

# World class from within: Aspiration, connection and brokering in the Colombo real estate market

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/epd](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epd)**Alessandra Radicati**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how the aspirational urban form of the ‘world-class city’ is produced from within the city itself. Rather than focusing on global competition between cities, the analysis considers how local actors in key industries discursively and materially produce the world-class city through their labor. The analytic of *connection* is introduced as central to understanding how world-class city-making projects are achieved. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Colombo’s high-end real estate sector, the article examines how a successful broker creates and manages connections across different scales and registers. It focuses on three key areas: (1) the rhetorical connections drawn between luxury real estate and national development; (2) the connections created between wealthy foreign clients and local property owners and (3) the work of connecting disparate narratives about supply and demand for luxury housing. I highlight that against the backdrop of considerable economic and political uncertainty, connections are valuable even if they do not result in immediate profit. Offering a glimpse into the world of white-collar professionals in the luxury real estate industry, this paper underscores that world-class city-making projects are embedded in local realities even as they reflect generalized patterns of urban development.

**Keywords**

Real estate, connection, world-class city, aspiration, labor, Colombo, Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

The sights and sounds of construction are constant companions in Colombo. Since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in May 2009, the city has been in a permanent state of building. The roads of the Sri Lankan capital are lined by glossy billboards advertising new places to live, each seemingly more luxurious than the last. New housing complexes promise amenities like swimming pools, gyms, air-conditioning and 24-hour security. Many of these buildings are being constructed by property developers from China, India, South Korea, Hong Kong or Singapore; they are material proof of the island's ability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Home to five million inhabitants and located near the island's only functional international airport, Colombo is central to the Sri Lankan state's vision of post-conflict economic development. But aspirational rhetoric about Colombo's future omits the ambiguities of the present. The realities of the Colombo economy and real estate market are far less optimistic than advertisements suggest. This is an economy of appearances (Tsing, 2000), in which the visual markers of success – new building sites, soaring skyscrapers and digital renderings of the future city – belie the more complex dynamics facing city residents, potential investors, real estate brokers and developers.

Colombo's construction boom raises one obvious question: who are these buildings for? With monthly rents representing far more than what many Sri Lankans might earn in a year, I immediately noticed a disconnect between the quantity of buildings springing up, and what I knew to be the financial situations of my informants, friends and acquaintances.<sup>1</sup> This was borne out in industry reports; a 2014 report by Jones Lang LaSalle indicated that the vast majority of Colombo residents were priced out of home ownership; “only the top 10% income-earning households, i.e. 8.7% of the resident population in Colombo, can buy a two-bedroom or three-bedroom apartment in Colombo” (Ragunathan and Bera, 2014: 10; see also Abeyasekara et al., 2019; Perera, 2016).<sup>2</sup> The luxury buildings visible everywhere were quite clearly out of sync with the purchasing capabilities of most people in the city. The solution to this problem, typically described by professionals working in the luxury real estate sector, was to fill the gap with wealthy foreigners (also referred to as “expats”<sup>3</sup>). But, as I discuss in more detail below, attracting and sorting through expats – in order to profit off of them – was not always a straightforward task and required labor on the part of industry professionals and brokers.

This article builds on recent discussions about urban theory in and of the Global South to complicate our understanding of how “world-class cities” are produced. An acute tension exists in contemporary urban studies which Hilary Angelo and Kian Goh frame as a series of debates pitting “difference against abstraction” (Angelo and Goh, 2020; see also Goonewardena, 2018; Jazeel, 2018; Khatam and Haas, 2018; Oswin, 2018). Through an in-depth ethnographic account of life in Colombo, I respond to calls for “deeply contextual” work on cities (Jazeel, 2018), while not losing sight of the widespread power of the world-class city form or the “global patterning of urban geographies” (Angelo and Goh, 2020: 4). In order to bridge this gap conceptually, I owe a significant debt to the work of Nipesh Palat Narayanan (2020b) and Nihal Perera (2009), whose scholarship has highlighted the various strategies of familiarization (Perera, 2009) and the local appropriations (Narayanan, 2020b) of global ideals manifested in Asian cities. Narayanan describes the world-class city as a “quintessentially . . . local construct” (2020b: 269) rather than an imposition from the Global North, which in turn demands that urban scholars pay attention to the nuances of how this “provincialized” construct is deeply rooted in local histories, planning agendas and power relations (p. 280). The term “world-class city” in the Sri Lankan context is a slogan used by the Sri Lankan state, corporations and elites<sup>4</sup>; it should be read as both an emic term used

within the world of luxury real estate, as well as being understood with reference to critical scholarly debates, which I unpack in the next section. By centering ethnographic work which offers a glimpse into the perspectives, thoughts and practices of a particular broker, I attend to the ways in which the dream of a world-class Colombo is constructed from within the city itself, rather than tracing the external origins of these aspirations. The framing of building the world-class city “from within” echoes Perera and Tang’s (2013) push for “inside-out” thinking about Asian cities.

I explore the work that goes into producing Colombo as a successful “world-class city” (Baviskar, 2010; Ghertner, 2015), through a critical look at the labor of real estate brokering and sales. I underscore the importance of *connection* in this work,<sup>5</sup> suggesting that building connections of various kinds – social, material and even rhetorical – are a crucial part of brokering. Drawing heavily on conversations and observations of one broker in particular, I argue that the connections being generated are more important than any single deal or a certain amount of profit. Connections at various scales – personal, familial, professional, but also the macro-level connections between Colombo and other places in the world – are crucial in producing and reproducing the city as a world-class destination. Amidst volatile economic conditions, connection is valuable in and of itself, and can translate into unexpected avenues for profit and success long after an initial relationship is forged. The importance of informal relationships and the cultivation of personal connections and networks are explored in the context of white-collar professionals working in a highly profitable industry aligned with the interests of the Sri Lankan state, rather than through the experiences of poor or marginalized urban residents.

