

A Century on the Tracks: The Enduring Legacy of Maradana

Posted on

The recent restoration of Maradana Railway Station demonstrates how a treasured landmark can be carefully preserved while retaining its history, character, and ongoing role in the city's life.

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Illuminated against the night sky, Maradana Railway Station shines with renewed elegance.

Maradana Railway Station is defined by its imposing clock tower, rising above the main entrance like a silent guardian of the countless journeys that have begun and ended here over the decades. The three-faced clock, visible from different approaches to the station, remains one of its most recognizable features, a reminder of an era when railway time governed the rhythm of daily life.

The building's façade unmistakably reflects British colonial architecture. In the warmth of the day, the structure conveyed strength and permanence in an ever-evolving Colombo. The lighter decorative elements around the windows, cornices, and pilasters added elegance. The ground floor is marked by a series of graceful arches that lend the structure a welcoming openness. The ornate iron gates' initials reveal the era of the Ceylon Railways, when railway stations were conceived not

simply as functional buildings, but as thoughtfully designed works of architecture.

The upper level, with its arched windows, balconies, and balustrades, adds refinement and visual balance. The longer one looks, the more details emerge—ornate moldings beneath the windows, decorative cornices, and roofline balustrades that speak to the craftsmanship of another age. Despite serving thousands of commuters every day, the station retains an air of dignity and grandeur, standing not merely as a transport hub but as a living piece of Colombo's architectural and railway heritage. Inside, the ticket counters, carefully designated by platform and destination, are housed within elegant timber enclosures, preserving an atmosphere of old-world elegance.

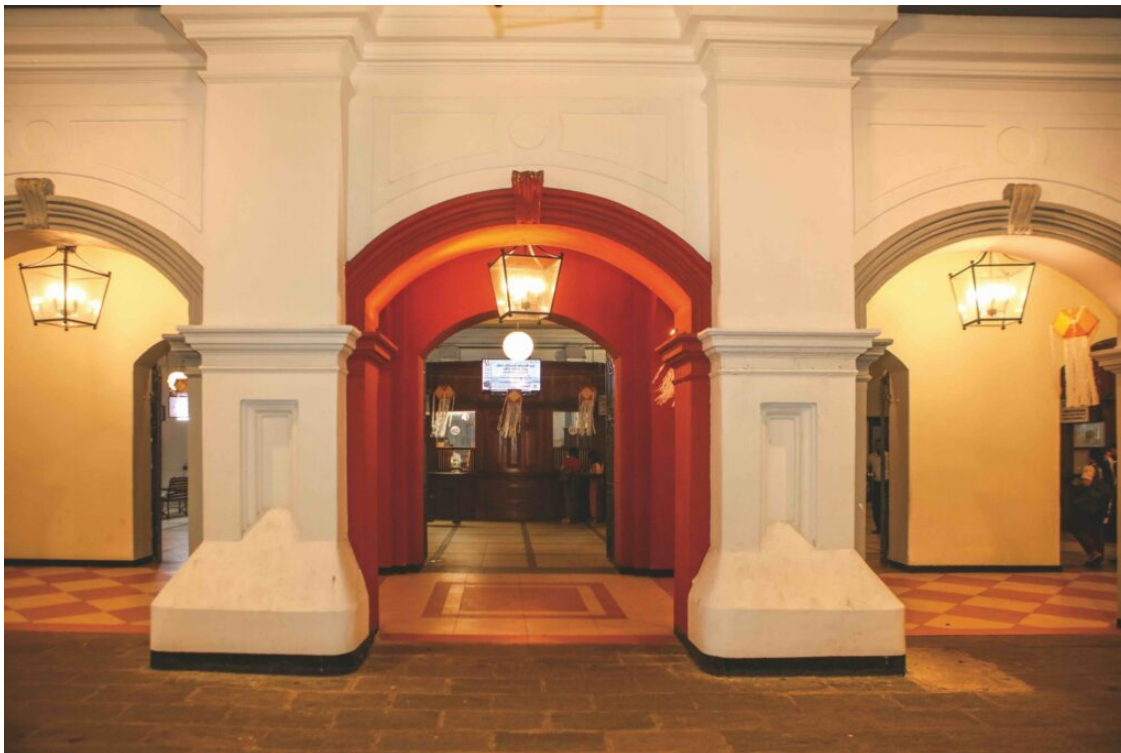
Maradana Railway Station's ten platforms are accessed via two pedestrian bridges: the bridge on the left serves the first six platforms, while the bridge on the right provides access to the remaining four. One of the station's distinctive features is that the platforms are situated at a lower level than the main concourse, requiring passengers to descend a considerable number of steps to reach them. This unique layout adds to the station's character and reflects the engineering considerations of an earlier era of railway design. On the way to the platforms, one can pause to observe the station from above, as trains arrive and depart in a constant rhythm.



