

THE CASE STUDY

GOONESINGHEPURA HOUSING AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT; – AN INSIGHT –

THE ORDER

It was early 1980. The Boom had started about an year earlier and the semi-gods became demi-gods, – the Architects. In the case of Goonesinghepura there was no “Brief” in the normal sense. Instead, a “Briefing” was given to the Architects at some meetings with Officials, – Meetings chaired by a sombre Secretary or a cherubic Chairman. These meetings were followed by other meetings with Planning officials. At these meetings one fact stood clear, – the very poor people in the Dias Place area had to be removed from their hovels and housed properly (?). It was almost an order. This, for all purposes was indeed the Brief. The “Consultant”, Architects Associated was duly appointed, Letter of Intent issued and the Architects were called upon to present proposals.

THE CONSULTANT

The word “Consultant” was not a familiar term in Sri Lanka, as used in reference to an Architect or Engineer prior to the eighties. The word at the time was used more to refer to a specialist medical man, – say a Paediatrician or Gynaecologist or such Specialist Medic, rather than to Architects, the reason probably being that Man needed medical care more than the tectonics of Architects.

EARLY MORN AND LATE NIGHT

The “Brief” being jolly short and therefore clear enough, the Architect had to now get-the-hang (so to speak) of his subject(s). How does one get to know the very poor people in the Dias Place area and thereabouts? In fact the Architect had not even known of such a road in Colombo. After some thought and consulting friends (who drove-in the fear of the Lord), the Architect decided to see for himself how the poor of the area really carried on their lives. So at the crack of dawn, around 4 a.m. the Architect was a part of the by-lanes and alleyways of Colombo 10, about an hour or two in the morning and another about sundown. This practice was carried on for a week to 10 days. On some days the place was visited late at night – about 11 p.m. to midnight.

THE WORK-A-DAY

A day in this area would begin something like this:

4 a.m. – Dias Place (typical of any road in the vicinity) :- Bandicoots (v. large) in abundance and very busy. Seem to be in a great hurry. An occasional dead Bandicoot. Emaciated dog with welcome wag. Black cats and coloured cats. Men sleeping astride their 2 wheel handcarts, some asleep in the carts and some stirring. Some women about. No children seen except the odd child with (may be) the mother. Few kiosks open, with bleary-eyed men sipping off tin mugs. Petromax or Oil Lamps. An occasional kiosk with an electric bulb. A man

may be seen sprawled by the road-side probably after a “hard day’s night”. Some light visible in Temple. No light on road but many tilting Lamp posts. Garbage here and Garbage there, Garbage all over.

4.30 a.m. to 6.00 a.m. – Dias Place (Typical of a street at this time in the area) :- Young men and older men in groups of 2, 3 or more, with buckets and bathing gear treading their way to the community wells. Dental care on street while on-the-walk. After ablution, a deity near the wells by the road is homaged. About 6 a.m. large men and smaller men, old men and young men and also boys in teens get into frenzied action. They scramble for the handcarts and dash down the road pushing the carts before them, towards the Bus Station, Railway Station and other areas of the business community in the Pettah. Breakfast, usually of bread and curry downed on the way, – and the day begins at Keselwatta.

4 a.m. – An Alleyway (typical at this time) :- Busy Bandicoots, many cats and some dogs sniffing and grubbing in garbage. Handcart chained to window bar. Most windows and doors closed with smoke wending through crevices. A peek (at great risk) through a window or crevice would reveal a sturdy woman blowing into a wood fuelled hearth. Man in slumber on, make-shift bed and children asleep on floor.

4.30 a.m. to 6 a.m. – Alleyway (typical at the time of morn) :- Doors and windows begin to open. Privacy of no consequence. Atmosphere a misty haze with the mix of morning sun, smoke and garbage steam. Men away to the bathing wells. In some abodes, groups of women busy on sewing machines and making (probably) cloth dolls. By six the men are out and away with their handcarts to earn their day’s keep. The children come out a while later, and are mostly well attired in school uniforms and canvas shoes.

