

Role of the 'American Style' in Post Independence Period Domestic Architecture in Ceylon (Sri Lanka)

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ABSTRACT

Having gained independence in 1948, a faction of Ceylonese elite embarked on a nationalist political course in 1956. Nationalism, with ups and downs, was perpetuated into the 1970s. In a context where elitist architects propagated core-oriented modes of domestic architectures, the middle-class patron non-architects turned to post-war mass-housing in the United States for inspiration, going by the name 'American Style'.

This paper evaluates the style's generic characteristics and explores apparent as well as underlying reasons for its success, where the latter, once bracketed down, proves to be decolonization. In the absence of major scientific studies on the topic, the methodology relies heavily on informal interviews conducted with style's patrons as well as for senior practicing architects.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism, Elites, Middle-class, Political-class, Americanization

ORIGIN

In the 1950s, US development companies combined with post-war GI loan schemes to produce the 'magic carpet to the middle class', and acres of model-homes were built to cover suburban land tracts. Home ownership became central to middle-class aspirations and was an essential step of the "American dream" (Johnson, 1994: 4). However, Pieris (2007: 47) believes that symptomatic modernism of this model was "*not entirely unself-conscious*", owing to the critique directed towards post-war Levittown suburbs. Levittowns and tract-housing sprung up usually in vernacular styles such as *Cape Cod* that predominantly appealed to post-war middle-class taste (Budds, 2011: 2). In 1945 John Entenza launched an experimental program titled the 'case study houses', aiming to design a low-cost prototype for post-war California that lasted till the mid 1960s. These houses have been described as icons of mid-century modernism, and Pieris (2007: 48) believes that it was "... *one of the many*

moments when the house became a laboratory for experimentation with new technologies, materials, building processes and aesthetics associated with social change".

INSPIRATION

Peiris (2007: 47) believes that the proliferation of American middle-class suburban home paralleled with American lifestyle appropriation in parts of Asia and Europe. An infiltration of American culture, namely Americanization, had already perpetuated in Europe during WWII, owing to its indispensable part in it. The growth in post-war media and telecommunication had consolidated its global reach (*Ssenyonga*, 2006). On the other hand, to the newly-liberated Asian colonies that had been subjugated under centuries of European cultures, more liberal-looking, non-feudal and non-colonial American culture was a "*breath of fresh air*" (Alahakoon, 2011). "*The dream that was borrowed or appropriated from America was one of modernity and democracy....*" (Pieris, 2007, 47); the very aspects that

the US appeared to stand for. Hence, the style was a stepping stone for the peripheral social classes to ascend towards elitism. Subsequently, 1960s Ceylonese began to call it the "American-style" in the presence of its variants such as "California-house" and "Ranch-style". In the absence of the Television, they grasped it largely through magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ideal Homes* etc., not to mention the Hollywood cinema. Pieris (2007, 2007: 47) states that the American-style was adopted for its "sense of modernity", rather than the "modernist aesthetic", in the presence of far-modern variants from Europe as Perera (1994:258) tells us.

PLACEMENT

During the late 1950s, suburbs of Ratmalana, Nawala, Rajagiriya, Nugegoda etc. sprung up around Colombo as residential areas to accommodate middle-class new-comers (Pieris 2007: 50). This group who had arrived from rural areas was largely the intellectual progeny of post-colonial state's educational franchise. However, they were relegated to the peripheries of intellectual, political, administrative, economic and social spheres. The middle-class had no stake in city real estate, and was required to vacation in Colombo; the "one-horse town" of Ceylon as Perera (1994:405) refers to it. Owing to limitation of land within city-limits, the less-affluent middle-class had to settle for suburbs on the metropolitan periphery.

CHRACTERISTIC FEATURES

American-style house articulated a revolutionary breakthrough from its immediate predecessor, the Victorian box-inspired *Public Works Department-type* house (Gunasekara, 2011). In contrast to palatial houses that normally had a considerable extent of surrounding landscaped-garden, American-style house placed within a smaller plot was pushed into one side of the site to create a semi-private garden (Alahakoon 2011).

