

# Reconceptualizing Sacred City Meaning: The Sacred City of Anuradhapura

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the Sacred City of Anuradhapura (SCA), a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in the Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka, adopting qualitative research methods such as literature survey and observations. In the Sri Lankan context, sacredness is dynamic and largely a cultural and social process which is constantly created and maintained by associated people and their belief systems. During the last few decades, practice and policy implementation in terms of planning and conservation of world heritage sites in Sri Lanka has shown the difficulty of achieving sustainability while reconciling conservation with community needs. This research raises issues regarding the disparity between authoritative materials based conservation practices and expectations of associated community.*

**Keywords:** *Sacred Space, Sacred City of Anuradhapura, Heritage, Material-Centre Conservation*

## Introduction

The practice and policy implementation in terms of planning, management and conservation of world heritage sites in Sri Lanka has shown the difficulty of achieving sustainability while reconciling living sacred heritage conservation with community needs. According to the dominant Western view, space is a purely quantitative reality, rather than a qualitative and symbolic reality. This approach leaves little room for conserving the sacredness of place. In the Sri Lankan context, heritage places have evolved to reflect physical and emotional interactions with the sites, not simply as tangible cultural products, but as social and cultural processes associated with connections between the visible and invisible, the quantifiable and the qualitative. Sri Lankan sacred cities are not just physical conglomerates that were built as an ensemble but have a kind of archetypal reality. The associated cultural community is entitled to practice what they believe and to perceive which they believe. As a result of archaeology-based material-

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centric conservation, thoughts and practices which still form the backbone of current heritage legislation may end up separating community rights from their sensitive sacred heritage places and, ultimately, disturb the spirit of a place. Hence, heritage management cannot be meaningful without people's involvement and attachment.

In the Sri Lankan cultural context, sacredness is dynamic, emerging and largely a cultural and social process. It is inseparably embedded in peoples' lives. When we look at Sri Lankan sacred heritage from the perspective of its people, we see that or we begin to understand that it is a living thing constantly created, maintained and modified by associated people with their belief systems. That is the key point which must be considered carefully when conserving the sacred. Therefore, considering associated communities as the primary anchor, it is argued that many of the issues and complexities associated with Sri Lankan living sacred heritage planning and management can be better understood and context-sensitively addressed to a greater extent.

### **Literature Review**

The theory of 'urban revolution' (Child, 1936) and the systematic investigation of the material remains of early cities by archaeologists describe momentous socio-economic and political transformations in ancient cities. The goal of such investigations has typically been to reveal the origin, form and function of ancient cities as a reflection of broad social evolutionary trends and regional patterns (Adams, 1966; Furguson, 1991). Within these patterns and processes, the recursive relationship between cities and their spiritual dimension has rarely been considered. The rise of post processual critiques in 1980s and 1990s brought with it interrelated developments that have changed how archaeologists look at built environments and the people who lived in them in the past. One of the most significant developments that arose out of the post- processual critique is the 'spatial turn' more generally seen in the archaeological inquiry and the social sciences (Blake, 2003). This trend has led to a growing recognition of cities and other built environments as spatial contexts in which human interaction takes place (Soja, 1989). The social dimension of space is interrelated through the concept of place. Space might be seen as the passive, neutral physical location in which social action occurs whereas place is lived space imbued with meanings, identities, memories that actively shape, and are shaped by, the daily practices and experiences of its inhabitants and historically contingent social processes (Fisher and Creekmore, 2014: 4). Cities therefore, are made. They are at once products and facilitators of social life. As this research demonstrates, sacred cities are created in the

place-making of multiple stakeholders from top-down planning of ruling elites through the bottom-up actions of communities. In this way, the production of sacred space in cities is actively implicated in processes of socio-political transformation.

Studies of city space often emphasise aspects that correspond to Rapoport's high (cosmology, philosophy), mid (identity, status, power) and low (behaviour embodied in architecture) level meanings that are more often discussed in terms of monumental architecture and formal planning of infrastructure (Rapoport, 1990). These levels of meaning are useful for thinking about and understanding how meanings materialized in the past in built environments. All levels of meaning elaborated by Rapoport are found in a complex web of physical and social relations that combine hierarchical relationships in the cityscape of the sacred city of Anuradhapura.

