

# Decolonization and Nationalism: The ‘American Style’, the Vernacular and the Domestic Architecture of Sri Lanka

M. N. R. Wijetunge

Department of Architecture, Faculty of Built Environment and Spatial Sciences,  
General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University,  
Sri Lanka  
mnrwijetunge@kdu.ac.lk

## Abstract

*Following independence in 1948, a Ceylonese elite contingent embarked on a nationalist political course by 1956. Attempts were made to address nationalism in the visual and performing arts striving for a national identity, where architecture too saw no exception. This nationalism was perpetuated into the 1970s and beyond. In a context where elitist architects propagated ‘core’-oriented modes of domestic architectures, Ceylon’s nascent middleclass employed non-architects who turned to post-war mass-housing in the United States for inspiration; the American ‘tract house’.<sup>1</sup> The local emulation went by the name of ‘American Style’. This phenomenon in Ceylon is said to have started in the 1960s, and disappeared altogether right after neo liberal economic reforms of 1977. The aforesaid style is arguably, a hybrid that encapsulated the country’s own vernacular, with a base of certain imported architectural traditions. The study of this fascinating area and its underlying reasons for success will be a useful precedence to assess and theorize similar architectural movements to come in future.*

**Keywords:** American Style, Nationalism, Elites, Middleclass

## Introduction

The 1950s post-war America was indeed a consumers’ republic’ (Cohen, 2003; Conrad, 1995). The 1954-64 window—the so-called period of the ‘baby boomers’—saw the American population explode, marking a great exodus into the nascent suburbs from the urban and rural America. Moreover, it was in fact, the period when the American masses, for the first time, acquired some degree of sophistication and elegance in terms of lifestyle—meaning encapsulated in the term ‘Populuxe’—to become the envy of the rest of the world (Hine, 2007). They were by now, the world’s richest economy, and the most modern society (Boucher, 2013). In this new industrial age of hitherto unforeseen promise, US development companies combined with post-war GI loan schemes to provide housing for the middleclass (statemuseumpa.org, 2022). This provided a fleeting magic carpet for them to become new home owners. Consequently, acres of model-homes were built to cover suburban land tracts all over the US. Hence, home ownership suddenly became central to American middleclass aspirations, and was an essential constituent of the ‘American dream’ (Johnson, 1994).

---

<sup>1</sup>Also known as the ‘cookie cutter’ house.



**Fig. 1:** Advertisement addressing needs of returning WWII vets that appeared on the *Chicago Tribune* in 1947. Source:<http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/b.html>



**Fig. 2: 'Cape Cod' style Levittown House:** An Early Family Poses in Front of their 1948 'Cape Cod' style Levittown, USA. Source:\websites\Levittown\LevittownDocuments of an Ideal American Suburb.mht

The so-called 'Levittowns' and 'tract-housing' sprung up usually in US vernacular styles such as *Cape Cod* and *Ranch Style* etc., that predominantly appealed to the post-war middleclass taste via familiarity (Budds, 2011). Such American vernacular arguably dwelt on materials readily available in the contexts of their birth, combined with colonial stylistic variations culled from early Spanish settlers to the time of Victorians etc. On the other hand, its Italian origins too could not be negated (Hine, 2007). Such vernacular had been an essential part of the American landscape since the time of its early settlers.

In 1945, John Entenza launched an experimental program titled the 'case study houses', aiming to design a low-cost prototype for the post-war California that lasted till the mid-1960s. These houses have been described as icons of mid-century modernism, and Pieris believes that it was "[...] one of the many moments when the house became a laboratory for experimentation with new technologies, materials, building processes and aesthetics associated with social change". (2007: 48)



**Fig. 3:** Case Study House No. 22 Source:<http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2011/02/27/case-study-house-no-22/>



**Fig. 4:** Levittowner Model #1. Source:<http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/d.html>

In this light, Hine (2007) points out to the new array of mass-produced cheap materials that were suddenly made available owing to the industrial development of the time in question, that were being used in the houses from the period. This versatile pallet consisted of products such as cheap plastics, fiber-based products, factory-sawn timbers and large-sized glass to steel members such as 'H' Irons. Certain materials such as 'Con-Tact paper'<sup>2</sup> and 'Applikay'<sup>3</sup> etc. became instant favorites to name a few.

The vernacular-based tract houses borrowed liberally, not only from aforesaid case study houses, but from the works of great architects of the time such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Marcel Breuer and Richard Neutra etc. The horizontality of the so-called USonian houses, open plan, walls

<sup>2</sup> a type of wall paper with versatile finishes.

<sup>3</sup> a type of fiber-based paint that could be applied on almost any surface.

of windows, low mantel-less asymmetrical fire places and the picture window—all suggesting a general air of informality and openness—were some noteworthy borrowings of such (Hine, 2007). Hence, The 1950s tract house was indeed a hybrid product with a vernacular base, fed by architectural modernism, and nascent technological advancements.

It was this housing model that became a great inspiration for the Ceylonese middleclass by the 1960s, and thus gave birth to what is locally known as the ‘American Style’ house phenomenon. This happened largely in the declared ‘satellite towns’ to Colombo and their close vicinities, subsequently spreading to rural areas.

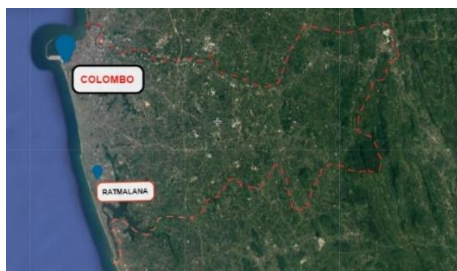
As its objectives, this paper evaluates American style’s architectural attributes by placing it against its American cousin (*i.e.* the tract house), and also explores its socio-cultural attributes; as underlying reasons for its making, and thus, success. By doing so, it can be a useful precedence to assess and theorize similar architectural moments to come in future. Further, it maps the hybridities that emerged within the movement, while also theorizing and articulating such. Another major objective is to investigate the style’s speculated middleclass patronage, and also the fact that if its championing was deliberate on the part of the middleclass. The role of vernacular too in the making of the style is assessed. Ultimately, the main aim here is to evaluate the hand of this unique brand of domestic architecture as a tool for decolonization.

### Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology and relies on case studies. Since this area has neither been featured much in literature nor been subjected to scientific scrutiny, the study relies heavily on empirical works. To fill-in gaps, supplementary interviews are brought in as appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

To collect information, photographic surveys of American Style houses and in-depth interviews of their patrons/occupiers are utilized. The analysis is done by using tables that also aid to place them against periodic changes (*i.e.* political, economic and socio-cultural), and thus, findings are revealed.

Five case studies were randomly selected from the former satellite town of *Ratmalana* in Colombo District, which was a foremost industrialized area settled by the new middleclass (the others being *Homagama* in Colombo District and *Ragama* in *Gampaha* District). These were the products of the Patrick Abercrombie Plan of 1948; seen as a means to decentralize urban activities formerly concentrated in Colombo, according to *townplanninginsrilanka* (2022). These are compared with three cases from other areas—first from nearby *Moratuwa* (Colombo District), second from relatively distant *Weyangoda* (*Gampaha* District), and third from rural *Embilipitiya* (*Hanbanthota* District).



**Fig. 5:** *Map of Ratmalana*  
placed within Colombo District

Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>

## Findings and the Discussion

### Ceylonese Nationalism

Nationalism is often explained in terms of nationalist thought, or an impulse of nationalist consciousness (Dharmadasa, 2003). On the other hand, Gellner and Anderson (Eriksen, 2002) illustrate the ‘notions of a nation’; an ideological construction seeking to forge a link between (self-

<sup>4</sup> Selected senior practicing architects/academics in the island who had firsthand experiences with the style in question were interviewed.

defined) culture group and state, and that they create ‘abstract communities’ of a different order from those dynastic states or kingship-based communities, which pre-dated them. Thus, as for the duo, although many nations tend to imagine themselves as old, they are in fact, modern (Eriksen, 2002).

*“Nationalism, which is frequently a traditionalistic ideology, may glorify and recodify an ostensibly ancient tradition shared by the ancestors of the members of the nation, but it does not thereby re-create that tradition. Instead, [...] it reifies it [...]”.*

(Gellner and Anderson in Eriksen, 2002: 100)

On the other hand, in Dharmadasa’s (2003) terms, the ancient glories revived, find provenance in certain resources of value—legends, religious beliefs/rituals, classical literature, language, architectural ruins, inscriptions/texts etc. In this light, it could be argued that the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism pre-dates its modern western counterpart, and it is the latter that recognized Sri Lanka as a modern ‘nation state’. Various phases of nationalism is evident from pre-modern to modern periods of the island’s history, and arguably, the minority nationalisms induced by the manipulative British colonial policies in particular, reinvigorated its Sinhalese Buddhist counterpart over time. Within this timeframe, Sinhalese Buddhist and Tamil nationalisms (latter as the former’s main contender) fed on each other, as they had done for centuries. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism saw a culmination in 1956 following the island’s political independence, and the phenomenon is commonly posited as a restoration of legitimate dominance of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. This nationalist fervor lasted for a few more decades to come—through the 1960s, into the 1970s—through a veneer of modernist masquerade (Wijetunge, 2012b).

### **National Identity through Architecture**

The connection between national identity and architecture was first established by Ruskin. He equated the sense of national identity with the memory and awareness of nation’s glorious past, and established that poetry and especially architecture provide the best mnemonic devices capable of embodying and preserving such symbolic signs. As Ruskin (1989: 202) elaborated, the national style is well established when

*“ [...] no individual caprice dispense[s] with, or materiality vary[s], accepted types and customary decorations” and “ every member and feature [is] as commonly current, as frankly accepted, as language or its coin”.*

As for Dayaratne (2016), architecture contributes to identity construction in two ways. First it inculcates an attachment to the past, glorifies it, and continues to makes it be present at any given time. Secondly, it endows legitimacy of its authors to be a part of the nation. Smith (1991) on the other hand, writes that symbols have always possessed the emotive collective qualities that can bring a nation together. For him, architecture is indeed such a symbol. In this light, after all, the immediate post-independence period architects’ search for a national architectural identity in terms of style was fed by the aforesaid notions. The initial growth of architectural historiography was accompanied by the subsequent development of art historiography and parallel movements in visual arts, performing arts, literature and cinema—all striving to find a synthesis of traditional with the modern (Jayewardene, 1984). It is in such a backdrop that the self-fashioning of a new social groups took place in Ceylon.

### **Self-fashioning of a Class**

According to present theories on elitism, in the modern world, in any given situation, the people who have access to political power (at least to a certain extent) make up its so-called ‘political class’. Within this small political class, lies an even smaller minority who could be perceived as its ‘governing elite’ – the people who yield the real political power. Then comes a much numerous periphery of the ‘middleclass’, and lies outside the aforesaid class the wider majority; the ‘working class’ (Bottomore, 1993).

The education franchise of the 1940s-50s had yielded a new middleclass in Ceylon, and its members were commonly referred to as the ‘*Swabasha-trained*’ youth.<sup>5</sup> The term itself was a manifestation of this newly-created duality with the only other educated faction—the elite class. This new middleclass had replaced its colonial equivalent that was the ‘*Petty-bourgeoisie*’ class as established by Jayawardena (1983), and unlike its predecessor was armed with an education.

In this period, Peiris (2007) believes that the proliferation of American middleclass suburban home paralleled with American lifestyle appropriation in parts of Asia and Europe, where the Ceylonese middleclass too saw no exception. An infiltration of American culture, namely ‘*Americanization*’, had already perpetuated in Europe during WWII, owing to the indispensable part played in it by the US, according to Andrew Marr (All Things British, 2022, 57:36). Moreover, the growth in media and telecommunication had consolidated its global reach by the immediate postwar period (*Ssenyonga*, 2006). Hence, by now, its onslaught was unavoidable for the newly-liberated world.

