

NATURE AND BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE: SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines 'nature' in the form of natural landscape, focusing on Sri Lankan landscape. Natural landscape in this study is discussed as physical features, physical geography and topography of the earth surface – topos. These physical features exist in variety of ways; mountains, rocks, stones and boulders, hillocks, terrains, valleys, water in many ways and trees and vegetation. Sri Lankan natural landscape consists of distinctive and varied physical features – topos – and many of these have been converted to Buddhist architecture: natural landscape represents significant role in these places. This paper examines how Sri Lankan natural landscape influences Buddhist performances, shaping landscape and architecture. It examines literature in philosophy, Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology of landscape and place. It analyses the relationship of patterns of settlements with the physical features and geography of its location, focusing on Buddhist performances. It is examined that these topos directs divine and mundane dimensions. The paper argues that Sri Lankan landscape provides unique locations for Buddhist divine understanding, which is ordinary in everyday life experiences and place concepts. It is revealed that these places as specific examples of compositions of Buddhist understanding with natural landscape and divine experience of natural landscape with mythical landscape in a variety of ways, resulting natural-cultural-architectural places bounded by cultural performances. These kinds of place understanding reflect ontological relationships developed between people, nature and their designs (settlements) rather than as traditional or modern.

Keywords: buddhist performance, buddhist architecture, chora, natural landscape, Sri Lanka, sense of place, topos.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates how nature and architecture of Sri Lanka united in Buddhist places; how physical features of landscape – mountains, rocks, stones, trees, valleys, sloping lands and etc – guide the place for Buddhist divine understanding and shape architecture and the place. Sri Lanka is a small island situated just below the south end of the Indian peninsula. Topography and geography of this country is interesting: mountainous landscape predominates at the centre of the island, inherits distinctive and varied physical features, what I call as natural landscape – natural topos. In Sri Lanka, mountains and mountain ranges make different shapes and patterns of the landscape with deep valleys, shallow valleys, basins, deep edges, etc. There are residual mountains of different shapes and forms in the flat terrains, water exists in many ways and trees and forests of different kinds; all these contribute to the character of Sri Lankan landscape. Many of these natural features have been converted to Buddhist architecture; natural landscape constitutes significant role in these places. Small stupa is placed on many of rocks, hills and hillocks; many caves are converted to image houses and meditation places; entire hill is converted to mediation place in some cases; trees became shrines as well as shading the tropical sunlight; water in ponds and lakes enhance the spirituality of the place. How people understand these natural features in the place, how these

landscape relate to Buddhist understanding, whether spirituality of the Buddhist place relates to the nature and natural features, how landscape defines and shapes architecture and how Buddhist performances of which many of these still continue relate to natural landscape are some questions in this discussion.

The discussions of De Silva [1], Buddhist place and architecture as a harmonized concept in traditional settings and Jazeel [2] as unison of Sri Lanka and landscape with Buddhism accentuate the profound relationship between natural landscape and architecture. Therefore, the role of natural landscape in Buddhist architecture and place understanding will be an appropriate question to be examined in this paper. In this study, the integrated relationship of natural landscape, architecture, Buddhist understanding and Buddhist performance will be discussed, focusing on traditional settings and architecture, within phenomenological framework. It analyses and synthesises theories in philosophy, phenomenology, Buddhist philosophy and historical review to understand landscape and architecture in Buddhist place, Sri Lanka; geometry is applied for architectural analysis. What part of these traditional place concepts is useful in contemporary place understanding is another question, as many of contemporary developments enforce significant impact on nature and natural landscape of Sri Lanka. In these traditional settings, how people experience sense of place which is related to dwelling is a key question arises out of these discussions; whether landscape features contributes to the spiritual experience of the Buddhist place and Buddhist performances and how dwelling, sense of place and spiritual experience are revealed in this place are further questions.

2 PERFORMANCE AND LANDSCAPE

'Sense of place' is a useful concept to examine the theoretical relationship and set the question within appropriate framework for the study, as these line of enquires relate to place understanding. Sense of place and dwelling denote inter-related experiences of the place, implied with experience of the body, mind with spatial dimensions and spatial experiences of the place. Casey [3] describes that experiencing sense of place means someone attached to the place and experience sense of belongingness. Place attachment is a developing link between people and the place, expressed through interplay of affects and emotions, knowledge and beliefs and behaviours and actions, as discussed by Altman and Low [4]. According to Relph [5], sense of place describes spatial understanding inside (invisible) of us, activated by the landscape or surrounding, the spirit of place. Therefore, place, sense of place and place attachment are all the result of people, their activities and performing and engagement in landscape and place. Sense of place signifies an effort to understand place in relation to the process of dwelling of Heidegger [6], which is an essential aspect of human nature as further explained in architecture by Norberg-Schluz [7].