Cities as cultural landscapes are particular ways of expressing conceptions of the world and they are also a means of referring to physical entities. The same physical landscape can be seen in many different ways by different people, often at the same time (Franklin and Buntne, 1997: 245-258). There is much recent writing on the subject of landscape which has established wide-ranging discussions, so much so that the term may refer both to an environment, generally one shaped by human action, and to a representation which signifies the meaning attributed to such a setting (Bender, 1993; Hirsch, 1995). Another insists that a landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1998). This definition of landscape corresponds to the principal theme of this paper on the Sacred City of Anuradhapura (SCA).

The evolution of most religions from animism to institutionalized religion across a wide variety of places and spaces such as historic monuments, sites, and cities is commonly built on the identification of sacred places produced as a result of social and cultural processes. During the last two decades, scholars from many disciplines have attempted to define and conceptualise the nature of relationships between people and places (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004). This paper is specifically concerned with the notion of sacred space in the Sri Lankan Buddhist cultural context.

There are different types of sacred places related to mystical manifestations, homelands, places important to historical legacies, functional religious places and places connected with the past or future purported fulfilment of prophecy. Man first defines space as sacred when it manifests itself to him as something 'wholly different from the profane' space (Eliade, 1958:11-13).

The religious capital is an interesting type of functional sacred place usually invoking strong feelings of sacredness. They may be centers of institutional meetings, rituals or pilgrimages. The sacred city of Anuradhapura as a centre of Theravada Buddhism and one of the oldest kingdom, represents multiple attributes. Today, the World Heritage Site of Anuradhapura is a prime cultural site in Sri Lanka and it also happens to be one of the most prominent heritage sites in South Asia. This is based on its historical antiquity and its tangible and intangible cultural value associated with sacrality, vitality and continuity with the past.

The dominant Western view highlights space as a purely quantitative reality rather than a qualitative one, and leaves little room for the conservation of the spirit of a place. In Sri Lanka, heritage places have evolved to reflect the physical and emotional interactions with space, not simply as tangible cultural products, but as social and cultural processes associated with connections between the visible and invisible. Sri Lankan sacred cities are not just physical conglomerates that were built as an ensemble but have a kind of archetypal reality.

During the past few decades, conservation and management of sacred heritage sites in Asian countries has become problematic. The inconsistencies between Asian and Western (European or international) approaches towards heritage management have been pointed out by several authors (Byrne, 2004; Chapagain, 2013; Chung, 2005; MacKee, 2009; Wijesuriya, 2005). These inconsistencies emerge from the fact that Asian heritage is valued for its spiritual significance rather than the historical or the material significance. In that context, most of the Sri Lankan living heritage sites are constantly maintained and uplifted by associated communities without much concern for their material authenticity. Therefore, heritage management cannot be meaningful without associated peoples' involvement. Often, when the authoritative foreign concept of conservation and management is endorsed through heritage legislation, heritage management encounters negative consequences and resistance from its own citizens. Our personal observations of conservation and management issues at the Sacred City of Anuradhapura (SCA) in Sri Lanka attest to this argument. The main questions that this research addresses are: (1) What is understood as living sacred heritage city in Sri Lanka? (2) Can the conservation of living sacred heritage sites fit within the modern principles and practices of conservation in the World Heritage context? (3) What are the problems and complexities faced by conservation professionals when conserving the sacred? (4) Since sacredness is one of the most important qualities of the World Heritage Site

at SCA, what do development plans say about the conservation of sacredness?

According to scholars, sacredness is an experience that arises from people's close interactions with a place (Levi and Kocher, 2011:22-26). The experiential perspective shows the range of emotional experiences related to sacred places. Further, they define sacred places as an experiential phenomenon, a behaviour setting, and an aspect of place identity. Sacred places are designed to promote different types of religious experiences. Buddhist sacred places are created and designed to generate an experience of respect, serenity, spirituality and identity as a whole. Cities are sacred because of their sacrality in events, devotees, spaces, structure, natural and built landscapes, and structures, divine or mythical heroes, all contributing to an intense sanctity of the place (Sopher, 1967: 51). They evoke a strong 'sense of place,' belonging, history and identity.