My analysis is shaped by a particular understanding of how discourse and materiality are linked. The project of world-class city-making in Colombo is an ideological undertaking in which symbolic and material registers inform each other. The connections I describe in this essay include the practical types of connection one would expect to find in real estate: introducing customers to landlords, buyers to sellers, with a rental or sale agreement being the evidence of a successful connection. But some of the connections I describe are more abstract; they involve utterances, rhetoric and discursive practices that frame the city and the luxury real estate market in certain ways, without producing any immediate profit. Following Julia Elyachar (2010), I am interested in how labor, in this case the labor of brokering, produces “channels” which can transmit both information and economic value (p. 453). These channels, or connections, become “a social infrastructure on which other projects oriented around the pursuit of profit [can] be constructed” (Elyachar, 2010: 453). This has particular implications in the real estate market of an emerging world-class city, in which developers have to “discursively and aesthetically” distance new buildings from the rest of the urban environment and in which “persuasive narratives and images [are] vital to industry members’ attempts to create demand and attract investment” (Searle, 2013: 274–275). Acts of communication have material effects in contexts where the possibility of profit is so intimately tied to abstract ideas of aspiration and appearance.

While urban development is generally orchestrated by the Sri Lankan state, white-collar professionals and business people play a key role in shaping the symbolic and material terrain of Colombo. Previous studies of Sri Lankan life (e.g. Kemper, 1993; Perera, 2013; Venugopal, 2018) have pointed out the numerous entanglements between projects of national identity and private industry. Real estate development and brokering are no exception, as the Urban Development Authority (UDA), Board of Investment (BOI) and representatives of both major political coalitions work with developers to re-purpose urban land (Nagaraj, 2016; see also Abeyasekara et al., 2019). In this account of the Colombo real estate market, my narrative centers on a specific professional: Ahmed, a young, multi-lingual, entrepreneur

with his own brokering firm.<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Ahmed is *representative* of real estate brokers in general; instead, I view my engagement with him “as an ethnographic entry point that illuminates broader contexts and processes from a particular position of mediation” (Lindquist, 2015: 874). Inspired by other recent studies of urban figures of modernity (Harms, 2013: 196), I suggest there is much to be learned from how individual people navigate and make sense of the aspirational urban contexts in which they find themselves.

Looking closely at the figure of a broker accomplishes two things. First, it sheds light on the workings of one of the industries central to the development of Colombo as a world-class city. While many different kinds of work contribute to the planning, design and maintenance of the cityscape, luxury property development is the most spectacularly and self-consciously situated of the various new forms of activity visible in the Sri Lankan capital. Second, by focusing on a specific broker, this article conveys not only the stakes of real estate for the city but the effects of world-class city-making on individuals. Ahmed is unique, idiosyncratic and unusual – like everyone else. And yet his idiosyncrasies point to broader social realities created by world-class city-making projects, highlighting specifically how national and urban aspiration is embodied and experienced at the individual level. This article thus provides a starting point for further discussions about the life-worlds of brokers and other upwardly mobile professionals, people who fold world-class city aspirations into their daily lives and routines and thus produce the world-class city from within.

In what follows, I draw on informal interviews, engaged observation and my own experiences of working with Ahmed as his client, as well as meetings with some of his employees and social circle. In addition to my interactions with Ahmed – which have taken place in person, over email, and via social media for the past five years – my observations are anchored in interviews with marketing managers for major property developers and real estate industry analysts; attendance at real estate industry events; site visits to luxury developments in various areas of the city and review of industry documents which spelled out trends in the city’s property market. My reflections on Colombo real estate and its relationship to projects of world-class city-making are part of a broader study of urban development in the Sri Lankan capital, which comprised 13 months of ethnographic research conducted between late 2014 and 2016 as well as additional fieldwork in 2019. All of my work is shaped by my positionality as a white foreigner in Colombo. Although my financial means were much more limited than the other foreigners, Ahmed was accustomed to working with, the social capital I possessed as a PhD student at an elite western university granted me access to his time and insights, and likely played a role in others’ willingness to speak with me. Connection is central to research, just as it is to real estate. At the time of fieldwork, I spoke Sinhala at an intermediate level. However, all interviews and discussions for this article were conducted in English, as this was spoken fluently and used for day-to-day purposes by Ahmed and others whose words I relate here.

I begin by discussing the centrality of connection to world-class city-making projects. I then turn to a discussion of how Ahmed drew particular kinds of connections between personal, familial and national understandings of success, progress and development. In the next section, I look closely at how foreigners in Colombo are connected to properties, and how they are sorted and assessed by Ahmed. Before concluding, I consider the disconnect between supply of luxury housing in the Colombo real estate market, and the actual versus imagined demand for such property. I end by offering some reflections on what centering connection in real estate might offer the study of world-class cities beyond Colombo.

## Connected? The “successful” world-class city

Like many capital cities across the Global South, Colombo is the focus of ambitious and fanciful claims about the future (Abeyasekara et al., 2019; Amarasuriya and Spencer, 2015; Godamunne, 2015; Nagaraj, 2016; Chan et al. 2020; Palat Narayanan, 2020b; Radicati, 2020). Described variously as “the Wonder of Asia,” a “hub city,” an emerging “megapolis” or “world-class city” in declarations by the Sri Lankan state, Colombo is a site of aspiration. In this essay, I situate Colombo and my analysis of its real estate market within the scholarly literature on world-class cities.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, I show the role played by *connection* in world-class city-making projects. As my ethnographic material (related in subsequent sections) shows, connections of various kinds and produced at various scales are integral to the work that Ahmed performs as a broker. Here, I wish to consider connection itself as constitutive of the world-class city.

In Colombo, the ideals of world-classness and success are tied to the city’s prospects for global connection. Policy-makers and business people frequently invoke the trope of the city as a “hub” in the Indian Ocean region, a nod to what many perceive to be the city’s “strategic location” and the potential – still unrealized – for greater connection via air and sea routes (Radicati, 2018). While these narratives make specific use of the island’s history and regional ties, this focus on connection is not unique to Colombo. Brenda Yeoh has noted that global cities are typically placed in competition with one another, and that part of this competition is based on which cities are more able to leverage connection to other places:

the global city concept is often used not so much as an analytical tool but as a ‘status’ yardstick to measure cities in terms of their global economic linkages, to locate their place in a hierarchy of nested cities and to assess their potential to join the superleague. (1999: 608)

In other words, connection is fundamental to what makes a successful world-class city. Connections might be symbolic and vertical (a place in an imagined hierarchy) or logistical and horizontal (commerce, trade and infrastructure linking global cities to each other). Connections might be expressed in terms of “cross-referencing” and constant comparison to other cities (Roy and Ong, 2011), or they might involve connecting futurity and aspiration to imaginations of “elsewhere” (Bunnell et al., 2018).

