Arcade Independence Square: Revival Of Colonial Grandeur

Posted on
The clock tower wing: the main entrance from Independence Square

As the clock tower chimes the echoes bounce off the high walls of the wing that surround the elegant spaces. Through the arched doorways, sprawling lawns, flowerbeds and promenades beckon to explore further. Resurrected from a state beyond recognition, The Arcade Independence Square is the new identity of this grand complex that makes a commanding presence in the city.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

It’s no wonder that vehicles passing by slow their pace to take a better look at the Independence Arcade. Restored to perfection, the complex commands attention, the dapper white wash elevating the colonial architecture to a heightened elegance. Despite a stately grandeur stepping on to the vast open spaces amidst all the frills and aesthetic trappings, eases the mind and the atmosphere settles to one of leisureliness.

This is very much the intended effect—a result of bringing to fruition the concept and vision of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. The mammoth undertaking ensured that the original architecture was unearthed to reveal its most preserved state that lay buried in years of neglect, ruin and layers of secondary construction. No signs remain today of the offices and haphazard arrangement of stalls that once occupied the dilapidated premises. Instead are a graceful series of arches and paned windows, long corridors, and wooden stairways. The surroundings are equally beauteous with long promenades, patterned landscape and many ornamental highlights. Each of these aspects right down to finer aesthetics that include softening of sharp edges of the lawns is attributed to the Defence Secretary.

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Over a period of two years, Army and Navy personnel brought the overwhelming task of the building’s restoration to a successful completion. This involved six months of clearing of the building by 200 army personnel, followed by construction work, management and maintenance.

In 1875, the Governor Sir William Gregory conveyed in his memoir that the building from its structural merits and decorative character of the grounds would become one of the future ornaments of the city. The Arcade, Independence Square, is an accurate realisation of this foresight. Originally designed as the city’s Asylum the building housed 400 inmates and more recently housed the offices of the Government Auditor Department and the Government Analyst.

Today it is a space to linger about and enjoy the sights and drink in the easy atmosphere. The H-shaped section that forms the major part of the complex has on one side a podium bearing a sculpture of lions to establish local identity. On the alternate side of the H-wing is a series of fountains and a glass topped fish tank embedded in the floor. All of this along with the buildings façade transforms by evening in the glow of ambient light. As crowds trickle in, drawn to the evening enchantments of the Arcade, there’s much that awaits them within its walls.

Housed along the long corridors of each wing is an eclectic combination of shops and restaurants of the choicest selection. Renowned brands of sportswear, eyewear, jewellery, clothes, and electronic items are among the retail categories The Arcade is also a place to dine out with Sri Lankan, Japanese and fast food restaurants. On the end of the the Bauddhalok Mawatha entrance is a food court with open air seating arrangements for visitors to lounge in while enjoying their meals. The food court offers a choice of five stalls to purchase reasonably priced servings be it rice, sandwiches, short eats, fruit juices or desserts.

With two entrances—accessed from Independence Square and Bauddhaloka Mawatha—the Arcade stands as one of the most prominent landmarks in the City. For the increasing number of visitors that frequent the Arcade, ample parking is accommodated along paved spaces that merge easily with the surrounding landscape. Incidentally the stone blocks used for the parking spaces are believed to be nearly three centuries old, unearthed from an old granary in Fort.

The Arcade is thus a monumental structure with a many-layered history. Basking in the modern-day limelight, it breathes to life and unravels to all who venture leisurely along its premises.

