



THE NATIONAL YOUTH CENTRE AT MAHARAGAMA : A Place for the Youth amidst Urban Chaos

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The dawn of the adolescence begins with the transformation of a child into the aspiring adult staged across what is usually recognised as the youthful threshold of life. It is indeed a pleasant, exciting, thrilling and stimulating interlude but unfortunately for some it is often misconceived, misled and ends in misadventures with catastrophic consequences for later life. Most grown-up adults realise that the young age was punctuated more by immaturity, misconception and calamity and wish that they could re-live it with the consciousness and maturity they now possess. Life however never offers this opportunity: it never does!

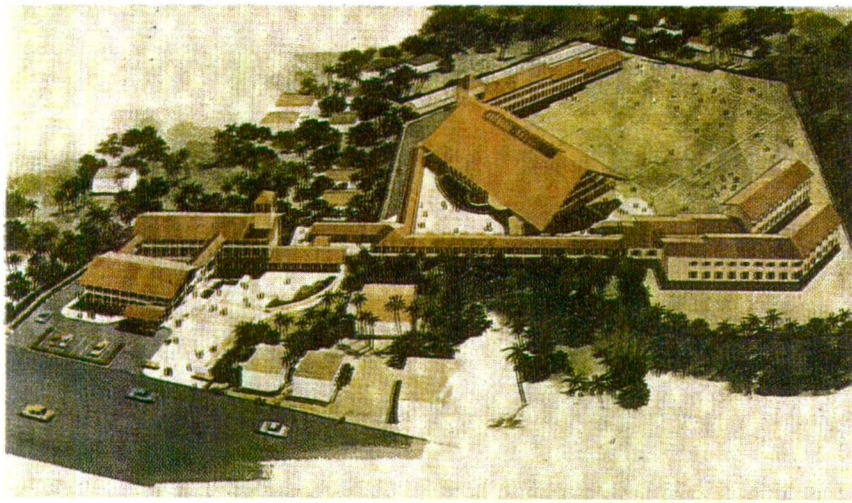
Youthfulness is a time when life is discovered, organised and collected from among the chaos and confusion that descend upon a child through adulthood. However, it is one thing to encounter personal and perhaps 'sweet' calamities in life as an individual but yet another to be totally misled and misguided to tragic consequences as

a community and a society. Restlessness, adventure and challenge are aspects of youthfulness and it is not unusual that Sri Lanka witnessed many a period of youth unrest and uprising against the odds and realities of the emerging Sri Lankan culture. Indeed such upheavals still continue and perhaps will never subside as long as children grow into becoming adults in the midst of an unjust society.

It was in the late 1960s that the Sri Lankan government came to realise the importance of the issues of the youth in particular and the need to devise specific policies and programmes for their resolution. As a result, the State accepted its responsibility to create opportunities for the Sri Lankan youth to cultivate their self-reliance, creativity and sociability through planned interventions. Initially, programmes were started to enable them to acquire the ability to participate in productive activities through vocational training and to provide various activities such as education, culture, sports and recreation

specially prepared for the youth. The unemployed youth, especially the educated rural section of the younger generation who enjoyed the benefit of free education introduced to Sri Lanka in 1956 had become restless about the way the society was moving, how its political machinery was governing and indeed the social injustice that they began to see at their door-steps since independence. There were no opportunities for the youth to use their inherent abilities to involve in organised social sports and recreational activities when compared with their counterparts living in the other countries in the Asian region.

It was in recognition of the above need that the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) was established in the year 1969. With the introduction of the Act No. 69 of 1979, the functions of the NYSC was broadened to cover all the youth services activities in the island such as planning, co-ordination and implementation and the formulation of policies pertaining to the upliftment of the quality of life of the youth.



The objectives of the NYSC were clear and manifold. It aimed primarily to foster the feeling of dignity of labour, understanding of social and economic problems and to create a sense of discipline and enthusiasm about the national feeling among the youth of the Sri Lankan Society. It sought to motivate the participation of youth in the national development ventures and to enhance understanding and friendship among the youth of Sri Lanka and the other countries. Its goal was to encourage youth to develop the feeling of competitiveness and victory and to broaden the knowledge of youth and give them training related to development so that they could be encouraged to participate in cultural, sports and artistic activities as much as in physical development. It aspired to provide opportunities and facilities for entertainment and to help the disabled youth. NYSC wanted to create employment opportunities by investing funds on a long-term policy which will strengthen the government's economic plan and make opportunities for the youth to get involved in policy-making and implementation. Assisting the existing organisations for the welfare of the youth while establishing new organisations, it aimed to plan the expansion of the youth services and integrate, develop and manage them in order to facilitate the development of the inherent characteristics of the youth.

In 1985, the government realised the need to establish a well-equipped centre to offer opportunities for the youth to achieve these objectives and to co-ordinate the implementation of youth services carried out by the organisations at local levels. However, since the government did not have adequate funds to construct a youth centre that will have facilities for the comprehensive training of youth, it decided to request the Japanese government for their assistance.