Rather than taking these external forms of connection as the focus, this article turns attention to the ways that people and industries within the city itself participate in urban development projects aligned with state interests. Instead of assuming that world-class city-making projects rely solely or primarily on global competition and exchange, I offer an ethnographic exploration of how actors in the local luxury real estate industry shape processes of urban transformation. Connection is crucial, both beyond and within the city. Alongside the obvious forms of transnational linkages that might be readily understood to underpin world-class city-making dreams, Colombo life offers abundant examples of the importance of less glamorous forms of connection needed to prop up failing material and technological infrastructures: tuk-tuk drivers build relationships with customers who make use of their expert ability to navigate through the city’s punishing traffic, along poorly maintained and clogged roads; people repeatedly visit the same shops in Pettah to get a better deal on goods that would be heavily marked up in the city’s malls, using personal relationships with vendors to circumvent more conventional retail spaces; in times of turmoil and violence, city residents circulate news and rumor in equal measure by text message or word of mouth when social media channels are shut down.<sup>8</sup>

All of the above examples speak to the importance of relationships for making the city function. They suggest that connection exists at multiple scales, not only at the level of the geopolitical and global, but at the level of the street or neighborhood. The reliance on such alternative infrastructures is often viewed as precisely what makes Colombo an “unsuccessful” city in the competition between aspirational urban centers: such forms of sociality suggest that modern, material infrastructures are not working properly. But, as Ahmed’s own work attests, connections do not matter to the urban poor alone; in elite spheres of life, too, people rely on personal relationships, gossip and informal channels to create and maintain their lives. Emergent world-class cities *need* connection at various scales – global, local, personal – to function.

Colombo’s luxury real estate market is a crucial site at which to examine the intersections of different aspirational scales. High rise luxury buildings “inscribe a calligraphy of global significance” (Ong, 2007: 83); the success or failure of various real estate projects is a significant part of what might make the city read as world-class. This is just as much about the look and feel of the city, as it is about actual sales or occupancy of units. Unlike understandings of global urbanism which rank cities in the global economy, based on the presence of significant financial markets (e.g. Sassen, 1991), the world-class city relies instead on “clearly felt, even while unmeasured, standards of order and appearance”; these implicit understandings “give world-classness a sensory self-evidence” (Ghertner, 2015: 8–9). Luxury housing complexes feed into the aesthetics of the cityscape, which produce a kind of circular logic – one *knows* that something is world-class when visually or experientially presented with it (Ghertner, 2015; Harms, 2012).

In this analysis, I shift focus from aesthetics to connection. My interest here lies in showing how the social and material channels created by someone like Ahmed act alongside the visual markers of development to *make them* make sense to key demographics: foreigners and wealthy Sri Lankans. In a context of urban development without clear benchmarks or criteria (Ghertner, 2015: 9), the relative success of world-class city-making projects is fuzzily defined. Various actors can thus declare Colombo “world-class” by referring to the visual evidence of change, but the visuals do not speak for themselves. Narratives are needed to explain why spectacular luxury compounds exist alongside urban poverty; stories have to be told to account for the disconnect between developers’ plans and the actual number of people able to purchase high-end apartments; someone has to make these dissonances look and feel like part of a larger story of development.

This is where Ahmed comes in.

## **“A developing mind, a developing nation”**

“*Real* real estate comes from the heart, it’s about relationships,” said Ahmed. It was a weekday evening in the fall of 2015 and we were sitting in Colombo’s exclusive Cinnamon Grand Hotel. Amidst surroundings designed to mimic a cross between a typical British pub and an American-style sports bar, Ahmed and I were eating dinner with some of his friends and colleagues who sat discussing their work in the real estate industry. He continued:

Real estate isn’t about the nine to five – it’s not “typical.” It’s fun. You get to go to meetings and not sit in the office all day. We’re lifestyle specialists. We can help you with what kind of lifestyle you want to lead.



The others in the group nodded, and all seemed throughout the evening to agree enthusiastically with much of what Ahmed had to say. As they spoke, I came to understand that most people at the table owed their jobs to him. One person was his brother, who was helping him build up what had originally been their parents' much more informal family business. Another was a man slightly younger than Ahmed, who had met him at school – and now spoke of him as his “mentor.” Although when Ahmed spoke of “relationships” in real estate, he meant primarily the relationships he created with landlords and customers, our dinner in Cheers Pub drove home the centrality of relationships – familial, friendly and professional – to his work. The work of real estate, as understood by Ahmed and his associates, was not only about the labor of selling and showing properties, but about building relationships of different kinds which might eventually lead to profit.

Ahmed's view of social connections is informed by his own experience of class mobility. “I grew up hearing a lot of filth,” he sometimes says apologetically, when mentioning his upbringing in one of Colombo's rougher neighborhoods. Like many working-class areas of the Sri Lankan capital, the place Ahmed grew up was multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, and so he cheerfully notes that the “filth” he heard was in both Sinhala and Tamil. Although not desperately poor, his parents were not wealthy. His father worked as a tour guide and occasionally as a real estate broker for foreigners; this is how Ahmed was first exposed to the business. Describing a moment that clarified his ambitions to leave behind these modest circumstances, Ahmed often speaks of a memory from his teenage years, when he saw a vegetable seller in the neighborhood walk by, carrying a heavy load. “His back was like this,” says Ahmed, moving his hand at a 90-degree angle to his wrist. “I thought, no. No please. Not for me.”

Now, Ahmed's business depends heavily on relationships with landlords who are much wealthier than he. Born in one of Colombo's poorer neighborhoods, his family had only recently managed to move out to a nicer suburb. Ahmed's role as a broker means that he is in constant contact with extremely wealthy Sinhala-Buddhist and Sinhalese Christian families, as well as with Tamils and Muslims. In addition, he sorts through and evaluates potential renters and buyers from all over the world. In this way, Ahmed's work brings him into contact with many different kinds of people, including both elite, property-owning Sri Lankans, and foreigners from a number of different continents. Ahmed thus occupies a unique position vis-à-vis both landlords and potential renters and buyers – as a real estate broker, he performs a function which requires constant adaptation, and in which he is in close relation with people whose financial and social capital dwarfs his own.

