

## A year on the Duplication

As I walked past Bars on my way home that afternoon the incessance of the traffic at the point where I needed to cross meant that I had some moments to witness someone back a car into a parking space which left me with the thought that the average Sri Lankan simply can't reverse a car. A little further on, as I passed the new Cargills supermarket I was forced to wait as someone else botched up a parking manoeuvre and I thought "actually the average Sri Lankan can't drive". This led onto the thought that it is perhaps fortunate that the density of traffic and the nature of the roads severely attenuates the maximum speeds that drivers can achieve. But then that led to another thought. Given that one is so speed limited why is it not mandatory for people only to have small cars? There are ATVs everywhere that have never touched anything except asphalt roads. But then why do people in UK have Chelsea tractors to deliver their children to school?

In the diarrhoea of aimless thought that can occupy you as you walk along a familiar road I fell to thinking how things have changed during the year that I have been here. For those who are not familiar with Colombo I should explain that south of the Fort (centre) there is a broad highway which should be impressive and the authorities are working hard to return it to that state. When it simply could not take the density of traffic they cut another close by. So, for several miles incoming traffic moves along the Galle Road while outgoing traffic uses R.A. de Mel Road. "Who?" you might ask. I gather that he was at some point Mayor of Colombo, but to almost all people his is called the Duplication Road, because that is what its construction did. In an effort to take pressure off the Galle and Duplication Roads yet another parallel highway has been constructed next but a railway line from the sea, but nobody has so far referred to it as Triplication Road. It is Marine Drive and it has come a long way since I arrived in May 2010.

Anyway, I am in danger of getting ahead of myself and to begin at the beginning it is probably best to join me in an early-morning stroll from my apartment in Alfred House Gardens to American National College which is opposite Stone-and-String near the top of the Duplication where the two roads rejoin before passing the US Embassy on the left and heavily guarded Presidential residence on the right.



Alfred House Gardens recalls Victoria's son Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh who visited Ceylon in 1870. The site of my apartment which is close to the Galle Road on the south side still

appears on maps as a hospital/nursing home and is just one of three 'luxury' apartment blocks on a road that also houses several expensive emporia and a church. Turn right as you exit from St Michaels and you soon arrive at the intersection with the Duplication Road with the British Council offices some way back on the other side. It is a big crossing and during the day most people take their lives in their hands and venture over. In the evenings there is at least one traffic policeman waving his hands ineffectually and there is probably another sitting reading a newspaper in a nearby semi-derelict building. It doesn't take things long to assume the look of dereliction. I arrived before the monsoon started, but I could not have guessed as there were some torrential periods of downpour and during these I observed how the very material of the roads seemed to be washed away. I assumed that it was from neglect, but no. They quickly repaired most of them and I have seen the erosion that just a year can wreck on the fabric.

When I arrived dengue fever was at epidemic proportions. One of the porters in my apartment went down with it. While most mosquitoes are nocturnal by habit and reside in dank water *Aedes aegypti* prefers daytime as well as clean water conditions. Thus, they multiplied in the rain and had lots of places to reside in the open drains on either side of the road. I was lucky because at first I seemed to be bitten every time I had a shower and guess who was responsible? In the bigger world the army was called in to fight a new enemy. In my flat it meant that I had to spray the drains, the lavatory bowls, the lavatory cisterns and even the overflows of the bath and wash-basins. Once this was done the problem went away, but I still do a regular spray just in case.

Shortly after turning left and heading north along the Duplication one passes a dental practice, an office, of which I will speak more shortly and a shop-front. At first this was an empty premises and it was obvious that there was some dispute about a hole in the pavement. At best guess there must have been a 600 x 900mm cover over some sort of drain-rodding point between the office and the shop, but it was not there and anyone walking the ill-lit street late at night was in dire danger of stepping into this cauldron of putrid liquid and probably breaking a femur en-route. It stayed like that for the first six months and then there seemed to be a movement. The offices were occupied by a government department with the wonderful title DMC (Disaster Management Committee). Did this mean that they could manage a disaster or that they could turn anything into a disaster? I thought that the whole thing about a disaster was that it was unpredictable. Now if the Sri Lankan Government has discovered how to manage that which cannot be predicted then the country has an asset that would be the envy of all others. Just think what the Japanese could have done if they had had the DMC before the recent earthquake/tsunami. So what is the DMC? Is it a conduit for siphoning international aid into ministerial or relatives' pockets? On an occasion when I was stopping to look at a vehicle parked in front of their offices (where it clearly says 'No Parking') in such a way that pedestrians were forced to walk out onto the busy road I was immediately approached by a tall lean and mean looking security guard who demanded to know what I wanted. I informed him that I was observing how an official vehicle was breaking the law and that next time I would photograph it. It did have the effect that vehicles were not parked there for some time. I mused about the appointment of that particular security man, clearly ex-military. I wondered whether they had demanded to see his birth certificate, just to check that he was a real bastard. Are they such fools not to realise that the more that they try to shoo away the prying eye, the more that people like me will think that there is something piscine? There is one thing of which I feel certain. They have a fleet of Japanese 4X4 vehicles that would probably break down at the first sight of rough terrain. These are not like your old-style Land Rover or even Range Rover.