Religion can have a profound influence on people's relations to place, and on place itself through designs of sacred structures and cities. According to Eliade (1958:43) religious man sought to live as near as possible to the center of the world. This concept of the center and its religious symbolism is well articulated in the cultural landscape of village and city design in India (Highwater, 1981:122). This concept and associated religious values governed the structural layout and orientation of streets and buildings, the location of temples and places of worship, monasteries and cemeteries etc. (Mukherjee, 1940/1961; Sopher, 1967; Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004). The changing perceptions discussed here resulted in questions about the materiality and the social production of ancient and sacred cities.

### **Methodology**

This research examines the Sacred City of Anuradhapura (SCA). The study method includes literature survey, phenomenological observations, and case studies. It is based on one case study conducted on the SCA, a UNESCO world heritage site in Sri Lanka. Plans for the SCA were reviewed and the extent of their implementation was assessed through on-site observation.

### **Discussion**

The Sinhalese word '*Pujaneeya*' (English word 'sacred' is derived from a Latin term of which the technical meaning is 'restricted by belonging to the Gods') is used in the sense of 'to be worshiped.' The opposite word of sacred is profane or secular (*Laukika*). Though the SCA consists of both sacred and profane spaces, it has been popularly known as *Puja nagara* (Sacred city),

*Suddha nagara* (purified city) and *Arameeya nagara* (*Monastic city*), which implies a religious significance that is manifested throughout its history.

In Sri Lanka the concept of sacredness is mostly derived from a Buddhist heritage context. The concept of *Solosmasthana* (twelve most sacred places) and *Atamasthana* (eight most sacred places) developed within a Buddhist context, one which promoted Buddhism and Buddhist pilgrimage with the purpose of maintaining the vitality associated with the place. These places became sacred places because of their inherent power. As articulated by Eliade (1958), the phenomenology of religion understands sacred places as manifestations or eruptions of inherent power. The Sacred City of Anuradhapura is the only macro-city area where there is a highest number of sacred places in Sri Lanka. People understand these places not to be homogenous, but qualitatively different from others. These qualitative differences are defined by the tradition itself due to multiple reasons. Accordingly, the sacred Bo-tree (one of the most sacred or *Mudunmalkada* of Buddhists) and the *Ruwanwelisaya* (great stupa or *Mahathupa*) have become the most sacred of the sacred places (*Atamasthana*) in Anuradhapura and Sri Lanka in general. These great religious symbols have individual biographies or life histories (*Bodhivamsa* and *Thupavamsa*) constituted by the meanings accumulated over the duration of their existence (and that of their ancestors and descendants) as well as the memories of them held by their associated communities. This shows how the concept of sacredness evolved and came to dominate in relation to Anuradhapura.

Making pilgrimage to worship places (*Siddhasthana vandana*) related to Buddhism, and particularly to Anuradhapura, was a traditional practice which continues even today in Sri Lanka. This concept is known as *Anuradhapura Vatavandana* (pilgrimage round the sacred city of Anuradhapura) among the general public. This process of worshipping the most sacred places in Anuradhapura has been facilitated by creating the *Vatavandana* road through modern planning interventions under the sacred area planning scheme.

The study revealed that several major factors influence the perception of sacredness at Anuradhapura. Sacred space is the part of the total environment which is perceived as sacred by individuals and religious groups. This sacred place may be conveniently divided into five generic categories: mystical, historical, functional, homelands, and places connected with the future fulfilment of prophecy. Sacred places of all five types are found in the SCA. It is believed that the Buddha predicted that his doctrine would flourish in Sri Lanka and thus handed over the Island to God *Vishnu* to protect. Hence, for

Sri Lankans, Anuradhapura is the most sacred place in the world. It is believed that all four Buddhas who lived in this *kalpa* visited Anuradhapura and meditated at the place where the Sacred Bo Tree was planted. There are eight places in Anuradhapura where the Buddha meditated. These are the *Atamasthana*, which form a very significant part of a pilgrimage and sometimes the *Atamasthana* becomes the total pilgrimage. Collectively, all these micro sacred spaces come together to raise Anuradhapura to the status of sacred city. All these sacred places consist of mystical, historical, as well as functional qualities of sacred space. As history says, the Sinhala Buddhist community in Sri Lanka believes that Anuradhapura is the birthplace and identity of their civilization. Because of this sacred identity, Anuradhapura has been declared a 'sacred city' by the UNESCO world heritage committee after considering its sacred attributes as outstanding universal values to be safeguarded. Hence, this is considered to be one of the most significant sacred cities among the few sacred world heritage cities in the UNESCO world heritage list.