Connection is central to Ahmed's work. In order to get customers and make a commission, it is necessary to build relationships. Some of Ahmed's most lucrative deals have been made through chance encounters with the right people – what he calls “the upmarket crowd.” He establishes friendships with wealthy people, usually men, and over time this can translate into big returns when one of these friends needs to sell a property, or knows someone who does. Meeting new friends and potential clients might be a matter of luck and timing, but this is “luck” within controlled circumstances. Ahmed is not looking for friends outside of the established channels of influence and power in Colombo. He speaks openly about the way wealth is concentrated in Sri Lanka, never critical but rather marveling at the influence of the rich. “Money rotates in a circle within themselves,” he said to me once as we had drinks at another high-end Colombo hotel, moving his fingers in a circular motion, closing an invisible loop. A circle was a convenient shape for describing the flow of money and influence within the Colombo elite: it showed how things might move in a cyclical fashion, never leaving a confined circuit. And yet Ahmed's use of the pronoun “them” in presenting this idea, combined with what I knew about his early life, positioned him rather

uncertainly relative to this circle. The circle might be closed most of the time, but he had succeeded in opening it up a bit – just widely enough for himself to enter, at least.<sup>9</sup>

Real estate in Colombo is deeply entangled with broader conversations about Sri Lanka's national development and post-conflict economic growth. Although Sri Lankan politics are characterized by deep polarization and party divisions, both the Rajapaksa government which ruled from 2005 to 2015 and the coalition government which unexpectedly swept to power in January 2015 saw “development” as their primary goals (Tennekoon, 1988).<sup>10</sup> Despite the two major parties' longstanding antagonism, there was little disagreement about the methods to be employed in bringing about development: foreign investment and the marketing of Sri Lanka as a utopia for businesses sat at the core of both governments' post-conflict economic strategies.

Real estate development was one core piece of this strategy, as many politicians and developers hoped that Sri Lanka would become like Dubai, Shanghai or Singapore, places where people from all over the world bought properties for investment purposes, as forms of “pied a terre citizenship” (Ong, 2007). Luxury apartments are not only built with foreign capital, they also consciously refer to and play on Sri Lankan aspirations to match foreign lifestyles. One recent ad for a luxury development blatantly makes this connection in its depiction of a lavish living room looking out onto an urban skyline and promising “*first world living spaces*.” Luxury housing is not only a matter of personal preference and desire; the construction of such buildings and people's choices to buy them blur the distinction between consumption and citizenship (Kemper, 1993: 383), as a purchase indicates a vote of confidence in Sri Lanka's overall development trajectory.

To Ahmed, real estate was about more than housing; how people lived and where they lived signaled their commitment to development. He often spoke of how Sri Lankans needed to be “educated” into learning how to live in apartment buildings, as opposed to houses. This translated into critiques of those he deemed less cosmopolitan. For example, Ahmed preferred not to show properties in certain areas of the city, even if they were centrally located, because of people's tendency to dry their laundry outdoors on balconies and on lines stretched between apartments. “It's not a good look,” he explained, worried that it signaled dirtiness or a “village mentality” to prospective buyers. In guiding clients away from neighborhoods he deems less sophisticated, Ahmed not only creates channels, he cuts off others. Specific neighborhoods drop off the map of “desirable” locations in Colombo, becoming disconnected from the channels of privilege and luxury that Ahmed cultivates.

Ahmed's single-minded focus on development rests on a highly teleological view of both individual and national change. For instance, Ahmed traces a line of improvement and transformation between his parents and himself. He laughs relating his father and mother's decidedly more informal approach to real estate brokerage, describing how his father would take clients out to view properties, meanwhile his mother would sit all day by the landline telephone, waiting for calls so she could relay information back and forth. Ahmed's own methods of communication – sleek mobile phone, social media, WhatsApp messages – provide a significant contrast to this, as does his move to hire employees and incorporate and name his business, giving it a website and dedicated office. His team had originally been based in one of the Colombo suburbs, but eventually moved to a highly desirable address in downtown Colombo – the very heart of the city, where luxury apartments were springing up everywhere one looked. On my last meeting with him, Ahmed spoke of plans to expand even beyond the confines of Sri Lanka itself, speculating about the possibilities of franchising his company in other countries.

Ahmed drew connections between the problems facing the Sri Lankan real estate market and what he viewed as the less cosmopolitan tastes and habits of most Sri Lankans,



including fellow real estate brokers. Instead of framing the troubling data about affordability of homes in Colombo as a sign that the developers were moving too *fast* to introduce expensive units in a market that still contained few buyers with the disposable income necessary to purchase them, Ahmed instead attributed mismatches to local people being too *slow* to catch up to changing values and norms. In one of our first in-depth interviews, he snickered at other real estate agents who “might show up wearing a shirt and sarong,” referring to them as “unprofessional” or “dodgy locals” who didn’t know what they were doing. Ahmed’s western-style formal attire and excellent English was thus an important form of differentiation from these “local” agents. Describing himself as “personally disappointed” in the attitudes of people around him, in our conversations, Ahmed often invoked the mentality of tuk-tuk drivers, symbolic (to him) of the uneducated masses, when he expressed exasperation with the current political situation in Sri Lanka. For Ahmed, the personal preferences and tastes of the majority of Sri Lankans were indicative of how far the country still had to go on the road to development and prestige. He referred to Sri Lanka as being “a developing mind, a developing nation.” “If the mind is not developed,” he said to me once gravely, “then we are still on square one.”<sup>11</sup>

The labor that Ahmed performs in his real estate business goes beyond simply turning a profit; his framing of the city of Colombo as “developing” and his selective view of which neighborhoods are appropriate for his clientele are examples of the very real effects of talking or thinking about the cityscape in particular ways. Ahmed’s views impact how prospective renters and buyers come to understand Colombo, and in doing so dovetail with the Sri Lankan state’s narratives about widespread post-war economic development.