The Roads and Alleys

The Alleys are officially called “Gardens”, being recorded by this quaint name by none other than the Colombo Municipal Council. Try as one may, none could explain how and why. The Architect did some reasoning and came to the conclusion that the expansive gardens of the Mansions of 150 years ago became the alleyways of Maradaña, Keselwatta, Kotahena and such places, retaining the garden nomenclature coined with the name of the old Mansion or the name of its last owner, at least to make matters easier for the postman.

These Alleyways are mostly dead-end (and this too had a good enough reason), are the places where the familed folk inhabit and cohabit and are mostly derelict additions in the

gardens of the spacious houses of a by-gone era. An old Mansion with about (say) 10 large rooms would house about 70 to 80 or even 100 people.

Historical Background and the Informal sector

In the latter half of the 19th century, a major transformation occurred in the social structure of Colonial Colombo. The growth of an Import-Export economy based on a plantation agriculture and the development of the port of Colombo to meet new demands, resulted in the expansion of the Commercial hub of Fort and Pettah, causing the city elite occupying the residential ring of Kochchikade, Wolfendhal, Keselwatta, Hultsdorp and Maradana to move to more congenial areas in keeping with their spacious life styles. The residential ring around the Hub with the Mansions and their well laid-out gardens soon became the highly congested living quarters of the working and lower income people, whose casual mode of living and working earned them the sobriquet "The Informal Sector".

The Site

The "Brief", as stated earlier, was confined to a sentence. This was considered a very healthy starting line. The site was identified by the Urban Development Authority and consisted of 2 properties opposite each other with Dias Place running through. The larger was over 2 acres in extent, to the north of Dias Place with an old abandoned Foundry and the other just under One Acre to the South of the same road with an old Brewery Warehouse. The availability of over 3 acres of land in a highly blighted area was indeed a Present on a Platter, because it avoided the possibility and the pain of dehousing a large number of people, which if happened would have been the very antithesis of the purpose of the whole exercise, however worthy the result may have been.

Resolution and Resolve

The solution needed Resolution which needed Resolve and Resolve needed a Resolvent.

The "Order" was clear. the Site was there. The solution and the resolution were the matters to be taken in hand. After

some discussion and debate it was decided to Resolve by applying the following Resolvents.

Resolvent 1 :- The solution rested on an Urban planning approach for the **entire area**.

Resolvent 2 :- The Planning solution for the identified site to be considered a Catalyst for the development of the whole blighted area of Colombo North.

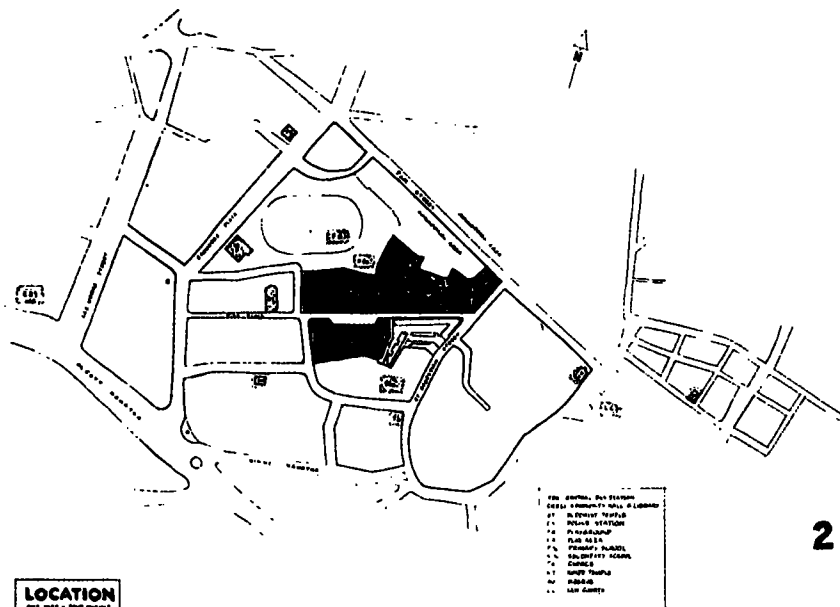
Resolvent 3 :- Blocks of Flats (as they were known) and as already constructed by the Authorities to be retained and "made good" and made livable as practicable and within the Urban Planning context and the realities of Economics. Same policy to apply to Private Development in the area.

