

[Western-based or Decolonised Welfare Planning? Ulrik Plesner's Town Design for the Mahaweli Development Programme in Sri Lanka, 1982-1987](#)

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The Danish architect Ulrik Plesner (1930-2015), not to be confused with his homonymous uncle (1861-1933), has received little scientific attention until now. He first lived in post-independence Ceylon from 1958 to 1967, and later returned to Sri Lanka (contemporary name of Ceylon since 1973) from 1982 to 1987. There, he assisted the design of 6 out of the 12 new towns planned for the Mahaweli Development Programme (MDP). The MDP is an agency-driven project of spatial planning initiated with a preinvestment survey carried by the United Nations Development Program in 1963, and then supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank. The program included the building of dams to double electricity production, the improvement of flood control and the irrigation of rice production in the North-Eastern dry zone of the Mahaweli river drainage basin. Motivated by developmentalist goals of self-sufficiency, endogenous economic development and welfare housing, the MDP originally envisioned the resettlement of one million workers into new towns equipped with low-cost housing and located near workplaces. Legitimised by a nationalist narrative and praised as a new chapter in the Sinhalese 'hydraulic civilisation', its centralised, vertical integration was modelled after the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal American corporation focused on comprehensive energetical and spatial planning, and the Central-Place Theory, a theoretical explanation of the spatial distribution of human settlement. Its implementation reflected the contradictory tension between the influx of Western technical expertise and a 'bottom-up', vernacular-based approach to housing and town design. By focusing on Plesner's career and role in the MDP through the lens of his Danish background and the narrative taken from his own memoirs, this article examines his critique of architectural modernity and his ambivalent stance toward Sri Lankan decolonisation and welfare planning.

Thème(s) de recherche

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