

A Living Legacy: Inside the Restored Chapel of Trinity College, Kandy

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The Chapel of Trinity College, Kandy — rooted in Kandyan architecture and a sense of stillness.

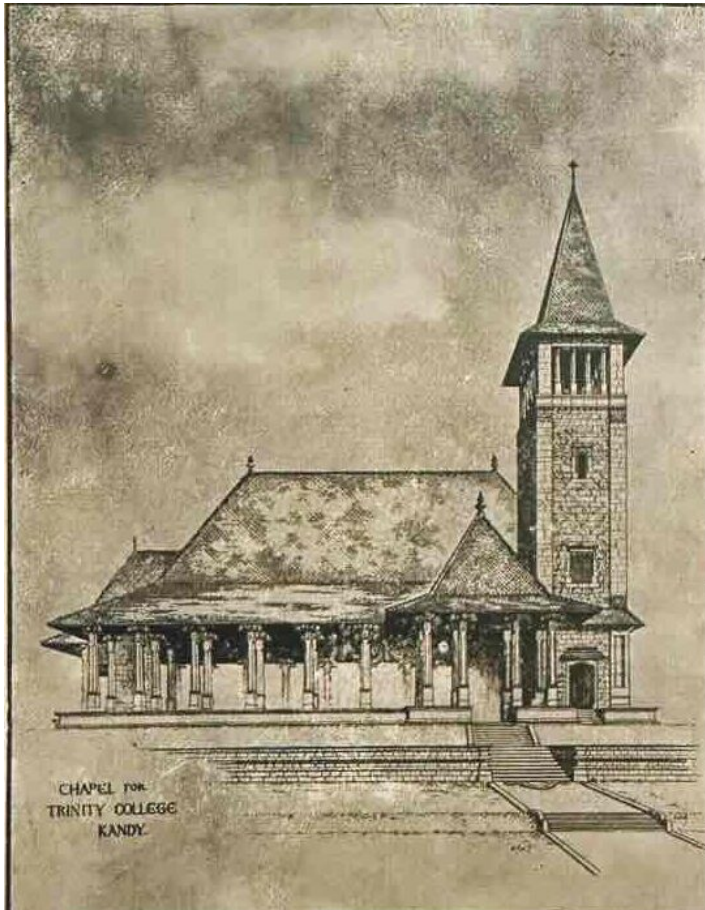
The Chapel of Trinity College, Kandy stands as a testament to visionary leadership, its majestic interplay of wood and stone shaping a serene and sacred space that, over the past hundred years, has been thoughtfully restored to carry its remarkable story into the future.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

By ten in the morning, Kandy had turned unexpectedly cool, a gentle drizzle veiling the grounds of the chapel of Trinity College, Kandy. Yet, nothing could diminish the quiet magnificence of this sacred space, an ode to Sri Lanka's rich architectural

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corpus.



One of Gaster's sketches for the proposed Chapel. Source: Trinity College Kandy Archives and Museum.

As one gazes at it in awe, a clear realization emerges: religious worship and spiritual fervor are not confined to established architectural schools. At a time when many churches on the island adopted European Gothic or Classical styles, this chapel stands apart as wholly indigenous. It departs from inherited conventions to root a faith brought from the West within a sanctuary modelled in Sri Lanka's own heritage design language. To the connoisseur of art and history, the Chapel of Trinity College, Kandy, is profoundly awe-inspiring. Standing outside, the mind travels easily across centuries: Embekke comes to mind, as do the royal audience hall of Polonnaruwa and the open-pillared structures of Anuradhapura.

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The arrival of a pillar. Source: Trinity College Kandy Archives and Museum.

Its double-sloped Kandyan roof echoes the Magul Maduwa (Audience Hall) at the Temple of the Tooth. Granite plinths support majestic carved columns, crowned with robust timber “pekada” floral capitals and intricately carved rafters. The pekada carvings, floral and animal motifs, lotus-inspired forms, and the meticulous interplay of stone and timber draw deeply from Sinhala cosmology and Kandyan craftsmanship. Yet, these elements sit seamlessly alongside Christian symbolism, affirming that faith and worship can be expressed through local artistic traditions without compromise. Every detail is deliberate, precise, and finely contoured.

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Rising above the chapel, the bell tower stands as a silent guardian of time and tradition.

Its vernacular design ethos is strikingly iconoclastic, nonconformist and audacious in every sense. Its initiators, Reverend A. G. Fraser, Reverend L. J. Gaster, and Clement L. Unamboowe were true catalysts, men with the discernment to appreciate the beauty and brilliance of art and design shaped by religion and the native environment. Gaster's writings reveal a deep conviction that the Chapel should be built "for eternity" and firmly rooted in the local architectural language, while Fraser's steadfast support reflected a broader educational vision that embraced cultural integration.

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A sanctuary that carries generations of stories.

Stepping into the nave, an elevated granite platform supports imposing stone columns that bear the weight of the roof. One's gaze is drawn to the altar. Above the altar, in place of the customary crucifix stands a painting of the crucified Christ. Old Trinitian and celebrated artist, David Paynter's work is a poignant reminder of the chapel's sacred purpose. Here, Christ is portrayed like an islander. The background to this somber scene is the vegetation, said to depict coastal mangroves near Trincomalee. Paynter's masterstrokes are evident in how well he depicts the grief of the moment, the desolateness and the harshness of the landscape completing the emotions of the Man on the Cross. Flanking the altar are two further paintings, facing the congregation, one illustrating the parable of the Good Samaritan (1957), whose characters' faces have been modelled after the members of the College staff of that time, and the other depicting Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (1965), each rendered on granite.

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Pulpit, lectern, and pews — together forming a sacred space against the backdrop of David Paynter Murals.