H. P. K. Pushpakumara, Station Superintendent.

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From its humble beginnings as a simple wooden structure in 1889 to its current form from 1908, Maradana Railway Station has evolved into one of Colombo's principal rail hubs. Its growth mirrors the development of Sri Lanka's railway network under British rule, an era that left an enduring architectural legacy across the island. The station's permanent structures bear the unmistakable influence of British design, carefully preserved over the decades as an important part of the nation's heritage. In April this year, Maradana Railway Station entered a new chapter with the completion of a six-month restoration project under the Dream Destination program of the Clean Sri Lanka initiative. The project marked the first phase of the station's renovation.



Classic arches and restored details, including exclusively designed lampshades.

The initiative forms part of the Dream Destination program led by the Minister of Transport, Highways, and Urban Development, and Leader of the House Bimal Rathnayake, which seeks to modernize 100 railway stations across the country.

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A gateway to countless journeys, the iconic entrance gates are as old as the station itself, faithfully bearing the initials of the Ceylon Railways.

Driven by the support of private businesses, community organizations, and the public, the program seeks to breathe new life into railway stations across the country. Contributing to this initiative, Akbar Brothers funded and carried out the restoration of the Maradana Railway Station at a cost of 35 million rupees. For Tyeab Akbarally, Chairman of Akbar Brothers, the restoration was significant. As one of Sri Lanka's leading tea brands, Akbar Brothers recognized the historical bond between tea and the railway network. From the earliest days of the tea industry, the railways served as its lifeline, transporting tea from the plantations. Far more than a cosmetic upgrade, the project required the careful conservation of a building that has stood for well over a century.

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The restored lobby welcomes visitors and regular travelers alike with a sense of history and charm.

The restoration was carried out under the guidance of a specialist architect engaged by Akbar Brothers, with the involvement of the Department of Archeology. Christine Walbeoff of SWPlus Architects dedicated her time without a cost, delivering an excellent example in corporate social responsibility.



Thoughtfully designed lighting has renewed the station's heritage ambiance.

The challenge was clear: how do you renovate a heritage building that has remained in constant use for more than a century, a place where thousands of people pass through each day, crossing its bridges and platforms on journeys to work, home, and countless destinations beyond? To ensure the uninterrupted continuation of daily railway operations, much of the restoration work was carried out during the evenings and late into the night. Throughout the project, passengers patiently endured temporary inconveniences caused by scaffolding and construction materials, understanding that these disruptions were a small price to pay for preserving one of the country's most historic railway landmarks. The renovation project encompassed the restoration and refurbishment of the station's front façade, the lobby area housing the ticket counters, new light fittings, the sanitary facilities, new sign boards for the entire station, the landscaping of the forecourt, and CCTV monitoring.



Beautiful timber ticket counters continue to serve modern travelers.

The once-dilapidated ceiling has been carefully restored, with new panels introduced where necessary to revive its former grandeur. According to S M Thushara Lakshman, Operations Manager at Akbar Brothers, what began as a modest restoration effort evolved into a far more ambitious undertaking, with Akbar Brothers going beyond the original scope. As part of the expanded scope of work, over 2,000 square feet of the terrace's concrete roof was waterproofed to eliminate

long-standing water leaks. While the station's historic façade and interior have been meticulously preserved, a notable addition is the series of custom-designed lampshades along the front colonnade.