In architectural theory, the concept of dwelling provides profound framework to understand several phenomenon related to architecture, urban designs and landscape, although different interpretations exist strengthening or weakening the profound meaning of 'dwelling' of Heidegger. According to Norberg-Schulz, dwelling describes how people live on the earth, according to Bollnow [8], how they make their own human space on the earth and according to Heidegger, how they experience their existence on the earth; all these discuss inter-weaving nature of their existence with the earth and themselves together, through which they experience their belongingness to the place as sense of place. Heidegger [9] further explains, experience of dwelling is a process, unfolding fourfolds, that is earth and sky; divine and mundane dimensions reveal same time in the dwelling place. Therefore, the dwelling essentially links with the ontological relationships of humans with the earth, the physical

bearer and the geographical/ topographical landscape, and also with the non-physical nature of the place. According to Norberg–Schulz, ‘understanding of landscape’ is a dwelling process, which he explains as, ‘the world is experienced as a ‘thou’ rather than an ‘it’; man was thus imbedded in nature and dependent upon the natural forces’. Heidegger’s profound ideas related to dwelling and existence, Norberg–Schulz utilizes in architecture to describe cities, places and settlements and their relationship to landscape they occupied. He proposes ‘genius loci’ to describe the spirit of the place or living being, intrinsic to the locality. Each place has its own genius; the understanding of the spirit is a process through human life. He proposes a typology of spirit of landscape (genius of locality) based on topography, land extension, how earth meets sky, character, order, light and time, focusing on more European landscape. It is acceptable that, sense of place, dwelling and genius loci provide useful phenomenon to describe architecture, place and landscape, its profound meaning relates to people, their behaviour and cultural norms. However, dwelling and sense of place describe the end result of the peaceful domain, more static harmonized relationship with nature, topography and landscape; the process of dwelling in landscape is still unclear. Devereux [10] explains that the ancient Greek word topos and chora describes two understandings of the place attached with dwelling; topos as the visible form, physical setting of the place, the static form or shape of the landscape; chora as the whole concept inter-relationships between visible and non-visible form and experience of the place, as becoming place. The idea of chora as receptacle of becoming by which ideas pass from the timeless realm of the ideal forms or types into the everyday world of becoming, as changing forms that follows the natural cycle of emergence and decay, thus, place flourishes with people, with their life activities and also diminishes. However, original ideas of Plato seem to be misinterpreted and hidden in long time of history and yet to be explored further. Nevertheless, in this discussion chora is more useful to describe how physical place, shape and forms of the landscape relate to non-physical place: spiritual experiences, albeit, the process is unknown. In this study, the physical shape and forms of landscape is described as topos, thus natural features as natural topos. At this point, performance provides better approach to describe Sri Lankan landscape related to chora of the place. According to De Silva, the experience of sacred dimensions of landscape is a performative dwelling process dynamically re-enacted in landscape in traditional societies and primitive societies as rituals and ceremonies. Therefore, the role of natural landscape in Buddhist place, focusing on place understanding and experience, gained through Buddhist performance would be a realistic approach in this research. Hence, it proposes the importance of body performances and ontological, philosophical phenomenological relationships in describing Sri Lankan landscape, cultural place and Buddhist architecture.

3 NATURAL TOPOS AND IDEALS

The above discussions disclose the ontological experience of divine and mundane dimensions in dwelling and performing in landscape. How natural landscape guides for this experience in the place, and how genius loci reflect in architecture and the place discussed by Norberg–Schulz, however, the shapes and form of natural landscape – natural topos – related to this experience and process of dwelling and performance is ambiguous. Although chora denotes becoming place through physical and non-physical relationships, its mechanism and spatial dimensions and its relationships to natural topos and experience of chora are yet to be examined. The research proposes applying geometry and myth of the place to understand topos and chora, thus incorporating reality and imagination of the place.

