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CITY OF COLOMBO AS AN

ARCHITECTURAL

HERITAGE

The Need and a Philosophy for Preservation

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Colombo, the commercial capital of Sri Lanka, is an architectural heritage despite the fact that it does not have a comparative history similar to most of the Regal Cities of the past. It is not yet recognized as a World Heritage Site, although it's contemporary, Galle is listed. The authorities in Sri Lanka have not taken any steps so far to recognize the city as an architectural heritage. These negative attitudes have caused a threat to the historic urban fabric of the city, and it is endangered and diminishing at a very rapid phase. Buildings, open spaces, built up areas and the characteristics of the historic urban fabric of Colombo are fast disappearing.

This paper elucidate the need for preservation of historic urban fabric of the city as an architectural heritage, and a philosophy for accomplishing that task.

1.0 COLOMBO AS A HISTORIC CITY: the city has traversed through several phases of history, including Regal Administration of Sri Lanka as well as Colonial Occupations such as Portuguese, Dutch and British, before becoming the administrative and commercial capital of independent Sri Lanka in 1948. The long history of the

City of Colombo; the present commercial capital of Sri Lanka has gradually developed over the years since it's inception as a settlement of seafaring groups, approximately a millennium ago. The development of

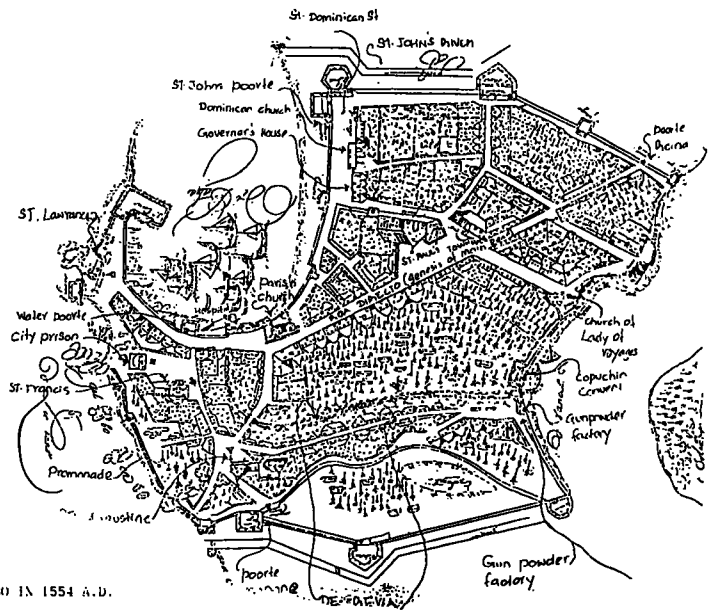
city had left behind a repository of valuable architectural heritage, to become symbols of a glorious past.

Colombo did not play a vital role in the Early History of Sri Lanka, a city or a settlement by that name is not referred to many of the chronicles of the country.

However, Kelaniya, a suburban city in close proximity has been mentioned in Mahavamsa relating to an incident that took place in the Second Century BC.

The first reference to the City in a recorded form goes back to a Chinese record belonging to Fifteenth century. At the inception, the city had been developing as a settlement of the Chinese, Moorish, and Arabian sailors who had been using the seashore as a roadstead for their boats. The first settlers seemed to have been Moors. The Moorish population had been predominant until the beginning of the 16th century. Though there were not much infrastructure available in Colombo at the inception to be recognized it as urban settlement, it had given impetus for subsequent developments. Maritime activities of those early the settlers might have had influenced Portuguese to capture and occupy, and make Colombo the centre of their administration in Sri Lanka.

