomenon in order to understand the dynamics of the place. Phenomenology is the research methodology. A theoretical framework, synthesizing key concepts of place, sense of place, dwelling, Chora, becoming, non-representational landscape theory and performance theory is developed and used to examine performance of the Asala perahara ritual process in Kandy city. Case study findings illustrate that, Asala perahara marks geometrical patterns, in the landscape connecting different locations, rituals, people and the invisible dimensions of the place. Unfolded place within this cultural drama, experiencing natural –cultural setting and body performances is a dynamic process. Spiritual experience is significant in these ritual performances and built forms, inseparable from people and the place. Analysing of Asala perahara explains that city is understood as an inside enclosed by three mountains, reflected in the city form and architecture of Kandy. This reveals important guide lines for city conservation and developments.*

**Keywords:** Sense of place, Chora, Performing place, Asala perahara, Nuwara (Kandy: a traditional city concept)

## Introduction

Ritual performances make significant role in sense of place, place attachment and place identities in traditional cities like Kandy. These places are celebrated through series of cyclical ritual performances highlighted the spiritual experience of the place and place attachment. Performances of people, spiritual experience, emerging place and city identities are inter-related with the dynamics of performing place. Asala perahara in Kandy is focused in this study in order to understand the dynamics of the place, people and spiritual experience of the place in traditional cities. The name Kandy is from the original Sinhala meaning of 'kanda uda nuwara' (city on higher elevations/mountains)<sup>1</sup>. Asala festival is an important ritual performance celebrates in Kandy with large participation of people. The city atmosphere becomes more lived and spiritual by gathering of performers, performing ritual events, vibrating sounds of drums and horns, celebrating different places and streets of Kandy during these festival season. How people experience the place through bodily performances in Asala perahara in Kandy, how these

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<sup>1</sup> Portuguese shortened this name to Candea and continued by British and Dutch used the same name to describe both the kingdom and its capital (Seneviratna, 1993. P.15)

repeating of ritualized performances relate to the place and dynamics of the place and how these experiences reflect in the city and built space, are research questions focused in this study.

## Methodology

As research questions are framed within the human experiences and understandings the methodology is focused on phenomenology and Asala perahara performance in Kandy is examined in order to find the relationships of people, performance, emerging place and the city. Performance approaches as a research method is applied in this study. Performing place unfolds a dynamic place of becoming, a holistic understanding of both physical and non physical domains of the place is the theoretical model applied in the case study. A theoretical framework, synthesizing key concepts of place, sense of place, dwelling, Chora, becoming, non-representational landscape theory and performance theory is utilized to understand the place. Researcher needs much patience and intuitive attention throughout the investigation to understand the contextual character, spending long hours in case study location and also sometimes acts as a participant observer.

## Literature: People place and performance

How people experience the place and understand the relationship between them and the physical setting/ location is described as sense of place<sup>2</sup>. Sense of place strengthens the place attachment<sup>3</sup>. Many traditional cities, specially Asian cities are significant with both physical and non-physical sense of place as the dynamics of becoming place<sup>4</sup> attached with everyday life of people and performances. Plato<sup>5</sup> describes ideal forms and the everyday world of becoming in sensing Chora; by which ideas pass from the timeless realm of ideal forms or types (concepts) into the everyday world of becoming as changing forms that follow the natural cycles of emergence and decay (Plato: Timaeas and Critia). Therefore, Chora as a defined and established word could be used to describe the dynamic nature of the place attached with performances and everyday life of people linked with physical to non-physical experiences<sup>6</sup>. The non-physical experience of the place is attached with spiritual dimensions as in traditional Asian cities. This kind of spatial understanding is discussed by many: Plato as Chora, Heidegger (1962) as fourfolds, Bollnow (1963) as polar experiences, Eliade (1961).