It is evident in Indian-Sri Lankan cultural context, in religious interpretations and cosmogonies, in performing rituals and festivals, understanding the place and landscape, sense of

place as chora is common and within everyday life experiences. Divine experience is evident in these place concepts, which unites earthly bounded people with invisible/ non-physical/ divine dimensions of the place. For example, maha-mera, a place concept in Indian Sri Lankan cultures describes mythic place super imposed on earthly bounded place through which the whole concept of chora of the place is depicted. Maha-mera is a conical shaped rock, stands on the centre of the world and on the summit of the maha-mera is the residence of Sakra, the king of the gods. De Silva [11] suggests that maha-mera indicates the spatial dimensions of ideal place, which acts as topos for imagination; which guides the mythic landscape to be flourished around by imagination, telling stories, performing in the landscape or any form of making the place into cultural landscape. Considering these theoretical and historical concepts, the paper proposes the ideal place as a vertical conical shape as maha-mera directing divine dimensions on top and mundane dimensions at the base, but uniting each other through centre and verticality/ axis of the place. Centre, axis and inside/outside or polar relationships as important spatial dimensions of the place are discussed by many scholars, such as Norberg-Schulz, Eliade [12], Bollnow, Bachelard [13] and Merleau-Ponty [14]. People experience these spatial dimensions through everyday performing and dwelling in the landscape. It also suggests that people relate these experiences to natural topos, physical features in the landscape from one hand and on the other hand topos guides the people giving indications of ideal places to develop cultural stories and cultural dramas around them. Both parties are actors as well as participant observers in these performative processes. Sinha [15] uses the word 'archetypal symbols' to describe forms and meanings of landscape referring Plato, who uses it in the sense of an ideal form. She usefully employs archetypes in discussing landscapes of profound cultural significance, as mountains or rocks; trees or vegetation and water; Eliade and Norberg-Schulz also discuss these as essential elements in sacred landscape, the ideal spatial understanding intrinsic to these natural topos. The paper proposes that these primary natural forms provide visible dimensions (natural topos) to sense and imagine ideal forms and ideal places in mythical landscape, where variations occur. The shapes of the mountains, which are similar to the 'ideal place', are performed as sacred places around the world, for example, mount Fuji, Japan; mount Peru, Peru; and Sri Pada, Sri Lanka. Referring Eliade, Norberg-Schulz discusses; 'mountains were therefore considered 'centres' through which the axis mundi goes, a spot where one can pass from one cosmic zone to another'. De Silva suggests that people understand world around them within the ideal forms established in dwelling, natural landscape directs dwelling by providing pre-images of ideal forms through visible dimensions to be visualized the invisible dimensions the mythic landscape – chora of the place. Further it suggests that, when natural topos provides part of the ideal form, people imagine the missing part relating to ideal form in many forms; as imagined stories of gods, spiritual beings, narrating stories, comprehended by built forms, performing cultural dramas and imagination.

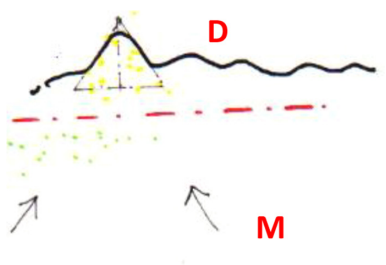

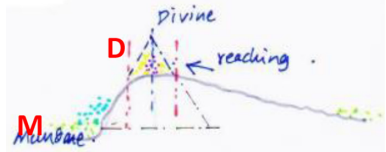

4 BUDDHIST DIVINE PLACE AND SRI LANKA

This section explains how nature and natural landscape of Sri Lanka evoke the Buddhist understanding of the place as well as the divine understanding of the place, from the view of landscape and place notions discussed in earlier sections. Hinduism and Buddhism were introduced to Sri Lanka along with larger migrations take place during the 6th century BC from India. Unlike in Buddhism, in Hindu mythology landscape is experienced and understood by relating to gods and their subsequent characters. Sinha discusses about how mountains, mountain ranges, and rivers are venerated as gods and goddesses according to the