A living piece of railway history, the station's classic train information board continues to mark the rhythm of railway life.

Created by a designer engaged by Akbar Brothers, they blend seamlessly with the building's architectural character, reinforcing its enduring heritage appeal.

According to H. P. K. Pushpakumara, Station Superintendent, one of the most significant aspects of the project was the upgrading of the washroom facilities on Platforms Five and Six. He notes that it is the responsibility of railway authorities to provide commuters with clean, adequate sanitary facilities, particularly when they pay for their journeys. For some time, the station's washrooms had been in urgent need of repair and modernization. The result is a marked improvement in the commuter experience.



One of the two bridges leading to the train platforms located at a lower level.

The ladies' waiting room, which was renovated earlier under an Asian Development

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Bank funding, is now airy, spacious, and designed to international standards, featuring facilities for showering and changing, infant-feeding areas, lockers, and modern washrooms. The space is continuously maintained under the supervision of dedicated staff. The ladies' and gents' toilets have likewise been renovated and are regularly cleaned and monitored.



Gracefully restored and thoughtfully modernized, the ladies' waiting room welcomes travelers in comfort and style.



While Pushpakumara is pleased that these improvements enhance passengers' comfort and well-being, he is equally mindful of the need to preserve them. He emphasizes that the public has a shared responsibility to use these facilities with care and consideration, recognizing that they are intended for the benefit of all. Damaging public property, he points out, not only imposes a financial burden on the State but also deprives fellow citizens of services and amenities that belong to the wider community. The restoration marks only one phase of the station's ongoing improvement.



A rhythm of archways and doorways draws natural light deep into the station, creating a welcoming sense of space and openness.

Pushpakumara envisions it as a continuous effort, with recent additions including nearly 100 donated benches to provide greater comfort for waiting passengers. Further enhancements are also on the horizon, with roof extensions planned for Platforms Three and Four, supported by Ananda College, St. Joseph's College, and Zahira College, whose students rely on the railway for their daily commute. Implemented under the Clean Sri Lanka initiative, the project will be carried out by service personnel, with the Railway Department providing some of the required materials.

The Maradana Railway Station remains one of Sri Lanka's most important rail hubs, serving as the starting point for many trains bound for the coastal regions. More than just a passenger station, it spans a vast area stretching towards Baseline Road and Fort, housing the Railway Department's repair and control centers, while also serving as a depot for trains that operate to and from Fort each day. As the birthplace of Ceylon Railways, Maradana holds a special place in the nation's

railway history. The first ceremonial sod-cutting for the railway took place here, and according to Station Superintendent Pushpakumara, the first train journey also began from Maradana.



The semi-circular timber ticket counter at the heart of the lobby remains one of the station's most distinctive interior features.



The orange arch adds a touch of sophistication to the station's timeless white façade.

From its humble beginnings, the station was gradually expanded, becoming the island's principal rail hub in 1906 following the closure of the Colombo Terminus Station. Its present building was completed in 1908, nearly a decade before the establishment of the Fort Railway Station in 1917, underscoring Maradana's significance in the early development of Sri Lanka's railway network. Sri Lanka's railway network may not yet match the speed and technological sophistication of many modern rail systems around the world, but it possesses something equally distinctive—heritage. Across the island, historic railway stations dating back to the

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colonial era stand as enduring reminders of a rich rail legacy that has connected communities, industries, and landscapes for more than a century.



Standing tall amid the bustle of the city, the station reflects a legacy that has endured for over a century.

While the railway continues to evolve and modernize, its greatest charm lies in these beautifully preserved stations and the stories they carry. Maradana Railway Station is a proud example of this heritage, embodying the history and enduring character that make Sri Lanka's railways unique. As its restoration shows, preserving such landmarks is not only a matter of renewal but of safeguarding the legacy they continue to represent.