Resolvent 4 :- Advice on the above approach to the decision making level of the State Machine at the appropriate time and after the achievement of the Catalyst (phase 1) ie: the Goonesinghepura scheme as we now know it.

As most often happens, it was possible to apply only Resolvents 1 and 2, and no thoughts were even considered for the entire area by the powers that be. This situation arose mainly due to events which overtook the Decision Makers and the country itself, shortly after work commenced on site.

High Density Encompassment

The formula for resolving low income Urban housing has to be based on a high density equation. This would mean the maximum number of Units per vertical access. A Unit was to be 400 Sq. ft. as decided by the Authority. The height was restricted to Ground + 3 Uppers ie: 4 storeys. Now, the prevalent norm was 2 units off each staircase on each floor. This would give 8 units off a staircase over a 4 storey height.



At Goonesinghepura the Architect achieved 16 Units per staircase over the 4 storey height restriction. This was possible by using the half landing **and** the normal floor landing as access to Units, by playing with levels (contorting the section as it were) and somewhat aided by a fall of about Five feet on a stretch of about 800 feet along the length of the larger site and a fall of similar proportion on the smaller site. Some ingenuity was required of course, particularly in the control of headrooms at the lowest levels and in the practicalities concerning underground service lines.

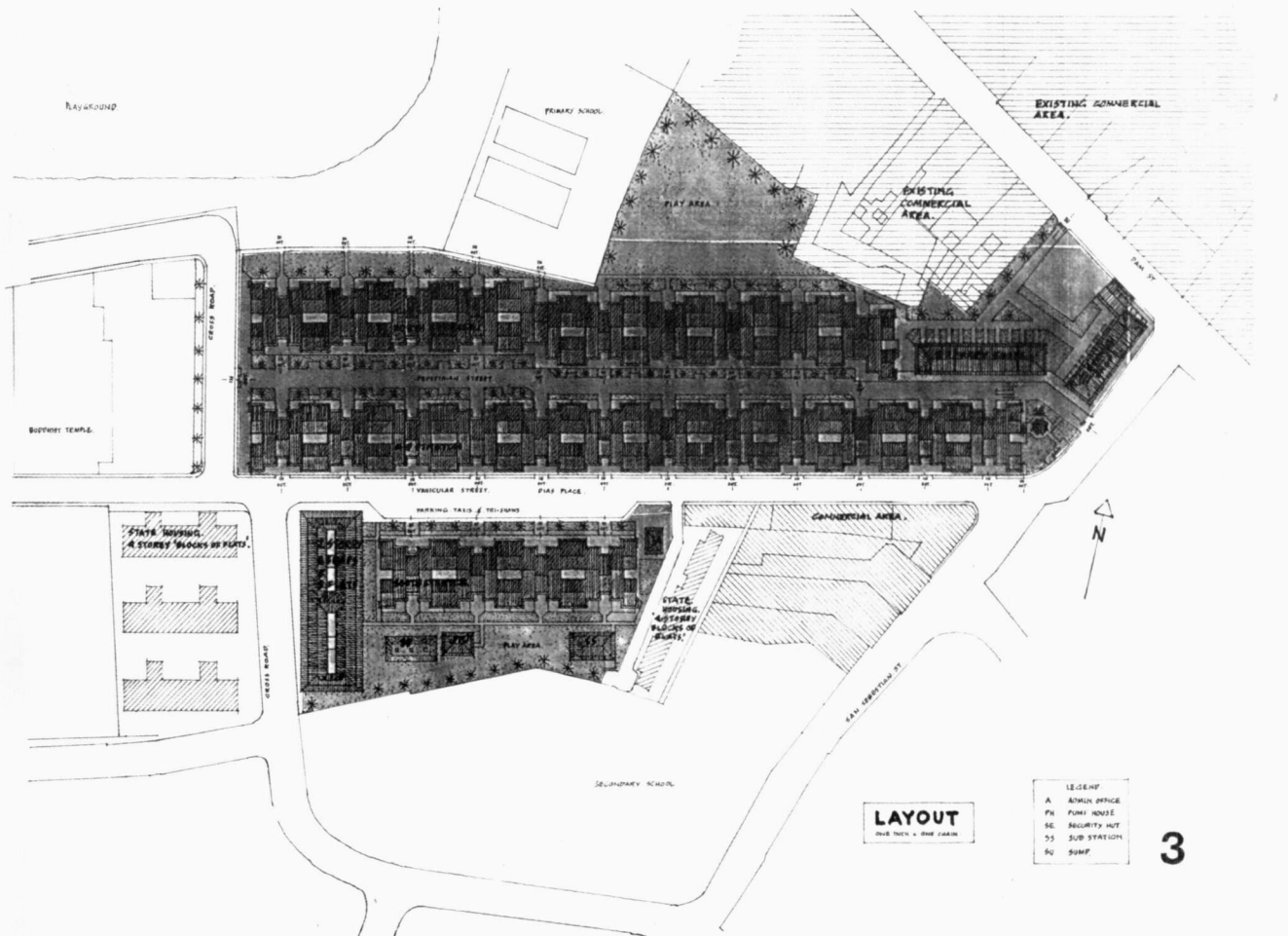
The Unit

A Unit as stated above was 400 Sq. ft. It was first designed as a single space, with living and eating area, and a sleeping area, the kitchen was separated off with a partition and door, and so were the shower and toilet. This proposal was rejected, so much so a senior Official aired his view at one of the meetings, probably also taking other features of the proposal into account, declared **"This bloody Scheme must be thrown out of the Window"**. The Unit was later changed to suit the Authority requirement with the

conventional Living & Dining room, Bedroom etc., but the change was not calamitous.

Shops and Offices

Units are replaced by shops on the lower two floors facing Dias Place and the North Stretch of Buildings facing the Pedestrian way. The commercial aspect was considered a vital prerequisite for the success of the scheme, and was based on the theory that the place of Work and the home were very much interconnected and a part of Informal Sector activity. "For the shops, semicircular arched colonnades were used at the