



1 EPIPHANOUS ARCHITECTURE

- ❑ National Youth Centre
Maharagama
- ❑ Architect
Kume Architects - Engineers
Japan
- ❑ Text and graphics
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Hidden almost completely from public view behind profligate kitsch facades, and set back from the densely-packed linearity of the unrelenting ribbon-developed bazaar in Maharagama, the National Youth Centre's (NYC) diaphanous spaces have largely remained unsung, and hence unknown, to most of the architectural aficionados in downtown Colombo.

Across the main street from where the secularised Bodhi Tree – a gateway of

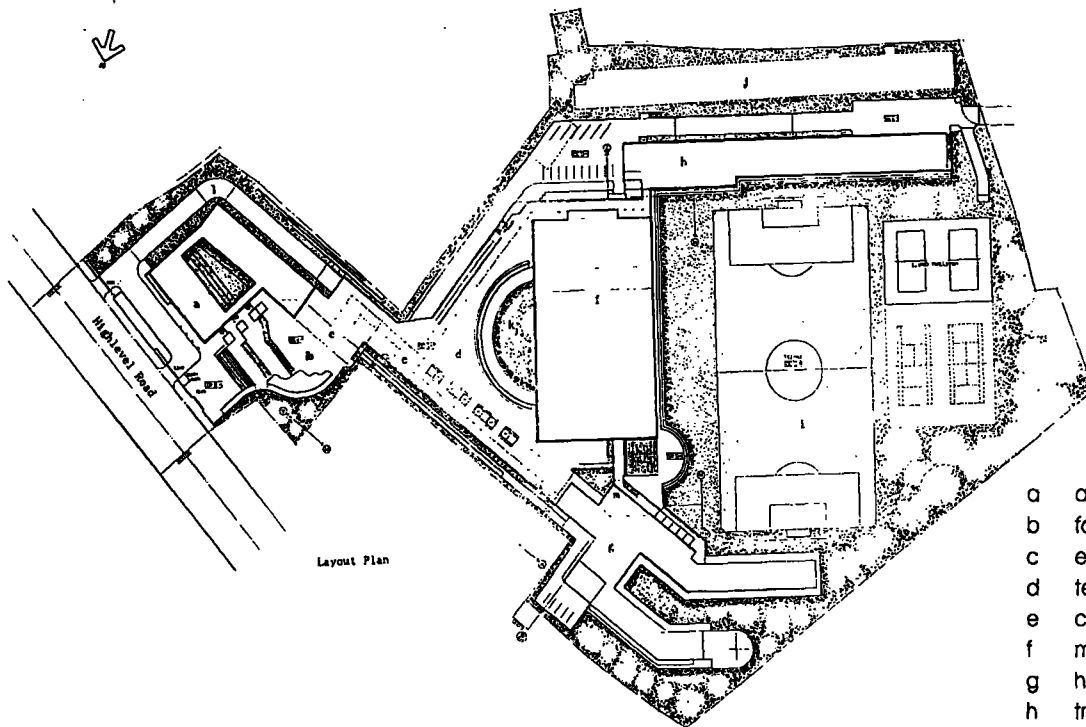
sorts to the town – casts its dappled shadow on the makeshift stalls of the vendors of trivia below, its airy sprawl rises, striking a welcome note of dissonance within the town's cramped epicentre.

The NYC was acclaimed as the biggest centre for youth in Asia when it was commissioned nearly fifteen years ago and, it still is purported to be the biggest in South Asia. The entire complex was designed, built and gifted

to the people of Sri Lanka by the Government of Japan.

The NYC invites philosophical appraisal. This is in no small part due to the near meditative effect its spaces have on the visitor: when the quiet hubbub of the average workday dies down, a greater sound, that of an insistent silence, takes over. One discovers, not surprisingly, shades of Ando and the rhetoric of Norberg Schulz, frozen into masonry. Imbued

NATIONAL YOUTH CENTRE MAHARAGAMA



Layout Plan

key:

- a administration block
- b forecourt
- c entry pavilion
- d terrace concourse
- e colonnaded walkway
- f multi-purpose hall
- g hostel building
- h training wing
- i playground
- j maintenance wing
(existed previously)
- k semicircular courtyard
- l ramp to carpark
- m canteen

with the spirit of youth and sculpted by its movement, this vast "temple" complex, for that in effect is what it really is, is a consecration to youthful aspiration.

The first thing that strikes a visitor upon entering the well laid out premises, is the preponderant roof element. The entire complex in fact, gives the appearance of having been designed with the concept of the traditional pavilion in mind.

The buildings finished crisply in cream-tinted white, are a toned-down presence, and provide a supportive framework for the streamlined agglomeration of colourful roofs. Steel members assume the function of rafter and plate: colour-coded in dull black and deep red respectively and set off exquisitely by the rich amber of the wooden raked ceiling, they guide and

direct the gaze of the observer along the main axes of the complex.