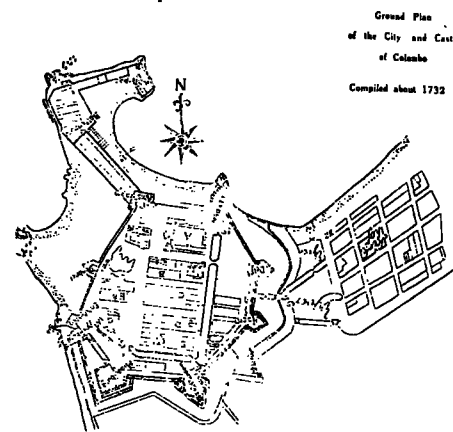
Portuguese, who landed in Galle in 1505, sailed to Colombo, and their construction activities in respect of facilities and defense had subsequently given impetus to develop Colombo as an Urban Centre. With the permission of the king of Kotte, the Portuguese constructed a factory in 1518, and it had been encompassed by a Cabook fortification for better security and defenses. With the passage of time, they constructed other amenities and facilities for commercial, residential, administrative, military and religious functions. These developments had gradually segregated agricultural and non-agricultural activities, compelling Colombo to transfer from a village settlement to a fine colonial township, and to become the seat of government for Portuguese colonies in maritime provinces of Sri Lanka (Plate 01).



COLOMBO IN 1554 A.D.
Portuguese Colombo

Portuguese administration in maritime provinces was terminated in 1756 by the Dutch, after an extensive battle, which resulted severe destruction to already developed urban form, amenities and infrastructure. Most of the architectural heritage of the Portuguese city, including the fortification had been destroyed. However, the Dutch also selected Colombo, as the seat of administration of their territories in the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka. Further, they encouraged Colombo to develop as an

urban centre, but adhering to a different concept. A new fortification was erected with much stronger materials, but reducing its overall extent to a third of the Portuguese fortification. The residential accommodation for top strata of the society as well as administrative and military institutions were constructed within the fortification. Residential District and the Commercial facilities were located outside the fortification (Plate 02).



Tenement indicating details alphabetically referenced on the Map.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p>The Bastions</p> <p>Leffen
Delft
Hercin
Rotterdam
St. Michael
St. Peterburg
Emil system
Des Huel
St. Lawrence
Zwiburg
Vaterburg</p> <p>are indicated to their names on the respective bastions</p> | <p>The Block A contains—</p> <p>Residence of H. B. the Governor
Secretariat
Pay Office
Judicial office and Court of Justice
Gun carriage shed
Trade office
Carriage shed
Bastioner's room
Audi office
Plink
Clerk's house
Lawyer's room
Attendant's room
Carriage shed
Lawyer's and two-ton hoists' guard
The Military room</p> <p>The Block B contains—</p> <p>Residence of the Hon. the Military Commanders
do
Hon. Mr. Attorney
do
Rev. Mr. Notary
do
Hon. the Chief Administrator
do
Rev. Mr. Kowij
do
Secretary
do
Hon. Donberg
do
The Dutch had a separate office of Military Commander during the earlier part of their administration in Ceylon.</p> | <p>The Block C contains—</p> <p>Residence of the Lt. - Govt of the Artillery
Military office (17th - 18th century stone)
Dutch school</p> <p>The Block D contains—</p> <p>Residence of the Foreman of the Carpenters
do
1st Clerk
do
Hon. Mr. J. S. N.</p> <p>The Block E contains—</p> <p>The Dutch Hospital
Residence of the Chief Surgeon
do
Quartermaster (Foreman of the Commandant)</p> <p>The Block F contains—</p> <p>Residence of the Storekeeper (Winkelker)
do
Lomb. Master
do
The "Disposer" (Commodore)
do
Lomb. Ledger
do
Clerk (Foreman)
do
Foreign King
do
The Trade account office
do
The 1st servants office</p> <p>The Block G contains—</p> <p>Headquarters of the Foreman of Ships' Carpenters (Dutch and Foreman)</p> <p>The Block H contains—</p> <p>Residence of the Apothecary
do
The Hon. Captain's Agent
do
Hon. Mr. J. S. N.
do
Hon. the Fiscal (Public Prosecutor)
do
Hon. the Fiscal's office</p> <p>The Block I contains—</p> <p>Residence of Keeper of the Prison</p> |
|--|--|--|

