

ARCHITECTURAL APPRECIATION OF CHRIST CHURCH

The Arrival of Rev. G. Pettitt was a historical event of missionary work in Colombo. He found that a church should be built for the purpose of creating unity among people of all classes in the City of Colombo. A site near the Galle Face esplanade — a prominent location - was selected for this purpose. The church had two main phases of architectural developments. The first phase is during the period between the years 1853 and 1898. W. A. Tunstall, a British Architect did the original design of the church and rendered his services free of charge. The foundation stone was laid on 21st January 1853 and the church was open for divine service on 13th October in the same year. Judged by the size of the congregation it was obvious that the initial structure was small in scale and built with local materials, mainly Kabook.

Information available also proves that it had a single nave structure with a light timber roof. The roof was gable-ended, covered with half round tiles adapting an architectural style in order to match the local built environment and climatic conditions. In the year of 1897, on 10th August, the West wall of the church collapsed due to decomposition of Kabook. At this juncture the entire building was pulled down. Thus further information of the former church building is unavailable in order to be more descriptive about its architecture. The foundation stone for the 'new' church was laid on 14th June 1898. The basic church plan was cruciform and was almost in the East-West orientation with an overall length of 127 ft. and a width of 88 ft.

(Plate 01)

Over the years the church changed faces many times though the initial architectural language and the internal layout remained unchanged. It was also discovered the said architectural language consisted of several dominant architectural features such as the flying buttress, pointed arch and lancet windows which were elements used in Gothic architecture. Gothic remained the accepted style for church buildings both locally and universally over many centuries since its founding in the year 1103 in Paris. It developed chronologically, yet has been identified as the inevitable expression of the Catholic religion. Since emerging in the first half of the 12th century Gothic architecture evolved during four eras namely the Early Gothic Period, High Gothic Period, Rayon Nant and Flamboyant continuing well into the 16th century. There were several motifs that contributed to the unique character, which constitutes Gothic architecture during above epochs.

Early Gothic Period was a period of experimentation emitting internal walls and reducing size of internal supports with the use of ribbed vaults, flying buttresses and the pointed arch. The creation of the Christ Church as in Early Gothic style, combines a division of interiors with pointed arch nave arcade and king post roof bracing in to a succession of flying buttresses, thus the structure is articulated in a way that it resembles a skeleton.

(Plate 02)

Both internal and external openings feature the pointed arch. The entrance porch had pointed arch openings to all three sides of the structure roofed by four high-pitched gables.

(Plate 03)

Two pinnacles on either side of the gable ornamented the facade while two centrally placed pinnacles dominated the façade.

(Plate 04)

A steep pitched roof breaks above the chancel arch with a lean to roof above the aisles in order to allow the upper part of the nave containing windows namely the clerestory, another element adapted during Early Gothic Period.

(Plate 05)

The emphatic verticality of both elements and structure soar upwards to heaven as defying the strength of the gravity and towards God, repeating the Early Gothic Style.

The main feature during the High Gothic Period was the subdivision of single windows into two or more lancets by means of mullions. The head of the window was filled with a tracery design that has the effect of a cut out. Similarly the Christ church possessed two independent slender and pointed arched lancet windows placed in between each buttress in both the original and the new design.

(Plate 06)

The tracery in the sanctuary window was also an indication of the High Gothic Style been manifested.

During 1226 to 1270, Gothic architecture entered a new phase, known as the Rayon Nant; a word derived from the radiating spokes like those of a wheel, during which the enormous rose window became the main feature. In the Christ Church the three Lancet windows introduced initially above the main entrance were later replaced by a rose window derived from Rayon Nant style. In the evolution of Gothic architecture, the progressive enlargement of the windows was not intended to shed more light into the interiors, but rather to provide an ever-increasing area for the stained glass — a luminous darkness, vibrant with the radiance of the windows. The dominant colours were a dark saturated blue and a brilliant ruby red. Small stained-glass medallions illustrating episodes from the Bible and from the lives of the saints were reserved for the windows. Beginning in the 1270's the mystic darkness was gradually dispelled as grisaille glass - white glass decorated with designs in grey was more often utilized in conjunction with

coloured panels, while the colours themselves grew progressively lighter in tone. Stained glass had been used in the Christ Church for windows in the side walls of the sanctuary

(Plate 07)

East window and the rose window (illustrated elsewhere) with an exquisite variation of colours. Thus the sense of divinity of the church interior was emphasized further with the use of light suffused with rich colour from darkly glowing stained glass windows that seems to derive from a non-natural source.

The ebullient ornamentation of the late Gothic architecture in France denominated as the Flamboyant style was largely reserved for the exteriors of the churches. The interiors underwent a drastic simplification by eliminating the capitals of all the piers and reducing them to plain masonry supports. It was evident that an elaborate ornamented exterior incorporating decorative octagonal pinnacles dominating the exterior.

(Plate 08)

And a simple interior was also adapted in the Christ Church resembling the Flamboyant style. Since the 76ft. high bell tower named 'Sir W. Mitchell Memorial Tower' designed by H. Walker was introduced adjoining the Southern wall of the church in the year 1918, the central pinnacles were demolished and converted to battlements.

(Plates 9 & 10).

The remaining octagonal pinnacles and the pinnacles in the belfry were ornamented with crochets. Apart from the above distinctive elements of Gothic architecture, several other prominent features enhanced the architectural value of the Christ Church. Mosaic, a surface decoration formed of small tile pieces set in mastic to a repeating geometrical pattern had been placed in the Christ Church floor, which creates an exceptional interior

(Plates 11)

The Baptismal Font stands on a platform placed in a salient position near the West end of the church.

(Plate 12)

And the elaborately carved brass Lectern features a flying eagle above with small brass spheres at the base.

(Plate 13)

The value of the church interior is also refined with the timber carvings on benches and the stands where intricate foliage traceries are engraved.

(Plates 14 -15)

During a long period of 150 years, above characteristics are still preserved in the Christ Church, Galle Face, enduring many alterations and modifications made from time to time. While featuring elements that belonged to different chronologies of Gothic architecture, Christ Church became a creation that still retains its original Gothic character in an un-profaned manner to date.

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