## The complexion of Colombo

The success of the Sri Lankan luxury real estate market, I was told over and over again, would be assured by the arrival of foreigners. Tourists needing hotel rooms, employees of multi-national firms coming to live in Sri Lanka for a few years and wealthy foreign citizens wanting to safely park their money by purchasing Colombo real estate were all classed as foreigners whose speculative presence drove the construction and marketing of high-end buildings. Not only did such people need places to stay, they needed places to eat, shop and spend time. Whether through more transient engagement with Sri Lanka (i.e. a family coming for a two-week holiday), or more lasting stays, the assumption of everyone I interviewed who worked in real estate was that foreigners would heavily supplement – perhaps even surpass – local demand for luxury apartments and retail. Aihwa Ong has noted that “the presence of a significant number of foreign actors is a symbolic image of the city itself, as a participant in the creation and exchange of global signs and values” (2007: 91). Foreign brands and foreign direct investment are crucial to world-class city-making projects, but so are foreign *individuals* (Oswin, 2019). The future of Colombo seemed to depend in part on how many of them it could attract. But who exactly are the foreigners in question? Where do they come from, and how could their presence be converted into profitable opportunities for Colombo real estate developers?

Ahmed played a crucial role in facilitating the entry of foreigners into Colombo. He dealt with both renters and buyers. He described both as “expats,” though their levels of investment in Colombo real estate differed. For an entrepreneurial person like Ahmed, this influx of new people translates into many possibilities for monetary gain, and for solidifying his own connections with the Colombo elites who might be renting out or selling homes to foreigners. One day when we were deep in conversation about his work in the real estate industry, Ahmed observed that since the end of the civil war “the complexion of Colombo is

different.” In hearing these words, I was struck by their multiple meanings. Although Ahmed was in fact talking about the appearance of the cityscape itself – newly paved roads and modern buildings – his words also carried connotations about the race and ethnicity of people inhabiting Colombo. The complexion of Colombo was changing indeed, reflecting the importance of foreign-ness in rendering the city more desirable.

Ahmed positioned himself to take advantage of this “changed complexion” in various ways. His fluency in English was a significant part of this, and in the time that I knew him, he asked my opinion about learning additional European languages to work with a broader clientele. While I first encountered Ahmed as a real estate broker, over time, I heard him describe himself as a general “consultant” for Colombo expats, who could provide advice and insight beyond helping people find a place to live. Ahmed sometimes spoke of foreigners in Sri Lanka as if they were a kind of precious commodity, and seemed to believe them to be inherently at risk in what he considered the treacherous real estate market of Colombo. “Expats need to get guided into a channel, otherwise they get a bad first impression, they get ripped off,” he explained to me once. This comment stuck with me. Just as the luxury buildings springing up around Colombo were marketed based on a sense that they provided separation between occupants and the ever-encroaching city outside, Ahmed’s remark about “expat channels” implied that foreigners in Sri Lanka needed to be separated from the world around them. The shift from real estate broker to lifestyle consultant was relatively seamless, since Ahmed would be among the first Sri Lankans that foreigners might meet on arrival to Colombo, and he could easily deepen and expand his initial working relationships with them.

Through this new facet of his business – and for the price of \$4000 to \$10,000 per client – Ahmed was now involved in new areas of his clients’ lives. He told me about a recent foreign client who worked for an international shipping company. The client needed to furnish his house but ended up “at the wrong place” and was being quoted exorbitant prices by the Sri Lankan salespeople. Ahmed stepped in and took his client to the “right place,” and helped the man buy various home appliances for a much more reasonable price. He also became involved in helping clients select an appropriate school for their children, usually one of the well-known international or British schools in Colombo. I listened once as he riffed for a while on the differences between the Overseas School and the Colombo British School, talking about them as if they were properties he was marketing. “The Overseas School has AC in the classrooms,” he said by way of explanation for its appeal. He considered this new part of his business a way for him to “build a good network” with what he termed “the upmarket crowd” of Colombo expats. Socializing with this “upmarket” demographic lent Ahmed a more successful air, as proximity to foreign-ness and whiteness were seen as highly desirable. These upmarket expats would, in turn, be granted entry in some of Colombo’s most exclusive spaces, frequented by locals and foreigners alike, and could lay the groundwork for future business deals with wealthy Sri Lankans.

Ahmed thought expats operated in a different moral field from Sri Lankans. According to him, “they have certain ethics, a certain level of decency.” But working with foreigners also required a certain amount of discernment. Ahmed saw it as part of his job to help landlords, owners and sellers ensure that the people who lived in their properties were suitable and trustworthy. He had to make decisive, often rapid, judgments about people based on only a few interactions. Although Ahmed generally spoke in glowing terms of his foreign clients, his stories also revealed an ability to cut people off if he feared they wouldn’t be suitable. For example, one client – a single man – needed a place to stay in Colombo after being relocated there by his employer. Ahmed dutifully showed him a couple of high-end properties in some of the central neighborhoods of the city. The man was demanding and

unpleasant. When the client went out onto the balcony to take a call, Ahmed heard him speaking rudely to someone on the other end of the line, “dropping F bombs left and right,” and promptly decided he would not “give him” the property – meaning he wouldn’t propose him as a tenant to the apartment’s owner. Ahmed’s personal assessment and impression of the man as uncouth, impolite and aggressive meant that he stepped in to prevent the rental from taking place. His own subjective judgments about a person could play a significant role in facilitating or severing the relationship between landlord and renter.

I myself had been sorted before I even realized it. Ahmed and I connected via an internet platform for expats in Colombo. I had already been living in the city for awhile when I saw his post about a two-bedroom property available for rent in a desirable neighborhood. Our early conversations quickly moved to email, and included only the most minimal details: my rough budget, the neighborhoods I wished to live in and a request to send my phone number, so that we could communicate via text. It wasn’t until I met Ahmed in person that he asked questions about my job and background. He told me later that I “seemed like a nice, trustworthy person” and that he immediately knew he could work with me – an assessment that I now partially attribute to my gender and soft-spoken-ness, in contrast with the man described above. Although invisible to me, Ahmed had already done a considerable portion of the labor of sorting by the time he agreed to show me the apartment in question. My very presence on the internet forum that initially connected us suggested English fluency and cosmopolitanism. My name made clear my European origins. Once in person, Ahmed asked me questions about my research and reasons for being in Colombo. I can now speculate that my academic affiliations and educational status contributed to making me seem like a worthy client, which helped balance my comparatively lower budget. Part of the critical assessment work Ahmed performed was also this: deciding that someone was worth it even if they had less money.