In order to understand how people perform in the place; what inter-actions take place among performers, observers, other people and natural landscape, recent research works on landscape understanding and neuro science provide better explanative framework. Actor network theory describes relational view of world always in the making of place<sup>7</sup>. People by acting and walking make a network of relationships around them, which produce place and space (Lefebvre, 1991). The performance approaches in landscape understanding (Lorimer, 2005) describe embodied relationship developed between individual subject and the environment. Surrounding as an extension of the body<sup>8</sup>, world hood understanding (Heiddger, 1962) and perception of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), the recent discussion of the body as embodied paradigm (Hale, 2013),

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<sup>2</sup> Casey (1993); Relph (1976)

<sup>3</sup> Casey (1993); Altman & Low (1992)

<sup>4</sup> Plato, Dovey (2010)

<sup>5</sup> Deverux (1997); Holden (2012)

<sup>6</sup> De Silva (2014)

<sup>7</sup> Latour (1987);Massey

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty(2002);Heidegger(1962);Hale(2006)

lived body<sup>9</sup> describe deeper understanding of the invisible side of the world by body and performance. Schechner's performance theory (1988) discusses that everyday life is framed and performed; emerging theatre place is evident. We all act better than we know how (Goffman, 1959). Neuro-scientific explanation (Rizzolatti, 2008) describes bodily understanding of action and when same action performed by another person. This kind of understanding is common in ritual behavior when they do the same action and others do the same action the whole group of people act as one entity of sensing and making the place (De Silva, 2014). Therefore ritual behavior, which is identical with walking, repetition of walking strengthen the sense of being and produce space and place. An analyzing of this kind of performances could be utilized to examine how people understand the place and make the place, the dynamic nature of the place.

### **Esala perehera and body performances**

Kandy is the last capital of Sri Lanka. Ancient capitals flourished for more than thousand five hundred years across the Northern flat terrains in Sri Lanka, later shifted to the hill country and thereafter gradually moved to Dambadeniya, Kurunegala and then to Gampola in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, thereafter to Kotte and the last was Kandy the last of this kind (Seneviratna, 1993).

There are many rituals and ceremonies performed in Kandy today, with participation of a large number of people making inter relationships between Nuwara (traditional city concept) and villages. Rituals practiced before 1815 A.D., still perform in Kandy. From 1815 A.D. to 1948 A.D. Kandy was taken under the British power and city and city life exposed to major changes. However, it is recognized by temple priests that rituals in Kandy including Asala perahara still continue without any major changes due to social/cultural or political changes in the history and even today in the contemporary globalization. According to Wellasse Disawa (1817) Asala perahara is known as Asala keliya (play) performed to celebrate God Vishnu's birth<sup>10</sup>. He describes Asala keliya as very ancient ceremony origins on the day of God Vishnu's birth. This should be a very important phenomenon about Asala perahara which describes Asala keliya as a performing of a play celebrates birth of a divinity, having spiritual experiences. During July, August, September celebrations of Asala festivals in temples and devales in traditional settlements all around the island is common today, making a celebrative atmosphere. Asala perahara in Kandy is performed annually, during July/August ending on a full moon day. The perahara festival commence by planting kapa, known as kapa situweema, at four temples: temple of god Natha, temple of god Vishnu, temple of god Kataragama and temple of goddess Pattini. The locations of these temples are same as it is in 1815 period. Inner parade is performed around these temples for five days. Thereafter outer parade known as kumbal perahara parades along the streets in Kandy and Temple of the Tooth Relic too participates in this parade. However, according to Knox' description during the period of Rajasinghe II (1639 – 87 A.D.), it was not mentioned about the participation of temple of the tooth relic in the perahara. Descriptive account on Asala perahara by Wellasse Disawe (1817)<sup>11</sup> says until Keerthi Sri Rajasingha period (1747 – 1781 A.D.) temple of the tooth relic did not participate in the perehera. Therefore, it is evident that the origins of these rituals are not related with Buddhism and are more ancient than Buddhism.

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<sup>9</sup> Post modern structuralism

<sup>10</sup> Seneviratne, 1978

<sup>11</sup> Descriptive account of Esala perehera on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1817, published in government gazette – Sri Lanka of 13<sup>th</sup> September 1817.

According to both descriptions, many temple women have followed the temple elephants holding sacred objects of Gods by giving services such as sprinkling water, flowers, scented smoke and singing special rhymes. Knox says 'thousands of ladies and gentlewoman- best sort of- in a brave manner' walk in the parade. Wellasse Disawe says many young women and men display their body skills, performing in front of the palace, before starting the perahara, for few hours. He describes; 'two women walking on ropes, displaying magical performances, balancing their body without the use of sticks. One woman jump up above the rope, seven/ eight feet high repeatedly, speedily'. He admires the speed of body movement, circling of their hands in different directions and brave performance of these people. In considering these, there are two important points to be highlighted about the Asala perahara during Kandyan period,

- Many females whose services required for temples (as potters, cooking women, washer women) and ladies and gentle women<sup>12</sup> participated in the Asala perahara. Today, only few females participate, only in Pattini Devle perahara, which is a small part of the whole procession. This shows that during Kandyan period **Asala perahara performance is not recognized as a cultural display; it is an 'ordinary Cultural Life performance'**. Therefore, these rituals have not been documented in ancient texts.
- Body movements, acrobatics, speed up movements and dancing are common, and therefore; 'body performances', and the 'mind- body' are prominent in the procession as an 'entity of sensing and making the place'.

Performing Asala perahara could be a very ancient technique used in place making and place understanding of traditional settlements by people. Therefore, it is reasonable to analyze the subject 'Performing Asala perahara' to examine the 'place', dynamics of place and performances within the traditional city concept of Nuwara.

### **Re-enactment of city and Asala perahara**

Asala festival is a dramatic performance begins with Kapa kapeema (cutting a tree) and Kapa Situweema (planting Kapa), where four temples in Kandy: Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Pattini perform main part with the help of devale villages outside the city. Today in Kandy, Temple of the tooth relic is the key feature in Asala perahara, and this is known as the 'Dalada perahara' by contemporary people. However, important rituals are carried out only at four devale premises, with the participation of devale priests. Temple villages belong to the Temple of the tooth relic also participate in many activities. As mentioned earlier, people in these temple villages and devale villages have to perform specific functions of the Asala festival for living in and utilizing temple lands. (For example: making arches in front of temples, and around the kapa house using young palm leaves, clean up the temple & premises, decorate temple, hanging clean white linen under the roof as a ceiling.) Asala perahara according to time, cyclic nature, relationships with natural features/landscape, methods of performing and significant aspect of the performing, is explained in (Table 1). Through series of performing they make inter relationships with natural landscape location: with valley, mountains, and river and with other suburban temples and villages. They narrate in the landscape by walking, repeating of walking, dancing, singing, drumming, displaying acrobatic games, making temporary structures and marking geometrical patterns. Marking centers, domains and divine experience is significant in these performances which describe producing space and place, a place making process.

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<sup>12</sup> Knox

In these rituals sounds of hewisi puja produce dynamic space, requesting divinities to enter human space. The four kapa are planted at same auspicious time at four temples in Kandy (fig. 1). Planting kapa signifies the centre (Seneviratne,1978). Inner parade marks four domains in the place (fig.2) repeating the event for five consecutive days. On the next five days, god's insignia is taken for parading along the streets, known as kumbal perahara. This procession is very long and takes about three hours to pass one point. Perahara parades only along the old streets of Kandy. Each day, they make enclosed domain, getting larger and larger. Perahara parades in clockwise direction, circumbulation of the city (Seneviratne, H.L. 1978). End of Kumbal perahara is followed by five Randoli perahara. Four Randoli of Goddess' are the new addition to perahara, which is longer than Kumbal perahara. As in kumbal perahara God's Insignias are taken to the street on an auspicious time, then all performers of four temples gather at the Deva sanhinda and performers of Temple of the tooth relic gather in front of the temple. This perahara makes larger enclosed domains than Kumbal perahara, by circumbulation of the city. The final night parade is more elegant, and performed until midnight, of a full Moon night day. This perahara is followed by Diya kapeema perahara which connects the city to the river (fig. 3). This place is known as Diyakapanathota at Gatame connected with several related mythical, historical stories developed around the place, describing spiritual mythical aspect of the place and the performance. After Diyakapeema Randoli and sacred insignia of temples are kept at Ganesh kovil, while sacred karaduwa of temple of the tooth relic is kept at Gedige temple. After receiving divine blessings from priests who perform tiresome continuous ritual performing process, day parade revisit the city on an auspicious time (plate 1). Throughout the whole

performances beginning from kapa situweema to day parade body performance take central role in the place, by sensing and weaving the place. Experience of performers describe bodily

understanding of the place, place and perahara as a part of their life, less feeling of the body , performing special behaviour as 'pewenawa' are some evidences of worldhood understanding and surrounding as extension of the body. By walking, repeating , circling, rotating, jumping, dancing and singing they experience the space, spatial quality of the surrounding making an inter-related –network. With the repetitive nature of these body performances which strengthens the sense of being, and strengthening of their attachment to the place and sense of place. These body performances establish important relationship emerged between people and the place, through performing of repeated ritual events, a performing place. Place is re-created with the performance and the people which makes the spiritualized space and place which is identical in traditional city concept of Nuwara in Kandy.

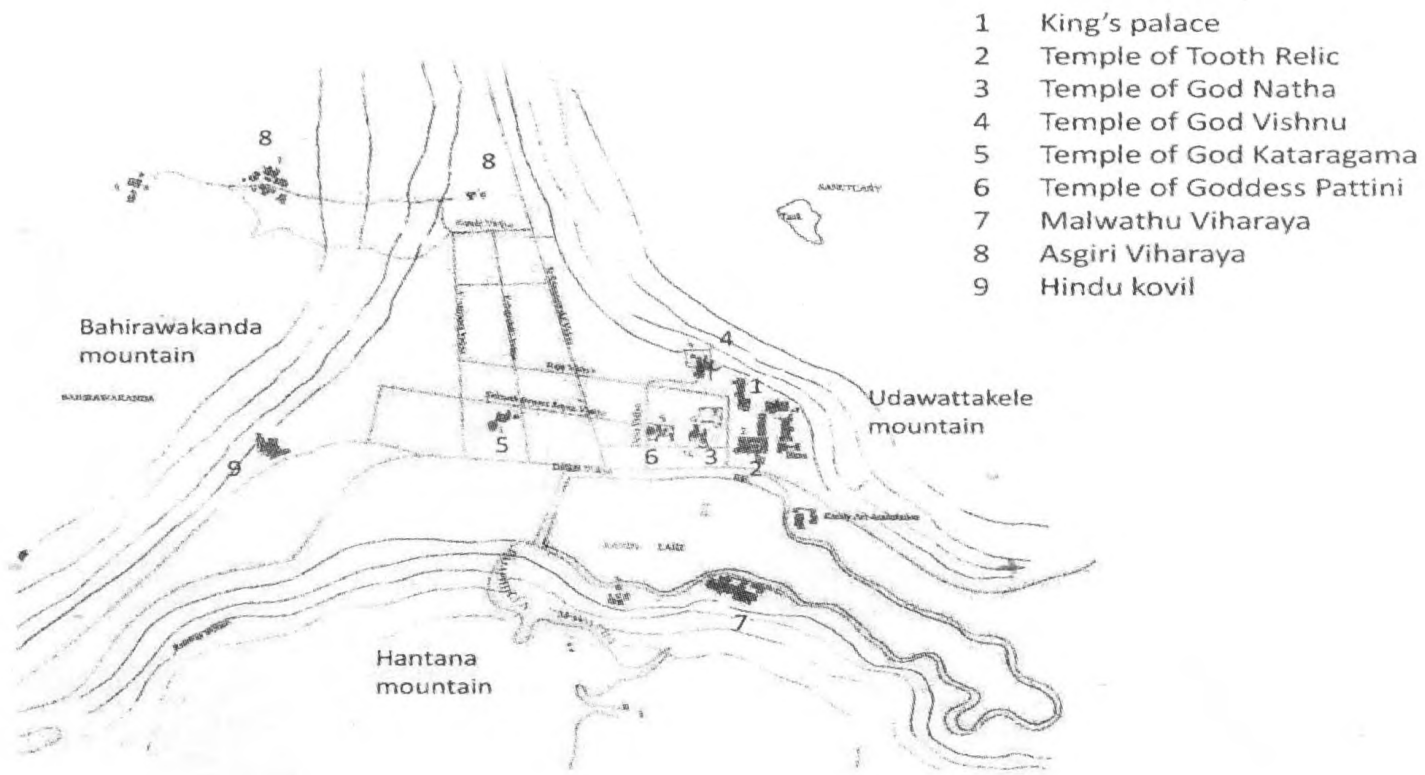
**Table 1: Asala perahara – Time, Space, Method of performing**  
 (Source: author)