I missed a trick during February 2011 when the derelict shop next to the DMC sprang back to life and got a typical Colombo makeover. One day there were banners outside and the next day it opened as "New Fresh Fish", still with the open sewer right outside. Now what I should have done was to get some students down there pronto with fishing rods and taken some photographs. It would certainly have got the thing covered. Maybe the new management didn't like the effect that it was having on their business or maybe some representative from a foreign aid agency disappeared, because very soon after there was a brand-new concrete cover in place. Incidentally, I am told that during the Spring monsoon a woman went to step off a bus into a large amount of ground water, thinking that she was going to land on terra firma disappeared down into such an uncovered drain, was carried underneath by the flow and was drowned.

We don't have to walk too far before we come to what at the start of my visit had been derelict town houses which the jungle was busy reclaiming in the centre of the city. Indeed there are such sites everywhere. Sri Lanka has gone through tough economic times like everyone else, but its plight has been compounded by the Golden Key Credit Card scandal, what is believed to have been a Ponzi scheme that collapsed before I arrived. This led to a buildings doldrum which since then has been warming up slowly. Everybody who owns land has been sitting on it, in the hope that the good times will return soon and they can make a killing. However there are some cases where plots have been sold off, the structures/jungles have been razed and work is ongoing to put something useful/valuable there instead. The new Cargills (just one of three premises which opened during the year) is just such a case, but to try and understand it at all we have to look at the bigger picture. My first dealings with Cargills was their supermarket on the Galle Road, a premises constrained by the space in which it is located with restricted parking in front. It also has a miserable electrical supply. Once when I was there the entire shop was plunged into darkness and it was about ten minutes before they got the standby gennie started. In the meantime, guards posted themselves at the aisles to ensure that all goods went into baskets and the girls simply took out their duplicate pads and returned to manual transactions involving cash only. Now there is a problem with all supermarkets that I have encountered in Colombo, but Cargills is perhaps the worst when it comes to the lack of speed with which they part customers from their money. A woman could conceive and deliver a child in the time that it takes to get through. There appears to be two reasons for this. The first is a truly crap computer system, so that when the bar-code on an item fails to read for the fourth or fifth time, the check-out girl then brings up the database and sets about matching the object in front of her with words on the screen. While all of this is going on the lard-arsed customers are simply standing there looking into middle distance completely ignorant of the fact that the moment that they have paid they are

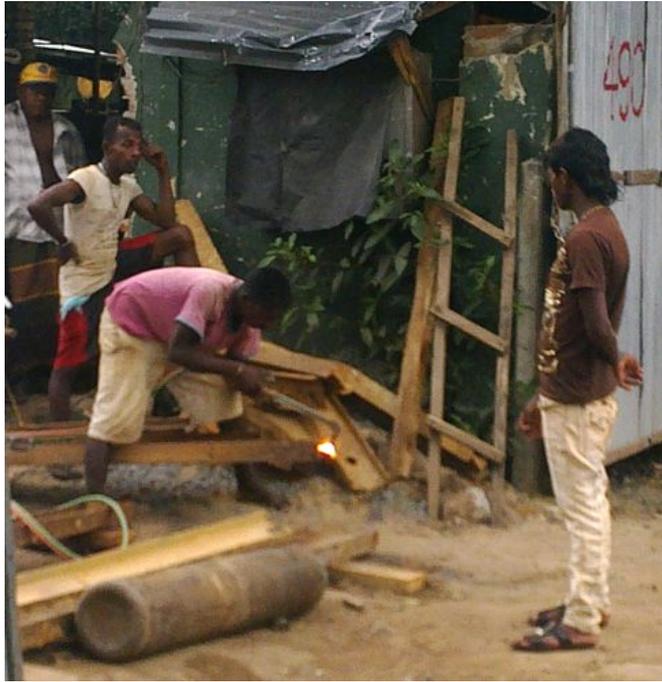
the owners of the goods and in law Cargills have no further responsibility. But what do Cargills do? The girl hands over the receipt, then takes out some plastic bags and starts to bag up the goods for the customer. Meanwhile the queue is growing older without a murmur of complaint. Roll on the day when someone introduces a Lidl/Aldi system or starts to charge demurrage for good not removed from the point of sale.

If you want a truly amazing experience you have to move north of Kolpetty and venture into the Fort district where a visit to Cargills is like stepping into an Edwardian time-warp. There is an amazing old-world premises inside of which a supermarket rattles loosely and given that the Company wants to appear modern one can only wonder why. The reason for its emptiness (so I am told) is associated with the Civil War and with the level of security in the vicinity of Government offices. For most except Cargills trade has moved away from the Centre of the City and into the suburbs. Meanwhile they are sitting on what in any other part of the world would be the most valuable real-estate. One can only hope that whoever eventually acquires it in more peaceful times maintains at least some of its wonderful old-world charm.

And so back to my patch and its slow redevelopment. In spite of the fact that it is only a few hundred metres to their supermarket on the Galle Road Cargills acquired land on the Duplication road and did a combination of construction and excavation. they dug down sufficiently to install a car-park underneath while they went up so that the retail area is about three metres above the level of the pavement. The result is excellent. Both staff and customers seem relaxed or at least most customers are, unless they are trying to circumnavigate a hunting pack of BMOs, black moving objects or Muslim women in full drab who give no quarter when, as a phalanx they bear down on you with their shopping trolleys; something that is best avoided.

