





Echelon Square: the way of Urbanity - Architecture and Commerce

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It is not unfair to say that architecture, urbanity and commerce are undeclared relatives of human civilisation. Commerce flourishes and so does architecture and ensuing urbanity that it propagates is undeniably the fertile ground for commerce. This reality has come to haunt the modern world across Europe to Africa and from Asia to Australasia, and today in the face of a global recession, commerce, architecture and urbanity are all distressed. The images and indicators are all around us, airlines being grounded, companies laying their workers off, architects shrinking their offices while the contractors pack up. The urban world seems to have come to an unusual standstill.

Not so long time ago, Sri Lanka witnessed an unprecedented expansion of its commerce propelled by a dramatic shift in its economic policies. What followed can indeed be called a renaissance of commerce, architecture and urbanity of unparalleled proportions. Two decades on, we are at the perilous juncture of economic decline, a culmination of a lingering civil war, shortsighted politics, an over-burdening governing system, economic mismanagement and most critically, hopelessness and apathy that has gobbled up the entire Sri Lankan society. Looking back, it all seems unbelievable that we were once a society with high expectations, aspirations and getting ready to climb the bandwagon to rise

to modernism. In November 1977, Sri Lanka activated a major shift in its economic policies from restrictive approaches towards a liberal regime with the partial liberalisation of external and internal trade. The increasing integration of the Sri Lankan economy into the global economy has been clearly demonstrated by the close association between domestic growth rates and the growth moments in the world economy.

There have been numerous positive achievements in the past years in many spheres of the Sri Lankan society. These can only be attributed to the undisputable benefits harnessed from the improved world economic environment and the alliance the Sri Lankan economy has built up with it. Moreover, measures



have been put in place to attract more foreign investment to the country particularly to its industrial and construction sector aimed at diversification and expansion of its commerce by means of enhanced facilities and infrastructure.

Indeed a new institution was created to take control of these new developments, initiate physical developments, manage the healthy growth of the urban spatial fabric, plan and construct the future of a well integrated socio-spatial world. Named, the Urban Development Authority, the institution was vested with the powers and responsibility primarily for planned development of centres in the country.

Its functions included the guidance, facilitation and regulation of urban development through innovative and integrated planning. Among the many urban development programmes that were launched, the World Trade Centre development popularly known as the Echelon Square development was one that

offers us greater insights into the relations between commerce and architecture.

The World Trade Centre-Echelon Square development was conceived in the site where formally the Echelon barracks were located. Considered as one of the most prestigious development zones in the country, it reflected the ideologies of the new government and its policies and in fact the new partnerships being struck between the international commercial enterprises. The development plan has been developed to address these needs and to reflect the robustness of the emerging economy.

The development of Echelon Square consists of the construction of facilities for a number of significant institutions. They constituted the Bank of Ceylon Headquarters Building, Galadari Hotel, Hilton Hotel and the World Trade Centre. It was believed that the development would rekindle the images of the high rise as expressive of modernity progress

and prosperity and would play the critical role in the introduction of the tall speculative office buildings and hotels into Colombo City, which were hitherto absent. Undoubtedly, it also awaited the arrival of the innovative architecture, manifested through the new construction technologies and building practices.

S.P.Tao, the Chairman of the Shing Kwan Investments/ Overseas Realty (Ceylon) Ltd who was bankrolling the Echelon Square project is a property developer who has made quite a name for himself in South-East Asia. In April 1991, Shing Kwan Investments (Singapore) Pvt Ltd purchased the share of the Overseas Trust and parking space for 550 vehicles. The total gross area of the project is known as 'Echelon Square'. The development comprised of twin 39 storeyed office towers with a 7 storeyed block that creates a podium with a large atrium and parking for 550 vehicles. The total gross area of the project was approximately 1.1 million square feet.

The Design Team

It was also the building that made legendary and extraordinary collaboration with the Architectural Consultant, Tao & Kinashna for overall management for the project and Anthony NG architects from Hong Kong as the project architect and the developer. This team transformed the way in which lucrative, speculative office premises were coaxed out of planning authorities.

The World Trade Centre at Echelon Square has the architectural high point of collaboration. The building's pioneering character and the inventive and energetic zeal of its creators are recognised at the time of its completion in 1996.

Echelon Square was aimed at attracting international commerce and industry of Sri Lanka by providing a high quality "Intelligent Building" with air-conditioned office space and communication with high technologies. It was intended to complement the facilities in the central business such as hotel, bank and government offices.

Today the World Trade Centre Echelon Square is more than just a speculative office building; indeed, it created and sustains the contemporary image of the modernised Colombo and signals in the skyline of Colombo, the prevalence of an underlying urbanity of its cosmopolitan. Having become the most significant landmark, it offers a sense of orientation and a feeling of modern sophistication in an otherwise down-to-earth urban landscape. Its signals are clear, a promising architectural renaissance, an emerging urbanity and an undeniable revitalisation of commerce.

Contract

The formal planning application was lodged and consent was granted in January 1992 for the construction of

the World Trade Centre at Echelon Square. When the project was reaching the phase of tender stage, the contract was altered into Guarantor Maximum Price contract, which was equally beneficial to the client and the contractor.

The tender notice was published in newspapers in Singapore. It was expected that all the tenderers should be internationally recognised and should have precious experience in South Asian region. Several parties who submitted their bids including Kajima Corporation, MT Danhof Joint Venture with Tudawe Brothers, Keangnam Enterprises Ltd, EdZublin, Taylor Woodrow International Ltd, Jhon La'ing International Ltd, John Holands Asia Ltd, Penta Ocean Consortium Co., Ltd, Chaine National Compelt Plant Export Corp and the Turner Steiner Asia Ltd. Turner Steiner East Asia Ltd was chosen for negotiation and finally won the contract.

Construction

The site work began in September 1992 when the first reinforced rods were inserted in the northern corner. The project suggested not only the beginning of the heights in construction but also the introduction of new materials into Sri Lankan Construction Sector. The original idea was for shear wall construction with a lift core and a column beam structure, but the site was constricted by the hotels and the Bank of Ceylon at sides made the use of scaffolding and external cranes impossible.

The building has been constituted employing pre-fabricated pre-cast concrete panelling for outer walls, columns and the beam structure. The panels bolted to each other and to the concrete floor become poise facade of the building. Loads were also designed to be carried by column-beam structure and the core walls were the lifts, toilets and fire staircase located in the centre.

The system was in essence, simple, appropriate and effective. The intention behind design at the time was to provide an interesting modelling in a self-finished material capable of withstanding the extremes of exposure and the culmination of dry trades, which considerably reduced the construction time.

What makes this simple idea memorable is the panache with which they were executed. The tower is poised by its sheer three-dimensional sculptural quality. It represents an entire break with the tradition of the street and, instead, proposed an architecture that stands out in the city, which commands space.

Yet, the World Trade Centre at Echelon square is more than just a syncopated office tower. It is a mixed-use development with shops, banks, restaurants, galleries and a three-storeyed atrium space at the centre of the two towers, which are linked by a podium block, behind which is a 7 storeyed building designed to contain art galleries, games, Jewelry centres and restaurants.

The World Trade Centre's content and the basic construction came from the brief and site, but from where did the refinement, the sound, sensible and innovative detailing, the powerful flamboyant imagery originate? These are the things that raised the building above a merely clever exercise of the creation of commercial space in the heart of the city.

Indeed, it united the aspects of urbanity, commerce and architecture that was emerging at that time and concretised its temporary dimensions in what has now become a historical milestone in the city of Colombo.