lowest levels facing the main road (Dias Place) and the pedestrian street. Repetition of colonnades on either side of the pedestrian street was avoided, so that the North stretch has shops with an arched colonnade facing the pedestrian street, U.GFI house units (where colonnades were not necessary) with little terraces raised 3 ft. above the street level, face the other side of the pedestrian street. The facade formation is enhanced by the cantilevered portions of the units at the upper levels, (which give part-cover to the open arcades of the shops at the lower first level), the setbacks for the staircases which culminate with the water towers, and a disciplined but variegated roof scape." (The Architectural & Building Directory of India 92/93).



Community Camaraderie

With the density situation under control, the next was in the planning for People-Interaction within and around the scheme. A significant feature of the lower income groups is their informality, total disregard for privacy as the rich regard it, closeness of association with their neighbours and fellow beings in times of happiness and sadness, and to stand by each other when "the cops come prying". Sensitivity to this most important human factor was the primary planning consideration of the designer. Starting from inside to outside, the Unit, the stairs, the landings, the upper walkways and street level arcades, the tree-lined Pedestrian Way all contributed to a human feel to Goonesinghepura and the camaraderie of Informal Sector life.

The levels approach, while doubling the density ratio also opened out a kaleidoscopic vista to the designer, which in turn helped no end in creating interesting forms and facades over an 800 foot stretch of buildings along Dias Place and the Pedestrian Way. The Facades would have been totally monotonous otherwise, like the "Blocks of Flats" approach to low income housing by the state sector.

Amenities

- Unit :- Single Phase Power Supply.
Metered Water Supply.
Normal Sewerage and Waste disposal
Garbage Chute.
TV Socket.
- Common :- 26 OH RC Water Tanks.
Portable Fire Appliances
Fixed Fire Extinguishing Equipment, with
hose Reels and Hydrant systems.
MATV
- Cultural Religious
and Sports etc :- New provisions in the scheme were not
necessary, as all these amenities were

available in close proximity to the scheme. A Community Centre and Library were already in existence next to the Scheme. A Buddhist temple was also already there and near by on Dias Place. A Mosque, Kovil and Church were there in the area.

The A. E. Goonesinghe Park, which is actually a sports ground flanks the North boundary of the scheme.