The generic house was single-storied and had an open-plan. It would normally have a covered entrance-porch via which, one enters the main living area; directly-linked to the adjacent dining/pantry. The "free-plan" as Pieris correctly points out, was normalized in this manner. The rooms placed in-line

would usually open into the living and dining where services were placed at the rear (Manawadu, 2011). The typical plan led to an irregular envelope that could be roofed at any convenient angle. The house was a simple shed with multi-directional roofs. In certain occasions a two-way flap commonly referred to as the "butterfly-roof" was utilized, which became the style's most striking feature. This in fact, was a copy of Marcel Breuer's 1949's "House in the museum garden" exhibit for MOMA in New York (Walkers, 1998: 188). Sometimes a number of butterfly-roofs were accommodated in the same building with little concern for proportion. The reason behind such daring roof angles was corrugated asbestos roofing sheets,

Pre-fabrication found common use in Ceylon's domestic architecture for the first time. Floor and wall tiles for the first time, became a common feature. Sometimes, stone, brick and wood combinations were utilized as exposed finishes to make features such as wall-claddings. As Pieris (2007: 52) further-elaborates, Stone, pebbles and granolithic finishes for feature-walls lent rusticity to the building surfaces. It is possible that the non-architect designers had not really conceived the modern architectural notion of "being true" to materials and simply fulfilled emulation. Hence, probably in a state of unawareness, the experiments on the tectonic by American architects – who attempted to replicate patterns of the American landscape for natural contiguity – also became symptomatic in the works of local designers. Tectonic quality could possibly have appealed to a group of people who grew up mostly in rural vernacular houses with similar materiality. R.C.C concrete was frequently utilized for front porches made to cantilever significant spans, as well as for awnings.

A notable feature of the style is its tendency to open the interior to outside environment through openings on the envelope, as against rather-enclosed British-period houses. Breathing-walls made of pre-fabricated units of either concrete or clay that is common in the tropical modern works of Fry and Drew (1982) also became symptomatic of this style. Incorporation of environmental devices such as concrete-grills, louvers and awnings; quintessential to Tropical Modernism also became a seminal feature.

The strip of wall between the two roof flaps was punctured at intervals to enable stack-effect as a passive means of cooling. Owing to such innovations, these houses were cool and livable (Alahakoon, 2011).

Innovations

Sculptural elements such as spiral staircases became plausible through pre-cast technology. Further, pre-fabrication was used to make repetitive features such as concrete lovers and breathing-walls blocks etc. The R.C.C technology pioneered in structural elements where cantilevering slabs and awnings became characteristic. Pieris (2007: 51) also attributes its popularity to the 1965 international industrial exhibition held in Ceylon that inspired technological versatility through numerous innovative projects that exploited prefabrication and new construction processes.



Figure: 1 Typical American style house.

APPARENT REASONS FOR PROLIFERATION

Economy

As the nascent middle-class had the opportunity to engage in government and private-sector employment since the 1950s, they had managed to accumulate nominal wealth by the 1960s. Some had sold their village properties to pay for their suburban houses (Alahakoon, 2011). Due to their permanent employment, the middle-class was given a chance for the first time to acquire long-term bank loans, mainly from state-run commercial banks. Loans could be used either to purchase land or to fund houses (Wijesinghe, 2011). Such nominal financial-backing was sufficient to realize the economical American-style house.

Land shortage

Suburban plots in the 1960s were being down-sized for affordability. In order to regulate such moves, the *Urban Development Authority* (UDA) was compelled to impose plot-size regulation; making the minimum fifteen Perches (Chris de Saram, 2011). Consequently, most of these houses were placed on relatively smaller plots, compared to their predecessors. UDA regulations after 1978, further-shrunk the plot-size to a mere six Perches that has perpetuated in to the present-day (UDA regulations, 2008: 17).