Now, if you want a real excavation mystery you have got to back-step a few hundred metres to No 490 Duplication Road, but in the normal run of things you are unlikely to see anything. Both it and No 492 are in the process of re-development. In the case of 492 the plot is cordoned off with coarse-mesh canvas. There has been some moderate excavation at the back and as of 31 May they are starting to pour concrete. For almost 12 months past the frontage to 490 has been concealed behind a 15 foot corrugated/galvanised iron fence. The little men who obviously work/live on site are clearly under strict orders to keep everything closed so as to avoid prying eyes. Of course it is not always possible as lorries have to go in and out. In the beginning there was a digger and it started making a deep hole in the far corner. As the hole got deeper it was clear that the sand under the nearby properties would shift sideways and to avoid this they sank RSJs vertically into the ground all the way round. The space between adjacent I-sections was then filled with lengths of stout timber. Then one day the north-west monsoon arrived and instead a hole there was a swimming pool which slowed down operations, but still the operatives inserted extra reinforcing which often had to be cut to size. The picture below shows a man using an oxy-acetylene torch with no eye protection and no shoes. Note how close it all is to the acetylene bottle!

Day by day the digger moved closer to the gate until eventually its bum was jutting over the pavement and still the operatives hid any view of the site by bringing the corrugation as close as possible to the digger chassis. The digger is long gone. Reinforcing rods have been delivered and still more wood, but I am sure that they are below the water table, so heavens knows what regulations they are breaching.



Mind you, I do wonder about the people who live 494 Duplication Road. They must feel very worried. Here is a nice town-house with massive developments going on next door. Hasn't someone made them an offer? Of course, if I had been the owners of the premises on the other side (No 488) I would have been really worried in case the wooden reinforcing between it and 492 gave way and they just slipped a little south and a little deeper. It is supposed to be a Chinese restaurant, but it always looks so empty that I would never be brave enough to venture in. So, if it does subside while there are customers there, I won't be one of them.

Of course what they would not know was that I have a bird's eye view from the 15th floor of the St Michaels Apartment. The view of the start of pouring at 490 and excavation at 492 can be seen in the picture below which was taken on 4 June 2011. Even here the "Berlin Wall" is quite visible, with the snorkel connected through the barrier.



At the next left turn, immediately after the Chinese 'Restaurant' (Bagatalle Road) we have an interesting example of the life-cycle of the concrete drain cover. Just as I arrived in May 2010 there were torrential downpours, lots of thunder, people marooned but I was assured that it was not the monsoon - you could have fooled me. Well buses come hurtling down Bagatalle Road from the Galle Road and one the swing around onto Duplication Road. Well one day the weight of a bus wheel proved too much and the concrete shattered, leaving a square hole in the road, around which all traffic moved without any need for warning signs or cordons. Eventually, and we are talking weeks rather than days there was a bright new concrete one in place. I am convinced that there are work gangs who spend the entire night on the road, because you never see this work being done. I looked at this cover the other day and was surprised to see that it was now sitting about two inches below the surface of the road. It must suffer over a hundred crossings per day from bus wheels. As it beds into its surrounds successive impacts will increase, the concrete will break, the cycle will be repeated and the people who make concrete covers will not be out of a job.

One the other side as you cross this intersection there is a travel organisation called Gabo Group whose female operatives are dressed in very smart uniforms. When I arrived first there was a nice big tree right in front of their entrance, but it is no more. Why was it removed might be one question and the other, perhaps more important question is: if it was necessary to cut it down why did those involved leave a one metre stump sticking out of the ground. The same could be said of the other tree removal within my small section of perambulation. Just beyond the new Cargills there are several trees growing in the middle of the pavement in such a way that you either have to step out into the oncoming traffic or you have to hop over a root that disappears under the boundary wall of the adjacent derelict property. So at night, should you come out of Cargills and turn left in the poorly lit street where you are dazzled by the car lights, you could easily trip over the remains of what looks like a perfectly healthy tree that has been cut a half metre above the pavement.

Oh! I do digress. After the Gabo Group premises there is a high wall. Sometimes you can be lucky as a servant is opening the high gate to allow his/her master's car to pass through and during this short time you will have an opportunity to view a truly beautiful example of a small town house.

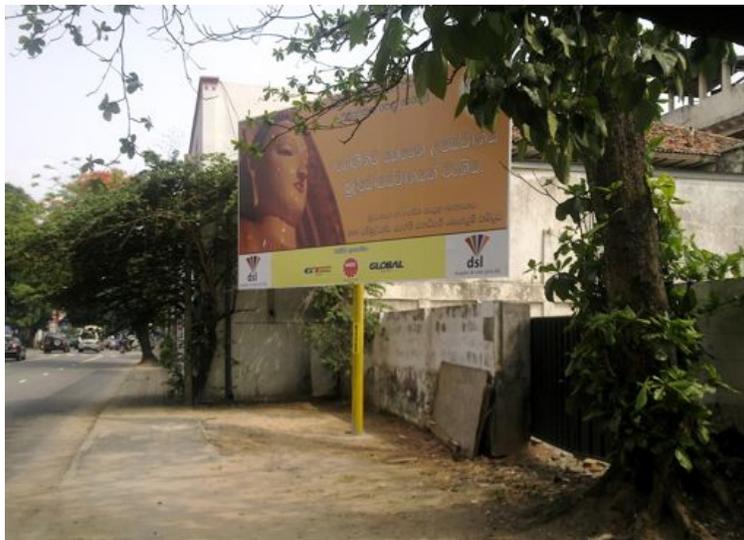
The trees along this section caused me much curiosity during the year that was only recently answered. Just as I arrived I could occasionally hear a bird call that sounded like the distressed cry of a baby and quite soon I heard it no more. Likewise, one of the trees had a beautiful orange blossom and all too soon it was gone. During March 2011 while I was teaching at ANC I would hear the same bird-call and there were times when it was a great disturbance - I am particularly sensitive to the distress cry of babies although I have no problems letting them exercise their lungs by crying. On more than one occasion I would stop the class and ask the students "what is that bird?" They would say "what bird? We haven't heard anything". Eventually I did manage to get one student to identify it as a coucal, a Sri Lankan cuckoo, which is only noisy at this time of year. Interestingly enough, advertisers use this sound as background to indicate time-of-year. I noticed that as I did shopping in Cargills the incessant over-the-loudspeaker advertising and jingles now includes quite a lot of coucal sounds.