A Primary School and Secondary also in close proximity.

Policing is carried out by the Station on Saunders Place and a Police Post on San Sebastian Street.

Maintenance :- Matters of general Administration, Maintenance and delivery of letters is done by the Common Amenities Board, which has an Office in the Complex.

At-a-Glance :-	Area of Land	3.50 Acres
	Units	320
	Shops	256
	Floor Area of Unit	400 s.ft.
	Floor Area of Typical Shop	200 s.ft
	Total Area on all Floors	217,500 s.ft.

An excerpt from the Architectural & Building Directory of India 92/93 on Goonesinghepura Design says this.

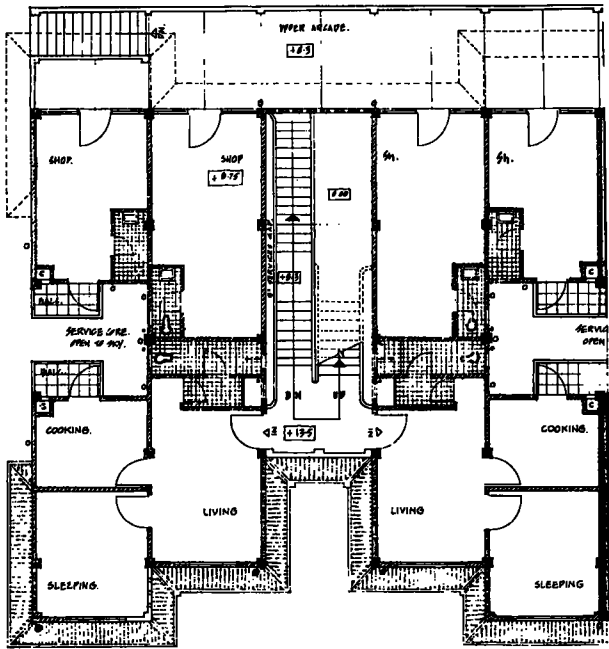
"The visual impact of Goonesinghepura is very pleasant, with the projections, set-backs, little cantilevers and arched colonnades at the lowest levels, all contributing to the play of light and shade under a tropical sun."

Arch. K. Ganesan

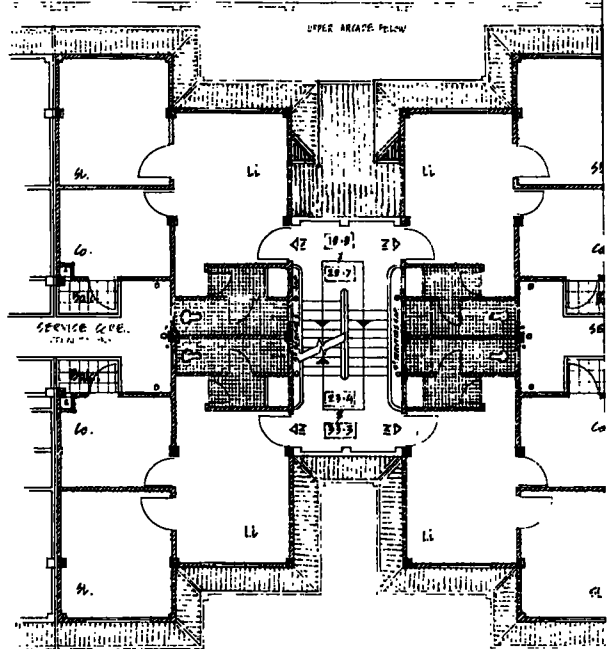
When faced with the task of writing a difficult report, many are the times when we struggle for hours with a jumble of phrases, idioms and ideas trying to arrange them into an ordered whole. Upon completion and in retrospect, one curious fact emerges: Progress was the fastest when the mind was least self-conscious and words flowed out smoothly in huge chunks. It is as if the mind preferred uncaring leaps instead of systematic little steps.

In order to travel a metre, do you have to think of the intervening half-metre the preceding quarter-metre or the initial few centimetres. You would be immobilised if you did.