character of these physical features in mythical landscape of India: the divine experience revealed through ontological relationship, developed between people and the landscape. These are evidences of divine experience of natural topos related to the ideal place as discussed earlier. There are many gods in Hindu cosmogony and cosmology. In Puranas [16], Brahma is described as the creator, and joined in a divine triad with Vishnu and Shiva. The universe was created by Brahma, preserved by Vishnu and destroyed for the next creation by Shiva is a profound phenomenon about the place concept. There are stories related to introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, one such story as in Mahawamsa [17] is, Buddha recognized Lanka as a place where his doctrine should shine in glory and requested Sakra, the king of the gods and Sakra handed over the guardianship of Lanka to Vishnu. This paper argues it is the distinctive and varied nature of natural landscape of Sri Lanka provides the guardianship of Buddhism and Buddhist understanding and in the cultural place, this profound understanding relates to the Vishnu: the guardian of the existence. Nature predominates in Buddhist places of Sri Lanka in pure form without relating to mythical understandings, reflects similarity with Buddha's way of salvation which is closely related to nature and natural landscape. It is noted that natural topoi have guided the place of Bodhisattva (before attained to Buddha) in the journey of attainment; there are evidences of mountains, trees and water as guardians/ communicators of life of Buddha. Pure Buddhism is a philosophy, which describes human nature and ontology, the four truths: pain, origin of pain, stopping of pain and leads to the stopping of pain. The pain and origin of pain relates to the body, the physical side, earthly bounded, while stopping of pain describes non-physical divine dimensions; leads to the stopping describe the path, journey, passing boundaries between divine and mundane dimensions, relating physical to non-physical. Hence, it is clear that the four truths as understanding the whole concept of physical and non-physical nature of the world (and the place) at once, leading to the path or journey: the four truths as the revelation of ideal place in Buddhism, uniting mundane and divine dimensions. De Silva shows that the physical shape, form and dimensions of natural topos guides this understanding, providing pre-images of ideal place, unfolding the spiritual way of connecting physical and non-physical nature of the world in Buddhist place, without relating to myth but direct experience of natural landscape – natural topos. It is evident that earlier divine concepts have been replaced by nature after the introduction of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Jazeel discusses nature/culture and sacred/secular as most tightly woven binaries in Sri Lankan landscape. This paper argues these cultural/religious concepts have been influenced by Sri Lankan landscape and evolved throughout the history; natural topos guide the place to make into a Buddhist place or divine place or Buddhist divine place. We suggest that, the pure understanding of revelation of ideal place through natural topos expressed as Buddhist place, when divine experience of ideal place of natural topos is superimposed by mythical landscape as the divine place and, when both exist Buddhist divine place, reflecting in cultural landscape.

The physical shape, scale, proximity of these natural features guide the place, directing mundane and divine dimensions. Out of number of case studies analyzed, the main typologies are discussed in the Table 1. The typology 01 describes that, mountains which are similar to shape and form of the ideal place, far away from mundane life performances and difficult to reach, the whole mountain is understood as divine and sacred, while mundane life continues far away the mountain, encourage pilgrim journeys to reach divine dimensions and experience spirituality, through long journeys and climbing difficult heights. This mountain is related to the abode of god Saman and inscription of Buddha's footprint, revealed the understanding of this place as a Buddhist divine place, superimposed by myth and imagination. People belong to other faiths

Table 1: Natural topos, cultural performances and architecture.

Natural topos D–divine, M–mundane	Cultural performances and cultural stories.	Architecture
	<p>Pilgrim journeys to reach the divine dimensions. God Saman resides on the mountain, invites Buddha to inscribe footprint</p>	<p>Mountain is the main architectural image, converging events, beliefs, thoughts around it. Built elements are very few. The shape of the green mountain is more prominent in the place.</p>
<p>1) Buddhist place in divine place</p>	<p>Climbing mountain, resting at different levels, meditation, Buddhist performance. First summan from Arhat Mahinda, on the mountain. Gods gathered to listen (Mahawamsa)</p>	<p>Stupa on terraces, flights of steps and caves are harmonized with topography, levels and shape of the mountain.</p>
	<p>Missing part on the rock is imagined and performed as divine and Buddhist. Miracle experiences of divine power on the summit.</p>	<p>Buddhist image and temple is placed at the centre (of ideal place). Temple is prominent, among other built elements.</p>
<p>2) whole mountain is a Buddhist place</p>	<p>Transcendental experience celebrates through rituals and festivals. Stories about divine experiences.</p>	<p>Transcendental experience relates to 'street of gods' in the place, which links mundane life to the temple.</p>
	<p>Transcendental experience celebrates through rituals and festivals. Stories about divine experiences.</p>	<p>Transcendental experience relates to 'street of gods' in the place, which links mundane life to the temple.</p>
<p>3) Buddhist and divine place</p>	<p>Buddhist kingdom directs the place to understand the ideal place</p>	<p>Large stupa acts as mountains, resembles ideal place.</p>
	<p>Buddhist kingdom directs the place to understand the ideal place</p>	<p>Large stupa acts as mountains, resembles ideal place.</p>
<p>4) more divine than Buddhist</p>	<p>5) Buddhist place</p>	

