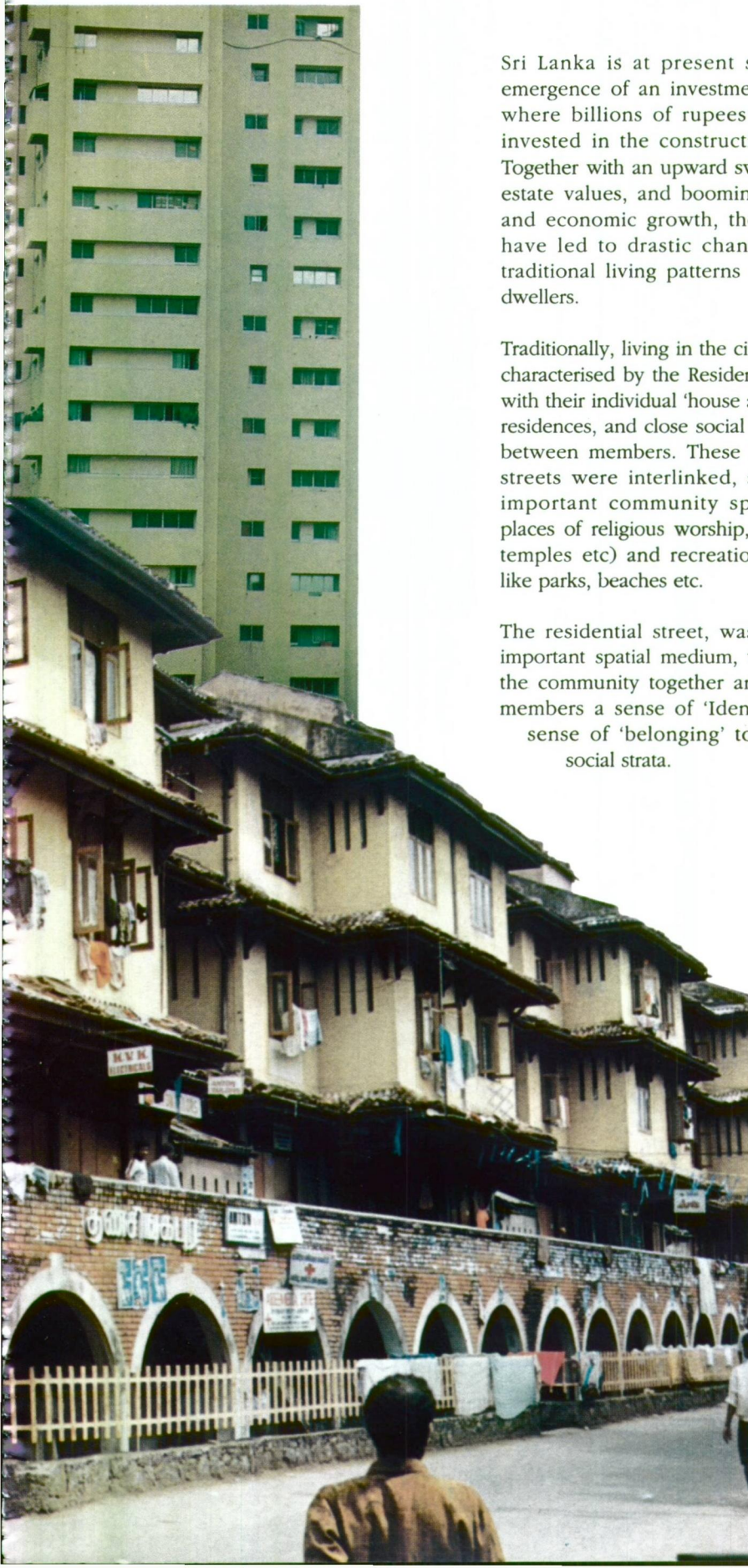


A WAY FORWARD FOR LIVING IN THE CITY ?