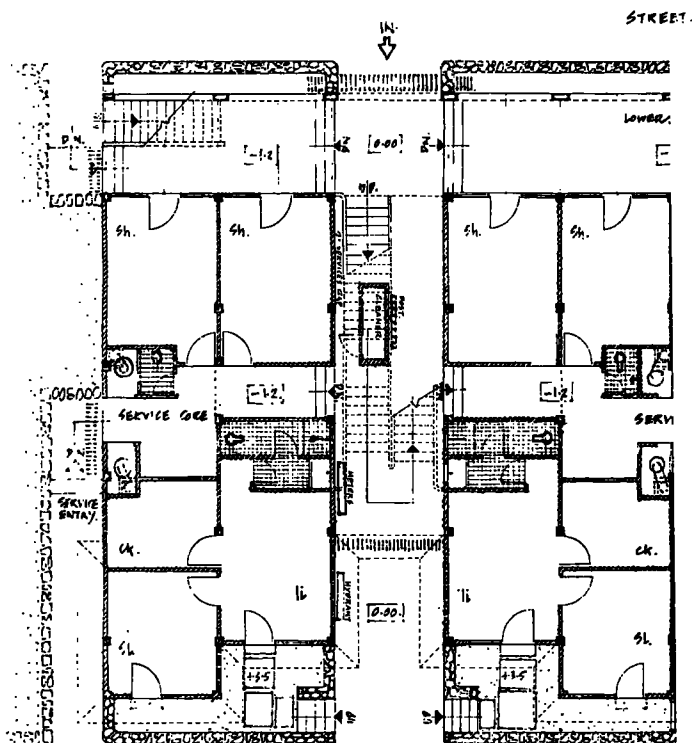
And Design ?



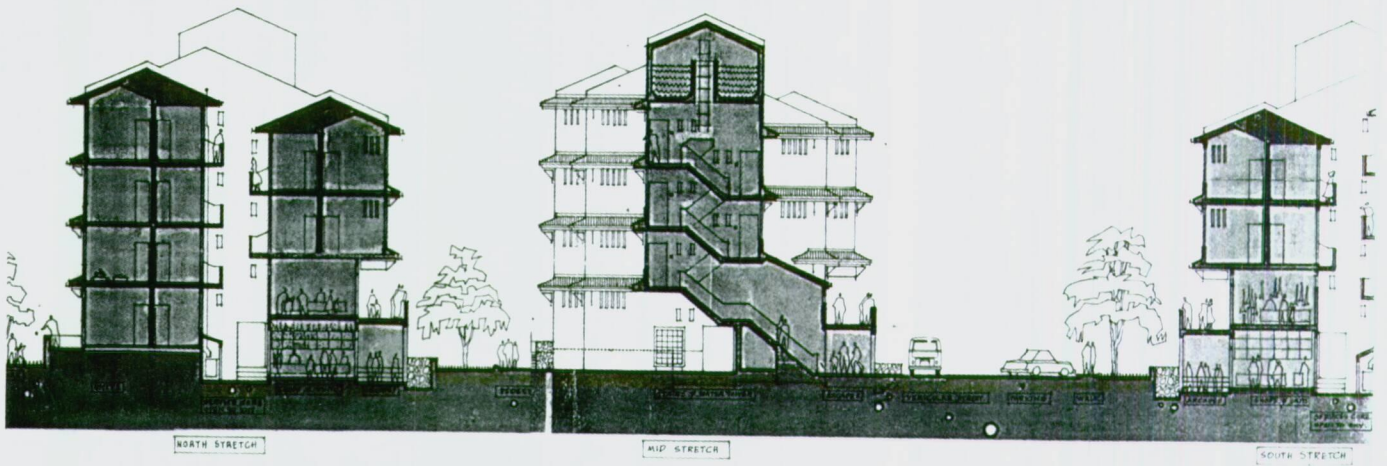
PLAN - LOWER FIRST of UPPER FIRST - TYPICAL
 1/8" = 1'-0"



PLAN - LOWER SECOND of UPPER SECOND - TYPICAL - REPEAT FOR LOWER THIRD of UPPER THIRD.
 1/8" = 1'-0"



PLAN - LOWER GROUND of UPPER GROUND - TYPICAL
 1/8" = 1'-0"



SECTION ACROSS

