STREETS ALIVE: How the new Dutch Hospital Square continues an old tradition

Posted on



The elegant British colonial-style architecture contrasts favourably with the Twin Towers beyond

The 2011 opening of the renovated 17th Century Dutch Hospital in Colombo's Fort as a refined shopping and dining precinct has created fresh vitality in the area. Now an adjoining building, constructed in the 19th Century during British times – former Marketing Department building – has been added to form a "Dutch Hospital Square". Chatham Street and

Hospital Street that border the Square have a tradition of being alive with activity. The tradition continues…

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A Long Time Ago

The Dutch, having captured the unsophisticated Portuguese fort of Colombo in the siege of 1655-6, constructed a far superior version with pleasant surroundings that generated an enjoyable lifestyle for the inhabitants. Jacob Haafner remarks in Travels on Foot through the Island of Ceylon (1821): “We amused ourselves in every possible way during our stay in Colombo [in 1773]. Every day we were with our numerous acquaintances and friends in different parts of the environs of the city, where we played billiards, bowls, and other games. In the evening we were commonly invited to a ball, a party, or a wedding.”

In 1796 it was the turn of the British to become the Island’s rulers. Many of the newly-incumbent colonists who resided within the walls of the fort chose Dutch houses in the southern area near the magnificently designed and highly advanced Dutch Hospital, still in use at the time although constructed in 1677. It is one of the few extant examples of such 17th Century Dutch architecture in South Asia; therefore a site of considerable importance.

Hospital Street, the short and narrow Hospital Lane, and the extensive Chatham Street, were popular. The latter, composed of two sections – “Upper” (towards the west) and “Lower” (towards the east) – was developed by the Dutch and named De Beer Street after an engineer who deepened the adjacent Beira Lake to allow ships to berth. The British decided upon a person of much higher rank and colonial significance: “Chatham” refers to Lord Chatham or William Pitt “the Elder”, Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1766 to 1768 and a passionate advocate of Empire.

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Before the British migrated from the fort (which was demolished in 1870), to Cinnamon Gardens, these streets continued the Dutch tradition of being places of great social activity. For military officers and civilians alike, when the day’s work was over the verandah at the front of the single-storeyed houses became the focal

point of hospitality and relaxation. Of the latter, Robert Percival remarks in An Account of the Island of Ceylon (1803), “it is customary to see the people walking about, or lolling in a chair with their feet supported against the [verandah] railing, which is placed along the pillars, to the height of three or four feet.”

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Chatham Street is the location of the best-known historical landmark in “Fort”, the modern way in which the old area is described. It’s a clocktower and (former) lighthouse, the only example of such a dual-role tower in the world. The clocktower, situated in the middle of the junction with Janadhipathi Mawatha just a short distance from the Dutch Hospital (and a priority destination for visitors to the Square), was erected in 1857. Ten years later a lighthouse beacon became operational, but a clock was not installed until 1914. Only then did the tower serve simultaneously as a prominent timepiece and a signal for approaching ships – that is until the emergence of tall buildings made the lighthouse aspect redundant in the 1950s.

In the late 19th Century, the environment of Chatham Street and other Fort thoroughfares was enhanced with the planting of shade-giving trees such as the rain tree – so-called because at night the leaves fold into a sac in which moisture condenses and at sunrise is discharged in a shower – and Suriya (the wood of which was used to manufacture cartwheels), which bears a yellow blossom with a purple centre similar in shape to the tulip.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, before the growth of the city’s shopping malls, Chatham Street remained a focal point for travel agencies, airline offices and curio shops

By the early 20th Century, Chatham Street had become Fort’s bustling shopping area as Henry W Cave reveals in The Ceylon Government Railway (1910). It was composed of a “strange medley of restaurants, native jewellers, curiousity shops and provision boutiques, the houses being for the most part old and limited to one floor. It is a remnant of old Colombo in the sailing-ship days and must soon disappear, as most of the Dutch buildings have already done, to give place to colossal houses of business befitting the dignity of the port.”