In such a backdrop, to the newly-liberated Asian colonies that had been subjugated under centuries of European cultures, “*more liberal-looking, non-feudal and non-colonial*” American culture was a “*breath of fresh air*” (Alahakoon, 2011). “*The dream that was borrowed or appropriated from America was one of modernity and democracy [...]*” (Pieris, 2007); the very aspects that the US appeared to uphold.<sup>6</sup> The attempts such as ‘*The American Small Industries Exhibition*’ during this period further helped the American cause (DE Silva, 2015).<sup>7</sup>

Subsequently, by the 1960s, the Ceylonese who were in the process of appropriating a new American-based lifestyle began to call its architectural extension the ‘*American-style*’. This happened in the presence of its variants such as ‘*California-house*’ and ‘*Ranch-style*’. In the absence of the Television,<sup>8</sup> they grasped it largely through magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ideal Homes* etc., not to mention the alluring Hollywood cinema. The hype the tract house received from Television in America as Hine (2007) tells us did not happen in Ceylon. Pieris (2007) states that the American-style was adopted for its “*sense of modernity*”, rather than the “*modernist aesthetic*”, in the presence of far-modern *Avant-garde*/Tropical Modern variants from Europe as Perera (1994) tells us. Such variants of course were the elite domain (Wijetunge, 2012b). After all, Goodman (1988) tells us that the state and aristocrats have historically derived power through their execution of architecture.

Owing to such reasons, this particular style became a stepping stone for Ceylon’s peripheral social classes to ascend towards the direction of elitism in terms of domestic taste. In this light it is worth taking into account the physical characteristics of this style preferred by Ceylon’s middleclass, while exploring its underlying factors.

### Architectural Attributes of Success

The generic physical attributes of the selected houses are established and compared in Table 1. Having done so, the underlying factors behind them are revealed as seminal points, utilizing the pertaining periodic changes fed by extant literature.

### Suburban Settings

After satellite suburbs of *Ratmalana*, *Homagama* and *Ragama* were declared by the Abercrombie Plan of 1948,<sup>9</sup> Pieris (2007) postulates that by the late-1950s, Colombo locales such as *Nawala*, *Rajagiriya*, *Nugegoda* etc. also sprung up as residential areas to accommodate middleclass new-comers.

<sup>5</sup>Youth trained in the indigenous languages.

<sup>6</sup>This notion was valid until America’s involvement in the violent Vietnam War. Since Vietnam was a Buddhist county, a majority of Sri Lankans did not approve the American intervention there.

<sup>7</sup>Since Ceylon’s pro-socialist political climate of the time was suffused with mounting anti-West sentiment, such exhibitions constituted the rare moments of sustained interaction between the two nations.

<sup>8</sup>TV was introduced only in 1979 (sri-lanka.mom-gmr.org, 2022).

<sup>9</sup>The plan is conceived by many as a desperate attempt on the part of the British administrators to orient Colombo towards the core (western colonizer nations) for posterity.

The group that had arrived in Colombo from the country's rural areas was largely the intellectual progeny of post-colonial state's educational franchise. However, they were relegated to the peripheries of intellectual, political, administrative, economic and social spheres by the nation's traditional elite class (Wijetunge, 2012b). With its predominantly rural roots, this faction had little or no stake in city real estate, and was required to vocation in the capital Colombo; the 'one-horse town' of the nation as Perera (1994) refers to it. Owing to limitation of land within the city-limits, the less-affluent middleclass had to settle for suburbs on the metropolitan periphery. Such suburbs were largely agricultural lands prior,<sup>10</sup> as in the case of their American counterparts (Pieris, 2011). These points were proven under Table 1, pertaining to case studies.

However, the scale of suburbanization that happened in Ceylon was never as extensive and organized as in the US. The suburban houses of the island were individually conceived and built by their owners utilizing the help of small-time builders or masons as there were no organized large scale developers involved.<sup>11</sup> Although the American tract houses sprung up all over the States, the examples here were largely limited to the Colombo District. The local satellite suburbs neither saw the advanced level of interconnectivity via conduit-like road networks as in the States, nor did the Ceylonese middleclass still afford the automobile that had made the American case plausible. The automobile too was still largely elite domain (Wijetunge, 2012b).<sup>12</sup> When the American suburbs were given Nature-evoking glamorous names such as 'Haywood Park' and 'Presidential Lakes' as Hine (2007) tells us, the versions here followed suit using Sinhala names such as 'Araliya Pedesa' (Frangipani place), 'Manel Pedesa' (Lotus place) etc. that suggested more tranquility but allure.

### Plot Size & Placement

In terms of site placement, in contrast to palatial houses from the British period that normally had a considerable extent of surrounding landscaped-garden, American-style house placed within a smaller plot was usually pushed into one side of the site to create a semi-private garden (Alahakoon, 2011). The plot size by the 1960s had shrunk; on the one part, owing to the lack of land availability, and on the other, for economy. Suburban plots in the 1960s were being down-sized so much for affordability, in order to regulate such moves, the subsequent government regulators such as the *Urban Development Authority* (UDA) were compelled to impose plot-size regulation; making the minimum fifteen Perches (de Saram, 2011). Consequently, most of these middleclass houses were placed on relatively smaller plots, compared to their predecessors.<sup>13</sup> These points were confirmed by Table 1, pertaining to case studies.