The site itself is shaped like an irregular figure eight, whose two "balloons" are separated by a height difference of about twenty feet. The design resolves this divide by introducing an intermediate concourse, creating the three main levels of the complex in the process.

Across the concourse level lies the main axis of the complex, which is pegged down as it were, by the squaring up of the administration block and hostel building. The tension generated by their polemic is gently diffused by a simple device: the tangential positioning of the two massive flights of stairs alongside the administration block and auditorium.

The administration block itself is a smart, but matter-of-fact building and

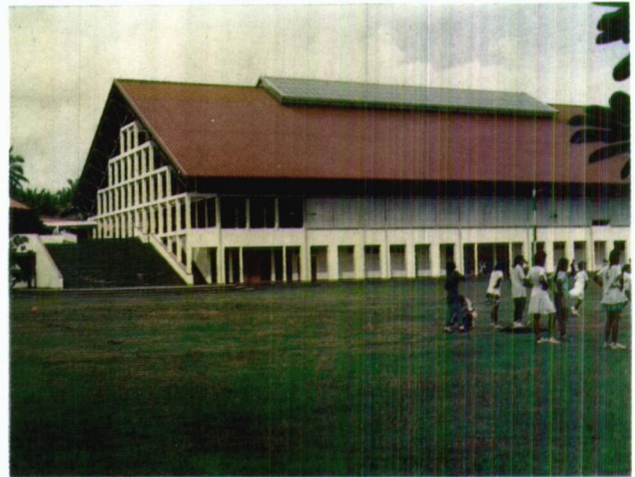
gives no inkling of the spatial fiesta that is to follow. The eye glosses over its exterior and probes the porosity of the entry pavilion for the telltale stimulus that betrays quality. The dramatic massing of steps which leads down obliquely towards the entry court hints at it, however.

Generously proportioned, they sweep one off one's feet and spill over the site's incline. A leisurely saunter through the pavilion brings one to the edge of the terrace that doubles as the roofdeck of the parking bay below. The terrace is a broad crescent shaped swathe; it bifurcates round a hemispherical courtyard below and transfixes the proscenium and lobby ends of the auditorium.

The sweep of the auditorium's space frame dominates the terrace. Although



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1. The terrace - a place of muted echoes and soft murmurings where boundaries merge and lose definition.
2. From the forecourt towards the entry pavillion, with the auditorium beyond.
3. The Complex, across the concourse - a bird's eye view.
4. The terrace sweeps past the auditorium culminating in a grand flight of steps beside the playground.

somewhat jarring to the eye it is effectively scaled down by the surrounding structures. In addition, by preventing the diffusion of space into the large quadrangle created by the playground beyond, it also preserves the integral function of the terrace as a "place in between".

Skirting the courtyard below at the terrace level, one is lead past the upper lobby of the auditorium, cajoled down a last flight of steps and brought to a standstill finally, before the playground. This is a vital meeting point where all pathways of the complex converge. We see that the architect has taken

cognisance of the fact, by his positioning of the canteen and dining hall below at this pivotal point of vantage, commanding views across the terrace and over the playground.

The NYC's staggering progression of stair and terrace is a metaphor - a veritable spatial simulation of youth's triumphal march. Even the gauchely placed statue at the head of the entry court, commemorating quite needlessly a proletarian uprising of sorts, fails to detract from its compositional balance.

The National Youth Centre, however, never quite exhausts its capacity to delight. The eclectic form of the administration tower, fashioned rather like an alpine campanile, seems like an unwarranted caprice. But the need for such a dominant structure becomes evident upon further reflection. The tower strengthens the main axis but more significantly, it marks the site's bottleneck - the tenuous link that connects its two segments and provides an anchor for the billowing spaces of the complex.

The extremity of the complex is made up of the hostel and vocational training



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5. The colonnaded walkway
6. The canteen commands views across the terrace and playground.
7. The walkway skirting the playground, links the auditorium with the training wing.

wings which contain the auditorium and playground. Radially located around the semi-circular courtyard are the gymnasium, dance studio and video training centre, beside which on the further side, the service access terminates under the terrace.

The asymmetry of the complex presents the visitor with a constantly changing tableau of massed forms, the proportions of which release "powerful associative charges." This, broadly speaking is what constitutes the NYC's architectural charm. And nowhere does one feel it more, than on the terrace – to which one comes harking back always. It is the heart of the NYC complex, where the harassed employee driven by the demands of the workday, invariably pauses for a moment's respite and quiet reflection.

The architecture of the NYC transcends the banal. Even the strictures of a regimented Japanese module, fail to elicit a negative response. For with it the architect has captured within the languorous ambience of our Sri Lankan way of life, the quintessential spirit of youth – and set it free.