Christ on the cross embodies supreme love and sacrifice, while the accompanying works speak of humility, compassion, and servant leadership. These are intentional expositions intended to educate, communicating to students that humility, service, sacrifice, and compassion are virtues to be lived within their own context.

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The 'Chapel of the Light of the World'.

The Side Chapel was the earliest part of the larger project, dedicated in March 1930. It features granite pillars and carved timber, with light and ventilation filtering through intricate designs to create a serene prayer room, adorned with the chapel's first mural "Are Ye Able" (1928) by David Paynter, a work that celebrates the island's lush tropical vegetation and natural beauty. Later additions, the Vestry and Bell Tower, harmonize with the chapel's granite and timber carvings, with the historic bell dating back to 1660 from St Mary the Virgin parish church in England.

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In this sacred arrangement, each finds its place, even the grand piano below the Chancel.



A symbol that stands as an eternal testimony to love and sacrifice in the calmness of the Side Chapel.

Almost hidden among the vernacular designs of the chapel are inward-facing capitals, insignias carved on granite, motifs that seem alien to the rest of the design. Yet they tell a profound story of generosity, of people beyond the island coming together to bring a vision and mission to fruition. The Coat of Arms of British schools and colleges are displayed to acknowledge their contributions to the chapel's construction, each contributing the cost of a single pillar, equivalent to one thousand rupees at the time. These emblems were placed with purpose. Rev John McLeod Campbell, Principal from 1924 to 1935, explains their purpose compellingly, a testimony to how a Public School in the East was built upon the traditions of the great institutions of the West.

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The nave - An enduring space of reflection and reverence.

Though envisioned for “eternity,” the chapel, built in the 1920s and consecrated in 1935, has not been immune to time. Persistent humidity, dampness, airborne pollutants, and rainwater seepage have caused structural fatigue in the walls and roof, decay in timber elements such as the pekada carvings and rafters, termite damage, and visible deterioration of the murals, including flaking, powdering, fungal growth, and surface deposits. Thus began the restoration of the chapel at Trinity College Kandy in 2024, guided by a dedicated Chapel Restoration Project Advisory and Oversight Committee comprising architects, a structural engineer, a resident engineer, a board-approved lead conservator, and heritage specialists.

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An ornate doorway, intricately framed, leading to the side chapel.

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Where everything comes together in quiet harmony.



A corridor of carved pillars guiding to the Vestry.

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Kandyan traditional craftsmanship — expressed through pekada carvings, lotus forms, and timeless detail.

Renowned architect and Trinity Old Boy Channa Daswatte served as Consultant Architect, ensuring that every intervention remained faithful to the chapel's architectural philosophy and Sri Lankan vernacular tradition.

The main goal was to preserve, not replace. Original stone pillars, bases, and woodwork were kept when possible. Where repairs were necessary, new materials and surfaces matched the originals, using traditional methods. As cleaning progressed, old layers of dirt were removed, revealing precise, detailed work, especially in the pekada carvings and ceiling panels, which had not been clearly visible for many years.

The restoration further revealed the sophistication of early construction techniques, especially in the seamless integration of stone and timber achieved without modern machinery. These findings reaffirmed the chapel's standing as a rare and significant example of large-scale vernacular stone architecture in Sri Lanka. Human labor lay at the heart of the chapel's construction, though many of its most compelling stories remain behind the scenes. Granite was quarried by hand, massive stone blocks transported by elephants and simple trolleys, and intricate carvings executed

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without modern machinery, feats often overshadowed by the finished edifice. Progress was slow and frequently hindered by financial strain, weather, and logistical challenges, yet the vision endured. These narratives of effort, faith, and perseverance merit recognition alongside the chapel's architectural achievement.

As restoration revealed the depth of its craftsmanship and engineering, it also brought into focus the individuals whose painstaking labor shaped the chapel's character. From K. L. Siripala, who hewed the massive granite pillars, and the Indian craftsmen led by Periyasamy, who carved them with refinement and balance, to carpenter Jonny, who fashioned gammalu wood into intricate pekadas, and master carvers such as Godapola Muhandiram, Araththana Appu, and Wannipola Appu, whose work bestowed its distinctive Kandyan identity, each left an indelible mark. Likewise, Ran Naide and Ratanappu demonstrated exceptional patience and precision in carving the marble slabs for the perforated windows, with their contributions evident in every detail.



The Chapel of Trinity College from above, gracefully set amidst Kandy's hills, overlooking the Hantana mountain range.

At the peak of construction, nearly a hundred craftsmen and laborers worked on site, marking one of the last great expressions of large-scale traditional stone and

timber craftsmanship in Sri Lanka. Their work was more than manual effort; it was the passing down of generational knowledge, now embedded in the chapel's very fabric. By employing local stone, timber, and traditional craftsmanship, the chapel showed that indigenous design could convey dignity, permanence, and spiritual depth. In doing so, it quietly reimagined what a "public school chapel" in the East could be, a statement of cultural pride and intellectual independence that challenged the notion that excellence must be imported.

Alongside the physical restoration, the College has prioritized digitally recording the chapel's history, architecture, murals, and conservation processes through photographs, written records, expert reports, and archival materials. Today, the chapel remains a living space for students and congregants, now guided by conservation-sensitive protocols for maintenance, lighting, sound, photography, and visitor access, supported by a structured monitoring plan for timely intervention. The project shows that heritage buildings can remain active and relevant when conservation is approached as an ongoing responsibility, highlighting the value of expert oversight, traditional craftsmanship, community engagement, and sustainable maintenance. The architecture and art of the chapel at Trinity College, Kandy, reveal a space conceived as a living lesson. It affirms that cultural rootedness and spiritual depth can coexist, forming individuals grounded in heritage, guided by faith, and committed to service.

The Chapel of Trinity College

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