Ritual	Number of happenings  Time Intervals – minutes, hours, days, months, years	Relationship with Natural features/ natural landscape location / time / universe.	Method of performing	Significant aspect in the performing
Asala festival	<b>Kapa situweema</b>  (planting a pole)	Once a year (July/ August)  Two days	Selecting and cutting a tree and planting mark direct inter relationships with landscape.	Parades, rituals, music, offerings.  <b>Marking a centre by planting the kapa</b>
	Inner parade	Three times in the evening for  Five consecutive days	Parade around the temple makes inter relationships with landscape location.	Small procession walks around the temple, three times in the evening for five days. Music, offerings and rituals.  <b>Marking a place in the landscape location.</b>
	Outer parade – <b>Kumbal perahara</b>	Five days in the night	Parade walks (clockwise) along the old streets.	Long procession, walking, dancing, acrobatics, singing, playing musical instruments,  <b>Parade represent the whole social structure , making interrelationships with landscape location.</b>
	Outer parade – <b>Randoli perahara</b>	Five days in the night	Parade walks (clockwise) along the old streets.	Include God's palanquins to the above long procession.  <b>Parade represent the whole social structure , making interrelationships with landscape location.</b>
	<b>Diya kapeema</b>  (water cutting)	from midnight till dawn	Relates to the changing patterns of midnight to the dawn, parade walks towards the river to perform rituals.	Perception and sensation of the landscape, walking, dancing, playing music, offering food.  <b>Water cutting, offering foods (special cooked rice) for Gods.</b>
	<b>Day parade</b>	From mid day until evening	Walking along old streets in day time.	Walking, dancing, playing music, acrobatics, body sacrificing.  <b>Parade ends, walking three times around the central square.</b>
	<b>Devil dance</b> (Wali Yakun nateema)	Seven days	Narrative performance of imagined stories	Dancing, singing, music, mime, stories, drawing symbols  <b>Performing series of mythical stories.</b>