UNDERLYING REASONS FOR PROLIFERATION

Upward Social mobility

Ceylon gained its political independence in 1948. By this point, the peripheral position of the newly-independent nations had been concretized through neo-colonial practices of the Western-core and ensuing ideological impartations did not spare the profession of architecture (Perera, 1994: 332). These tendencies prevailed for nearly a decade under the so-called “*post-colonial third culture*” (Perera, 1994: 257). However, a breakthrough came in 1956 when a local-elite faction under the banner of *Sri Lanka Freedom Party* (S.L.F.P) came into power, having been equipped with a nationalist agenda. As a reactionary force against bitter memories of colonialism, they adopted left-wing socialist slogans (Perera 1994: 358). Nationalism triggered measures such as making Sinhala the national language, enforcing a ceiling on private property, non-alignment, nationalization of vital economic resources to culminate with re-naming of the country ‘Sri Lanka’ in 1972. The ceiling on private property in particular, undermined the power of traditional elite; the feudalists and bourgeoisie. Property acquisitions complimented nationalization of vital economic resources, opening up numerous blue-collar employment opportunities.

Despite elite protest, Kannangara’s free education bill was passed in 1943, and by 1945 primary and secondary education became free for all (Jayetilleke, 2004). Tertiary education conversely, was available from 1921 via University of Ceylon, although considered as a “halfway-house to a national university” (de Silva, 1981:416). This non-elite educational franchise brought

about a newly-educated faction within the middle-class. Consequently, the 1960s saw a large body of 'swabhasha' trained youth although their intellectual horizons were extremely limited. All such changes led to a hitherto-unforeseen upward social mobility that strengthened the middle-class, altering the composition of existing class structure. However, this mobilization did not by any means; threaten even a single sphere of elite dominance. The post 1956 middle-class mobility from rural-oblivion to urban-modernity could thus be stated as the foundation that lead to the proliferation of American style house

Aesthetic novelty

When Ceylonese elite were harking back to a romantic colonial past, domestic styles coming from America, the emerging global culture, appealed to the Ceylonese middle-class as forward-looking. As Pieris (2007, 47) discerns, "...this style was used to negotiate an ideal social space for middle-class Ceylonese families in Colombo's new metropolitan suburbs"... It "... articulated a new sensibility that was free from the colonial rhetoric of politics, privilege and anglophile values that had inhibited experimentation by middle class home owners of a previous generation".

As the American models were based on their timber-based vernacular, they possessed a petite quality that was alluring to the less-affluent middle-class, and appeared affordable. During this period, Tropical Modernism was being popularized by a handful of architects such as Andrew Boyd, Visva Selvarathnam and Leon Monk etc. (Gunasekara 2011). Even more renowned figures such as Minnete de Silva, Geoffrey Bawa and Valentine Gunasekera started off with this style, to later deviate to their own respective styles of *Neo Regionalism* by the former two and *Expressionist-modernism* by the latter respectively (Robson:2010).

As Selvarathnam (in Jayawardene, 1984: 111) once explained, the clients who were in a position to hire architects "*could afford to be modern*". These clients were the elite, or at least the political-class in the case of Gunasekera. The sculptural quality apparent in the out of reach tropical modernism was also symptomatic in the American style in a different manner. Consequently, this factor made it further-palatable for the middle-class. Owing to their Western education,

rationality had suddenly become vital in all life aspects. Hence, some of the traditional architectural elements and detailing found in their village houses had suddenly become irrational in the Western-oriented city life that demanded efficacy; thus excluded. Hence, this process could be perceived

Middle-class Patronage

Ceylon in the 1950s was a semi-feudal and agricultural country (Jayawardene, 1983: 90). To the postcolonial elites, Great Britain was still the cultural and ideological hub as against the US; merely considered a nascent economic force (Perera: 1994: 433). When the elite allegiance was directed towards their ex-colonist, the newly-educated middle-class was drawn towards "fresh" modernity of the US. Pieris (2007) and many others superfluously believe that the American style was a middle-class phenomena. By carefully analyzing the professions of this group of people as against the ones catered by the architects of the period a social distinction becomes explicit. The middle-class patrons of the non-architects were less-affluent and socio-politically feeble than the elite and political-class patrons of architects.