Not So Long Ago

During the 1970s and early 1980s, before the growth of the city's shopping malls, Chatham Street remained a focal point for travel agencies, airline offices (including that of SriLankan Airlines' predecessor, Air Lanka), gem and jewellery establishments (such as Ishak & Co., Noor Hameems), textile merchants (Hirdaramani, Lak Salusala, Velona), and curio shops. In addition, entertainment was provided by bars (Lord Nelson, the Dominion) and diverse eateries where anything from short eats (snacks) to full-blown meals could be enjoyed.

Nanking and Epicures were fashionable Chinese-owned restaurants: bankers, government employees and private sector white collar workers were especially attracted to Nanking as it served delicious yet reasonably priced Chinese cuisine. In contrast the Pagoda Tea Room, which survives today, is renowned for its short eats and beverages and remains the place where families and friends can gather while visiting Fort.

Office workers and visitors to Fort thronged Hospital Street as well to partake of the tasty meals – including the best crab curry on offer in Colombo -– at a variety of restaurants. There was a Saville Row-style gentleman's tailor much frequented by bridegrooms, and a shoe store that produced hand-crafted, made-to-measure footwear. Betting shops crowded with punters were also located on the street.

The new precinct building is conveniently located just metres from the Dutch Hospital across Hospital Lane

Unfortunately during the civil war in Sri Lanka security concerns led to the closure of much of Fort, including Chatham Street, and thus the vitality of this area was diminished and many shops and businesses moved elsewhere. The streets were no longer alive.

The Dutch Hospital project, which has revitalised the area, has been extended with the addition of a commercial building

Today

Now that hostilities have ceased, much of Fort, especially Chatham Street, has been opened once again to the public. The Dutch Hospital project, which has revitalised the area, has been extended with the addition of a commercial building that has

been operational on Chatham Street since 1878. An excellent example of British classic-style colonial architecture, it has fine ornamental detail, exquisite windows, and a colonnade that incorporates the pavement. It eventually became the Government's Marketing Department building and has been renovated as the second phase of the Dutch Hospital project.

The new precinct building is conveniently located just metres from the Dutch Hospital across Hospital Lane. The first store encountered from this end, is Aviraté, which stocks stylish ladies' clothes of international standard in terms of design and quality. The store is tastefully arranged, furnished and lit, to provide an ideal backdrop for the impressive garments, all of which are manufactured in Sri Lanka. Incidentally, Aviraté has a number of stores in India.

Exiting Aviraté, proceed up Hospital Lane alongside the building. Soon the entrance to Kinnaree, a restaurant specialising in contemporary Thai cuisine, comes into view. Ascend the stairs to the first floor and discover a spacious dining area that seats 96. With an open kitchen and a platform bar to one side, Kinnaree has a pleasant atmosphere and features some interesting iron girder supports and crossbeams.

Walk to the top of Hospital Lane, reach Chatham Street, turn right, and immediately the entrance to another first floor restaurant, La Fiesta, which specialises in authentic Mexican cuisine, beckons clientele. It's an expansive, tastefully decorated restaurant, seating 160, which has three private dining rooms, an adjoining bar and a comfortable lounge equipped with a pool table.

Returning to the street the next store is Dilly & Carlo, which stocks formal and casual clothing for men, women and children of all ages. A high ceiling allows for a two-level store that stocks the in-house collections Moods, Voyages, Dilly's Formal, Discoveries, Carlo, and Carlo Boy. Twenty-five years of experience in retail design is manifestly evident.

As Sri Lanka is associated with tea it is fitting that Dilmah, the tea producer of international repute, has opened what it terms the "t Lounge". Here, imbibers of the world's most popular beverage can enjoy the finest luxury range of designer leaf tea as well as mocktails, cocktails, and even signature crêpes. Notable is a tea-tasting counter where white, green, black, flavoured and infused tea can be experienced. Gift items can also be purchased.

Finally, there is The Sandwich Club, where a variety of creatively-presented types of sandwich can be ordered, along with soups, salads, pastries and cakes.

Thus, with this addition to the already popular Dutch Hospital precinct, and the creation of Dutch Hospital Square, the streets that define it are once again alive.

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