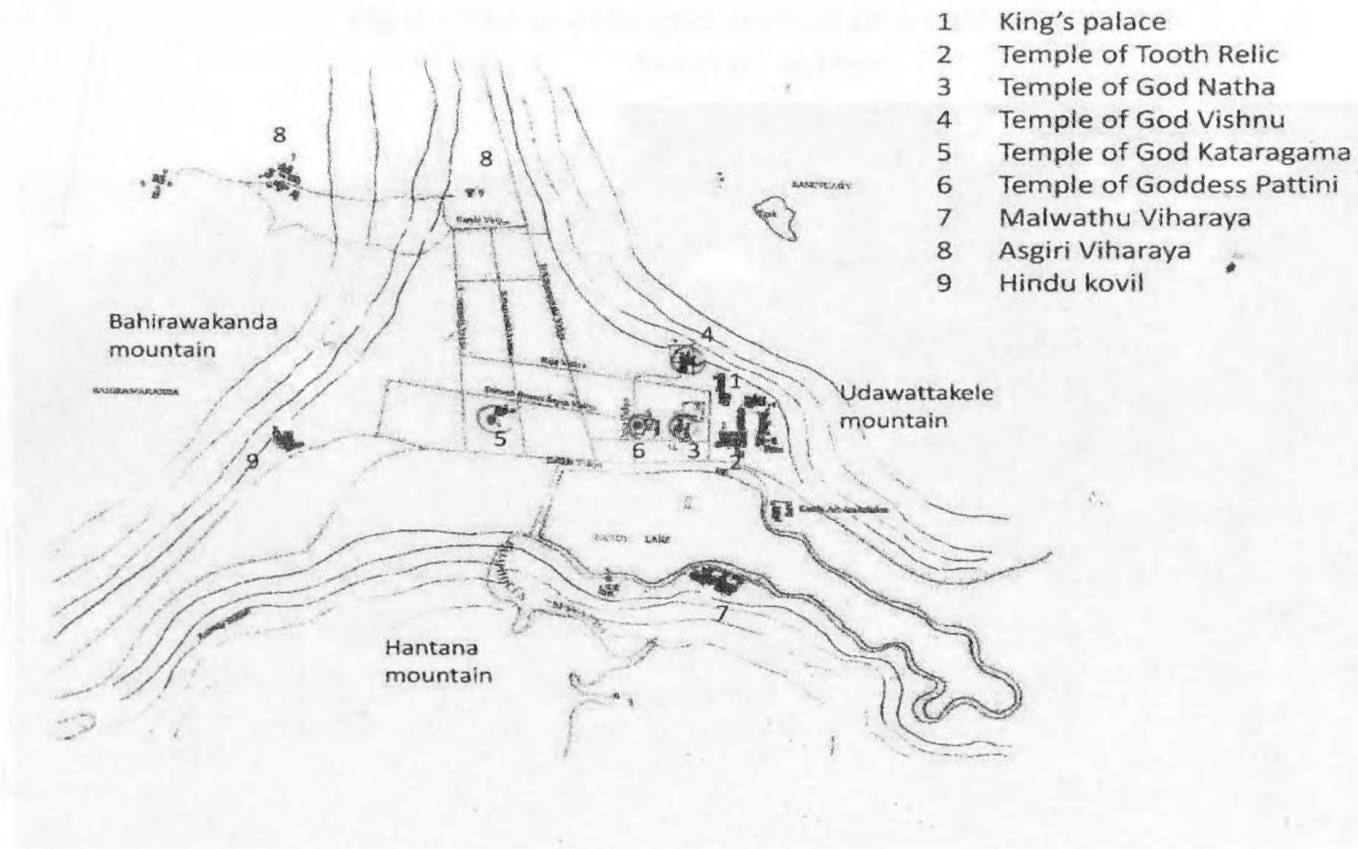
## **Conclusion: City as an Inside**

Analyzing geometrical patterns marked by perahara describe that perahara begins by marking a centre establishing divine experience on the earth, connecting physical domains to non-physical domains of the place. Thereafter this centre is enlarged into a domain, by parading around the temples. By each day of parading, the centre is getting wider and wider until the final night parade mark the city (the old city and streets). Therefore it is understood that the city is an enlarged version of a centre an inside (fig. 4). Within this inside they experience divine dimensions as well as mundane dimensions: the experience of fourfolds – earth and sky, divinities and mortals as one, the Chora of the place. It is evident that through repeating of continuous ritual process place and city is re-enacted by revisiting and re-strengthening the divine sense of the place by earthly performances of people in these traditional cities as an important concept to examine the contemporary cities and to develop conservation principles for traditional cities. All built forms and architecture is a representation of divine mundane experience in an intimate scale reflecting the understanding of inside within enclosed three mountains (plate 2).

This paper argues that these performances are not traditional or contemporary, but reflect important aspect of the nature of people, place and sense of place united in an inter-related network of performances in the city. It is evident that place is not only visual or physical , moreover, it is mythical and emerging with performances. Whether these kind of performances have been taken into consideration of urban developments, urban planning and governing policies of cities (specially in traditional cities), whether new developments and new life styles encourage these kind of performing to be established spatial networks to understand the nature of humans and the place are questions arising out of this study. Are there any places for people to sense and imagine of their own world views , stories, and narrations by repeated engagement among these places in new city developments ? In the view of city conservation of Kandy three mountains, inside valley and traditional performances are the vital aspects to be considering for people, place and city oriented urban concepts, the Nuwara. Also another significant question is why the later name Kandy used for the easy dialects of colonial rulers still continuing, while the original name provide better sense of the place and place attachment of the Nuwara with its natural location and people.



