

# Understanding historic Asian cities as ecosystems

18 February 2020, by Rick Hellman



A view of Sri Lanka's historic Galle Fort, home to a multi-ethnic community. Credit: Kapila Silva

The preservation of Asia's historic urban fabric is a passion for Kapila Silva, a Sri Lanka native and University of Kansas associate professor of architecture.

But he has long believed that laws protecting [historic buildings](#) cannot, alone, solve the problem. Rather, Silva asserts, in order to be sustainable, preservationists must take into deep consideration the context of the site and the desires of contemporary users.

That perspective clearly informs his latest work on the subject—a new book he edited and co-wrote, "[The Routledge Handbook on Historic Urban Landscapes in the Asia-Pacific](#)" (Routledge, 2020).

When Silva accepted editorship of the project, he reached out to his international network of colleagues in the field for ideas on chapters, themes and places to feature. The book wound up with 37 chapters written by 48 different writers and co-writers. Silva penned the introduction and co-wrote two of the chapters.

"The interesting thing is that the authors come from

different academic, professional and cultural backgrounds," Silva said. "Whatever they write ... always challenges what you believe in your subject area and your discipline. Then, as an editor, you try to make sense out of all these diverse perspectives, to bring them under some kind of a conceptual umbrella and make the reader see how they are connected to each other."

The book contains an extensive survey of places from Australia to Iran to Nepal, including the ghats (stepped terraces) lining the Ganges River in Varanasi, India; the historic port town of Tomo on Japan's Seto Inland Sea; and the Galle Fort in Silva's native Sri Lanka. Other chapters are more thematic, like ones on rural development and the "Sensory Heritage of Asian Cities."

Silva's KU colleague Mahbub Rashid, professor of architecture and interim dean, wrote a chapter on urban landscape management in Kolkata, India. And former KU lecturers Farhana Ferdous and Julie Lawless collaborated with Silva on the chapter "Sustainable Urbanism and Historic Urban Landscape Conservation."

"It doesn't mean that you can preserve the environment and then just leave it like that, and expect nothing will happen for the next 150 years," Silva said. "That's not the case. Things change in these locations. People change, governments change, the way people value these historic environments change. The [global economy](#) or [global climate](#) also have impacts on these places.

"You cannot just study a place and consider that our study of this [place](#) is done. There's always another issue coming up someday. So it's very important to regularly study historical monuments and the conservation of historical environments."

Silva said the new book is a look at how the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach adopted in 2011 by the United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has worked out over the past decade in the Asia-Pacific region. He believes it's a move in the right direction.

"In urban environments, if they are not the archaeological sites—if people are living in those places—there are a lot of issues," Silva said, "meaning, the social and economic development of those places, trying to add [modern technology](#) and modern transportation, retrofitting those places to accommodate modern amenities and people's change of lifestyles. And then, eventually, with the climate crisis, we need to design cities in a very sustainable manner," recognizing their larger ecological and political settings.

In the short term, Silva said, governments need to permit more changes to historic landscapes, and their architecture, in hopes of preserving their essence.

"People are living there, and they want to make changes," Silva said. "So these are emerging, evolving places, and we need a completely different approach ... within which we understand cities as ecosystems. They have their own kind of life. We need to ... somehow balance our conservation requirements with the need for socio-economic development."

"The professional stance about conservation of history at all costs in the urban environment is pretty limited. It shouldn't be at all costs. We need to be very enlightened about it and do the best we can to preserve as much as possible."

**More information:** "The Routledge Handbook on Historic Urban Landscapes in the Asia-Pacific" (Routledge, 2020). [www.routledge.com/The-Routledg ... p/book/9781138598256](http://www.routledge.com/The-Routledg...p/book/9781138598256)

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