The Dutch administration in the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka came to an end in 1976, subsequent to the surrendering of the Dutch kingdom to British Empire. The Dutch rulers in Sri Lanka defied the orders from their rulers in motherland at the inception, and consequently the British had to fight brief war, before becoming the rulers of the Maritime provinces of Sri Lanka. However the built environment of the city of Colombo was not affected by the war. A city with necessary amenities and infrastructure intact, had been transferred to British. They too, have decided to administer the maritime provinces from Colombo.

The importance of the city of Colombo had reached an unprecedented level, after the annexation of the Kandyan kingdom by the British in 1815. For the first time in the history of Sri Lanka, Colombo became the administrative capital as well as the commercial centre for the whole country. The city enjoyed this privilege, until the administrative functions were shifted to Kotte in 1982.

Economic developments within the country after becoming a British Colony; expansion of international trades; and, the reduction of threats and hostile activities, to the city centre from the interior, have encouraged the British to develop Colombo with facilities complying to a modern metropolis.

Success of the plantation industry; introduction of Railway transportation; and, development of domestic agriculture subsequent to the restoration of reservoir systems, had increased the economic activities within the city, pressing for enhanced facilities. The opening of Suez canal in 1869, increased the naval movements in the region, requiring ports of Sri Lanka an increased involvement. Impact on Colombo was severe with the decision of British to make the Port of Colombo the primary port in Sri Lanka, necessitating expansion of the city and increase of amenities and infrastructure. Their attempts began to change the Dutch-British urban fabric of Colombo (Plate 03).

The British demolished the fortification in 1869, enabling the city to expand outward. Further, construction of the

breakwaters in 1889, make the harbour much safer and increased arrival of ships. These activities encouraged new economic development, and, expansion of activities within the city. The lake, which stood as a barrier separating the centre from the rest of the city, also had been partly reclaimed in quest for lands for the construction of ware houses and other facilities. Many new buildings were constructed within the city to sustain international trade, commerce and local economy.

With these new phase of development, the administration of the British city too was transferred from the Government Agent of the Western Province to an elected body of members in 1866, pioneering to enter into local government systems in Sri Lanka.

2.0 POST-INDEPENDENT COLOMBO:

The British administration in Sri Lanka formally ended in 1948, with the granting of independence by the British Empire. Colombo, continued to be the administrative capital and the commercial centre of the country, with no immediate visible changes in the built environment. However, as a result of multifaceted influences, Colombo has undergone many changes subsequently.

After the independence, along with the country, Colombo city also has passed through four distinctive sub-phases of political history, absorbing various forms of influences. Some of these phases accompanied with destructive activities were detrimental to the historic Urban fabric of the city, and had been moulded by three different phases of Colonial administrations.

During the first phase, the city had to absorb the impacts of various changes which emerged as a result of increasing nationalism, which had been gradually growing from the latter days of the British Administration. The latter part of the 1950s was it's climax. Changes in political and social arenas encouraged the birth of new value systems. Economy of the country also had undergone several changes. Nationalisation attempts were predominant, and control of many of the privately owned properties and

business ventures were taken over by the public authorities. This trend continued through the first half of 1960s, and resulted in increased domination of government owned institutions and priorities within the city. Many properties held by foreigners became properties of the newly formed corporations and semi-governmental institutions.

The second sub-phase began in 1960s, at a time when the European economic boom was favourable to Sri Lanka. Country's economy was sustained mainly by agriculture and tourism, for which the facilities were built outside Colombo. Impact of them within the city was not noticeable, and the urban fabric of the city continued to be intact.

Phase three of the post-independent period, which began with the dawn of 1970s, continued when the world economy was in a crisis. The energy crisis and the economic recession in Europe made adverse influences to world economy. No major development schemes were carried out, and thus impact on the built environment of the city was not much visible. Colombo remained intact with favourable grounds to preserve the historic urban fabric intact, despite few developments were seen in the outskirts as a result of the Non-aligned Nations Conference during the early part of the decade.