While social capital and individual behavior might act as mitigating factors in particular circumstances, the primary type of assessment Ahmed performed was informed by clients’ nationalities. When I asked Ahmed directly how he approached the task of working with foreigners, he wasted no time in telling me how he broke down his customers by nationality and religion and used his own theories on their different “cultures” to help decide whether they were legitimate prospects and to guide them towards one property or another. In Ahmed’s view, European clients were easy to work with, “friendly, flexible and polite.” He often told me stories about becoming friends with the clients in this group even after the business part of their relationship was over. Next were the Middle Eastern clients – they were harder to work with. “They’re “fussy” and their “culture” isn’t as friendly, they can be very unpleasant to work with,” he explained, musing that perhaps it was due to “their language” which sounded “harsh.” But, he noted, “they have a lot of money.” “Asians” were considered less fussy than Middle Eastern clients. Maldivians were a very undesirable category – “they are looked down upon” he said matter of factly. When I asked why this would be, Ahmed explained that “they are very unclean,” again attributing this to “culture,” and said they will often bring “five, seven or eight people” to live in a single apartment. Chinese and Indian clients “require more screening,” but they could be OK. He explained it was a matter of who they were and their budget – for example, he said, if you have a Chinese or Indian family and their budget is Rs. 80,000 per month “it can get a little dodgy” (meaning their budget was too low). Chinese or Indian renters with higher budgets, however, would be taken more seriously as prospects and be candidates for some of the best properties in Colombo. Incidentally, the apartment I ended up renting from Ahmed was Rs.80,000 per month – at the time this was the limit of what I could afford. Judgments about nationality and race have the concrete effect of causing the same amount of money to be

valued differently. Although Ahmed's views were sometimes shocking in their frank description of what amounted to a racial hierarchy in real estate, they revealed the role played by brokers' individual perspectives and assessments in shaping who could access Colombo and on what terms.

Despite the pride he took in this area of his work, Ahmed was not making his biggest profits off of the rental market. Showing foreigners like me an apartment for rent was not as significant as other deals he reported, such as moving units in new high-end apartment towers, or helping the owner of a local business empire sell his Cinnamon Gardens mansion. A different calculus was clearly at play: foreigners were coming into the city, and needed places to live; local landlords did not want to deal with the work of sorting through these new arrivals, but wished to make money off them. Ahmed thus stepped into the equation, offering his services. The kinds of people who owned properties that would appeal to most "expats" – keeping in mind the term's classed and racialized implications – were Colombo elites who would be good to know if somewhere down the line they decided to sell a property they owned rather than simply rent it. Working the foreign rental market thus helped Ahmed cultivate connections within the world of wealthy and influential Sri Lankans. The value of these connections exceeds the immediate pay-off of renting out a flat. Ahmed initially presided over these channels in a straightforward way, simply connecting foreigners with landlords and taking a commission. But over time, the connections he built with foreigners showed potential to be profitable in other ways, hence his ability to convert the work of real estate brokering into lifestyle consultancy.

As Anna Tsing has observed, the work of assessment is critical to capitalism. According to her, "assessment allows us to consider how the commodity form can be made without industrial labor through a process of translation" (2013: 23). Sometimes, it is unclear what work is actually being performed by someone like Ahmed. And yet, when one examines his methods of sorting through foreigners and the weight his judgements can have, it is clear that underneath the veneer of minimal labor lies considerable effort. On one level, Ahmed forges connections between people and properties. On another level, the channels he creates and the connections he establishes between himself, expats and landlords *are themselves* rendered valuable (Elyachar, 2010: 460) and can be converted into new sources of profit.

## Supply and demand

In emergent world-class cities, day-to-day life is shaped by the future (Ghertner, 2015; Goldman, 2011; Harms, 2013). The city re-makes itself in the service of a "speculative imaginary for world-city investors who may just stay away, and for world-city professionals who have yet to come" (Goldman, 2011: 577). Ahmed's stories about working with expats illuminate some aspects of how their insertion into the city is managed, how channels are created and become profitable. And yet, it remained unclear how many "world-city professionals" were really coming to Colombo and crucially, whether there would be enough of them to justify the construction of the luxury high-rises dotting the urban landscape. The supply of buildings was immediately visible. Could the demand sustain it?

Potential problems arising from mismatches in supply and demand were made most vivid to me during a visit in June 2016 to one of the city's new apartment complexes, which I call here "Colombo One." The place was already being referred to by everyone in the city as Colombo One, though very little could be seen on the patch of land other than a sign bearing the name and logo of this much-anticipated building. A couple of low, one-storey buildings with taupe-colored exteriors and big glass windows nestled close together, as if taking refuge from the sun. Although elegant, they looked decidedly temporary. Inside the

Colombo One offices, I was the only visitor. I was shepherded through the complex and shown both miniature models of the planned luxury apartments as well as a life-sized show unit. As I took in the highly- detailed interiors of these luxury units, designed for an imaginary wealthy family, I also noticed the workers on the other side of the glass windows, toiling in the sweltering midday sun. I had been given a cream-colored folder filled with promotional materials extolling the virtues of Colombo One, especially its “amenities” and “international” reputation which made it a “lifestyle destination” for foreigners and Sri Lankans alike.

The young woman accompanying me through the show-unit was lively and positive as she guided me along the shining tiled floors. She brought me over to a miniature model showing what the completed complex would look like. As I stared at this tiny vision of the future, she pointed out where the on-site shopping mall and five-star hotel would be, as well as the residential apartment towers. I asked how many of the new apartments had already been taken. “The towers are filling up quickly,” she said confidently, gesturing at the model and describing what percentage of each building was already spoken for. When I pushed her on whether these were binding commitments, she showed me an Excel spreadsheet which listed all the units by tower, size and kind and swept her hand over the document, saying that the color-coding spoke for itself – it indicated the level of interest in purchasing a home at Colombo One. There were very few blank cells on the sheet, giving the impression that the units were mostly taken. But when I looked a little more closely, I noticed many of the color-coded squares only bore text that said “interested,” while far fewer actually said “purchased.” At the close of my visit, my guide passed me off to another staff member, more senior to her and considerably less friendly. She answered my questions briskly, as if she had heard them all before. I asked her who the buyers would be. She rattled off the usual reply that it would be “a mix of foreigners and locals.” But when I pressed her on the actual proportions of locals versus foreigners, she confessed that she wasn’t “too sure,” and then waved off the question, asking if I had anything else I’d like to talk about. These encounters highlight the considerable gap between aspirational images and reality, and the deep uncertainties surrounding even the most luxurious new developments. Show apartments, like the one I viewed at Colombo One, “are a critical interface between potential and risks” (Woodcraft, 2020: 24–25), making visible and immediate an object of aspiration which is still unrealized.