Elite non-elite rift

The Ceylonese elite having closely-emulated British masters' culture of Western capitalist-modernity, also attained his notion of 'humanism' that Gandhi (1998:23-41) elaborates on. Although 1956 political change facilitated upward social mobility via educating the middle-class, the Western-educated elites considered themselves to be beneficiaries of first-hand epistemology from the 'core'. Their locally-educated counterparts were considered to have received a trickled-down secondary form of Western knowledge. This notion justified, amongst many other things, their stance on the American-style domestic building in Ceylon, which was considered to be an "eyesore" (Pieris, 2007: 50). As Bewis Bawa (1985, pp. 42-43, 62-64), the elder brother of Geoffrey Bawa wrote derogatively of the 1980s Colombo's architecture, "*The houses of today springing up faster than mushrooms in one's back yard (which is all one has for anything to spring up in) it makes one wonder whether architecture is overtaking*

modern art... but our people after independence want to be independent; so prefer to buy dozens of magazines, cut out dozens of pictures of buildings that take their fancy take bits and pieces out of each, stick them together – and there's a house. Then a friend comes along when it is half built and says: 'but why not have the roof like this, so a hurried alteration is made ..."

Hence, the sculptural forms of the American-style that threatened the established traditions that defined elite domestic architectural splendor, was "bad taste" for them. Postcolonial architects of the country, as intellectual elite themselves, also shared the humanist approach of their allied elites. To them, architecture learned from the 'core' was the "best possible solution" and anything else that was disassociated with it, was "inappropriate" and "bad taste".

"...a vast section of the common herd have fallen for their [American] roofs. The infection is rapidly spreading to the remotest corner of our pearl of the East. I have seen village houses, wayside garages and even a cattle shed and poultry houses with the two-way flap" (Bawa, 1985, pp. 62-63).

Thus, to the Anglicized and western-educated elite, American style became the perfect tool to fabricate a new form of social distance.

Negation of cultural differences

Ethnicity and religion as well as caste have over the epochs, been factors that determined the superiority of certain factions of the island's population over others. Ceylon from the time immemorial has been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The factor of caste complicates furthermore, these cultural differentiations. In a socialist tendency where cultural differentiations were discouraged, the state-enabled upward social mobility resulted in a newly out looked middle-class. This was a class that shared a sense of solidarity not owing to ethnicity religion or caste, but on the grounds of similar intellectual and economic backgrounds, not to mention political ideology. They collectively had to relegate their varied cultural upbringings in favor of a modern Western life style that their occupations and city-lives demanded.

CONCLUSION

Ceylon's Nationalist and socialist-oriented political change of 1956 ensued a hitherto-unforeseen social mobility, where a multi-cultural middle-class was newly-educated and employed. This social mobility inflated the Ceylonese middle-class who chose to emulate their American counterpart's domestic model. A new sense of non-feudal, non-colonial and middle-class oriented American modernity was thus appropriated resulting in changing of a largely rural population with indigenous cultural values into a rather modern faction. The cultural hybridity they possessed was open for more outside influence. Owing to middle-class's intellectual, managerial, bureaucratic, political as well as social marginalization by elite humanity, coupled with their lack of economic affluence, placed them in the new peripheral suburbs. As against core-impacted domestic styles, the cheaper, far easily-buildable, maintainable and relatively comfortable American-style house with aesthetic novelty became rational. As the style refused British colonial life-style for one more American, it articulated a strong degree of decolonization. Further, this style had appealed to the middle-class – not to be confused with the political-class. In a context where American style became the aspiration of a vast rural populace, it could be conceived as the domestic style that achieved much-needed cultural-unification in a precarious social context.

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