also climb this mountain, according to their religious interpretations is an evidence of coincidence of landscape experience with religious concepts. The typology 02 is the shape and form of mountains similar to the ideal place, exist within close proximity to settlements, the whole mountain is converted to Buddhist place, in some cases with divine experiences. By climbing mountain and by panoramic views people experience passing between mundane and divine dimensions. Many of these places have been converted to Buddhist meditation places in Sri Lanka, as these natural topoi help direct transition from mundane settlements to divine dimensions through bodily engagements. Typology 03 is a prominent rock, similar to ideal place with missing part on top. This missing part is imagined as religious/historical stories, performing cultural dramas converting to divine or Buddhist place. Along the climbing slope of these rocks, they experience transcending between divine and mundane, celebrated in several rituals and ceremonies throughout the year. For example, Lankathilaka is a Buddhist divine place developed around Buddhism and around divine experience of god Vishnu guardian of Sri Lankan landscape and other divine beings. Typology 04 is sloping lands, where transcendental experience is evident along these topographies; mythical events and stories relating to gods are more common in these lands than Buddhist revelation/ concepts, thus mundane and divine experience present in the same plane, and in cultural landscape. This experience is celebrated through rituals and festivals. Typology 05 reveals interesting phenomenon about the landscape and the place and architecture; it suggests in flat landscape built elements act as topos – built topos, large stupa acts as mountains resembling ideal place, guiding the place and people to ideal dimensions and landscape. The last example Anuradhapura remained as the main capital of Sri Lanka until the end of the 10th century AD, and still continues as the centre of the Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Great stupa of Anuradhapura, in many numbers resembling the ideal place guide the landscape and the place, reflecting on large water bodies; signifies physical dimensions reflect on non-physical dimensions as a powerful place phenomenon, in the urban place reflecting local identities. These are interesting topics to explore further.

The shape, form, scale and proximity of natural topos either becomes part of the Buddhist place and architecture or imagined and performed in mythical landscape as divine places. Sri pada mountain and its centralized location in Sri Lanka trigger myth of the place, thus mountain in its original natural form exists with lesser built elements and more imagination in the place. Mihintale, a residual mountain in Anuradhapura, in perceptible and reachable scale, creates centrality and tension between mundane experiences at the foot of the mountain and divine experience on the summit of mountain, transforms to Buddhist performances. Lankathilaka is a rock formation, with missing part on top, centrality and axis created by placing a temple and Buddhist divine performances. In sloping landscape, only the transcendental experience, the axis exists, thus these places are evidences of transcending experiences of gods relating to myth. Great stupa in Anuradhapura is a built topos, converging surrounding landscape towards centre and transcending mundane dimensions to divine dimensions through the axis, uniting place.

5 NATURE AND ARCHITECTURE

We will discuss further, how these natural elements guide cultural performances and shape architecture and the place, comparing two case studies, Mihintale and Lankathilaka. As indicated earlier the history of Mihintale mountain goes back to the introduction of Buddhism during king Devanampiyatissa in the 3rd century BC. According to written and oral evidences, thera Mahinda, son of king Asoka of India, and other disciples came by air to preach Buddhism, and met Devanampiyatissa on this rock is an evidence of coincidence of reality and imagination of the landscape experiences. ‘Thera preached dhamma at the summit of the mountain, king and great assembly of devas (divine spirits) including Brahma listen’ (Mahavamsa).

The reality of this is the shape, formation, location and scale of the mountain and its geometries and natural elements such as terrains, rocks, boulders, trees, water pools and climbing heights along the slopes. The paper argues whole mountain formation provides physical image of the ideal place, the four truths of Buddhist philosophy, thus converting to a Buddhist place (Fig. 1). Several Buddhist performances are inscribed and performed around the mountain; circumbulation around stupa and rock, homage to Buddha and meditation are some of these performing through climbing flight of steps, shaded by flowering trees which directs journey, resting at terrace level with panoramic views leads to another flight of steps leading to another terrace level with different experiences utilized as design principles. The most ancient stupa in Sri Lanka placed here, in which its scale and location exactly responds to the mountain. Several different flight of steps lead to much higher level, until reaching the top most level. At higher levels are more significant for meditation purposes, carved with rock cut caves and built places for meditation of monks. Thus, whole mountain formation creates the architectural place for Buddhist performances and experiences, opening the direct experience of the landscape and nature, revealing four truths of Buddhist place. However, it is noted that before and at the time of introduction of Buddhism this experience was related to the myth and divine place as indicated earlier pointing Mahavamsa quotation.