Although youth unrest reached a climax at the beginning of the period, their activities were concentrated in remote areas outside Colombo, thus the architectural heritage of the city was not affected.

The government concentration on urban development emerged during this period, and with the help of UNESCO, a Greater Colombo Master Plan project was prepared. However, the proposals had to be modified subsequently, in order to give preferences for politically motivated development projects of the following Phase.

The fourth and the last phase after the independence, which appeared during the latter part of 1970s, was much dynamic and, at the same time much violent. The change of government

policy during this period was able to change the skyline of the city of Colombo drastically.

The economic liberalization and extended benefits given to investors, encouraged foreigners to invest in Sri Lanka. This policy coupled with new concepts of urban planning, encouraged new investments on infrastructure and buildings within the city. In those developments Short Term Planning replaced the concept of Long Term Planning, and the emphasis were given to project basis rather than keeping with a Master Plan.

Although a politically stable government was in power, most parts of the period was marked with violence associated with separatism, terrorism, insurgency and vandalism, the off-shoot characteristics of a transiting political system. The city of Colombo received the adverse results of these moments, and experienced rapid changes in the built environment.

3.0 CHANGING URBAN FABRIC:

The Political and economic trends at present have become one of the primary causes of destruction of the Architectural Heritage of the city of Colombo. Although this trend began almost concurrently with the nominal independence from British administrative in 1948, its early phases were slow and thus not visible.

When administration of the country was transferred to the Government of Sri Lanka with the nominal independence, those who have served under British Administration were entrusted to lead the country. Thus social, economic, and administrative policies remained unchanged. However, the impact of gradually growing nationalist movements had begun to influence social, economic, and political systems within few years after the independence.

Some of the political decisions which have been associated with these new movements, despite brought many advantages for the country, had unintentionally caused many detrimental effects to the architectural heritage of the city. The privately

owned buildings became property of the government organisations, thus reducing the interests of maintaining them in good conditions. Since the government regulations, and other bureaucratic procedures became effective, the maintenance and other necessary improvements were frequently neglected. New owners were not interested in maintaining buildings as architectural heritage, but wanted to retain them to house their offices or to earn some income as rents.

The political trends which began during the latter part of 1970s has brought the second wave threats to the architectural heritage of the city. These threats are in two forms. One of them is the new vision of the society, to develop Colombo as a metropolis of the 21st century, with conveniences on par with Singapore or any other South East Asian capital City. The other is the political violence brought about by the groups, whom are disillusioned with main political streams.

The latter has caused irreparable damages to the valuable architectural heritage of the city, in several occasions during the last two decades. The riots in 1983, destroyed several fine historic buildings which could have been treated as architectural heritage. These buildings were housing government and private institutions. This situation was aggravated the occurrences during 1987 and 1989, which destroying most of the buildings which had enormous history. Colombo was left with several urban blights consequential to these riots and subsequent clearing.

The other was the detrimental actions caused by groups promoting separatism and, their consequential terrorism. Terrorist's bombs and fires, riots and arsenals have destroyed several buildings of immense architectural and historical values during the last decade.

Economic liberalisation also has been one of the primary destructive forces for fine architectural heritage of the city. Large amounts of foreign exchange flew into the country, new materials and technology coupled with alien architectural concepts, and,

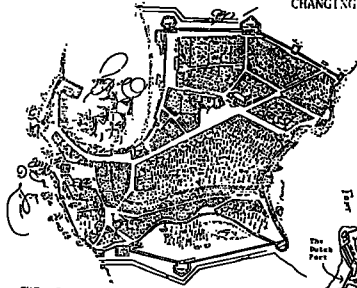
increased assets and wealth have encouraged local and multinational companies to establish their corporate office buildings within the city.