LIVING ON THE 21ST FLOOR



Sri Lanka is at present seeing the emergence of an investment climate, where billions of rupees are being invested in the construction sector. Together with an upward swing in real estate values, and booming business and economic growth, these factors have led to drastic changes in the traditional living patterns of the city dwellers.

Traditionally, living in the city has been characterised by the Residential streets, with their individual 'house and garden' residences, and close social interaction, between members. These Residential streets were interlinked, and led to important community spaces, like places of religious worship, (churches, temples etc) and recreational spaces like parks, beaches etc.

The residential street, was thus one important spatial medium, which held the community together and gave its members a sense of 'Identity' and a sense of 'belonging' to a certain social strata.

Current trends in the country's economic growth, increased real estate values, and the resulting changes in social and cultural norms, have produced a shift in emphasis towards residential groupings, that sustain themselves. The primary considerations being, centrality of location, security of the occupants, and the maintenance of recreational and commercial facilities 'within' the complex.

These trends have resulted in the emergence of a new 'Westernised' concept of residential development specifically catering to a more affluent, 'supermarket' culture, popularly known as the High-rise Condominium or 'Condo'. These complexes set out to introduce the concept of luxury Five-Star life styles, with all amenities to Sri Lanka.

The concept of multi-storey housing development, for city dwelling, is one which has been tried out in this country, with varying degrees of success. Schemes like the Soysapura Flats in Moratuwa, the Bambalapitiya Flats, and the Anderson Flats in Narahenpita, were largely unsuccessful in creating healthy living environments for the occupants, becoming hotbeds of anti-social youth activity.

The more successful schemes of recent times have been the Goonasinghepura Housing Scheme, catering mainly to lower middle income groups and the Keppitipola Housing Scheme catering to a more sophisticated upper middle class income group.

One of the salient features that emerge, on looking at these schemes, is that the designs themselves allow for interaction between occupants. These interaction spaces, like street level public arcades at Goonasinghepura the street itself, the stairways, stair lobbies and elevated 'streets', at the Keppitipola scheme are basically avenues of pedestrian movement, designed to accommodate public interaction, thereby giving the occupants a sense of identity to that particular scheme.



This aspect of visual interaction between occupants was explored by the Japanese Master Architect Tadao Ando in his housing scheme at Rokoko. To him user interaction was so important, as to eliminate the use of lifts for the seven-storey complex. The avenues of movement like the staircase, the corridor, and the floor lobby, were then designed to enhance this aspect of visual communication between occupants.

We as Architects need to look at design solutions, where public spaces can become viewing decks, and spaces where one can be viewed creating interest and drama. Building scales, should be conducive to public interaction. Utility spaces like stairways, corridors and lobbies have to be looked at differently, as spaces where people interact and the rituals of community living take place. These avenues of movement could lead to open recreational spaces for adults, and play areas for children, at Ground Floor and Podium level. These could further connect up with supermarkets, shopping arcades and restaurants, thus creating user interaction at a different level. The spaces which form the elements of condominium design, should thus promote, public interaction at varying levels.

Interaction at a more impersonal level occurs at supermarkets, shopping arcades and restaurants. These are areas where the users come into contact with 'outsiders'.

In many such buildings, the Ground floor lobby becomes one of the most important spaces. The Lobby marks the 'threshold space' of user entry into the building and entry into the recreational area of the complex like the swimming

pool, gymnasium, children's play area, club house etc. It is also a space where interaction takes place at a more personal level among occupants and it acts as an intermediate meeting place, between occupants and visitors. Its design should therefore reflect its importance and complexity.

Interaction of occupants at the closest level occur at the stairwell and lift lobbies and connecting corridors, making them vital links in the successful function of such a building.