### Design & Layout

When the American tract house plan was being experimented striving for efficacy as Hine (2007) illustrates, the local version in its layout was attempting simply to counter British colonial architecture. Thus, it articulated a revolutionary breakthrough from its immediate predecessor, the Victorian box-inspired *Public Works Department-type* house (Gunasekara, 2011). By the mid-British colonial period itself, after the rules and customs pertaining to the houses of the land imposed by ancient kings were lifted by the new rulers, Ceylonese—the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie classes—had liberally started adopting domestic architecture from their colonial masters (Wijetunge, 2011). By the aforesaid PWD-type house, several phases of British architecture itself had passed. Although certain types that evolved had vernacular plan forms and physical forms, by

<sup>10</sup> This point was proven via the interviews conducted with clients from Ratmalana (interview comments C. U. de Silva (2022))

<sup>11</sup> Rarely, major contractors such as N.U. de Silva were involved with such projects as in the case of the de Silva house at Ratmalana (interview comments C. U. de Silva (2022))

<sup>12</sup> This point was further proven via all the interviews pertaining to this study where no family owned a car at the inception of their houses.

<sup>13</sup>The regulations after 1978, further-shrunk the plot-size to a mere six Perches that has perpetuated into the present-day (UDA regulations, 2008:17).

the PWD version, the vernacular elements had all but disappeared to accommodate the more fashionable Victorian elements.

Hence, the American style house marked a clear break from British domestic architecture – a European colonial style that had killed the local vernacular. Thus, the Ceylonese middleclass had realigned itself towards yet another foreign architectural style that was based on an alternative version of the European vernacular. The European vernacular in this case could again trace its roots to either Italy, Spain or England (Hine, 2007).

The generic house was single-storied, rectangular and had an open-plan. At times, U, L and other irregular shapes were also realized. It would normally have a covered entrance-porch via which, one enters the main living area; directly-linked to the adjacent open plan dining/pantry. The ‘free-plan’ as Pieris (2007) correctly points out, was normalized in this manner. The rooms placed in-line would usually open into the living and dining, where services were placed at the rear (Manawadu, 2011). Table 1 confirmed the above points pertaining to case studies.

### Daring Roofs

The American tract house was mostly conceived as a dominant volume capped with either a gable or hip roof, out of which, other smaller boxes jutted out with their own smaller versions of the aforesaid roofs. At times, dormers adorned them. The covering materials of such roofs were largely Asphalt shingles or natural/artificial types of slate (Hine, 2007).

In comparison, the local counterpart was a simple shed with multi-directional roofs ranging from the common ‘gable’, ‘hip’ to the ‘lean-to’. In certain occasions, a two-way flap commonly referred to as the ‘butterfly-roof’ was utilized, which became the style’s most striking feature. This in fact, was a copy of Marcel Breuer’s 1949’s ‘House in the Museum Garden’ exhibit for MOMA in New York. Sometimes a number of butterfly-roofs were accommodated in the same building with little concern for proportion. The reason behind such daring roof angles was the newly available corrugated asbestoses roofing sheets that were easy to install (Pieris, 2007).<sup>14</sup> According to some owners interviewed, tiled roofs were widely considered the domain of the rich at the time. Hence, for them economical asbestos was appealing (C. U. de Silva, 2022). Table 1 illustrate that such variations exist pertaining to roofs in the case studies.

### Materiality & Finishes

The American Style house was predominantly a product of masonry bricks as against the mostly timber American counterpart. However, the American house always had a poured concrete floor, and at times, fancy facades with stone facing, wood-siding or of brick (rainbow or red bricks) (Hine, 2007). Although it involved an array of industrially-aided material, unlike products of the modernist *avant-garde* (what Americans called ‘predominantly formal’ modern architecture or ‘radical modernist’) or the mid-century versions, the tract house did not use pre-fabrication technology *per se* (Hine, 2007).

In comparison, pre-fabrication found common use in Ceylon’s domestic architecture for the first time. Pre-fab concrete floor/wall tiles, grills, steps, lintels etc. for the first time, became prolific. Hence, this marked a clear break from the traditional materiality of houses from the period. After all, until 1984, more than 70% of the total housing stock in the island still came under rather primitive thatched wattle and daub or its variations (Robson et.al., 1984).

Sometimes, granolithic, brick, pebble and wood combinations were utilized as exposed finishes to make features such as wall-claddings. As Pieris (2007) further-elaborates, such finishes for feature-walls lent rusticity to the building surfaces. However, in comparison to the rich material pallet available to American builders to achieve their desired natural finishes, the Sri Lankan counterparts had very little choice. The materials and technics here used for such replications were rather primitive in comparison, marking poor industrial development of the country during the period.

<sup>14</sup> The new middleclass saw this new wonder material as an advancement against the roofing tile (half round or Calicut) or the thatch (cadjan or straw) that topped their rural ancestral homes.

It has been established that the non-architect designers of such products had not really conceived the modern architectural notion of ‘being true to materials’, and simply fulfilled emulation. Hence, in a state of unawareness, the experiments on the tectonic by American architects –who attempted to replicate patterns of the American landscape for natural contiguity–also became symptomatic in the works of local designers. This tectonic quality appealed to a group of people who grew up mostly in rural vernacular houses with similar materials (Wijetunge, 2012a). However, the interviews conducted proved that they never instructed the designers to incorporate such finishes (Wijesinghe; Wijenadan; Gunawardene; C. U. de Silva, 2022). Hence, this would have been purely accidental. Table 1 lists such feature finishes pertaining to case studies.

### Inside-outside Relationship

A notable feature of the American style house in Ceylon was its tendency to open the interior to outside environment through openings on the envelope, as against rather-enclosed British-period houses. The picture windows that appealed to the Americans also appealed to their Ceylonese middleclass counterparts, yet in less elaborate versions.<sup>15</sup> However, occasionally, even French windows opened up into outside gardens.

However, the emphasis given to the American backyard of functionality that Hine (2007) tells us, never became important to the local counterparts who gave more emphasis to the front garden. While the American front garden remained simple in terms of foliage and open (at times with white picket fences), the Ceylonese version mostly created luscious gardens adorned with an array of tropical trees and plants, to be enclosed by surrounding short masonry walls. The gates to these houses were mostly out of tubular steel and welded iron rods, depicting either simple modern or at times indigenous motifs. Most of these walls and gates were in fact, latter developments and were absent initially, according to most owners interviewed (C. U. de Silva; Wijesinghe; Wijenadan, Gunawardene, 2022).

On the other hand, breathing-walls made of pre-fabricated units of either concrete or clay that is common in the tropical modern works of Fry and Drew (1982) also became symptomatic to this style. Incorporation of environmental devices such as concrete-grills, louvers and awnings; quintessential to Tropical Modernism also became a seminal feature. The strip of wall between the two roof flaps was punctured at intervals to enable stack-effect as a passive means of cooling. These punctures were mostly above ceiling and at times, could be seen under. Owing to such innovations, these houses were cool and livable (Alahakoon, 2011). Their environmental comfort too is attested by most tenants (C. U. de Silva; Wijesinghe; Wijenadan; Gunawardene, 2022). Table 1 lists such features pertaining to case studies.

### Symbolic References

The American tract house by the 1950s started trapping the stylistic references to speed that by then appeared in the prolific American automobile of the time. The cars such as Cadillac *Coupe De Ville* (1959) were emulating the references of aerodynamics such as the ‘delta wing’ borrowed from the jet planes that appeared as its rear fins for examples (Boucher, 2013). Such features eventually manifested in the tract house in the form of its tilted external walls and fins etc. (Hine: 2007).

The local version too eventually displayed the same features by the 1960s. These features were mostly placed on either side of doors and windows externally. Although the American cars were not so prolific in Ceylon in the 1960s, the European brands that were largely imported by the well-to-do had by the time been inspired by American versions. The British-made *Austin Cambridges* and *Morris Oxfords* from this era for instance, manifested the more subdued tail fins of their American cousins. Hence, such automobiles too kept the Ceylonese middleclass imagination flowing, although they were not car owners (C. U. de Silva; Wijesinghe; Wijenadan, Gunawardene; Siriwardene-Kurupparachchi; Kasthuriratne, 2022). Hence, it could be argued that

<sup>15</sup> The large glass sizes found in the American examples were not yet available here. To establish this point, more research is needed.



incorporation of such features was up to home designers embarking on blind emulation, but their clientele who were largely indifferent to such symbolism. Table 1 lists such features pertaining to case studies, and also confirms the fact that their clients never insisted on having such features in the designs.

### **Innovations**

In the age of promised industrialization by subsequent Ceylonese governments as Pieris(2007) points out, R.C.C. concrete was frequently utilized for front porches made to cantilever significant spans, as well as for awnings. The newly available steel types, sizes and engineering know-how—however limited that they were—made such fetes possible. Although certain such innovations could be seen in the PWD houses too as Wijetunge (2012a) points out, it could be argued that the intensity of use in the American style house was much pronounced.

There were special features quintessential to the local version too that was not seen in the American counterpart. Pre-fabrication was used to make repetitive features such as concrete louvers, steps and breathing-wall blocks etc. The R.C.C technology pioneered in structural elements where cantilevering slabs and awnings became characteristic. Pieris (2007) in fact, attributes the popularity of pre-cast technology to the 1965 international industrial exhibition held in Ceylon that inspired technological versatility through numerous innovative international projects that exploited pre-fabrication and new construction processes.<sup>16</sup> Table 1 lists such features pertaining to case studies.

### **Modern Conveniences**

In terms of modern conveniences, in comparison to its American counterpart, the version here lagged far behind. The conveniences such as under-floor heating were irrelevant in hot-humid weather in Ceylon, and ceiling fans were employed for added comfort. Further, the fancy lighting designs (*i.e.* George Nelson's Bubble Lamp, Pole Lamp varieties, UFO lamps etc.) and designer furniture versions (Herman Miller knockouts to Eames' designs) that were popularized in the US as Hine (2007) tells us, did not happen here to that extent. Instead, certain imported pieces of non-designer light fittings and appliances were utilized where appropriate. However, it is noteworthy that most of these houses initially lacked such conveniences when their tenants moved into them (C. U. de Silva; Wijesinghe; Gunawardene, 2022)

In terms of furniture however, as in the American version, a tilt towards Scandinavian designs were preferred locally. These sleek pieces worked physically and aesthetically with the rather short and compact interiors of these houses, and were largely manufactured locally in centers such as *Moratuwa*. Timber was used for their structural components where sponge and Rexin/fabric were the preferred choice for upholstery. In contrast, the more sophisticated American versions used a far rich industrial material palette ranging from tubular steel to fiber varieties and mock leather. Furniture too was a luxury to most home owners of the time who mainly had to settle for inherited mix and matches for economy. Some even did not have new pieces when they moved in, and hence used their old pieces (C. U. de Silva; Wijesinghe, 2022).

The pantry that existed in the PWD house was outdated and pre World-War.<sup>17</sup> Having emulated the American versions, the local versions were realized with either timber or newly available plywood. The more innovative materials such as Plastic-laminated table tops and Vinyl covers that made up the American panty was not available here. In the American kitchen, to maximize space, all major appliances—including automatic washer and dryers etc.—were built into the pantry area.<sup>18</sup> The local middleclass had no use of the above appliances. It was the same story when it came to other modern appliances of convenience such as fancy ovens, powerful

<sup>16</sup> The lone attempts by young architects practicing at the time such as Valentine Gunasekara, who strived to champion such technologies for mass-production of houses, had gone largely unnoticed (Pieris, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Although modern by the standards of the day, the typical 1930s kitchen in the Western world was still antiseptic white, relied on stand-alone cabinets, and featured few if any electrical appliances were used (statemuseumpa.org, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Homeowners could also choose options such as the built-in food processor with interchangeable attachments.

blenders etc. that were overlooked for economy; not being available under the austere economic conditions in the 1960s (Perera, 1994). The refrigerator however was available from the 1960s as it was assembled locally.<sup>19</sup> It was more of a status symbol than a necessity for most, and was mostly acquired much later (C. U. de Silva, Wijesinghe, 2022).

The Sri Lanka middleclass was in no economic position to even acquire furniture and appliances, let alone throw them away before they exceeded their full life span. The Americans on the other hand would discard the old version just because a more alluring (colourful/powerful) version was available in the marketplace (Hine, 2007). Although the pantry was placed adjoining the dining space in both American and local cases, the local counterpart used it largely as a showpiece and built a permanent or makeshift kitchen at the back of the house. The families that kept domestic maids were reluctant to let them use their show pantries (Wijesinghe, 2022). Table 1 lists such features pertaining to case studies.

Apart from these general attributes with an intrinsic economic aspect that also became logical points of consideration for the style's success, there were other reasons too that were mostly socio-cultural.

### **Socio-cultural Reasons of Success**

In its heyday, American style had numerous socio-cultural reasons too underlying its success. Table 2 helps to establish such, and reifies them using literature.

### **Middleclass Empowerment**

Ceylon gained its political independence in 1948. By this point, the peripheral position of the newly-independent nations had been concretized through neo-colonial practices of the Western-core, and ensuing ideological impartations did not spare the profession of architecture.<sup>20</sup> However, a breakthrough came in 1956 when a local-elite faction under the banner of *Sri Lanka Freedom Party (S.L.F.P)* came into power, having been equipped with a nationalist agenda. As a reactionary force against bitter memories of colonialism, they adopted left-wing socialist slogans (Perera 1994). Nationalism triggered measures from making Sinhala the national language, enforcing a ceiling on private property, non-alignment, nationalization of vital economic resources to culminate with re-naming of the country 'Sri Lanka' in 1972. The ceiling on private property in particular, notably undermined the power of traditional elite; the feudalists and bourgeoisie. The property acquisitions complimented with nationalization of vital economic resources, opened up numerous blue-collar employment opportunities to the immediate lower strata to elites. .

Despite the elite protests, Kannangara's free education bill had been passed in 1943, and by 1945 primary and secondary education became free for all (Jayetilleke, 2004). Tertiary education conversely, was available from 1921 via University of Ceylon.<sup>21</sup> This non-elite educational franchise brought about a newly-educated faction within the middleclass. Consequently, the 1960s saw a large body of *swabhasha* trained youth, although their intellectual horizons were extremely limited. All such changes led to a hitherto-unforeseen upward social mobility that strengthened the middleclass, altering the composition of the country's existing class structure. The post-1956 middleclass mobility from rural-oblivion to urban-modernity could thus be stated as the foundation that led to the proliferation of American style house.

As the nascent Ceylonese middleclass had the opportunity to engage in government and private-sector employment since the 1950s, they had managed to accumulate nominal wealth by the 1960s. Some had sold their village properties to pay for their suburban houses (Alahakoon, 2011). Certain others had inherited some wealth through means such as dowries (Wijesinghe, 2022). Due to their permanent employment, analogous to GI loans in the States, the middleclass here was also given a chance for the first time to acquire long-term bank loans, mainly from state-run commercial banks. Loans could be used either to purchase land or to fund houses. This fact was attested to by most of the homeowners interviewed (C. U. de Silva; Wijesinghe, Wijenadan,

<sup>19</sup>Companies such as SISIL became well-known (Wijesinghe, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> These tendencies prevailed for nearly a decade under the so-called 'post-colonial third culture'.

<sup>21</sup>although considered as a "halfway-house to a national university" (K. M. de Silva, 1981:416).

2022). They had borrowed either to build, to buy land or for both. Such nominal financial-backing was sufficient to buy cheap suburban lots and realize the economical American-style houses.<sup>22</sup> If the clients thought the suburban lands and American style houses were cheap to realize is tackled in Table 1.

### **Middleclass Patronage**

The wide speculation that the American Style house was a middleclass phenomenon is assessed by Table 2. This is enabled through the established theories on elitism that demand scrutiny of origins, ethnicities, faiths, casts as well as backgrounds of education and occupation pertaining to patrons of considered case studies.

Ceylon in the 1950s was a semi-feudal and agricultural country (Jayawardene, 1984). To the postcolonial elites, Great Britain was still the cultural and ideological hub as against the US; merely considered a nascent economic powerhouse (Perera: 1994). When the elite allegiance was directed towards their ex-colonist, the newly-educated middleclass was drawn towards the fresh modernity of the US. In this light, Pieris (2007) and many others believe that the American style was a middleclass phenomenon. By carefully analyzing the backgrounds of this group of people as against the ones catered to by the architects of the period, a social distinction does becomes explicit. The middleclass patrons of the non-architects were less-affluent and socio-politically feeble than the elite and political-class patrons of architects. This point was established by Wijetunge (2012b) who analyzed the clients of Bawa and Gunasekara respectively, with a criteria developed via a narration of pre-modern and modern elitism in the island, combining it with extant theories on elitism.<sup>23</sup> In this light, in the presence of only 20 odd architects in the entire country by the 1960s as illustrated by Jayewardene (1984), it is safe to say that none of this middleclass hired architects. Instead they opted for non-architects; mostly architectural draughtsman who practiced/worked previously under architects. Table 1 substantiates this point with relation to all considered case studies. When the middleclass settled in provincial towns and their rural hometowns, they brought the style to such destinations to widen its appeal. The same table also reveals this point by considering the outstation case studies.

### **Cosmopolitanism**

Table 2 analyses they ethnic, religious and cast origins to determine if some sort of a cosmopolitanism was realized in these communities, and confirms the fact that out of the considered case studies, the original clientele belonged to diverse ethnicities, religions and castes.

Ethnicity and religion as well as caste have over the periods been factors that determined the superiority of certain factions of the island's population over others (Obeysekere, 2007). Ceylon from time immemorial has been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The factor of caste complicates furthermore these cultural differentiations. In a socialist tendency where cultural differences were discouraged, the state-enabled upward social mobility resulted in a newly out-looked middleclass. They were so radical, marrying outside of religion, cast or even ethnicity became commonplace. This was a class that shared a sense of solidarity not owing to ethnicity religion or caste, but on the grounds of similar intellectual and economic backgrounds, not to mention political ideology (Silva, 2005). Thus, they collectively had to relegate their varied cultural upbringings in favor of a modern Western lifestyle that their occupations and city-lives demanded. Consequently, their choice of architecture in the form of the American style facilitated their cosmopolitan desire. This was analogous also for the melting pot of cultures that was the 1950s America.

<sup>22</sup> This was a far cry from the more attractive long-term financial assistance provided to the American middleclass via ventures such as the GI Bill that essentially covered both land and the house at the same time (Boucher, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> The findings revealed the fact that in Bawa's case, a majority of his domestic clients were drawn from the political class, whereas in the case of Gunasekara, it was only a small faction. Most of his clients came from the middleclass or middleclass-political class fringe.

The interviews also revealed that many Tamils (originally from outstations) for instance, lived in such communities and were forced out after the communal tensions of 1983 (Abeysinghe, 2022).<sup>24</sup> Hence, it appears that the community has by now become largely homogeneous and Sinhalese. However, according to case studies, as Table 2 illustrates, the diversity still prevails in terms of religion and caste.

### Social Cohesion

Another possible reason for the style's middleclass allure would have been the informal sector that was gradually assembled around the American style neighborhoods. As Peiris (2011) elaborates, the fish vendor, milkman, snack vendor, paper boy, garbage collector etc. who started servicing such neighborhoods made the life convenient, especially for their resident housewives. For the convenience of house builders, even brick and cement carts came that way (Wijesinghe, 2022). Because of the fact that such servicemen/women went from home to home, neighborhood residents who did not have automobiles could purchase most things they needed without leaving home. For most of their food shopping and other needs, the householders had to walk considerable distances to nearby towns. Ceylon Transportation Board (CTB) buses was the most common mode of transportation for all, not to mention the trains of the Ceylon Railways (Wijesinghe; Gunawardene, 2022). Some working in close proximities to home even opted for cycling (C. U. de Silva, 2022).

Domestic maids too became a common informal sector occupation; as the ladies could not receive help from their parents who lived in rural towns to raise their kids and maintain their households. The maids were mostly impoverished women from around these communities and visited daily. At times, they—both men and women helpers—were drawn from outstations and lived with families (Wijesinghe, 2022).

The social activities such as Sinhala new year festivals and Christmas parties organized by certain societies and clubs the neighbors formed (*i.e.* Rathmalana Airport Building Society, Model Town Welfare Society etc.) also helped their cause. For them, their neighborhood was physiologically pleasant to live in. The relationships with the neighbors were cordial and rarely there were conflicts. These facts are attested to by some residents (C. U. de Silva, 2022; Wijesinghe, 2022; Gunawardene; Dias, 2022). In fact, when there were working mothers, the stay-at-home mothers always assisted by keeping an eye on the neighbors' kids (Gunawardene, 2022). The case studies also revealed that the extended family was not a common occurrence in such neighborhoods. Hence, even such small comforts would have diminished elements of loneliness and anxiety from their residences who were far away from home. Table 1 helps to establish these points.

The informal sector servicing and social clubs could possibly have been yet another adaptation from the American tract house neighborhood, yet with a local twist. The American version also provided such informal services, although such neighborhoods were conceived with accompanying services such as mega supermarkets, shopping malls and leisure centers etc. Their social clubs too were far more extensive (Statemuseum.com, 2022).

### Sense of Modernity

When Ceylonese elite were harking back to a romantic colonial past, domestic styles coming from America, the emerging global culture, appealed to the Ceylonese middleclass as forward-looking. As Pieris discerns, “

*[...] this style was used to negotiate an ideal social space for middleclass Ceylonese families in Colombo's new metropolitan suburbs. [It] articulated a new sensibility that was free from the colonial rhetoric of politics, privilege and anglophile values that had inhibited experimentation by middle class home owners of a previous generation”.*

(Pieris, 2007: 47)

<sup>24</sup> As of now, most of their properties have either been sold or rented.

As the American house model inspirations were based on timber-based vernaculars, they possessed a unique petite quality. This was particularly alluring to the less-affluent middleclass in Ceylon as they looked and felt affordable. Table 1 establishes this point. This was a similar scenario of appeal to the case of the 1950s US.

During this period, Tropical Modernism was being popularized by a handful of architects such as Andrew Boyd, Visva Selvarathnam and Leon Monk etc. (Gunasekara 2011). As Selvarathnam (in Jayawardene, 1984) once explained in relation to his clients, the clients drawn from the elite class who were in a position to hire architects “*could afford to be modern*”. The middleclass on the other hand, simply could not. Even more renowned figures such as Minnete de Silva, Geoffrey Bawa and Valentine Gunasekera started off with this style, to later deviate to their own respective styles of *Neo Regionalism* by the former two, and *Expressionist-modernism* by the latter respectively (Robson, 2010). Neo-regionalism was a style that was firmly retained within the elite grasp. The aforementioned clients of most architects of the period were always drawn from the ‘political class’, or the political class-middleclass fringe in the case of Gunasekera (Wijetunge, 2012b). In this backdrop, the designers of the American style house were predominantly non-architects (mostly architectural draughtsman) of anonymity, just as in its American counterpart (Hine, 2007). Table 1 also establishes this point.

The sculptural quality and modern aesthetic apparent in the ‘out-of-reach’ Tropical Modernism was also symptomatic to the American style in a more psychologically comfortable less pronounced manner. Consequently, this factor made it further-palatable to the middleclass. Owing to their Western education, rationality had suddenly become vital in all life aspects. Hence, some of the traditional regional beliefs such as *Vastu*, architectural elements and detailing found in their village houses had suddenly become irrational and outdated when it came to Western-oriented city life that demanded efficacy; thus excluded. None of the patrons of the case studies had dwelt on *Vastu* when designing their houses.

