

COLONIAL IMAGERY

Between Then & Now



By Zeena Marikkar

To most people, cities seem to merely provide shelter and places for working, shopping, education and perhaps recreation. What is often not mentioned is the emotional appeal of a city - that unexplainable, spiritual attachment which helps to provide a sense of stability in a changing world. It is a feeling of security and reassurance provided by the mere sighting of a street corner, a square, a street, a building. Whatever the focus, this association makes a place sufficiently important for people to wish to see it remain unchanged.

Development has the most tangible effect on the 'built form' of the city. The survival of the built heritage depends on the community's sympathetic attitude towards it. The more we allow this physical heritage to decimate, the less likely future generations will be to bond with their cultural and historical roots. If a city were to lose its sense of history, people may lose their sense of identity, their sense of pride and self esteem, and above all - the will to build a better future for their children.

Among popular images that have acquired symbolic association in Asian cities, the most popular yet may be the Colonial Imagery. Many large cities in Asia are the legacy of colonial rulers - built for

their own purpose and use, but usually with great respect for local traditions. The colonial imagery may include buildings, streetscapes, parks or other landmarks. Though all of these have significant architectural value in themselves, owing to their age and historical associations, their value goes beyond mere brick and mortar.

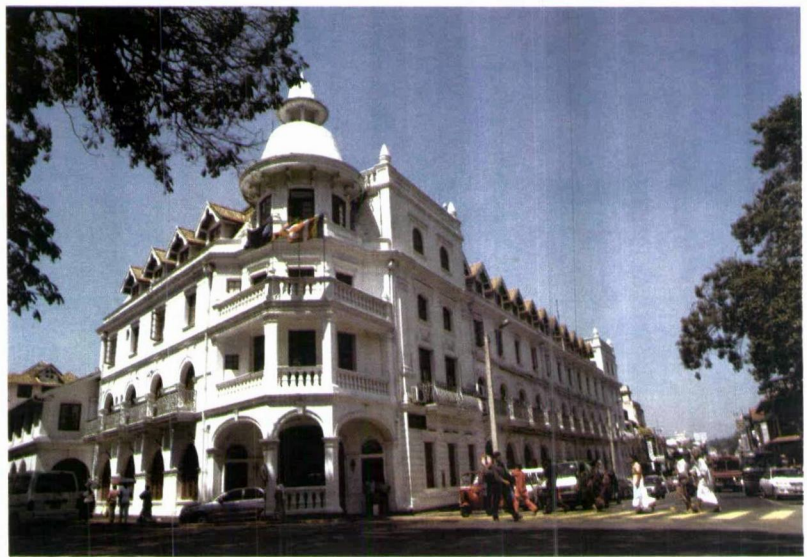
Almost all of Sri Lanka's major cities - Colombo, Kandy and Galle - have the Colonial stamp on them. Kandy and Galle have the added advantage of being World Heritage sites making them significantly important and 'cared for' in a global sense.

But Colombo, the major economic hub of the country, is more vulnerable to losing its pride as a 'Great Place', with each passing day. While it improves in offering opportunity and growth, it offers less quality of life, becoming more sterile and disintegrated than ever before. Effectively integrating the age old imperial landscape in development proposals, may help to 'bridge the gap' in a very subtle way, in our own city.

Colombo's physical growth over the past half century mirrors a pattern that's common to many other Asian cities. The once highly populated city core, and its streets and arteries, rapidly changed into



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faceless roads. These streets were earlier lined with high density housing where the place of work and place of living usually merged. This offered a wonderful environment for the social well being of the city folk.

Retail commerce resulted in the colonial streetscape, monumental in its own right, to change immensely; 'pop up' buildings and highly congested traffic began to dominate; original inhabitants moved away into more 'residential' areas; the buildings were often neglected and used only as overflow offices or stores which go dead at dusk.

Although larger buildings, churches and mosques within this fabric are still largely intact, conservation and development programs should also address more humble street architecture. A city's character is remembered not only by

masterpieces but also by what is to be touched, smelled and 'felt' by the city dweller or worker.

The effective rehabilitation of street architecture would depend on finding viable functions for the buildings and sound economic incentives to the owners. Though regulations can intervene, it is unlikely that mere legislation will do the job. The inhabitants of such buildings should feel obliged to repair and maintain, and take pride in preserving a nugget of history.

Cultural tourism, counting on historical and true city life, may be another answer. Owners could be encouraged to skilfully renovate the buildings to house more responsive functions; different but complementary uses during the day and in the evening. This would make town centres more attractive to residents, shoppers and

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visitors. The key is to ensure that fundamental deterioration does not occur, and that gradual change is accommodated.

New development to fill the gaps in the streetscape needs to pick up the threads of the disrupted urban fabric and complete it with structures showing an affinity to volume, scale and typology in a modern sense.

Singapore has set a feasible precedence as to how 20th century shop houses could be transformed into contemporary dwellings. The exterior is retained as part of the street while interiors have undergone dramatic transforma-

tion to accommodate new spatial and functional needs.

government institutions, or living quarters for the political and business elite. It is inevitable then that the government spends substantially for the maintenance of these buildings.

Other than good maintenance, which adds to the architectural preservation, some of the buildings have found appropriate commercial uses which also help to secure their own sustenance economically.

These commercial ventures have become great tourism boosters, capitalizing on their own building structure. Since change in function, the buildings

have transformed themselves into common landmarks linked to nodes and junctions, though directly catering to a specific clientele. Abutting streets, some large buildings boast a more active relationship with the city wanderer, the pedestrian, even if it is only to offer shade while window shopping.

Proposals are plenty - to use colonial buildings directly and less self consciously in the public agenda; to open out parts of buildings as streets; to penetrate walls to form plazas, where the entire public realm is absorbed into the conservation process. If sensitively done, the grandeur of the colonial structure could still remain intact. Unfortunately, many such proposals are not realized owing to lack of funds or mere political bureaucracy.

The UDA's proposal to rejuvenate the areas in and around independence square is a welcome effort. The scheme links together existing landmarks, symbols and institutional buildings, which are previously unrelated. The development makes these links and the object themselves more viable socially, economically and architecturally. Though the design centres on the post-colonial edifice which is equally important as a great building, it takes into account and acknowledges many of the colonial imagery in the vicinity. The proposed cultural street with lively functions created through listed buildings is commendable. This street will hold arts and crafts exhibitions, portrait painting, theatre troupes, musicians etc., while the buildings themselves would be transformed into interactive cultural museums.

New designs in a colonial landscape, is perhaps the most additive tool assisting the development process. This is an art requiring careful analysis of and respect for the existing features. Volumetric values, desirable skylines, street lines, street views, suitable elevation treatment, comparable solid void ratios all form important criteria for new designs.

The skill, sensitivity and respect that we reflect, or the lack thereof, in preserving the Colonial imagery in Sri Lanka's cities while moving forward to development, will speak volumes of our valuation of our history. City dwellers in Colombo, Galle and Kandy can only hope that the colonial imagery surrounding us today will still be a part of our cities in future generations.

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For a developing country such as ours, conserving streetscapes - unlike conserving national monuments - may prove difficult to begin with. But this not entirely impossible -- with commitment and participation of the community, the state, the private sector and the legislators can work towards both preserving and developing the city.

The other significant spatial area in Colombo is the low density Colonial settlements. Landscaped compounds with solid buildings mark this part of the city. A large proportion of visual, symbolic or ceremonial space was incorporated into the layout. Although some of the open spaces have been subdivided, the buildings themselves have not fundamentally changed. These now remain the preferred location for important