The Japanese International Corporation Agency (JICA) offered the grant-aid for the construction of the project but also offered to design and construct the project. JICA saw the main objectives of the project as having to offer the youth a place of their own where they could focus their energies on productive skill acquisition and development of individual and social traits. Thus it offered facilities to expand the opportunities for the youth to receive vocational education and

provided the arenas in which the youth could engage in creative activities of culture, art, sports and recreational activities. It sought to provide social education for the youth to deepen their knowledge regarding the development of society, nation building and roles to be played by the youth themselves and to promote goodwill and mutual understanding between the youth in Sri Lanka and other countries.

KUME Architects and Engineers of Japan carried out the design of the complex from the preparation of basic design report to the completion of construction. The Japanese team also did the construction management while local craftsmen were employed in the construction activities. The project architect saw the design concept of the building as having "to create a place reflective of the needs of youth and to provide an atmosphere in which they could excel themselves". With this in mind, the setting had to be conceptualised in harmony with the environment surrounding the project site and the buildings for the activities of the youth.

Located in a suburb of the city of Colombo amidst urban chaos, squalor and noisy crowdedness, it was necessary to look towards enwrapping in abundant green to create this atmosphere. The buildings were conceptualised low in height and comfortably stretched out so as to create harmony with its surroundings and defuse the crowded chaotic and noisy peripheral environment.



The buildings were conceptualised as a response to the distinctive shape of the site and the undulating terrain it offered. Creating the buildings acclimated to the customs and natural features of Sri Lanka was a strategy to enable the youth feel a sense of home having their own facilities with comfortable atmosphere. This, it was felt would make them feel free and enable them to perform at their best. Indeed, the way in which the facilities and spaces are couched together permit unobstructed visual encounters of the activities encouraging the interaction of the youth.

The spatial needs of the youth range from the intimate meeting places meant for a few to places for larger groups who could gather and engage in organised social and cultural activities. Along with the leisure and sports activities, the centre has to essentially cater to the more serious training and education activities for the youth at the same time. Thus, beneath the visible freedom and opportunity for the youth to be on their own, an atmosphere conducive for the fostering of discipline looms, making the youth acquire a sense of discipline to accept the challenges and responsibilities in the future.

At the inception, the architects have realised that the centre should inculcate the skills among the youth in preparing them for a working life and for this the ability for disciplined teamwork matters. The architecture thus offers the opportunity to subside the natural sense of unrest prevalent

among the youth and calms them to be receptive to training. After 15 years of commissioning, the National Youth Centre is so fondly occupied by the youth and used for youth activities, one could be sure that it would serve the needs of them for several decades to come.

The buildings fascinate the youth, the spaces offer a simple elegance to cherish and offer abundance of opportunities to occupy and live-in. It is not by accident that the simple architectural vocabulary of the Buddhist temples that is so familiar to the Sri Lankan youth have been brought in to trigger this sense of place. The buildings and the open gathering spaces are juxtaposed in the layout to achieve a visible spatial hierarchy; the most frequently used space having been the multi-purpose hall which houses an arena, a stage, a rehearsal room, a gymnasium, a video production room and a first aid room. The multi-purpose hall where indoor sports, seminars, musical shows or dramas are conducted has a very informal setting when compared with other similar facilities in the urban centres. It relies on natural ventilation and allows for the free movement of the spectators without disturbing one's attention on the event taking place at the centre of the stage. The layout and the interior arrangements of the multi-purpose hall encourages the grouping of the young people who come from different regions of the island, thus giving them an opportunity to know each other and develop closer relationships.



Placed centrally in the complex, it reverberates the hustle and bustle of the busy street fronting the site smothered gradually by the forecourt and the several descending terraces leading to the entry pavilion. The terraces, the colonnaded walkways and the grand flight of steps entice movement and the spaces which they encounter along this stride, invite for a pause in order to take part in the social or cultural activities taking place within. In fact, a walk through the busy street in haste is slowed down by the architecture that confronts preparing the youth for the activities that awaits ahead. The surrounding of the playground at the other end offers opportunities to relax in a very intimate and serene atmosphere of the terrace concourse.

Located within the busy urban chaos bordering a central driveway connecting two major cities, and being opposite to one of the most congested urban nodes, the architecture of the Maharagama Youth Centre skilfully transforms this environment to a quiet ambience constantly re-invigorating its inhabitants throughout its spaces.

It is undeniable that the rural youth who frequent the centre most often, find solace in the calm and quiet settings reflecting those familiar in the open paddy fields, flowing waterways and specially the sand-spread courts surrounding stupas in the village temple. An overwhelming sense of place and home in an urban chaos and familiarity recreated, the architects have succeeded in making a place for the youth even in one of the most obdurate locations in Sri Lanka.