Much recent scholarship by sociologists, cultural geographers and others have suggested that spaces, places and cultural landscapes are actively produced by numerous social activities and thus place becomes a social production. Silva (2008) proposes a definition of the notion of the spirit of place, its constituents, and how the tangible and intangible aspects of a place and culture evoke such a spirit of place and memory of it. Activities take place within the environment, whether they be rituals, festive events, or daily happenings, they each contribute in generating a certain physical and social ambience within the setting. Furthermore, activities are also attributed with meanings, communicated via associated stories, myths, and other forms of narratives. These meanings could be sacred, social or affective meanings, or a combination thereof. To most scholars, sacredness is an experience that arises from religious socialization and people's interactions with a place (Carmichael, Hubert and Reeves, 1994). Places are made dynamic throughout the history because of the community connection and the continuity of religious activities. In this process, seasonal pilgrimage to sacred places develops religious place attachment through rituals and other events. In this regard, conserved structures as well as associated events play a significant role. Continuing such activities should be an important strategy in preserving the symbolic image of the sacred city.

Over the long centuries, Anuradhapura was associated with several traditions that formed part of the sacred place. Though Buddhism as a philosophy does not encourage any ritual or observance in relation to sacred spaces, as a living sacred place, Anuradhapura evolved many such traditions. The many

religious processions and events add colour to the sacred city. The great chronicle *Mahavamsa* and other chronicles such as *Bodhivamsa* (genealogy of Sacred Bo-tree) and *Thupavamsa* (genealogy of the great stupa) describe how, many such ritualistic events occurred in the premises of the sacred city. The Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien describes a procession in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relic held in Anuradhapura in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and it is interesting to note that the same procession (*Esala Perahara*) is still being held in Kandy. Today in Anuradhapura, a huge number of religious and ritualistic festivals such as *Poson-festival*, *Aluth sahal mangallaya*<sup>2</sup>, *Parana avurudu mangallaya*<sup>3</sup>, *Nanumura-mangalya*<sup>4</sup>, *Karthi-mangalya or Daramiti-poya*<sup>5</sup>, *Dalada-perahara*<sup>6</sup>, *Sanghamitta-perahara*<sup>7</sup> and *Picca-mal-puja*<sup>8</sup> are celebrated annually. The biggest of these festivals is the Poson-festival held on the full-moon day in June. This celebrates the day when *Thera Mahinda* from India arrived in Mihintale (Kurukulasooriya, 2005). All these ritualistic festivals offer respect to most sacred places in the city, thus heightening the sacred experience of the city. This overall experience of the sacredness of the city can also be described as a core-dimension of a living sacred city. This core-dimension of the SCA is, in fact, evoked by means of the collection of stronger tangible features and significant intangible meanings associated with the SCA. An integrated approach to conservation and development should focus on managing the sacredness as a spirit of the place, by fostering and promoting the core-dimension of the place sacrality.

How does Buddhism as a religion affect a community's attachment to sacred places? Some scholars like Wijesuriya (2005) argue that place is an integral part of religion and religion can in turn play a significant role in the promotion of place attachment. In Buddhist philosophy, sacredness is a mental feeling, but the sacred experience is influenced by the inherited

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<sup>2</sup> This is a festival to offer the first portion of the paddy harvest to the Sacred Bo Tree usually held in January.

<sup>3</sup> This is held to obtain blessings from the Sacred Bo Tree for the New Year falling in April.

<sup>4</sup> This is a festival held in the New Year in April or May and involves all the *Atamasthana*.

<sup>5</sup> This is held in July or August when people bring wood to the Sacred Bo Tree as offerings.

<sup>6</sup> A reminiscent of the ancient procession in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relic, this is held in July when the procession starts from the *Ruvanvalisaya* stupa and ends at the Sacred Bo Tree.

<sup>7</sup> This is a procession celebrating the bringing of the Sacred Bo Tree sapling from India by *Theri Sanghamitta*, daughter of Emperor Asoka, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It is held annually on December full-moon day.

