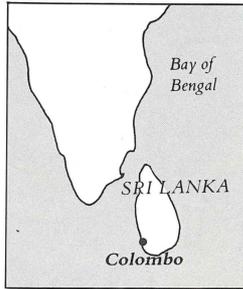


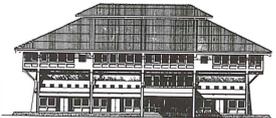
# The Mahaveli Museum & Royal Asiatic Society Building, Colombo

Anura Ratnavibhushana



## Project Data

Site: 8,000 square metres  
Located in a cultural zone of Colombo  
Client: Ministry of Mahaveli Development  
Project Architect & Designer: Anura Ratnavibhushana  
Consultants: Mihindu Keerthiratne Associates Limited  
Contractor: A construction unit within the client's Ministry  
Building area: 3,500 square metres on three floors  
Construction: 1981-85



The main development plan of the 1978-88 Sri Lankan national administration centred upon the ambitious accelerated Mahaveli Programme (See MIMAR 28). The aim of this was to build five major dams and reservoirs for harnessing the waters of the Mahaveli river. New agricultural settlements, more jobs, and the generation of hydropower were the expected benefits from this programme, much of which has now been realised. While massive inputs of modern technology and planning made these projects possible in a relatively short period, the inspiration for undertaking it was a successful historical legacy. Sri Lankas' ancient kings had built major irrigation projects involving dams and reservoirs, some of which survive to this day.

In early 1980, at a time when the Mahaveli projects were only an ambitious vision, the minister in charge of Mahaveli Development summoned the architects to design a building which would basically serve the dissemination of information related to these projects, and possibly could become a museum of sorts as time passed. It was to be open to the public and particularly to school children from all parts of the island. The client also requested that some place be allocated in the proposed building to

house the priceless collection of books and documents of the scholarly Royal Asiatic Society, which hitherto had no permanent repository. The need for an auditorium and some administrative office space was also requested.

At the time of designing this building conceptually, the architects were unable to find out specifically what kind of exhibits would need to be displayed in this building. The desire to have a building well-designed and actual construction begun without delay, was a high priority of the client. Only much later was it decided that the exhibits would include photographs, topographical models of dams and reservoirs, historical artifacts unearthed from ancient dam sites, as well as related objects of artistic value.

The selected site was within a designated cultural zone and situated close to the old British colonial national museum and the National Art Gallery. It overlooks a wooded public park across a wide avenue with large shaded trees. Two magnificent trees, a Ficus Religiosa at front and a Ficus Bengalensis (Banyan) with enormous prop roots, exist at the rear. It was obligatory for buildings within this cultural zone to have a 'traditional' appearance, and to have a clay-tiled roof.

It was with these guide posts and the rather undetermined and generalised idea of the intended use given by the client, that the project architect conceived the



Front elevation of the museum and its main entrance.

Text and plans by the architect.  
Photographs by Dominic Sansoni.



building shown on these pages.

The building is three-storied and 'U' shaped in plan. The second floor and tiled asbestos roofs have generous cantilevered overhangs, thus emphasising the roof all around. The structure of reinforced concrete columns beams and slabs makes it conveniently possible to achieve these large overhangs, as well as to eliminate the bearing walls; instead there are plastered brick walls punched with openings with relative freedom. The structure rises from a generous, brick-paved podium that surrounds the building and sets it apart from the surrounding garden, providing a formal character. Interestingly the pre-colonial Sri Lankan architecture (such as peasant houses and religious edifices) by and large have the same basic three elements of a podium, a structure which carries a generous roof, and the walls which are independent.

While presenting a formal but limited facade to the road, the 'U' shaped building in plan encloses a beautiful courtyard that is dominated by a large reflecting pool on the same level with the podium surrounding the ground-floor exhibition hall. The visitor to the building, however, discovers this pool and courtyard as an unexpected surprise only after proceeding deeper into the ground floor exhibition space. This brimful pool overflows across granite rough cut flagstones on the podium into a deeper but narrow

long pool at the lower garden level. Pumps recirculate the overflowing water via three fountains into the larger pool again as a visual invitation to draw the public from the exhibition hall to the exterior space. The outdoor pools, the podium around them and the garden courtyard were intended to be developed into an outdoor sculpture garden with views from the indoor exhibition spaces. This has not been adequately realised. Presently only three sculptures have been displayed, one of which is a replica of the rock cut statue at Polonnaruwa of the great tank builder, King Parakramabahu the Great. This statue can be glimpsed at the end of the shaft of space formed between the main building and the large Ficus tree at the left foreground.

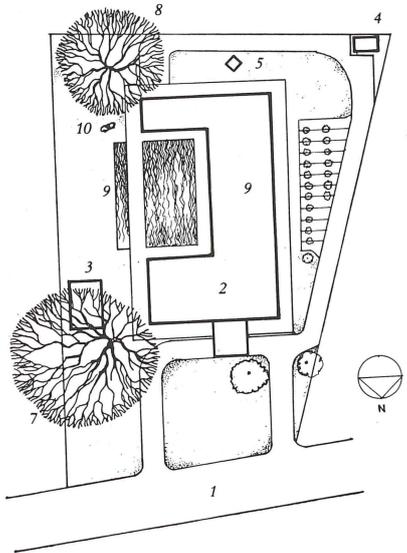
The ground floor, which is primarily the Mahveli museum exhibition space, has a perimeter of glass windows with a pair of yellow ochre double doors in each structural bay. They provide access to the podium, views, and natural ventilation. The wide, concrete slab window sills provide a platform for models and ancient relics unearthed from dam sites. The spaces below the sills have back-lighted, colour photo-transparency boxes with views of the various Mahaveli projects and their progress. A part of the exhibition space is double height and is overlooked from a gallery at first floor level, thus providing advantageous views

*Museum seen from the Northeast.*

of very large topographical models of dam sites and reservoirs. A remarkable photographic blow-up of Sri Lanka taken from a satellite dominates this double height space and replicas of ancient banners add a festive air. The first floor is primarily the library of the Royal Asiatic Society. A portion of this floor which surrounds the double height space is a picture gallery. The second floor contains a small auditorium equipped with audio-visual facilities and subdivided office space for the publicity unit of the ministry. It also has a flat roof-terrace overlooking the pool and gardens below.

A considerable amount of natural light reaches the interior due to the frequency and location of the windows. Artificial light for evening and special occasions is provided by ceiling, soffit-mounted lighting tracks with movable spots. This system was devised with the assistance of a local lighting specialist at a fraction of the cost and time needed to import an equivalent system as the building was hurriedly completed for a ceremonial opening in 1985.

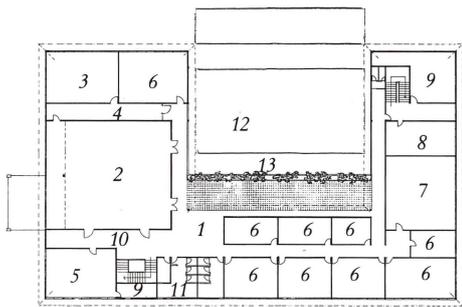
Most areas of the building are naturally cross-ventilated (except the auditorium and audio-visual rooms which were air-conditioned later) at lower and upper levels of rooms, and are reasonably cool and comfortable.



Site plan

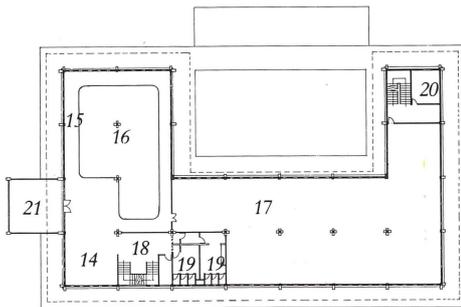
0 10 20m

1. Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha
2. Mahaveli Museum and Royal Asiatic Society Library
3. Bookshop
4. Transformer house
5. Water tower
6. Car Park
- 7, 8 Ficus trees
9. Pools
10. Statue of Tank builder, King Parakramabahu



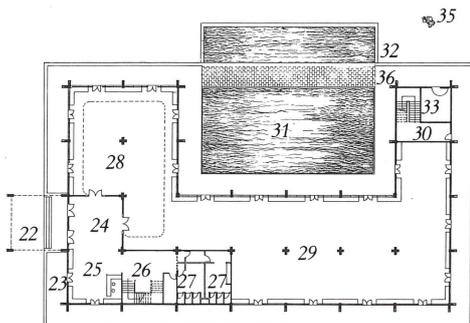
Second floor plan

1. Lobby
2. Lecture hall
3. Audio visual equipment room
4. Projection room
5. Directors' office
6. Administrative offices
7. Conference room
8. Canteen
9. Store
10. Main stair
11. Toilets
12. Open-air terrace
13. Plant trough



First floor plan

14. Exhibition hall
15. Viewing gallery
16. Void
17. Royal Asiatic Society Library
18. Main stairs
19. Toilets
20. Store
21. Terrace



Ground floor plan

0 5 10 15m

22. Entrance porch
23. Podium
24. Lobby
25. Reception
26. Main stair
27. Toilets
28. Exhibition hall (double height)
29. Exhibition hall
30. Emergency stair
31. Large pool
32. Small pool (lower level)
33. Store
34. Water tower
35. Statue of King Parakramabahu (Reservoir builder)
36. Granite paved overflow area



Left, top: Detail of the reflecting pool.  
Left: At the corner of the south wing of the museum stands a statue of the great reservoir builder King Parakramabahu.  
Left, below: View of the building from the South-west corner.  
Below: View of the interior exhibition spaces on the ground floor.

