

Capturing The True Essence Of Gampaha

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A confluence of traditional and modern architecture

Simplistic yet elegant in design and structure, this office building is a blend of ancient Sri Lankan architecture with a sense of modernity. Consisting of open spaces with good ventilation and natural light, the aim was to make the office space accessible and user friendly for those who walk through its doors. The environmentally conscious design incorporates features so that the building blends seamlessly with its surroundings.

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Situated along Oruthota Road in Gampaha, the primary role of the building is to function as an office and secondarily as a place for meetings and gatherings. As such though the main building sits in the centre of the approximately one acre land the surrounding garden is spacious and includes a 250 seating capacity outdoor theatre with its own dressing room and if necessary the entire garden can hold up

to 1000 persons.

The concept for the building was to reflect the identity of Gampaha district, that is modernity while maintaining traditional values. In its design the office building has captured the true essence of the district. Furthermore the environment was deemed as the highest priority. Therefore the maximum possible number of trees from the original land have been kept with the design of the structure revolving around the trees. While the old trees include mahogany, beli and cashew, the new varieties that have been planted contain medicinal value, thereby the garden itself has been envisaged to provide a service to the community. Some of the new varieties include rambutan, *mee*, *anodha*, *aatha* and many more. Varieties of orchids give colour to the somewhat green, white and brown background. Those entering the premises would not feel as if they were entering an office as the well manicured lawns with blossoming Temple trees and the cooling breeze generated by the greenery of the land has a homely and welcome feel.

A special feature of this office is the home garden at its rear. All the required vegetables for a meal can be supplied from this home garden. The available varieties include *kathurumurunga*, *dambala*, tomatoes, beetroot, turmeric, ginger, *sera*, *bathala* (sweet potato), *karapincha* (curry leaves), pepper, cauliflower and Chinese cabbage to name but a few. The required water for this home garden is supplied by a drip irrigation system. The water for this system is provided by the rain water harvesting facility that has been installed on the premises. It has a capacity of 10,000 litres. The water for drip irrigation is provided by a solar powered water pump. The rain water collected is not only used for drip irrigation but also for the garden and the water features within the office. Water is supplied by the water board but there is also a deep well where about 15,000 litres can be pumped through a solar powered pumping system. In line with its renewable energy approach, the home garden end of the land is lit by a solar powered street lamp, which has a 24 Volt capacity and can be used for up to 12 hours. This is a new concept to Sri Lanka, and as it is a stand alone lamp powered by solar energy, wiring and other such cumbersome installation is not required.

In line with its environmental conscious approach, a 5.4 Kilowatt capacity solar grid tie system has been installed to provide electricity to the building. This follows a process called net metering where the required power capacity is generated from the solar grid, which runs parallel with the CEB. At any particular time if the solar grid is generating in excess of the requirement of the building, that excess energy will be exported to the Gampaha national grid. The system is such that there is

energy sharing and the system constantly monitors whether CEB is generating power and only then will it contribute to the grid. As such it has its own protective features to prevent accidents that may occur during maintenance or repairs by CEB. In order to capture the maximum possible sunlight the solar panel has been placed on the slab between the two sections of the roof. This is the first system in Gampaha.

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Natural lighting and cross ventilation has been maximised through the design. Windows and doors are large with thick glass panes. Another reason for using glass is to increase openness and transparency of the building so that everyone can see each other. The use of large windows and doors have also ensured that the beauty of the natural environment outside is brought in. Elements from the architecture of a *walawwa* (old mansion) have been incorporated into the design in line with the design concept of representing Gampaha through the building.

The ground floor mainly consists of the lobby area, office space, Minister's office and meeting room. The facade of the building as well as the interior of the Minister's office has maintained the essence of Gampaha through intricately carved ceilings and wooden panels. The sitting area in the lobby as well as the VIP waiting area and Minister's office exude a sense of friendliness and warmth thereby going beyond the traditional 'stiff' political office. The common areas are very free and there are many spaces where people can sit and be comfortable. A decorative design adorns the simple cement floors. Timber has been used to give the traditional look and reduce the modernity of the building.

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The first floor mainly consists of an auditorium with a seating capacity of 183. The design and lighting of the space is very simple and modern.

The stage is a removable timber structure therefore the room can be used as an auditorium or as a hall for any function. It is also used as a VIP meeting room. The auditorium leads out into an open terrace which overlooks the outdoor theatre and home garden. The pergolas over the terrace provide shade from direct sunlight and a vine of passion fruit will soon provide a green canopy for the structure.

The office building also consists of a number of access points to ensure efficiency and ease of access to the building. These include the front entrance, VIP entrance and side entrance that opens out to the outdoor theatre. Even though the building is situated along a busy main road, sound does not penetrate into the building and this has been achieved by having thick walls. Furthermore outside parking arrangements have been made so that the people within are not disturbed. Granite walls have been used for outside structures so that they blend with the overall feel of the land and the primary building.

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Each and every aspect of this property has been well thought out and has a precise function. Sustainability has been a key aspect in the concept, design and construction of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) Gampaha district office. It has captured in true essence the persona of Gampaha while maintaining traditional architecture with modern technology.

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