<sup>8</sup> This is a festival of offering flowers to the *Ruvanvalisaya* stupa.



unique characteristics of the place. Architectural design and religious symbols (stupas with relics, images and image houses, chapter houses, *Bodhigharas*, *Dharmasalas* etc.) are also important to define the sacredness of a place. These sacred structures provide the setting for the learning and expression of religious identity. The architectural design and physical elements and built environment can transport the believer to a different place and reality. In Anuradhapura this is done through the selection of location, designs of spaces in monasteries at micro level, and in the city at macro level. All sacred structures and built spaces are places of devotees, veneration, meditation, and education. Through their design and aesthetics, they help bring a person closer to the Buddhist triad: the *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, as well as religious ideals like spirituality.

The behaviour setting and physical attributes of the sacred city makes clear the importance of preserving both the sacred structures and the associated religious practices in order to sustain the sacredness of the place. It can be argued that sacredness is a spirit of the place and an experiential quality, unique to a particular place. This experiential quality is a combination of tangible heritage attributes (of buildings, landscape, objects, people, activities, etc.) and intangible heritage attributes (cultural attitude towards environment and its use, symbolic meanings embedded in the place, historical memories, personal attachments, emotions, preferences, etc.) of the place.

Though conserving sacredness as an intangible heritage value is a highly neglected aspect within the authoritative material based heritage conservation discourse at global level, it has been a major topic of discussion in the history of conservation in Anuradhapura during the last century. The history of the Department of Archaeology and Archaeology in Sri Lanka is mostly about conservation of the SCA. Even before Independence, the Department of Archaeology recognised the need for sensitivity in dealing with the SCA. Preservation of the site has been a longstanding concern of Sri Lankan authorities too. The first preservation ordinance dates from 1938, when Anuradhapura was gazetted as a Wildlife Sanctuary, falling under the Fauna & Flora Protection Ordinance and related amendments. This status is still applicable, raising the level of protection for the Sacred Area. Godakumbura (1960), the Commissioner of the State Department of Archaeology commented in his official reports of 1960/61 and 1961/62 that, 'most of our monuments are inseparably tied up with the religion of the majority of the citizens and this often makes it difficult to hold the balance between the conflicting interest of science and religion' (Wijesuriya, 2001:31-36). He further states that 'as we proceed to write this report on yet

another year's progress of the Department, we sincerely hope that we have satisfactorily met the demands of both religion and science' (*ibid*, 2001:35). The UNESCO sponsored Cultural Triangle Project had the principle for religiosity at the top of its agenda and stated 'these sites will have to be considered as religious sites with monks and pilgrims playing their parts in religious establishments' (Wijesuriya, 2005:32).

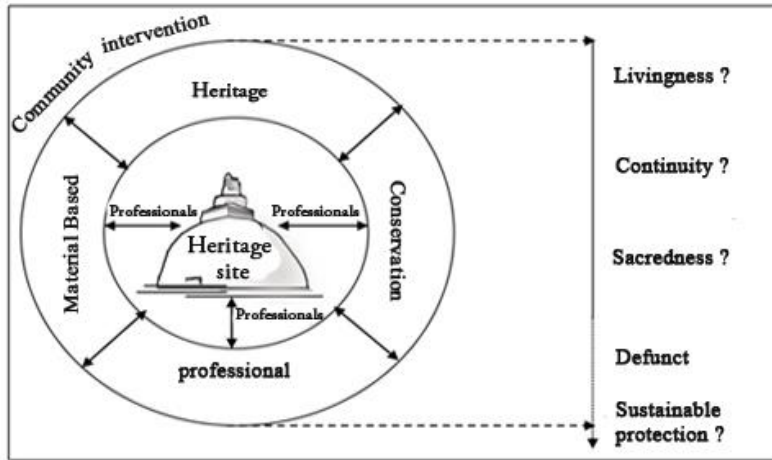
Main planning approaches adopted during the last few decades, and such plans as the Anuradhapura preservation plan (1949), the sacred area planning scheme (1984) and the greater Anuradhapura development plan (2000) reflect the need for conservation of the sacred heritage through planning strategies. The urban plan was implemented in 1949 by the British urban planner Sir Clifford Holliday in order to free the archaeological site from human occupation, which led to a division of the city into 3 spaces: on the west, the sacred city gathering the principal archaeological remains (1), a green central corridor (2) and the modern city on the East (3), designed in the "garden city" tradition. The project area matches the entire Anuradhapura Municipal Council (AMC) territory, thereby covering both the Sacred City and Modern City. The sacred area planning scheme (1984) illustrates how the sacredness of the ancient city centre of Anuradhapura has moved the entire political structure of the country to invent innovative approaches to conserve the city centre. This planning example shows how sacredness dominated the decision making process to the conservation of the SCA.