In many of my conversations with real estate workers, my questions about oversupply of luxury housing, excessive competition and not enough buyers were met with bland assurances that wealthy foreigners would be making up for gaps in the Sri Lankan market. But a KPMG report from a few years prior cautioned against this, making the sobering observation that

the peak levels of expat interest in Sri Lankan real estate may be fast approaching or even possibly behind us in which case the rate of demand growth will slow down . . . any perceived risks involved with doing business in Sri Lanka also tend to play a significant role in the minds of potential expat buyers. (KPMG, 2012: 4–5)

KPMG’s dour analysis conjured a world in which growth had limits, and the market boom could not last forever. Ahmed, by contrast, seemed fully convinced that the march of development and progress were inevitable. Although he himself had been the one to send me these reports attesting to the Colombo real estate market’s volatility, he continued to operate as if the content of these documents was pure fiction. His optimism seemed boundless. When I would bring up the issue of oversupply, he rarely answered me directly but would



typically counter with a barrage of statistics and numbers, mostly of uncertain provenance: Sri Lanka was bringing in “one million tourists a year” in his estimation, a number that would be doubling in years ahead, “but we only have 400,000 rooms, so accommodation-wise, there’s a *“shortage”* he emphasized. Another time I attempted to address the oversupply issue, Ahmed responded by rehearsing to me his breakdown of the different “tiers” of luxury housing, using this as evidence that Colombo was not saturated with, but in fact *lacking* sufficient luxury units; “I showed a client the Monarch [one of Colombo’s new complexes, which Ahmed classed as “super luxury”]...he looked at me and said, “you call *that* luxury?” I had to explain to him, this is in the Sri Lankan context.” To Ahmed, “oversupply” was hardly a concern in a market which, in his mind, had much farther to go in terms of offering up “international” and “world-class” levels of luxury.

Similar to many other projects of urban and national development which were in evidence across the Sri Lanka from 2009 onwards, the luxury towers which could be seen in digital renderings and on massive billboards were suspended in a state of unclear progress. Many of these developments had estimated completion timelines stretching years into the future, with indications that significant delays in construction were likely. One real estate analyst I interviewed expressed concern that too many of these properties were going to come on the market at the same time, thereby “flooding” the landscape of luxury housing. The analyst proceeded to paint a much gloomier picture of the Colombo market than anything Ahmed had ever shared with me, citing concerns about oversupply, “saturation” and changes in the tax code which were hitting developers with a “triple whammy” making construction materials more expensive, capital gains taxes higher and removing tax breaks for developers. “[Developers] have to have guts to come to Sri Lanka now,” he said. Another marketing professional I interviewed admitted to me that though his employer – a large Sri Lankan firm – was banking on sales of units to foreign customers, this would be hard to achieve because of various legal restrictions. Most notably, a purchase of property would not confer citizenship as it might in other countries, making this a riskier investment.

Magical thinking is hardly alien to capitalism. Critical work on political economy shows the extent to which affect, desire, aesthetics and speculation – “the making present and materializing of uncertain futures” (Bear et al., 2015: 387) – are bound up with capitalism, especially in the context of expansion into new markets (Bear et al., 2015; Searle, 2013; Tsing, 2000; Zaloom, 2003, 2009). In this sense, the performances of confidence undertaken by Ahmed and other real estate professionals are unremarkable. Still, the dissonance between Ahmed’s perspective and that of the real estate analyst and KPMG report struck me. How could such different views of the Colombo real estate market co-exist? This dissonance illuminates the stakes of Ahmed’s labor. The connections he builds are not only material, as in the physical acts of showing buildings to clients, or setting up meetings between buyers and sellers, they are discursive and symbolic. There are real problems in the Colombo real estate market having to do with saturation, affordability and the availability of foreign customers. While there is not much Ahmed can do to change any of these things, he can work to *connect* things in ways that make the real estate market seem more appealing, for example by drawing a link between a statistic about tourism and one about the availability of luxury units and hotel rooms.

Ahmed’s labor, I suggest, is partially about reconciling completely different expectations and world views; it is the labor of making mismatches appear not as “oversupply” at all but as *insufficient demand*. This is a crucial distinction; in the former case, “oversupply” suggests a problem with luxury developments themselves. In the latter, insufficient demand locates the problem of Colombo real estate within the tastes, desires and purchasing power of Sri Lankan consumers. Through his habit of linking national development with housing and

real estate, Ahmed performs the task of framing Sri Lanka as a place in which if people alter – or in his view, *improve* – their modes of living, they will come to want the properties in question. These discursive practices function as a form of phatic labor (Elyachar, 2010) which solidifies connections and lays the groundwork for profitable activity by reassuring potential buyers, making luxury apartments seem like safe investments. In this way, Ahmed’s work aligns him with the overarching objectives of the Sri Lankan state itself and forms a small part of the larger project of attracting capital.

## Conclusion

Many academic studies, including several focused on Colombo, have juxtaposed the urban imaginaries of planners and state representatives with the lived practices and experiences of city-dwellers, particularly those engaged in informal labor and marginalized from power (e.g. Elyachar, 2010; Palat Narayanan, 2020a; Palat Narayanan and Veron, 2018; Perera, 2009; Simone, 2004). This article takes a slightly different approach, inspired by Ananya Roy’s argument that “informality is not synonymous with poverty” (2009: 82). By highlighting the labor of a real estate broker who works with wealthy clients and markets some of Colombo’s most exclusive properties, I offer insights into the ways that informal channels, personal connections and unpredictable relationships also characterize the work of those working within the heart of an industry which is central to the making of a world-class city, not peripheral to it. In doing this, I respond to Nipesh Palat Narayanan’s call to better understand where elite city conceptualizations come from, and how they take shape (2020b).