When I returned from UK on 28 May (2011) it was delightful to see that the orange blossom was back.



In this picture we are looking north along the road to ANC. There are two car sales premises on the right, one Chrysler and the other Tata. On the left just beyond the beautiful tree that must be circumvented is the Rover salesroom which was empty when I arrived and is still empty.

Just beyond the Rover salesroom the wall is stepped back all the way to Alfred Place. Earlier in the year a property next to the salesroom was demolished, presumably to extend the Durdan's Hospital car park. There is some unmade up surface between the pavement and the wall along this stretch and here we see a game being played all the way along the Duplication Road. This game is being operated at two or possibly three levels. There are those who want to use any means and any space upon which to position an advertising hoarding and there are those who will put their posters on any advertising hoarding regardless of whether they have a right to do so. Much of the battle takes place at night. The owners of these hoardings put up posters and very quickly the advertisements for which they derive revenue are eclipsed. As you walk up in the morning you can see where poster material has been pulled down and left scattered on or near the pavement.



View south along the Road with the tree in blossom just visible on the left and the recently demolished house, now an extension of the Durdan's Hospital car park on the right. The hoarding on the monopole went up during April 2011.

Whatever you do, do not have too much sympathy for the owners of advertising hoardings. Many of them are illegal constructions. Indeed I can imagine teams of people during darkest night digging some holes, pouring in concrete around two poles between which a hoarding will be seen in the morning. Sooner or later someone is going to dig through an 11kV underground cable and that will be a shocking departure for the labourer who is carrying out the task. Although they are not quite so quick off the mark the City authorities do come round soon after and remove these hoardings. Unfortunately, they take the easy way out and cut the poles, leaving the concrete in the ground and two metal stumps sticking up for any unwary traveller to trip upon. Between ANC and Alfred House Gardens I note that a total of eight new billboards have been constructed and have survived during the year, but the route also includes a total of thirteen stump pairs. As I have already said, it is a dangerous place to walk in the dark.

While still on the subject of billboards, signs and hoardings, you might think that a hospital might as be concerned for the welfare of people who have not yet had reason to visit it as they are for those who are in-patients. You might think that they would be particularly concerned for the welfare of disabled people, but in the case of Durdan's Hospital you can just forget it. I think that it was sometime around March that they joined the game of nocturnal hoarding construction and this coincided with the City erecting new street signs in the area. Could anyone indicate to me how the occupant of a wheelchair could possible circumnavigate the array of obstacles shown below? The grey thing in the middle is a Ceylon Electricity Generating Board fusebox and you can guess with all these holes that 415V is never far below the surface of the pavement. I was more than a bit surprised when I first noticed that the doors on all of these are unlocked and wondered whether CEB was a participant in that section of the Darwin awards which encourages children to open the box and have a poke inside - I would never have survived a Sri Lankan childhood!



Taken on 5 May 2011



Plus new monopole (taken on 23 June 2011)

It was much later that I was told that it was the military and not the CEB who dictated this as the lesser of two evils. If all such boxes were locked it would have been possible for the LTTE to insert a significant roadside IDE. Having them open means that like everyone/everything else they are subject to regular inspection.



Here we have the uncovered drain just outside Cargills car park. If one looks above the car that is trying to exit you can see the wall that cordons off the derelict property beyond the shop. You can also see the crop of trees that occupy centre ground of the pavement for the next 100 metres.

At the next turn left, which appears to be a cul-de-sac, even though I have never stopped to investigate we have three curiosities. Having had skin irritation as a kid where the ends of my short trousers rubbed against my thighs during the damp Irish winter, would I ever dream of going to a Chinese restaurant that offered 'chafing food'. The pain is enough to make me squirm.

