# THE TEA FACTORY A TRANSFORMATION

By Channa Daswatte

Tea Factories are indeed an integral part of the landscape of the hills of Sri Lanka. In the total transformation of the landscape by the plantation industry, these large, utilitarian buildings become landmarks in an otherwise endless carpet of green. Like everything else of the period, the ingenuity and practicality of the Victorian engineer finds fulfilment in this particular building type. In a period when speed of construction meant entering the market and thereby making profits more quickly, the tea factory is a masterpiece of prefabricated industrial engineering. Along with the elegant iron girder bridges and railway stations, the tea factories are the industrial vernacular on the production end of a vast empire of tea trade.

Redundant industrial buildings have been seen as a ready stock of building easily reused and forming a part of the redevelopment of the inner suburbs of many modern cities. A whole tradition of conversions has been the focus of a large amount of work in the recent past. The Conversion of the redundant tea factory of the Hethersett Estate built in 1927 and disused for the past 30 years is probably the most convincing of such projects done in Sri Lanka.

The Project, initiated by an enthusiastic director of a major business house in Colombo, was to convert the tea factory of the Hethersett estate, incidentally a factory on the highest elevation on the island, into a habitable place. The old building itself was found by the architect in an excellent state of preservation, having been put to use for a mere 30 or 35 years. Spectacularly sited on the crest of a hill, overlooking a gap in the eastern slopes of the central mountains with a view down to

*The Tea Factory and its surrounds*

the Randenigala reservoir, it is a well proportioned, corrugated iron clad building with a standardised 'H' iron structural frame. Like all tea factories the ground floor housed the main production machinery, which are heavy and require firm anchoring. The upper floors were used only for the wilting of the leaf. These were large, timber floored open spaces with drying racks for several thin layers of leaf and no more then five or six persons working on them at any given time. A large centralised multiple height space installed with fans made in the tradition of the spitfire aircraft propellers of laminated wood circulated air to speed up this process. The problem faced by the architect was how to load this structure more than ten fold and insert the services required for a hotel operation and still retain its integrity so that the inhabitants felt the magic of living inside a production facility 7000 feet above sea level. All the interventions had to have the spirit of a Victorian engineer of the industrial age, but add up to the modern conveniences of an international hotel.

The layout of the facility concentrates the public rooms and main service facilities on the ground floor, where an extension is built to house the stores and extra services required by the hotel, in the same corrugated iron clad architecture which now looks as though it was always there. The old chimney stack takes out the exhaust from the kitchen and the oil tank holds the extra water supply required by the fire fighting equipment. The simple entrance canopy on the centre of the long side of the building opens of the multiple height space which formally carried draughts of hot air into the wilting racks and is now the reception and main vertical circulation space. An open tread timber staircase wraps around an old caged lift, leaving all its working parts and the occupants of the lift in full view. On either side of this central space are the other public rooms, all separated not unlike in any factory, by screens of glass paned window sashes. On the end which looks over the most spectacular view is a lounge, from which an old timber stair leads to the bar, the only public room on the first floor. The dining room wraps around this space, thus concentrating all the activity generated by the maximum of 100 occupants in a single large area, save for another lounge bar on the other side of the reception. This obviously helps in the social processes which are an integral part of the life of a hotel.

The upper floor wilting and drying rooms are all converted into 50 bedrooms. The planning here has been determined by the proportions and spacing of the elegant teak windows that are on the face of the building. An elegant strategy of using every other bay for a bedroom and the in between bay as the two bathrooms works extremely well. The rooms are strung on double loaded corridors opening off the galleries around the central multiple storey space.

This planning follows what is in fact the inevitable dictates of the building

***Typical Bed Room***

***Typical Toilet***

and its siting. As any good architect, Nihal Bodhinayake, has been able to see the whole building as if it were as a 'site' on which to make interventions that seem inevitable. His skill as a designer and meticulous nature is displayed best however, in putting together the details of design. His approach has the same rigour of an engineer first commissioned to produce an efficient building.

The major problem of strengthening the structure is elegantly married to the existing structure, that if not for the differentiating paint, red for new and green for old throughout, the new additions could have been part of the old structure. The new strengthening structure literally wraps itself around the old 'H' irons physically and visually supporting them. In the upper floors the partitions are entirely of stud walls, so as to reduce the loading, and also meet up to the most exacting international standards for fire protection. Fine corrugated iron line the corridors. The timber floors in the public rooms are all held down by a precise pattern of brass screws enhancing the total industrial aesthetic further complemented by the lighting that uses bare bulbs held on galvanised iron pipes. All the services are elegantly integrated with the structure and is in full view, making them very much a part of the general ambience along with sections of the old shafts and wheels that ran the many machines in the factory that have been deliberately left over.

In this age of environmental degradation and wanton misuse of resources, this project seems to point a way to the reuse of existing resources to fulfill new needs. Recycling materials have been a part of the building trade in this country for some time, however the effective conversion of buildings is yet to catch on. This project stands as a pointer to what potential an existing building stock can have. Most of the older more solidly constructed buildings are a valuable resource of material and energy which can be reused with imagination. Understanding the logic of the initial builders and a rigorous application of that logic to the new interventions can result in a product that manages to live a second life that is enriched by the former.

***Hethersett Bar***

***Restaurant area showing the Buffet Canopy***

***Note: The photographs were taken by Mr. Gemunu Amarasinghe***