The literature on world-class city-making in the Global South has shown ample evidence of the disconnects between aspiration and reality (Anjaria and McFarlane, 2011; Pettit, 2018), exclusion and eviction (Doshi, 2013; Harms, 2013b; Nagaraj, 2016) and the importance of aesthetics in justifying oppressive or inequitable forms of urban development (Amarasuriya and Spencer, 2015; Ghertner 2015; Harms, 2012). This ethnography of real estate work in Colombo has offered a distinct perspective on how the world-class city is conceived and (re)produced. I suggest that *connection* is central to the kinds of sweeping development projects envisioned in Asian cities. The analytic of connection allows me to take in not only the interpersonal and individual relationships central to Ahmed’s work, it also accommodates geopolitical and international connections, which are critical to the flow of capital. In the Colombo real estate industry, actors are extremely self-conscious and aware of the need to market the city as “world-class.” But in a context in which there is simultaneously no clearly defined metric for ascertaining whether the city has really achieved world-class status (Ghertner, 2015), *connections* prove to be valuable in ways that do not translate into immediate monetary gain.

The luxury developments dotting the Colombo landscape are as mysterious as they are ubiquitous. It is unclear which of these complexes will be fully realized, living up to the glamorous promises they make. Even those that are completed and ready to welcome new residents may fail to attract sufficient buyers. At present, the Colombo real estate market faces even greater challenges than those outlined in the reports Ahmed initially gave me. The terrorist attacks of April 2019 and the global economic crisis caused by the covid-19 pandemic have contributed to the difficulties of attracting high net-worth buyers. At the same time, the over saturation of the market foreseen in the 2010s has hit the industry hard: rental and sale prices have fallen, and the hoped-for foreigners have not materialized (Cox, 2020). Given Colombo’s rapidly appreciating land prices, it is entirely possible that profit is being made from these buildings in other ways, decoupled from whether or not apartments are filled.<sup>12</sup> But these possibilities are in some ways beside the point: regardless of what might be

happening with developers' finances and the broader political economy of real estate development in Colombo, Ahmed continues working. Single purchases or rental agreements might be small parts of the story of capital, but they matter a great deal to Ahmed and to other white-collar professionals working in marketing and sales for developers.

It is this "smallness" to which I have paid attention, looking at how connections are cultivated between a real estate broker and his various clients. But in the small interactions there have lingered imprints of a larger story, one which Ahmed weaves throughout his narratives about life in Colombo. His rhetoric and framing of the Colombo real estate market produces the image of success at different scales – individual, familial and national. The social infrastructure of which Ahmed is part – and which he constantly reproduces and maintains through his relationships – is intimately tied to the aspirational visions promoted by Sri Lankan state agencies and by real estate developers. In this way, the small details of individual connections nourish and are nourished by larger dreams of national development. The world-class city is produced from within at the same time as it is self-consciously marketed with a view to attracting capital, people and status from outside.

This article offers a starting point for further critical discussions of the real estate industry and property development as a crucial part of world-class city-making in the Global South. While a significant body of literature exists in both anthropology and human geography which considers the role of housing in fueling middle class aspirations (Caldeira, 2000; Falzon, 2008; Srivastava, 2012; Woodcraft, 2020; Zhang, 2010), the daily practices of brokers and other real estate professionals have been less explored. My depiction of Ahmed gestures at the possibility for further ethnographic fieldwork with similar figures. Work on real estate markets in India has shown how developers do more than respond to demand, they have to actively *create* it by invoking aspirational ideas about who might live and work in these new complexes (Searle, 2013). Here, I have built on such insights by showing how real estate industry professionals themselves become interpellated into the very categories of "professionalism" and aspiration that they work to market. By focusing primarily on how an individual broker navigates his work and builds connection, I have offered a glimpse of how those working in the key industries of an aspiring world-class city make sense of the forms of development they work to bring about.

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### Notes

1. To give an idea of scale, in 2016, the national average monthly income in Sri Lanka was estimated to be Rs.62,000/month (about \$300) (Department of Census and Statistics, 2016; De Silva and Sahasrabudh, 2017; Sri Lanka National Budget, 2016). The property Ahmed helped me find cost more than this amount per month, and it was not a "luxury" unit.

2. Even during the war, Colombo land prices increased, if slowly. Colombo land prices then grew at considerable rates amidst the post-conflict excitement; they rose on average by 5% in the first half of 2014, with a higher rate of 7 to 8% in the more central neighborhoods (Raghunathan and Bera, 2014).
3. I use the term “expat” throughout this paper as an emic term widely used by the real estate professionals I encountered in Colombo. The term is laden with racial and class implications (Vora, 2012) and should be read critically. See Harini Amarasuriya (2014) for further discussion of how foreigners are viewed in middle-class Sri Lankan discourse.
4. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
5. Recent work on Colombo has introduced the idea of (dis)connection with slightly different meanings (Radicati, 2018; Chan et al. 2020) but here, my focus is on connection in the form of interpersonal relationships and networks.
6. All names given in this article are pseudonyms, and some identifying information has been changed to protect the privacy of people who appear in this article.
7. I use the term “world-class city” to gesture at the academic literature on this topic. Terms like “world class” and “global city” are often used interchangeably among elite Colombo English-speakers; they index the same set of aspirations and visions for the future. “Global city” and “world-class city” have been developed in academic terms by Saskia Sassen (1991), Amita Baviskar (2010) and Asher Ghertner (2015) respectively and further expanded on by a host of others. However, as discussed in this piece, these terms are not solely academic in nature but have lives in the world beyond. For particularly incisive analyses of the global cities literature and its limitations, see works by Brenda Yeoh (1999) and Natalie Oswin (2018).
8. Each of these forms of connection is resonant with the work of scholars in other Global South cities who have shown the ways in which interpersonal relationships and informal labor patterns act as forms of urban infrastructure (e.g. Elyachar, 2010; Simone, 2004).
9. See Jayawardena Kumari (2000) on class formation in Sri Lanka for more detail on elites and stratification in this context.
10. Rajapaksa’s brother, Gotabaya, was elected President in November 2019, and the family was thus returned to power after the time period covered in this article. Under Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency, Gotabaya had served as the Minister for Defence and Urban Development.
11. See Roelofs (2021) for a similar critical discussion of the concept of “mind shift” in Ibadan, Nigeria.
12. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

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