As far as practice and policy implementation at SCA is concerned, conserving the sacred involves a range of issues. As a consequence, the application of the modern scientific and material based conservation approach with an extreme focus on the preservation of the material/fabric (Figure 1) by conservation professionals, recent stupa restoration interventions (*Jetavana* stupa and *Abhayagiriya* stupa) under the Central Cultural Fund, illustrate the contradiction between the need for associated communities and the need for professional conservators. The weakness of the material-based approach is the exclusive power of the conservation experts. Furthermore, the approach does not recognise indigenous religious communities as significant group of stakeholders of heritage sustainability.

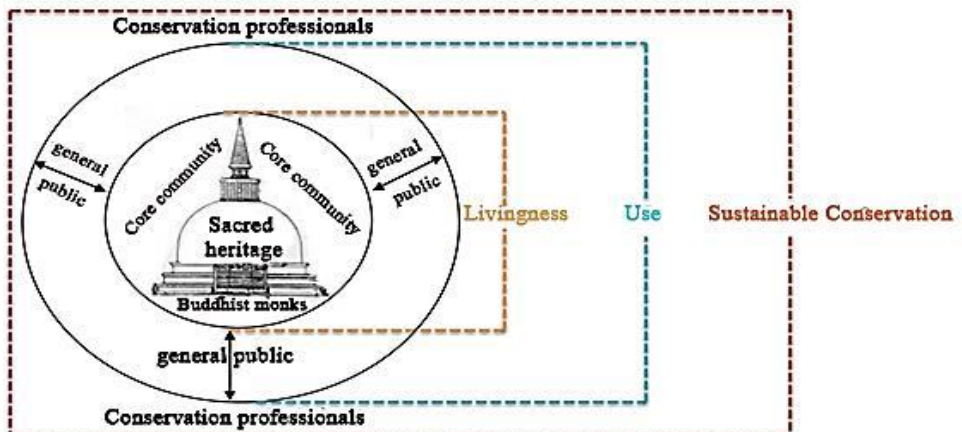
When religious practices stop occurring as a result of the material based conservation approach, the place identity shifts from being a sacred to historic place, and ends up with meaningless professional conservations. Therefore, we argue that conservation of sacredness and livingness as part of place identity is a must for continued religious use of a living heritage site like SCA (Figure 2). The main objective of conservation should not be the

preservation of heritage itself, but the protection of the values of different associated stakeholder groups. A Living Heritage Conservation Approach attempts to represent the whole range of stakeholder groups throughout the conservation process, and resolve conflicts that inevitably arise between them.

**Figure 1** Material Based Conservation Approach (Rajapakse, 2017a)



**Figure 2** Living Heritage Conservation Approach (Rajapakse, 2017b)



## Conclusion

Several themes relevant to the larger literature on sacred space and place identity has emerged from this study and, in the process, it revealed the multifaceted relationship between people, Buddhism, and the sacred city of Anuradhapura. This study on the sacred city of Anuradhapura establishes the symbiotic relationship between religion (Buddhism) and sacred place. Place and place characteristics are important in the development of people's close connection with sacred structures and cities. These cities and structures are associated with mythical and historical stories and events of the nation and Buddhism. The Sacred City of Anuradhapura, for Buddhists, is an example of a collective religious possession and a valuable historical and cultural asset.

This study helps us to define different dimensions of the sacredness of SCA and these dimensions are, in fact, evoked by the collection of stronger tangible characteristics and significant intangible meanings associated with the place. The '*sense of sacrality*' of the city is derived mainly from the presence of the sacred symbols such as Bo-trees and stupas with relics and the great monasteries of the Sri Lankan Buddhist Order.

This study argues that sacredness is an experiential quality, unique to SCA. Therefore, in heritage preservation programs, the following aspects need to be given attention. First, sacred meaning and community values associated with monuments should be given priority rather than preserving the physical fabric with minimum intervention. For this, a living heritage conservation approach would be a better option as a value-based intervention. Second, attention should be given to the behavioural aspects of a site to promote interaction and continued use between the sacred place and the associated community.

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