

4th September, 2025

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Urban Trails: Exploring Colombo through street photography

01 Sep 2024 | By Naveed Rozais



- **Exploring Colombo's urban landscape through the lens of street photography**

This week sees a unique side of Colombo come to life with Urban Trails, an exhibition organised by the Streets of Colombo (SOC) photography collective set to take place from 1-7 September. The event will not only showcase a diverse array of street photography but also delve into the nuances of this dynamic art form through workshops, talks, and interactive sessions.

With Urban Trails kicking off today, *The Sunday Morning Brunch* sat down with SOC Founder Johann Latiff to learn more about street photography as a genre and about Urban Trails itself.

Examining the genre of street photography

SOC was established in 2018 with the goal of promoting street photography in Sri Lanka, a genre that Johann feels has not received the attention it deserves. “We want to promote the art of street photography in Sri Lanka. We feel it is not given the attention it deserves compared to wildlife photography, for instance” Johann explained.

With a growing community of 144 members spread across the country, SOC is actively working to bring street photography to the forefront, not just in Colombo but also in other parts of the country.

Streets of Colombo is the Sri Lankan equivalent of other international street photography movements like Streets of Mumbai, Streets of New York, Streets of Boston, and so on. (There is no connection between these movements; it is just a form of nomenclature that has caught on internationally.)

The art of street photography goes beyond merely taking pictures of people or places. It's about capturing the essence of the environment, the emotions of the subjects, and the interactions between people and their surroundings. Candid and unscripted, it captures the genuine moments that transpire in public spaces – a musician lost in their melody, a commuter's contemplative gaze, or a spontaneous conversation at a street corner cafe.

“If you take masters like Steve McCurry,” Johann continued, “their work is not just pretty pictures of the street; they are quite beautiful works of art.” Through street photography, everyday scenes can be transformed into powerful visual narratives that resonate with viewers on a deeper level.

Johann shared his view that street photography was the “mother of all photography genres”. Unlike other forms of photography, where subjects can be carefully composed or staged, street photography thrives on spontaneity. It's about being in the right place at the right time, with the ability to anticipate and capture the fleeting moments that define the urban experience.

“Street photography borders closely on documentary photography and photojournalism. It's really hardcore; the only thing more strenuous would be photojournalism,” Johann said. He observed that the challenging nature of the genre, where photographers must constantly be alert and navigate the unpredictable and often chaotic urban landscape to capture moments that tell a story, built very important skills in a photographer that translated across all genres of photography.

Urban Trails: A celebration of the genre

Urban Trails – an exhibition paired with talks and workshops – is a testament to SOC's dedication to promoting street photography.

This exhibition itself is a rerun of the street photography exhibition 'Discovery' held by SOC held last year, with added sessions and new content to cater to the growing interest in the genre. The exhibition will feature a wide range of street photographs taken by SOC members, capturing the vibrant and diverse urban landscapes of Sri Lanka.

In addition to the exhibition, Urban Trails will offer a series of workshops and talks designed to educate and inspire both seasoned photographers and beginners. One of the highlights of the event is the session titled 'Overcoming Your Fears' led by Johann himself. This session will provide practical tips and techniques for street photography, addressing the challenges that photographers often face when shooting in urban environments.

"When walking around and pointing your camera at people, you have to be prepared for different reactions," Johann noted. The session will guide participants on how to navigate these interactions and capture candid moments without intruding on people's privacy.

Other notable sessions include 'A Day at Negombo Beach' by Mohan Gurusinghe, which will explore the unique photographic opportunities offered by the coastal town, and 'To See and to be Seen' by Carolyn McKay, an ode to the women of Sri Lanka through the lens of street photography.

Each session is designed to provide participants with valuable insights into the various aspects of street photography, from composition and technique to the ethical considerations involved in capturing candid images of people in public spaces.

Why celebrate street photography?

Street photography holds significant cultural and historical value. It serves as a visual record of life in the city, capturing moments and scenes that may disappear over time. By documenting the evolving urban landscape, street photographers create a visual archive that future generations can look back on to understand the changes that have taken place.

Johann underscored this point, saying: “You can’t really make a living out of street photography, but it does record segments of life in the city that you live in. Street photography has a historical importance; for example, consider 10 or 15 years later, when we no longer have certain structures like Rio Cinema or the De Soysa building.”

Street photography also challenges photographers to hone their technical skills. It requires quick reflexes, a keen eye for detail, and the ability to anticipate and react to the ever-changing environment.

As Johann put it: “Street photography is about placing yourself in front of interesting things so that you can get an interesting shot. You need to be where the action is and place yourself at the right place and time.” This level of skill and intuition is what sets street photography apart from other genres, making it a rewarding yet demanding pursuit.

Investing in the street photography genre

Urban Trails is more than just an exhibition; it is a celebration of the art of street photography and its significance in capturing the essence of urban life. Through this event, Johann shared that SOC aimed to not only showcase the work of its members but also to educate and inspire others to explore the world of street photography.

It is also part of a larger plan for the future that Johann is leading to take SOC's vision beyond only serving as a collective of street photography enthusiasts. The collective aims to connect with other photographers and groups, both locally and internationally, to foster a sense of community and collaboration and thereafter to organise a festival celebrating the genre regionally.

“We’re also trying to have a street photography festival in Sri Lanka, with Colombo being its base. We’re trying to connect with other street photography groups across Asia,” he said. This festival, which Johann envisions to take place on the same scale as other big Lankan arts and literary festivals, will not only celebrate street photography but also position Sri Lanka as a hub for this art form in the region.

Johann is also looking to build more awareness and interest in the genre, especially among youth. Urban Trails will be followed by the Urban Snapshots Skills Garage, an intensive workshop series on street photography for youth aged 14+ led by Johann in collaboration with Colombo Dream School, one of Sri Lanka's newest visual and performing arts schools.

Urban Snapshots will see aspiring young street photographers learn about the art of street photography over four weeks, venturing out into the streets of Colombo with Johann and learning how to capture

candid moments in the urban field.

Urban Trails by Streets of Colombo takes place from 1-7 September at Siam Nivasa, Colombo 7

For more information:

Facebook: [@streets.of.colombo](#)