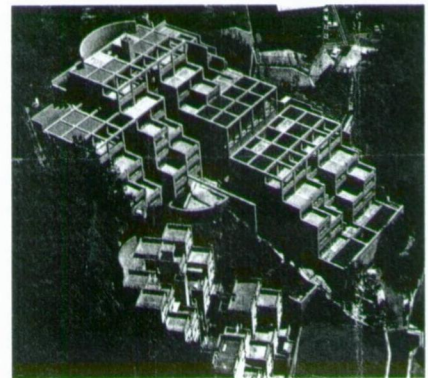
An argument could be raised, that these High-rise condominiums, which represent the ultimate in luxury city living, are designed and built for the super rich, who have reached a degree of sophistication where traditional norms of community interaction bear little or no relevance.

But then, Sri Lankan Culture is noted for its warmth and strong affinity towards the social ties of 'Living in a community', be it the rich, poor or middle income bracket. should not, then, these condominiums be designed taking into account certain cultural trends, instead of replicating Western models, as in certain Asian countries like India and Malaysia.

As the French Architect Jean Nouvel says 'Housing is not a consumer product but a cultural product. (World Architecture Issue No. 31.)' This then

should be the essential difference between living on the 21st floor in a 5-star hotel suite and living on the 21st floor of a super luxury condominium. The difference exists not in the design of the individual apartments themselves, but in the design of the 'complex' with a view to forming of a 'residential community'.

The attraction of the condominium to the affluent class seems to be in the support services provided. The glamour associated of living in a scheme which offers membership 5-star recreational facilities and amenities is what attracts buyers, of this social level.



The tower at Station Road, Bambalapitiya is a good example. These were a mixture of residential apartments and office space, without the luxury of recreational support services. The project was a failure and the developer had great difficulty in selling the apartments.



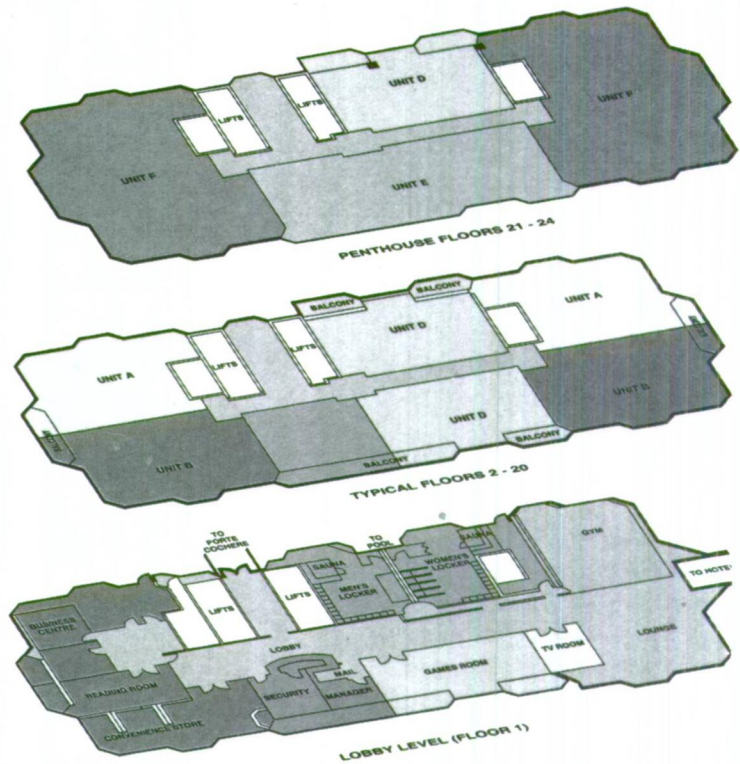
The fact remains that very few of our people, even the super rich, have reached the degree of ("Western") sophistication necessary to live fulfilled lives in these super luxury condominiums. Except for a few who have lived extensively abroad, even the super rich have to be gradually educated, and architects and developers have an important role to play in modifying the Western Model to suit a local culture.

Looking at some of the proposed condominium developments that would dramatically alter the city skyline, 'Crescat Residences' stand out as the most expensive and ambitious of these. The developer, the Asian Hotels Corporation hopes to invest approx US\$ 100 million in the project, which will consist of two, 24 storey towers, each housing 149 apartments, a shopping mall, two high-rise tower blocks, containing rentable office space, and associated recreational facilities.