At the 6th Lane turning there sit two tuc-tucs, the operators of which could hardly be more contrasting individuals. One man with a round face and missing teeth talks to you through a mouth filled with betel nut. A combination of areca nut wrapped in betel leaves is used as a mild stimulant although it is now well known to cause oral cancer. It came as a relief to discover this as the source of many rusty red deposits on the pavement and elsewhere as users spit out the nut remnants as they chew. Any tuc-tuc driver is one of life's depressives, forever complaining about the lack of business. Given where the two of them park I am surprised there is ever any business there at all. The other man could not be more of a contrast. He is elderly, but thin, with fine-chiselled features. He looks like a Buddhist monk who changed into civvies and although now sitting in his trishaw has thoughts on a higher plane. Both greet me as a regular as I pass by, but while the one will wave and talk this ascetic just about raises an eyebrow in greeting

Within a few metres of these two men there is a showroom on the left that, although it is not empty, it could be. I pass it almost every day and I have no idea what they sell. I never see customers and I am not sure that I have ever been conscious of staff. I really must look sometime, but if that is the effect that the shop-front has on a most curious passer-by, is there not a lesson in marketing to be learnt here. At this point the pavement narrow and you come across yet more crass stupidity on the part of the local authorities. Some functionary has removed a pavement slab and built a small parapet around the space. They have inserted a wooden frame inside this, the inside of which has fine black netting attached. And what is this for? Would you believe that with little concern for pedestrians with umbrellas and absolutely none for wheelchair user they have planted a tree which will grow to be just like the ones in the background of the picture above?

One of the pleasures of the daily trip has been the good humour of the regular tuc-tuc drivers who have their stands along the route. They could be miffed that this person never uses their services, but there is for them the pleasure of a foreigner who is prepared to stop and talk with them. Amongst the best of this species is Abdul who parks on Pantreave Gardens. It was early on that he asked me if I needed to be transported somewhere and because he asked nicely I responded nicely explaining that at 64 it was essential for my health that I get exercise. Then there were days when I would pass him at forced-march speed when he would stand rigidly and salute. I remember one occasion when I was walking home deep in thought and he just passed a few cheerful words about the fact that I looked down. Now, that just meant a lot. There would be times when he wasn't there and there would be times when he would be back, telling me that he had got fend up with standing and had tried cruising for a while. It was probably early March 2011 when he appeared in a spanking new black machine. It really looked nice and I had to stop and admire it, but it was not long before he was pretty depressed. He may have over-stretched himself. He was telling me how little business there was. Then they were having to park further up Pantreave Gardens, the police did not like them parking down at the intersection. He told me that within a year or two there would be no tuc-tucs in Colombo, the authorities were trying to clear them off the road. Has it happened. I walked up on the morning of 8 June and between Durdan's Hospital and the Casino there was not a single tuc-tuc at any of the intersections. So, I will be watching with interest.



Within a few metres north of Pantreve we have on the left a premises called Excel Tile Showroom. Again, one hardly ever sees any customers, but given the price of what they sell they probably don't need too many to be doing quite well thank you. Just beyond their cordoned off car park we have an interesting obstacle. There is an electrical fuse box straddling the pavement and right in front of it there must have been a hole which someone, presumably the electricity board has covered over with what look like railway sleepers, each of which is engraved with the words 'EHT'. How do you circumvent it. It rises up about four inches above the pavement, so you could jump over it or you could squeeze round it. You cannot go behind the fuse box as it appears to be private property or maybe just another example of people expropriating the pavement. Instead of leaving a facility for the passer-by the owner of the house behind has constructed a wall, exactly like you might have around a raised flower-bed. Instead of earth he has a bed of concrete out of which he is growing a fine crop of sharp stones which are all pointed menacingly upwards. Oh the people of Colombo can be so inconsiderate!

Since I am moaning about lack of consideration I need only to proceed a few steps to be at my next bone of contention. On the other side of the intersection with Simon Hewavitarana Road we have Lalitha Jewellers. This is another of these premises that has a blank-wall frontage. There is generally a functionary standing around, although on one occasion I saw something much more scary, a security guard wandering around with a pump-action shot-gun. Anyway, these people have cobbled their forecourt (which is too small to park) and extended this right over the pavement to the edge of the street. If pavement there is, then it contracts so that there is a recessed parking space on the road - and of course the City authority has erected a signpost to indicate that it is a parking space. So far, so good, but nearby there is a mound of red clay in the centre of which the proprietors have inserted a long pole on which they had a narrow hoarding which attempted to make you aware that this was Lalitha. In the early part of the year I had no problem, but then they decided to improve their advertising by increasing the size of their hoarding. Going upwards might not have been a problem for me, but they also went down and out. So, as I exercise my 'right' to use the pavement I am required to do a quick left-right manoeuvre between the street parking sign and their new hoarding if I am not to have my head knocked off. So, this is certainly one shop that has been knocked off my shopping list.



Nevertheless, the dirt space between the pavement at the wall just beyond Lalitha was the first place I ever became really aware of street dogs. Okay, so I had seen them just about everywhere and simply viewed them as possible sources of a rabid bite and best avoided. They are best avoided for less dramatic reasons; they are mangy and they are lousy. However, it is fascinating to see how they can negotiate the traffic on the busy roads of Colombo. In addition, they are generally very docile. I suppose that aggressive dogs don't survive long, given that their survival depends on them being agreeable. If you pass a police checkpoint on the Galle Road the chances are that there will be a few dogs hanging around. So long as there is not a bitch in heat they will not attempt dominance and they will not fight for territory. They tend not to congregate near most of the military checkpoints because these are now very sporadic and most are not fixed installations, unlike the police checks. They will be seen near any building site, indeed, anywhere where people will drop them some scraps of food. You could say that what I am seeing is nothing different than when the first wolves discovered that there were benefits to hang around near humans without attacking them. In my early days on the Duplication Road I saw this dreadful mangy specimen which had forged itself a sort of a dust dug-out next to where the Lalitha external security staff have their little office. As I would pass in the morning it would appear to be fast asleep and likewise on my return in the evening. Someone seemed to leave out a bowl of water for it, but God it was mangy. One day it wasn't there any more and now the dust declivity has almost disappeared. Just before I headed off to UK in early May there were dogs everywhere and they were moving in packs. I had other things on my mind, but on Wednesday (8 June evening), just as I was about to turn from the Duplication Road into Alfred House Gardens I saw a street dog waiting for a policeman to stop the traffic so that people could cross and this pulled me up sharp when I realised that it was almost the first that I had seen since my return. I enquired from Mr Solomonz, the head porter in our apartment. He said that the City

used to regularly collect and destroy street dogs. He thought that they tended to go to ground at the start of the south-west monsoon. Maybe it is that, but I will be on the look-out.



Approximately 100 yards beyond where the Lalitha dog had his little dug-out there is another gaping hole. There is a large manhole where the cover comes away in parts. At some point before I arrived one part went missing and over a year later it is still missing. There are some benefits. An inspection shows that there are pipes about two feet below and somehow there must be internal drainage, because at no time have I ever seen water standing in it. So, at least you will only break a few bones should you fall in, but you won't drown.



Almost immediately you cross 5th Lane and just before Beverley Street (a cloths shop) you have to negotiate 'the water-jump'. This is a declivity in the pavement right by an electrical fuse cabinet. In the absence of rain it is either filled with clay (or mud, if it has been raining), but it only requires a few drops from the sky to assume the character of a horse-trials water jump. It is clear in the picture above that the proprietors of Rocell Tiles would not wish their sign to block any of their car park spaces.

Now we come to what I feel is one of the most blatant attempts to appropriate the pavement and is probably where I have the most fun on my journey. Bellagio Casino seems to be a magnet for a large number of skinny Chinese girls in very short skirts. If they are of negotiable affection, then they are certainly not my taste. The forecourt is covered in lavatory tiles right to the road and there is a continuous yellow line about a foot beyond that. It is also littered with functionaries;

radio-controlled security men in dark trousers, white shirts with tie as well as flunkies in white hat, white suit and white shoes. They tend to congregate out at the edge of the lavatory tiles so as to intimidate any pedestrian who might be minded to step on the tiles. This way the unfortunate pedestrian is forced out onto the road, frequently over the yellow line. At least, if you are walking north then you can see the oncoming traffic that might threaten you, but if you are walking in the opposite direction you will not know that you have been winged by some car's wing mirror until it is past. Daily, I establish my right to walk on what is (or should be) the public pavement. On one occasion, a security man talking with a flunky moved so as to block my path. So, I walked straight at him and at the last minute took a little step to the right, followed by a little step to the left and thereby forging a passage in safety between the two. They were flabbergasted and the security man made some comment to which I replied without slowing my pace "well, if you are going to deny me access to the pavement what do you expect". Now they regularly move out of my way as I plough past.



The wall that divides the Casino from the Seylan Bank next door does a pretty good job at forcing pedestrians out onto the road and there is a problem with it, because on the Bank side

there is a series of Catholic grottos recessed into the wall. One of the ones high up in the wall has the Infant du Prague behind glass. The lower one which is at waist level is open and the statues that it contains seem to be changed regularly. At Christmas time it has a nativity scene. At present (June) it has St Anthony and there are oil-lamps, joss-stick holders etc which seem to be used.

The Seylan Bank has several things to recommend it, the chief being that its ATM takes MasterCard and does not restrict the amount of cash that it dispenses. Some others will only allow you a maximum of LRs4500 in a single withdrawal. If you look at the above picture you will see that there is a Hindu shrine at the top of the building and again one has to ask - why? The forecourt area in front of the bank has been a right pain from the very beginning of my time. A combination of notices and inconsiderately parked motor cycles makes navigation very difficult. Within the last week it would appear that the removers of illegal signs have been at it again and once again, instead of a clean sweep the poles that held the sign have been cut off approximately 8 inches above the ground but the tiny railings that surrounded the poles have been left in place. It is now a perfect obstacle for the maiming of an unwary pedestrian.

Why is my short daily commute so full of sources of anger? On the other side of the road from the Seylan Bank stands the ACCA centre, another organisation which attempts to claim the pavement as its own forecourt. They do this by having removable poles inserted at the very edge of the pavement with a chain-link between them. On arrival of a car the attendant removes the chain to let a car in and then replaces it. However, things have got slightly better because on the north side of the ACCA Centre, at the start of where minibuses stop to deliver and wait for students of Mahanama College there was a wall that extended right down to the road. This has recently been cut back, but many people walking south still approach the wall and step out into the traffic. Me, I walk straight ahead on the inside of the chain-link and heaven help anyone who challenges me.

Do you think that I am done with gripes yet? Not a bit, although along this reach there may be a seed-change. It is perfectly reasonable for mini-buses to park there after delivering, or while awaiting Mahanama College students. The College is on the other side of the road and is graced with a 'zebra' crossing and usually attended by two traffic police. Until recently these vehicles lined up orthogonally, or at least at an acute angle to the road. I think that the authorities here refer to it as 'parallel parking'. That would not be too bad if they showed consideration and parked a little way off the pavement, but no. They back up right over the pavement and most pedestrians meekly move out onto the road. I generally scrape by and if a van should get scraped by my back pack or anything protruding from it, then too bad. Well, would you believe my surprise on Wednesday morning when I observed all the minibuses lined up parallel to the pavement. The police had been out and had had a go at them, but of course once the thing dies down they will be back to their old tricks.

This reach is a forest of old stumps and one evening I was walking back from the College after dark. There were two Chinese tarts walking in front of me and as I passed between them and the road, my foot tripped on a stump which I had not seen and I went flying. It may have been a bit of a shock for me as I tried to collect myself, but it gave the two of them one hell of a fright.

At the other end of this parking area just before a shop premises that was vacated early in the year there is a tree with a raised square parapet around its base. This is where the street cleaners, male and female assemble to dine and rest. It is a social microcosm. In spite of the nature of their job

the ladies always dress respectably. The wiry men in their shorts and their tops that proclaim that they work for Abans all congregate together and seem to generate an oasis of tranquility in spite of the fact that everything seems to be against them. The brushes that they use are not designed to sweep with maximum efficiency. They appear to be better suited to scattering the leaves and dust. Their wooden wheelbarrows are a disgrace; a box with tiny (frequently non-circular) wheels on an ill-fitting and unlubricated axle. It seems to require more effort than it should for them to sweep their streets and minor maintenance of their barrows would make their task ever so much easier, but then maybe that is not the objective of the society here. I missed a trick early in the year. In order to raise their sitting place the cleaners had a narrow gauge railway sleeper sitting on top of the parapet. Almost all narrow gauge track in Sri Lanka are now gone, so that the sleeper might have had collectable value. Maybe someone who recognised it did collect it.



There is not a lot to be said about Bar's cafe above the road and the confectioner Perera & son on the ground floor. Little seems to have changed in a year. From time-to-time a lady with a little girl sits on the parapet surrounding a tree just in front, selling joss sticks. The child is happy which seems nice, but I don't think that I have ever seen anyone buying anything from the mother. Bars is not a bad cafe. The service is a bit slower than I would like but the staff are always pleasant and the food when it does come is excellent.

As we cross the road we see a large premises on the corner which has also garnished to pavement. It is called Dialog Future Centre, but it is now a thing of the past. Dialog have decamped and there is a 'To Let' notice in the window. Dialog is one of the major mobile phone providers in the country and I have had to deal with them of several occasions when my phone or my SIM, courtesy of ANC went on the blink. While individuals who worked there have been most helpful, it was not a nice place. As you go through the door you are faced with a lady in a saree and a security man who direct you to someone sitting at a desk on the left. They listen to your story and then issue you with a number. Why not cut out the middleman and just issue you with a number. Eventually your number comes up and a youth or youthess behind a desk listens to your request and then fills out reams of paper. When Anne needed a Pay-as-you-Go SIM I think that there was more paperwork required than when she applied for her residence visa. Dialog is owned by some Malaysian company and I cannot see how they can tolerate such inefficiencies. Near the door to this premises which is at the corner of the building there is a step

up to a raised frontage which continues around the side along the Duplication Road and this is edged with a low parapet rail. Again, HSE in UK would immediately condemn such a structure and the relatives of anyone who tripped over it and got killed on the road would have a very strong case. In this case there is no pavement. You either walk on the road or you do as I do, take the step and walk across the raised surface past the shop window and past the gaze of the lady in the saree and the security guard. However, you are not out of the wood yet as you are faced with a wall and forced to step onto the road at a point where traffic is funnelling and cars and motorbikes can come very close indeed. Nevertheless, once past this obstruction you have a clear run for the rest of the journey, or at least you should have. On the left we have several businesses that seem to operate from the same building. They have a car-park, but at least it is on the other side of a wall that separates the building from the pavement. There are two gates in the wall and drivers give no quarter as they enter or emerge when the gate is opened. The major operator here seems to be the Ceylon Electricity Generating Board which is both the generator and the end supplier, rather like the ESB in Ireland. I had to go here when I returned from UK in October to find that the College had not paid my electricity bill and I had been cut off. It was late on a Saturday morning when I arrived back from the airport to discover the state of affairs. So, it was a quick leg up the road, stopping to get money on the way. The ATMs at several banks would not accept my card and this was the first time that I encountered the Seylan Bank. It was a nick-of-time job as they were about to close for the weekend, but again, it was the individuals, not the system that turned out to be very helpful. Now mentally and physically exhausted I returned to my apartment and had a long sleep. By the time I woke up power had been restored.