As a result of the aforesaid economic growth, two detrimental forces were effective on the historic urban fabric of the city. One of them is the gradual degradation of the historic neighbourhood with distinction of residential facilities within the city. The other was the appearance of high-rise building blocks, either dwarfing or demolishing historical buildings, disregarding the context of the urban fabric. Most of the residential facilities were first moved out of the historic quarter, and gradually shifted out from the core area of Colombo in order to provide spaces for increasing commercial activities within the city. Further, the palatial bungalows located in the residential areas were demolished paving way for flats and other high-rise accommodation facilities. Fine low-rise buildings within the city had to be demolished paving way to construct high-rise commercial complexes. The important residential buildings within the city, which were enjoying large open spaces around them, had to set off part of their lands for new development. Even the parliament had to be moved out of the city enabling old capital to gradually develop as the mono functional commercial centre of the Country.

Wilful damages to buildings earmarked for conservation has been one of the very prominent features during the last two decades. Several of the fine colonial buildings of the city were demolished ignoring the cries for their preservation by conservation groups. Former, Registrar General's Office Building was one of them. Some other buildings were gutted by fire, enabling to conclude the cause of fire as an electrical fault. Whichever the way, the consequences were the destruction of fine architectural heritage as a result of vandalism.

Demolition of historic buildings in several occasions were sponsored by state organisations. Several buildings of the colonial layer of the city of Colombo have been demolished paving way for high rise buildings within the historic quarter. In some occasions,

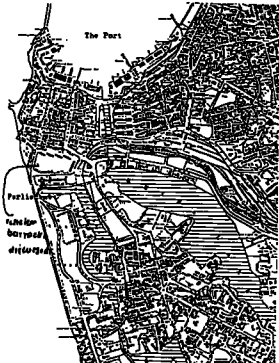
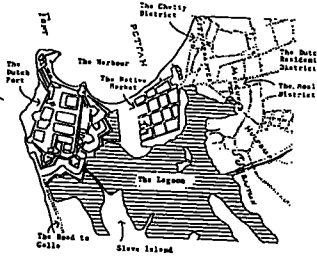
CHANGING FACE OF COLOMBO.



THE PORTUGUESE FORT OF COLOMBO. THIS ENCLOSED PALACE COLOMBO FORT & PETTAH CONSTRUCTED IN 1554.

COLOMBO AT THE END OF THE DUTCH PERIOD

Hulsdorf and Waffendahl were Dutch residential districts lying the east of the fort on high ground. The muslim and chetti merchants lived at the foot of the hill beside the Pettah markets. Lagoon and swamps limited any growth of the city towards the south.



COLOMBO IN 1948
With the exception of the Cinnamon Gardens most of the high ground has been developed and there has been considerable reclamation of the lagoons. All major elements of infrastructure are in place. The fort is occupied totally by administrative and commercial buildings. No further expansion of the port is possible. The Pettah remains the main market district. Hulsdorf is the centre of the legal profession.



COLOMBO IN 1931

By this time the main residential district of the British administrative and commercial classes had moved to Cinnamon Gardens, a couple of kms to the south. The Ceylonese middle classes were to be found in Munwala to the north, and at Wollwarte and Detawalwa to the south. Waffendahl and San Sebastian were declining rapidly to slums. The map shows the line of the new railway and the location of the first Fort Station. The Gas Works are seen beside San Sebastian.



HISTORIC QUARTER OF THE CITY

certain clauses of Building Regulations were suspended, in order to allow for construction of inappropriate and high-rise buildings. State sponsored vandalism such as above have been aggravated by the non-availability of regulations or building codes which could either prevent or at least discourage such actions. No regulations or methodologies, except for the Antiquity Ordinance, remains in force for protection of architectural heritage.

4.0 THE NEED FOR PRESERVATION:

The historic urban fabric of Colombo is blessed with numerous values such as architectural, historic, archaeological, social, economic, spiritual, aesthetic, documentation, political and symbolic. However, the first impact by them always is emotional. It is a symbol of cultural identity and continuity.