Located at Kollupitiya, on one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in the city, the complex would form a vital function of a pedestrian linkage between Galle Road, Duplication Road and Navam Mawatha, through its commercial and recreational facilities.

The apartments themselves offer the ultimate luxury Five-Star Life-styles with their service connections to the 5-star hotel Lanka Oberoi. Apart from the panoramic view, which one could expect of the ocean to the west, the Beira Lake to the East and the entire city of Colombo, the designs of the high-rise condominiums themselves seem to offer little to stimulate and interest the user. Even the design of the Lobby Level, which one feels should be an important point of entry, to the building, is basically utilitarian in approach with little emphasis on user stimulation. The emphasis one feels seem to be in its 'links' to the 5-star hotel.

The user seems to have little to identify himself to in terms of a 'living environment', and one wonders how living on the 21st floor of the apartment complex could be differentiated from living in one of the hotel bedroom suites. In fact, the



design of the apartment seems to cater exclusively to the high-powered life style of the foreign investor, or the business tycoon, who would be more of a periodic visitor than a resident.

The other major condominium development coming up is the Royal Park Complex located just outside the city limits in a four acre land at Kotte. It consists of two, twenty-four storey towers, housing 248 apartments, at a projected cost of US\$ 32 million.

The complex has been designed on the lines of the 'Country Club Resort' just outside the city, with five star resort style residential facilities. The design of the high-rise itself follows similar lines to that of the Cresscat Condominiums but allows a greater sense of user 'Identity' or 'belonging' to an exclusive club, at ground level itself.

In both these condominiums one is struck by the fact that the few public spaces for user interaction which are provided, are confined entirely to the Ground Floor Lobby. No consideration has been given to user interaction spaces at the intermediate levels. For example some of the recreational and utility spaces like gymnasium, games rooms, reading could be at an intermediate level thereby creating a sense of 'focus' within the complex itself.

The concept of 'spaces for people', in condominium design is not a popular

one for the developer. His primary motive being the maximum 'Return on Investment' in terms of rentable or saleable floor area, in the quickest possible time. But, if we as Architects bow down to developer pressure, we could be held responsible for the propagation of a 'Condo Culture', western model, carried into the 21st Century.

Thus it is up to the Architects to enlighten and educate them as to the intrinsic benefits in terms of providing not only five-star type accommodation, but mass housing for a large cross-section of the public of which Sri Lanka would face a dire need in the years to come.

Architects need to look beyond the developer's brief in arriving at concepts that combine the essential social functions of condominium design with innovative solutions to designing for climate. Design concepts based on shading from sun and glare, and the natural ventilation of Lobbies and service areas become very important in arriving at buildings, which are energy efficient.

Applications of these concepts could lead to diverse building forms other than the high-rise tower, which one mostly sees.

Valuable research needs to be done by architectural students and academic

institutions on the social and climatic aspects of condominium design which could be used by Architects in formulating design concepts.

Architects and Town planners need to look at the condominium in terms of the changing skyline, and its relationship to available public recreational space within the city, and the connecting avenues of pedestrian and vehicular movement. The condominium needs to be looked at **not just as an isolated entity, but a 'living community' with interconnecting links to the rest of the city life.**

Architects and planning agencies who dictate policy, should look at the actual need to go high-rise, in terms of available land and the possible need to impose restrictions on height, at least, initially.

To us in Sri Lanka, it is clear that high-rise condominiums have come to stay and by the year 2001 we could expect it to be applied to mass-scale middle class housing not just in the city of Colombo but in other important cities and towns. It is thus of added importance that the mistakes made in Western countries and in other developed Asian countries, are not repeated by permitting the developer to dictate their design and policy.

Bernard Gomez

"A chair is a very difficult object. A skyscraper is almost easier. That is why Chippendale is famous.

Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe