

FORT: BEYOND 2000

Posted on

by Special Correspondent

As we stand on the threshold of the 21st century, humankind has a brief moment in which to stand back and take stock of the situation: our lifestyles, our cities, our environment..... most importantly our future which has to be sustainable.

“The inherently parasitic nature of cities would seem to defeat any attempt at harmony with nature. It is obvious that nature cannot concentrate resources. to support urban life nor can it absorb the waste of the urban lifestyle. But are we to sit back with folded arms while nature wreaks its ultimate solution to unsolvable problems: extinction? Man’s very existence is a natural part of the complex cycle of life. Like our ancients we must recognise that man is an integral part of the environment. Our cities have to become sustainable. (In Search of Equilibrium, A Sustainable Urban Infrastructure Plan, Millenium Consortium, 1996).

In the aftermath of the material devastation resulting from the terrorist bombing of Fort on January 31st 1996, H.E. The President, presided over a meeting attended by affected parties on Janadipathi Mawatha and its environs, heads of all Government agencies involved with the redevelopment of the area, security establishments and other concerned parties. At this meeting, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) was assigned the task of repairing the damaged buildings and beyond that of undertaking a major redevelopment project of the Fort area with a view, designwise, to ensure its viability as a regional financial hub for the 21st century.

The UDA took this on as a challenge and their architects and planners prepared a development proposal. They decided to hold a competition and invited local consultancy agencies as well as foreign consultants to submit. Twenty two leading architectural/urban design concerns in the country responded to the invitation and the UDA short-listed five teams who were given ten weeks to submit conceptual designs.

This can be recorded as the first such instance of the private sector being brought into the decision making process and the competition was an unique event, with the UDA recording great satisfaction at the effort put in by the competitors.

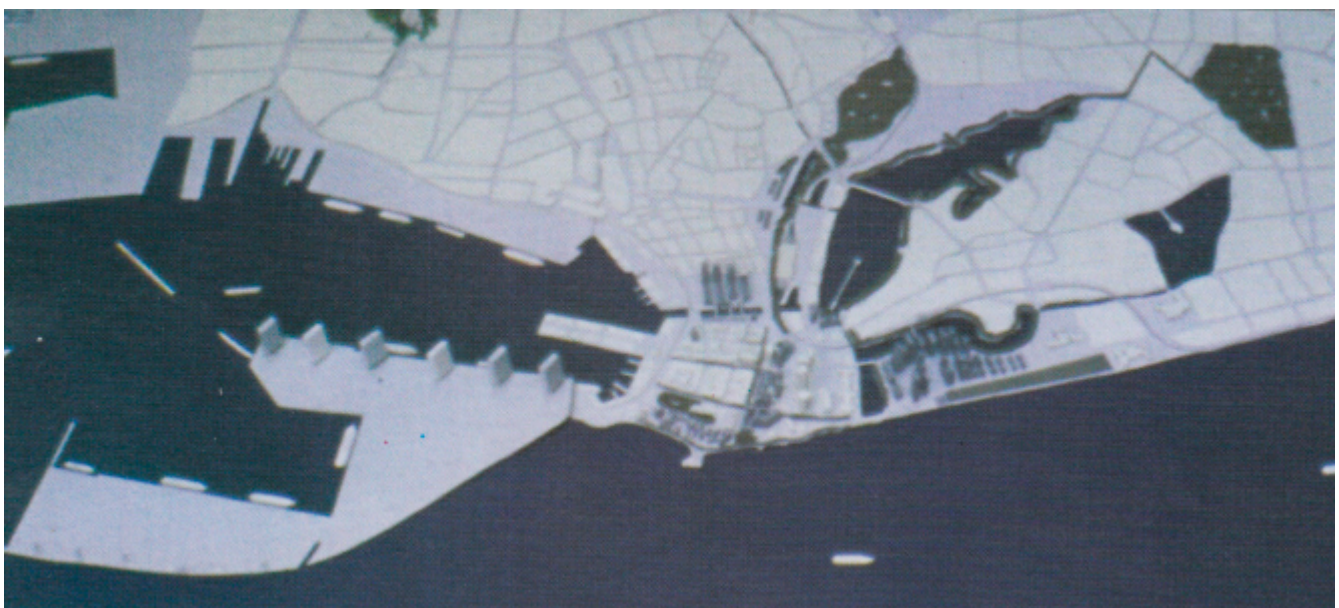
Says Suren Wickremasinghe, Chairman of the UDA, “the first three entries were very close.

The scales were tipped in favour of the winning entry because of their inclusion of energy conservation and environmental factors and the futuristic outlook of their concept for Colombo as a city in the new millenium. Also, their entry included the outer Fort area, Beira, as well and this was a favourable component". Wickremasinghe added that some of the world's foremost architectural consultancy firms responded to the UDA's competition announcement and this was "most encouraging".

The winning team emerged as *Millenium Consortium*, a group of locally based architects namely Milroy Perera, Deepal Wickremasinghe, Ragi Kadirgamar, P. Kokularaj, Prof. Lal Balasuriya, Prof. Lakshman Ratnayake and Feisal Mansoor working in collaboration with Short Ford and Associates (UK), Ove Arup & Partners (UK) and Mario Cucinella Architects (France).

In preparation for the competition several architecture students were hired to assist in the drawings and making of models. It was on the whole a young and dynamic team and their dedicated spirit would have played an important role in making theirs the winning entry.

Millenium Consortium approached the challenge of the competition by looking at the evolution of the city of Colombo, examining her past and assessing her future, and "recognising that a city is an organism that functions according to natural laws towards a state of equilibrium".



"The Fort today is an urban centre in accelerating decay. Most areas are inaccessible to the general public and whole streets are deserted. The location of strategic installations in key

areas has effectively eliminated one third of available land. The dearth of car parks and an antiquated and overloaded public transport system has constrained the accessibility of the area as a whole. This has led to an increasing number of companies moving out of the Central Business District (CBS) and relocating themselves in Slave Island and Kollupitiya. This is our starting point". (In Search of Equilibrium, A Sustainable Urban Development Infrastructure Plan, Millenium Consortium 1996).

In the case of Fort the present government's futuristic vision is of the zone being a financial centre for Asia. But a city centre must have a heart and offer its people leisure and entertainment facilities as well. The plan for Fort offers a mix of uses for the area, making it a vibrant living downtown which has business as its primary function during the day, while offering leisure and cultural activities to its citizens at night. The Millenium Consortium team foresee Colombo as being a:

- Sustainable Tropical Garden City.
- Viable 21st Century Regional Financial Centre.
- Energy Efficient Model for the Region.

The extremely impressive Millenium project proposal with its panels and scale models which was displayed for some time at the UDA, had among many this interesting observation:

"We must convince our partners in SAARC that their success is ours and vice versa. They should not fear a successful Lanka on their doorstep but rather, revel in the new business opportunities this would bring them. We have a second chance to prove ourselves as a conduit to the sub continent. If Lanka can offer all the accoutrements of modern business and a pleasant, efficient and clean environment in which to do business, half the battle is won."

In the case of Fort the present government's futuristic vision is of the zone being a financial centre for Asia

The historical importance of the Fort as a colonial bastion and its proximity to the Port of Colombo, currently growing in importance regionally and globally, must not be overlooked. The overall character of the Fort therefore is to be maintained by conserving most of the buildings, restoring facades and making strategic guidelines for heights, setbacks and arcades.

"Conservation and development may appear to be contradictory but it is not a matter of

“preserving nor recreating a past city, but shaping a new city in which preserved forms and past associations play an important contemporary role”. (Colombo: Fort District, Urban Design Strategy, Millenium Consortium).

Millenium Consortium has therefore developed guidelines for this project based on specific architectural considerations such as: Land Use, Built Form, Transport, Landscape, Conservation, Climatic Response, Security, Services, Information, Technology and Phasing.

The following reports were consulted during the formulation of this redevelopment project:

- The Revised Colombo Metropolitan Regional Structure Plan (Draft), Nov. 1995
- Study of the Development of new Port of Colombo, June 1996
- Report on the Listing and Preservation of Historic Building and Zones in the Colombo Urban Area (Lewcock Report) Aug-Sept 1980.
- Colombo Traffic Study, June 1995.
- Beira Lake Business Study Plan, April 1996.

The Land Use plan has been designed to make best use of land released from institutional use and in keeping with the conservation strategy, planning an expansion of the Central Business District (CBD) south of the land to be vacated by Army Headquarters and the rest of the Beira Lake in line with the Beira Lake development plan.

The Built Form has been determined by gradated plot ratios in line with the general characteristics of existing skyscrapers in the south of the Fort World. Trade Centre and Bank of Ceylon Tower. There would be a crescent shape starting from the Chaitya Road, round to the proposed People’s Bank tower block with point blocks at key landmark locations at the extremities of the site and Janadipathi Mawatha.

Point Blocks would include the redevelopment of the derelict Gaffoor Building at the north eastern extremity of Fort (suggested height 75M); a proposed city hotel next to the Chaitya, angled towards the sca (suggested height 50m); redevelopment of Ceylinco Building as a landmark site (suggested height 150m)

A linear edge park is suggested for the north west strip of land to be vacated by the Department of Immigration and Emigration and Navy Headquarters extending up to the Hotel Intercontinental in the south and Presidents House and Gordon Gardens to the east.

Along Chaitya Road, high density medium level housing of five to eight floors is suggested.

Climate Response in the form of micro climatic control mechanisms will be introduced to minimise the energy requirements of Fort in an effort to make it an energy- efficient model for the region

The Transport Strategy will be one of System of Access (SOA) based on:

- Restricted uni-directional private vehicle access in the area, using a time based restricted entry pass system. All traffic within Fort will be controlled by traffic slowing mechanisms keeping the pace at less than 20 kph.
- A cost effective and efficient Tram Loop system is recommended to serve the Fort area and should be connected to a wider urban network. The Trams will have priority over vehicles and will speed up internal travel taking commuters to train, bus and parking terminals in the 'green finger' areas.
- Within Fort the walking distances are short therefore increased pedestrianisation would be introduced to maximise the public's access to this area. However, the walkways would provide sufficient shade and air flow creating a pleasant environment in which to walk. 'Downtown Fort' is defined as the area contained by Janadipathi Mw., Sir Baron Jayatilleke Mw., York Street and Bank of Ceylon Mw.
- One level underground parking, though an expensive option, is suggested for all new buildings to satisfy their own needs at least.

The Landscape Design is one of 'green fingers' lining the main approaches into Fort, accentuated by open spaces and panoramic views. The sea of green will link the Beira, the ocean and Galle Face. Trees planted will be chosen for their CO₂ absorption rate thus providing a 'green lung' in the heart of the concrete jungle.

The Conservation Strategy adopted is based on preserving buildings of sound architectural value which are authentic and relevant to their surroundings.

Four approaches have been considered.

Climate Response in the form of micro climatic control mechanisms will be introduced to minimise the energy requirements of Fort in an effort to make it an energy-efficient model for the region. Actual mechanisms will include alignment of facades in a heliotropic method to minimise solar radiation, attention to shade and inter-building distances and heights,

consideration of wind direction and vertical and horizontal planting of trees in line with the landscaping.

The choice of vegetation plays a significant role in localised cooling. Some types of trees suggested for their cooling effect are: *Millettia Atropurpurea*-cooling factor 28%; Angsana-26% ; Rain Tree -18.5% etc...

Large, unprotected surfaces such as pavements and roads should be shaded as it has been found that low level vegetation reduces the temperature of surfaces otherwise exposed to the sun.

Air movement can provide improved comfort by 'convective cooling'. Given the prevailing North East and South West wind directions, it is proposed to utilise maximum penetration of available breezes at street level.

Rooftop planting also reduces solar gains to the building and provides amenities such as outdoor dining areas.

Security now a foremost concern, will be maximised by limiting vehicular access and prohibiting roadside parking. All parking will be controlled in secure car parks and access to buildings will be through electronically activated barriers. The wide pedestrian arcades and walkways planned will further insulate buildings from terrorist attacks.

Environmental Services for the Fort area would include:

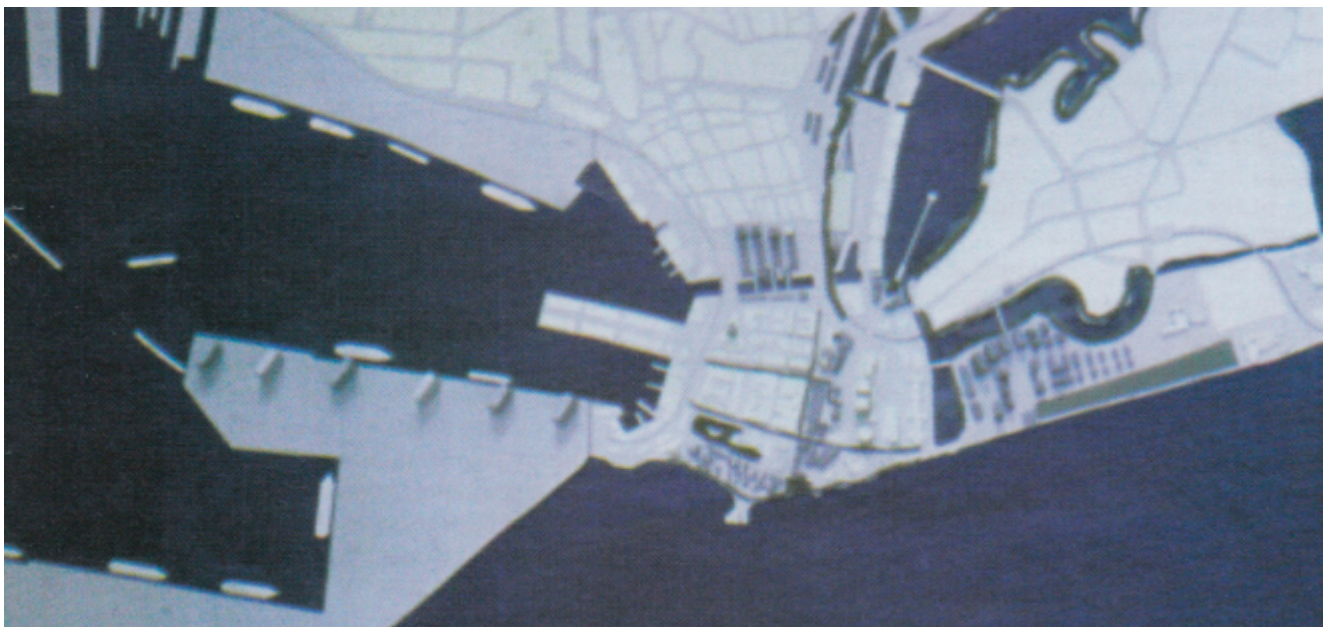
- Recycling of rain water collected on roofs and pavements. This water can be used to water plants, wash windows etc. 'Grey water' can be used for toilet flushing.
- Bio Gas generators (using solid waste and garbage) which would be installed in the basements of new buildings as part of the re-cycling strategy.
- Windmills which produce cheap electricity without pollution; The south west breakwater of the Colombo harbour would accommodate strategically placed wind turbines of up to 1.5 mw.
- The use of solar power, as a move to minimise energy requirements from the national grid.
- It is also suggested that ISO 9000 power consumption standards are adopted where ever appropriate to bring Fort in line with modern practices.

A state of the art Information Technology (IT) network should be installed according to the urban planners, if Fort is to be viable as a 21st century financial centre. Optical fibre cabling to ensure voice, video and data communications facilities to those operating from and within the Fort area must be offered if Colombo is to be a hi-tech centre in the region.

A central Sri Lankan database would be managed as a web site on the Internet, providing all business and financial information as well as social, cultural and tourist information. Foreign investors would be encouraged to trade on the Colombo Stock Exchange by placing orders through the 'Net' or Reuters Stockwatch mechanisms and dealing terminals.

The Phasing of this redevelopment plan has been so structured that any part can be implemented at any time, as each component is autonomous.

It is expected that the UDA will put the plan into action by firstly initiating the redesigning of Janadipathi Mawatha, the worst hit by the bomb blast. This stretch of buildings and road would be projected as the 'Wall Street' of Colombo.



The Millenium Consortium with its focus on the 'sustainable city' ideology is promoting the concept of a low energy, high rise building. Very often increased urbanisation and heightened 'built density' adversely affects the climate of inner cities. A typical high rise office building uses 260 kwh/sqm/annum on lighting, pumps, refrigeration and fans at great expense to the client. The potential of the low energy high rise building can reduce energy consumption to 135 kwh/sqm/annum.



In addition, the service and quality of environment in the low energy high rise is the same if not superior to its counterpart. These factors could have an impact on the level of investment required and could act as a model for all future development in the city.

The architects and planners of Millenium Consortium stress that Fort must be used to its maximum potential night and day. At present, the area is deserted at night and this is an inefficient use of space; Fort should be accessible to the city's population 24 hours a day, offering a multitude of activities.

While it is expected that most institutions will be relocated, specific government buildings such as the Central Bank, the Central Telegraph Office/Sri Lanka Telecom, the Presidential Secretariat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Post Office and the President's House are expected to remain.

Commercial activity must however be expanded to include offices, media parks, retail shops,

mini markets, hawker centres, super markets etc. A new city hotel is suggested to cater to increasing international business traffic passing through the city centre.

Leisure and recreational facilities such as cinema complexes, water sports, waterfront activities, museums, bars and restaurants, sports centres and bowling alleys are some of the recommendations for the mixed use of Fort.

Open Public spaces are proposed at Gordon Gardens (next to President's House and opposite the Foreign Ministry), the Hospital Square bounded by Dutch Hospital and what is now Canal Row at Transworks House and at the termination of Chatham Street leading to pedestrian access to the promenade across Chaitya Road.

The promenade on Chaitya Street is to be extended and widened on the lines of Bombay's Marine Drive, which will make an entertaining vista and recreational facility. The Governor's Pool at the Light- house would be rehabilitated and opened to the public.

Janadipathi Mawatha

The buildings on either side of the Janadipathi Mawatha which bore the full brunt of the bomb blast have been rendered unoccupiable, thus causing tremendous financial losses and inconvenience to the owners and businesses housed within them.

The property owners in the area, among them Cargo Boat, George Steuart, Mercantile Credit Group, Hotels Corporation, Ceylinco Building, the Central Bank and the Hotel Intercontinental have subsequently banded together to form Centrepont Limited, a public company which is a joint effort between the UDA and the private sector.

They have succeeded with the assistance of the Ministry of Finance, in obtaining a soft loan of US\$ 110 million (at 6 1/2%, repayable in 10 years) from the Export & Import Bank of the United States Government, for the rebuilding of Janadipathi Mawatha, which they see as the 'face of the nation'.

The UDA claims US\$ 400 million will be needed for the entire redevelopment project but UDA Chairman Suren Wickremasinghe is confident they will be able to raise the money. "We are relying a lot now on the private sector and Centrepont will have an important role to play. However, the private sector cannot get a loan from a foreign agency as you need a sovereign/treasury guarantee which can be given only via a State organisation. So the UDA's contribution to Centrepont is the muscle in being able to acquire land and get the assistance of the Treasury, for example."



Ceylinco House, Colombo's first 'skyscraper', has suffered terrific loss and damage amounting to at least Rs 700 million, of which a mere Rs 100 million may be recoverable through re-insurance, according to Ceylinco Deputy Chairman Daya Senanayake. "The structure of Ceylinco House is sound, engineers have examined it", says Senanayake, "so we plan to build a completely new and modern building around the existing skeleton, in the form of a facade. It will fit into the overall development of the Janadipathi Mawatha as it is in the corner and is an important landmark". He estimates that construction work should begin in early 1997.

"...The economy needs to be activated. The only way we can give it a kick start is by starting construction and infrastructure development..."

One of the *Centrepont* directors and an affected land owner himself, Zarook Marikkar, Managing Director, Computerlink says the only way to redevelop this area is through the joint efforts of these land owners, most of whom own small plots of approximately 30

perches.

He adds that many of the buildings did not have terrorism insurance cover and the sum of Rs 1.5 million which is the limit for those insured is so negligible it does not even cover the cost of clearing a site.

Marikkar and some of his colleagues are, however, disappointed that plans for restructuring the Janadipathi Mawatha have taken so long to materialise. He notes that the street remains closed and the area is dead and offers examples of other cities such as Manchester, London Docks and Bombay which were immediately reconstructed after the bomb attacks that affected them.

Says Marikkar, "the economy. needs to be activated. The only way we can give it a kick start is by starting construction and infrastructure development. Anywhere in the world, construction activates economic activity."

Reflecting on the outcome of the Janadipathi Mawatha being closed for so long and the general 'high security' label attached to Fort, Marikkar notes that this has resulted in "traffic snarls and energy loss in terms of fuel waste, environmental pollution, loss of productivity and aggravation leading to stress. The country's economy is dwindling as a result and productivity and efficiency in gone."

Public/Private sector cooperation is not an easy task to achieve because there is so little precedence in this area. Says Lakshman Jayasekera of the UDA, 'public/private sector participation is a good thing but it doesn't happen that way unless some practical measures are taken. This has happened in Singapore and Malaysia but it is not really happening in Sri Lanka. There are problems, partly because the government itself and the way we do things historically we have no history of working with the private sector. We look at each other with suspicion. That attitude and procedural problems has to be tackled."



since the bombing and the slowness in moving ahead with restructuring the Janadipathi Mawatha in particular, Wickremasinghe agrees that little appears to have happened on ground level but states, “you have to have plans, think of the future. You cannot develop just one bit of the Fort. We have been studying the transport system, how to get cars off the road, improve public transport, railway diversion and improvement. All of this constitutes the Colombo Metropolitan Region Strategic Plan which we are working on”.

The general idea in the Fort redevelopment scheme is to give the city back to the people

While the general idea in the Fort redevelopment scheme is to give the city back to the people, in a way, security remains a main concern. There is a general consensus that key institutions, particularly security-sensitive ones, should be moved out of the Fort and the success of this new project would depend to a large extent on this happening.

In addition, one tends to forget that the Fort and its environs house nine major hotels Hotel Ceylon Intercontinental, Hilton, Grand Oriental Hotel, Galadari, Taj, Oberoi, Trans Asia and Holiday Inn. The area in which these hotels are located should be lively, busy places particularly at night and foreign visitors should not be confronted by a constant security presence around this area.

If Chaitya Road, bordering the ocean was opened up it could be developed into an attractive leisure area like Galle Face and some of the old charm of Fort could be rediscovered. However, the good news confirmed by UDA Chairman Suren Wickremasinghe is that Gordon Gardens is to be opened up to the public after 25 years.

At the UDA's first press conference on the Fort project held on December 20th 1996, it was announced that work on the Janadipathi Mawatha is scheduled to begin on 15th January 1997 and should be completed in fifteen months. No doubt the public will wait with baited breath to see the emergence of a 'new' face to this central road, and in keeping with the public's 'right to information', one would hope that there will be regular official updates on the progress of this impressive project that will take Colombo into the new millenium.