Lankathilaka is a temple village organized around a Buddhist temple and Vishnu temple, established around 1,344 AC–1,345 AC during Gampola period (1,341 AC–1,410 AC). The geographical, topographical character of Lankathilaka is a prominent rock, not in a large scale, within the reachable height by walking and climbing, in five minutes. The three sides of this rock are surrounded by paddy fields and access to the rock is easier from the west through the village. People approaching along the main road through village gradually climb up passing the stone terrain, and reach the summit, where the panoramic view of Hantana mountain and far away mountains are revealed (Fig. 2). This sudden experience is related to many historical legends about the place and divine experience of Vishnu, the guardian of Sri Lanka. Annual ritual ceremonies still continuing mark the divine area on the summit is an important phenomenon of the place and its dynamism. Placing large temple on the summit and through ritual performances and imagination, the complete ideal place is created visually and non-visually. The Buddhist image is placed at the exact centre of this, while other divine performances related to other gods (while Vishnu is the main god) are around the Buddhist image house. Thus summit of the mountain is transformed to Buddhist and divine performances, while mundane life continues at the foot of the mountain. These two examples reveal how architecture of the place is created between the myth and the reality; how natural topos guides the place for Buddhist performing and Buddhist/divine performing (Figs. 3 and 4). The reality in both cases is the natural

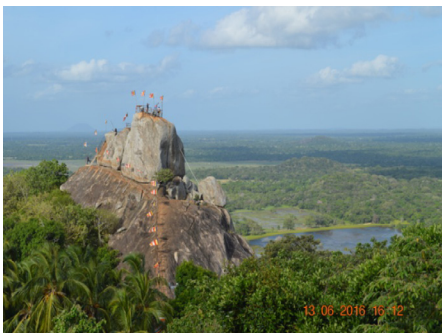


Figure 1: Mihintale.



Figure 2: Lankathilaka.

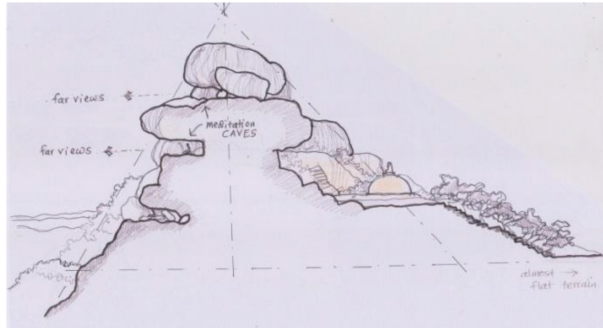


Figure 3: Mihintale mountain (section – not to scale).

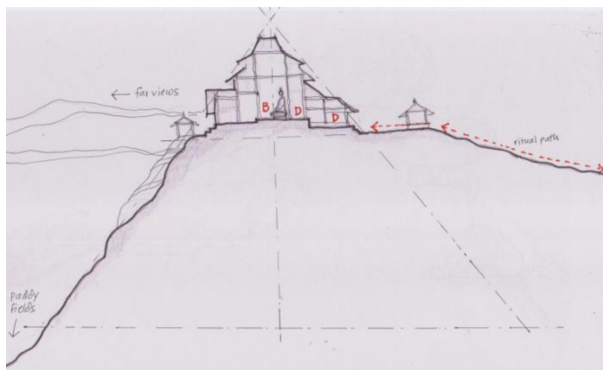


Figure 4: Lankathilaka rock (section – not to scale). B–Buddhist, D–Divine.

landscape & natural features and shape, form, scale and location of these. It is evident that these natural topoi have been understood relating to spatial dimensions of ideal place, throughout ontological relationships developed between people and these topoi, through performative dwelling processes, rituals & Buddhist performing and imagination reflect an everyday process of place understanding. Sense of place, place attachment and creation of the place as Buddhist place or Buddhist divine place harmonized with nature are consequences of this process, not as traditional or contemporary, but as universal or ontological.

6 CONCLUSION

It is evident that unique experience of landscape of Sri Lanka and its relevance to Buddhist place and architecture. These places are specific examples of compositions of Buddhist understanding with natural landscape and divine experience of natural landscape with mythic landscape in a variety of ways, resulting natural-cultural-architectural places bounded by cultural performances. These kinds of place understanding reflect ontological relationships developed between people, nature and their designs rather than as traditional or modern. Nature and architecture are inter-woven within these complexities of relationships.

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