Just before you arrive at the first of the CEB gates there is a site of interesting drama during the year. There is a tiny wooden shack which takes half the pavement which serves as a stall for a lottery ticket vendor. The man himself is old beyond Methuselah, skin and bones in a traditional garb with a round-face, tiny moustache and glasses. As I write this I think that he reminds me of Ghandi. For most of the day he stands there with a cobbler's hammer and taps upholstery tacks into a piece of wood that covers his stall-front. Under each tack there is a lottery ticket and people come by and talk with him and some even part with money in order to release their chosen ticket from its bondage. One day before Christmas I came by and it had gone, not so much gone as destroyed. It looked as if a car had gone out of control, hit the booth and taken out a large chunk of wall behind it. The first question in one's mind was "was the old man in it at the time?" Probably not, because it looked as if this had happened at night. It was not too long before the wall was repaired and repainted so that one would never have known what had happened. And then a little while later a spanking new booth was placed on the site and the old man was back in business, but that was not for too long. One morning the place was locked up. There was no sign of life when I came back that evening and indeed, it remained empty for the next week. When it reopened there was a youngish man selling the tickets. "Okay" I said to myself "So the old man has died, but the lottery people know that there is a big market for tickets from CEB and other businesses on the other side of the wall, so the show must go on", and it did, but when, on 30 May, after my three weeks absence in UK I next walked to the College, there was the old man back again, still with his hammer mounting his tickets like a lepidopterist might mount the butterflies in his collection. Life on the street goes on as if nothing had ever happened. Maybe it hadn't. Maybe it was all in my imagination. It is almost as if it were Prospero's closing words in Shakespeare's *Tempest* say "These our actors, as I foretold you, Were all spirits, And are melted into air, Into thin air.

Early in the year the passage past this booth was all the more difficult because there was a missing drain cover, but obviously someone (CEB bosses) had sufficient influence to get

something done. One day, just beside the booth a rectangular wooden frame had been laid out on the pavement and had been filled with concrete. Was this a new plinth for the booth? Just a few days later the answer was there. It was the new cover which can be seen in the picture on the right below. The residue of the moulding that was constructed on the nearby pavement can be seen on the left



We are within a few hundred yards of our journey's end and there is still lots to look at and marvel. After the CEB building we have a very busy link that joins the Duplication Road with the Galle Road. You stand waiting to cross and suspiciously eye the traffic that is hurtling towards you. Some drivers might indicate their intention to turn right into St Anthony's Mawatha. You hope that St Anthony might protect you because many drivers do not. Buses are the worst and as they swing round the more macho passengers of different ages jump off and use the centrifugal force to propel themselves towards that gap in the metal railings where you happen to be standing, waiting to cross. In fact it worse on the return journey. You are craning your neck around checking to see that there is no traffic coming. More than once a tuc-tuc decided that I must require a lift somewhere and has stopped so as to block my passage during those few seconds when the crossing was clear. I have not yet stepped through such an obstruction and continued on my journey, but maybe I will sometime. The funny thing is that having inconvenienced you tuc-tuc drivers are most put out if you swear at them and will drive away saying something like 'bloody inconsiderate foreigners' in Sinhala.

Now as you stand forlornly waiting to cross you have the opportunity to view a Buddhist shrine. This has been replaced recently and I must confess that it is a great improvement. The original was a small statue mounted on a piece of grey concrete with a covering roof. What I found completely naff was the halo and yet it seems to be a big thing in this country. How is it that in Buddhist art there are severe restrictions on the types of depictions that are permitted and yet when technology delivered the light emitting diode in a wide variety of colours it was immediately taken up and engineering students in Sri Lanka vie with each other to produce bigger and better switched arrays of LEDs for this purpose. Did Nick Holonyak Jr in his wildest dreams ever think that he would contribute to a revolutionary change in Buddhist art?

Right above the Buddha is what I call 'My Tree' I call it that because I seem to be the only one who is curious about it. I have asked so many people about it - "what is it called? Does it have medicinal properties" Nobody seems to know. One botanist delivered an opinion that it was a *Barringtonia Ceylanica*. Certainly the leaves look similar, but it throw and amazing component.

I cannot call it a fruit because it does not look as if it ever held anything, but what is green on the tree falls on the road below and looks like a frog with its mouth wide open



The very beautiful flower bears no relationship to the published pictures of any *Barringtonia*



Next we come to another fuse cabinet that is not quite in the middle of the pavement, simply because the latter is broad here. Just after Christmas a pipe leaked and there were springs in the pavement for several days. It was repaired relatively quickly, but it did leave some sink-holes. The smaller ones were filled with earth. The larger one is still there and just in case someone might miss it, some kind operative planted a grove of withies, just like a navigation warning on a small river. Of course, they have all rotted and gone, but not the hole in the tar-mac on the pavement.

Some things don't seem to change. Just before the teaching block of the College there is a place called "The Duplication Reception Centre" It is not quite clear, even after a year what it is or what it does. It appears to be a hall and from time to time one sees tables/chairs being collected/delivered from the back of a lorry. Just beyond the entrance there is a hole in the wall at pavement level and out of there exudes all sorts of nasty things. It is an open-drain that doesn't go anywhere. At the height of the dengue fever epidemic last year something was done about it,

but it was obviously a temporary measure, because the outfall would flow across the pavement, if the pavement was still there. It is as if whatever the effluent is it has eroded the pavement and people, oblivious to the smell simply step over



Finally, it only requires a short few steps across Abdul Kafoor Mawatha (Road) and we are at our destination.

It is strange to think that all of these pages have been concerned with just one side of the Duplication road. If the reader should think that I am banging a drum about certain matters then I make no apologies and recommend that they look at someone in New York who has taken an even more aggressive stance (see [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13730774](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13730774)).

I suppose that my closing comments would have to concentrate on the fact that everywhere you go you see posters with the President's smiling face, associating his presence with some product, service or achievement. If only he was saying the Sinhala equivalent of the message below then I for one would be a happier commuter.