**Fig 1:** Planting four Kapa mark four centres in Kandy.  
 Source : author



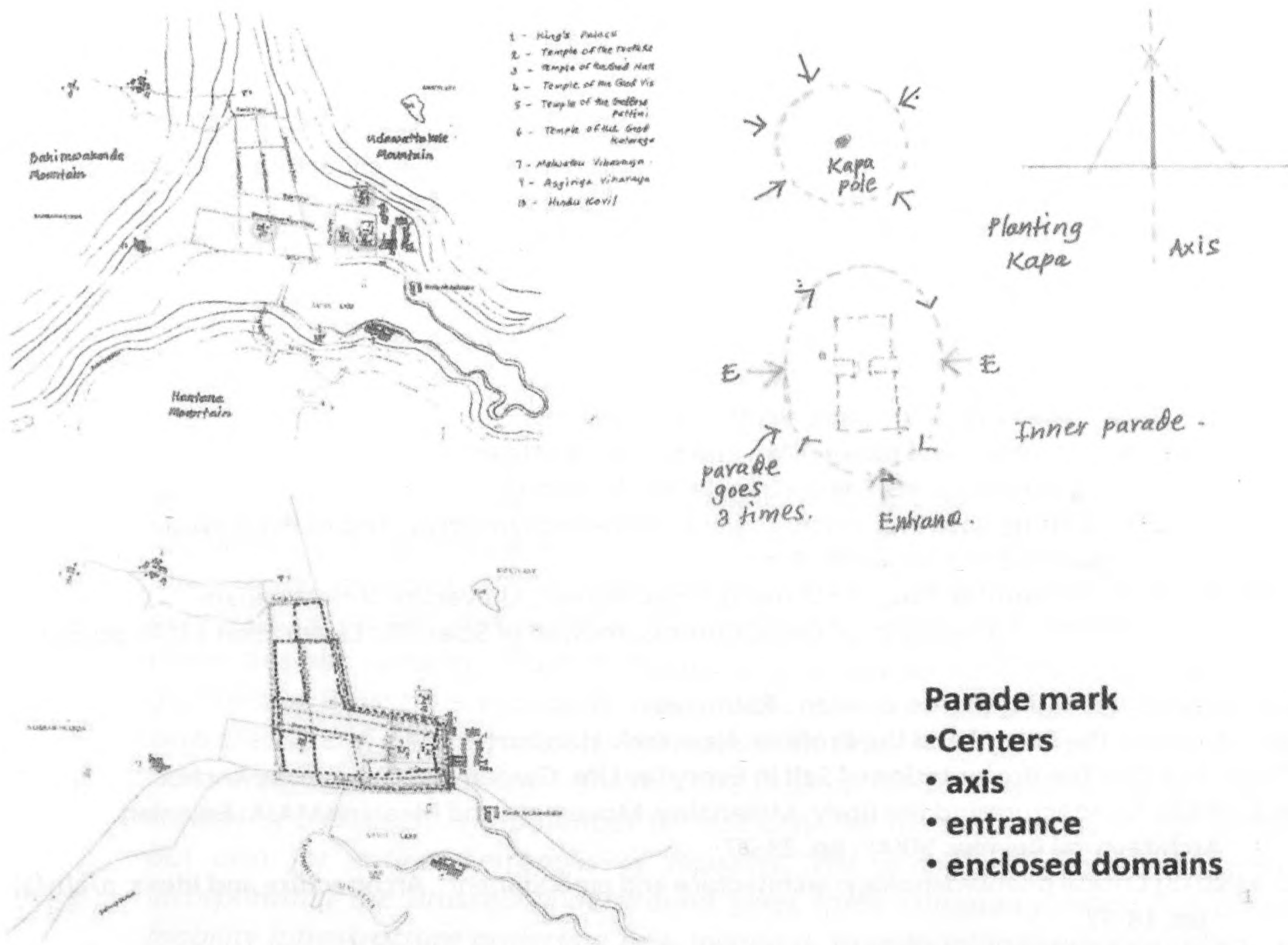
**Fig.2:** Marking four domains – Inner parade  
 Source : author



**Fig.3 : Diyakapeeme perahara**  
Source: author



**Plate 1 : Perahara re-visit the city**  
Source : author



**Fig 4 :** city as enlarged version of a centre  
 Source : author



**Plate 2 :** Low scale architecture and built forms  
 Source : author

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