The history is an important resource for the cultural, social and economic development of the city. The historic urban fabric provide identify and livable living environment. At present this identity in the City of Colombo is eroding rapidly.

Colombo already indicates symptoms of a major city in a developing country, which grows explosively. Uncontrolled urbanisation, social and economical expulsions, increasing condensation and mono functionality, building in business centre rising out of scale, and, traffic congestion are some of them. All these symptoms lead to an increasing erosion of the historic urban fabric. Under economic pressure, the environment identify is overruled by international architectural standards. Unlimited growth lead to administrative and infrastructure uncontrollability, cultural disorientation, social & economic pauperisation and estrangement.

5.0 A PRESERVATION PHILOSOPHY:

All the aforementioned negative forces effective at present have increased the necessity, and demand an immediate intervention to safeguard the historic urban layer from it's trends of erosions. However, in the context of modern dynamism in the social system, if the historic fabric is restored to the glory of a particular period of history, it may be laying idle, and, become only a place for a visit.

The present cultural, social and economic structures are based upon the historic development, and all together form the historic identity of the City. The future development of Colombo should enhance this phenomena, and the historic identity should not be disturbed.

Therefore, it has become necessary to maintain a restrictive development policy, at least for the historic city centre, based on continuity of present environmental qualities. The historic urban heritage can be an asset of inestimable value for this purpose. A reasonable urban development, based on said phenomena, will always be a combination of two elements, namely Urban Conservation and Management on the one hand, and Urban Renewal and (Re) development on the other hand.

Following, levels of interventions could be made in order to achieve compromised results for the development of historic urban fabric of the city.

- (a) Redevelopment;
- (b) Renovations; and,
- (c) Restorations.

Under the redevelopment scheme, slum clearance and demolition of not retainable buildings followed by a reconstruction and reorganisation of the historic quarter according to current needs could be implemented. This system inevitably brings radical social and economic changes to the historic neighbourhood. Pauperisation process will often be moved to another place.

As Renovations for the historic urban fabric, the present environment (built up area and public open space) could be adapted to suit the current needs and new functions, using localities architectural characteristics.

The third, Restoration mean the repair of the present buildings and open spaces for appropriate functions, conserving the architectural details.

Conservation of the historic urban fabric of Colombo, should always strive for a rational and well balanced mixture of conservation (redevelopment/restoration/renovation) & renewal/(re) development, to continue to pluriform

the environment in space and time. At present, the trends are increasingly moving towards the latter.

The Colombo Municipal Council must provide an active role in planning, as well as subsequent urban management policy.

Apart from them the authorities can improve the architectural climate of the city adhering to an architectural policy in different ways as follows:

- (a) Setting Examples.
- (b) Makes rules regulations.
- (c) Appoint a person to the role of **architectural conscience** to advise state to select and architect.
- (d) Awareness programs, TV media and conference.

6.0 CONCLUSION:

The foregone explanation elucidate the impacts of diverse modern forces on Historic Urban Fabric of the city of Colombo, both in their constructive and destructive forms. Though the impacts of early clays were instrumental in moulding and nourishing a fine architectural heritage, the present trends are mostly detrimental to them. At present, the country is lack of any regulations or rules which could monitor the existing stock of historic buildings, prevent from their destruction or conserve them for the future generations. The other major constrain is the financial commitments which are needed to take any intervention to protect the heritage.

However, it appears that the awareness of the people for conservation of architectural heritage in general, and preservation of historic urban fabric of Colombo in particular are gradually but slowly surfacing up. It has become the responsibility of scholars, academics and other interested groups to work for this ends. Attempts have to be made to create an enhanced enthusiasm among ordinary people for the conservation of architectural heritage. Despite the fact that the present trends are stronger than the conservation and preservation movements, the efforts should not be loosened until a rescue oriented new trend emerges.