On the other hand, the Ceylonese elite having closely-emulated British masters’ culture of Western capitalist-modernity, also attained his notion of ‘humanism’ that Gandhi (1998:23-41) elaborates on. Although 1956 political change facilitated upward social mobility via educating the middleclass, the Western-educated elites considered themselves to be beneficiaries of first-hand epistemology from the core. Their locally-educated counterparts were considered to have received a trickled-down secondary form of Western knowledge. This notion justified, amongst many other things, their stance on the American-style domestic building in Ceylon, which was considered to be an “*eyesore*” (Pieris, 2007). As Bewis Bawa, the elder brother of Geoffrey Bawa, wrote derogatively of the period’s architecture in Colombo,

*“The houses of today springing up faster than mushrooms in one’s back yard (which is all one has for anything to spring up in) it makes one wonder whether architecture is overtaking modern art [...] but our people after independence want to be independent; so prefer to buy dozens of magazines, cut out dozens of pictures of buildings that take their fancy take bits and pieces out of each, stick them together – and there’s a house. Then a friend comes along when it is half built and says: ‘but why not have the roof like this, so a hurried alteration is made [...]’”*

(Bawa,1985:42-43)

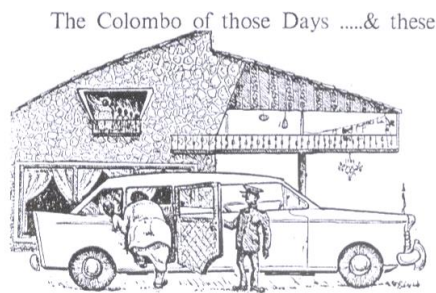
Hence, the sculptural forms of the American-style that threatened the established traditions that defined elite domestic architectural splendor, was simply “*bad taste*” for them. Postcolonial architects of the country, as intellectual elite themselves, also shared the humanist approach of their allied elites. To them, architecture learned from the core was the ‘best possible solution’ and anything else that was disassociated with it, was ‘inappropriate’ and ‘bad taste’. This well explains why none of the few architects practicing in the country at the time opted to utilize the American Style vocabulary.

As Bewis further elaborated sarcastically, “[...] a vast section of the common heard have fallen for their [American] roofs. The infection is rapidly spreading to the remotest corner of our

*pearl of the East. I have seen village houses, wayside garages and even a cattle shed and poultry houses with the two-way flap” (Bawa, 1985:62-63).*

After all, even the American tract house too could not be spared from such comments. For instance, for American intellectuals, the tract house represented not a triumph of democracy, but a proof of Robert Maynard Hutchins’ formulation that the industrial revolution made it possible for even a “*moron to be successful*” (Hine, 2007).

Thus, to the Anglicized and western-educated elite, American style became the perfect tool to fabricate a new form of social distance between them and the middleclass. By jumping at the American style and not opting for architect-championed styles, the middleclass too voluntarily fell into this elite trap. Alternatively, it could also be argued that the nascent middleclass’ choice was intentional as a reaction against elite snobbery. However, all the interviews conducted affirmed that the style was largely a decision of the draughtsmen/architectural technicians who designed them but the choice of clients. The clients mostly were not aware of such thing as the American style, let alone knowing about architect-championed stylistic counterparts. Some in fact, were not even aware about a professional called ‘the architect’ (Wijesinghe, C. U. de Silva, Wijenadan, Gunawardene, Kasturiratne, Siriwardene-Kurupparachchi, 2022). Hence, it appears that the clients were content as long as the designs were modern, economical and comfortable to live in. This ‘modern’ was arguably ‘American’ modern, but ‘European’ modern. Further, this confirms Pieris’s aforementioned notion that the style was embraced for its sense of modernity than for the modern aesthetics.



**Fig.6:**Cartoon by Bewis Bawa  
 (“*The Colombo of those days & these*”, Briefly by Bewis,  
 Sri Lanka: The Sapumal Foundation, 1985).  
 Source:  
 Bewis Bawa (1985)

## End of American Style




It has been observed that the American style phenomenon that started in the 1960s became big in the island, and also went out-of-style by the late 1970s-early 1980s. Table 1 containing the completed years of the case studies substantiate this point. Widyalkara (in *Architectural History*, 2009, 45:22) attributes the style’s fading to the neo-liberal economic reforms of 1977. When more new goods/materials were being imported, when more Sri Lankans were getting international exposure in terms of travel and vocation, when mass media and telecommunication were experiencing exponential growth, the taste of the people too changed as attested by Widyalkara.



After the Neo-liberal economic reforms, when the middleclass was fragmented into ‘lower’ and ‘upper’ strata (Wijetunge, 2012b). The latter that had more international exposure started favoring domestic styles with more ‘international style’ temperament. According to her, by the 1980s, ‘a pluralism in design’ was experienced. The others who had reached elite fringes started hiring architects with their preferred core-oriented styles (Wijetunge, 2012a). Such movements marked the demise of the American Style. However, a small faction of such upper middleclass home builders started building grander multi-story versions of the American style, marking the end of its legacy. It appears that such examples are largely limited to Colombo metropolitan areas, but suburbs such as Ratmalana. This particular point requires more extensive research.

**Table 1 – Analysis of Physical Attributes**




Source: Author

G=Garage P=Pantry OK=outside kitchen AS=American Style

	Plan		Roof		Ventilation holes on walls		Feature wall finishes		Window		r.c.c features		G	P	OK
 <p><b>No. 1</b> Ratmalana 3 Bedrooms   28P   2000 sq.</p>	rectangular	-	butterfly	√	above ceiling	√	Granolythic	√	French windows	-	. sunshade	√	√	√	√
	L shapes	-	gable	-	-below ceiling	-	brick	-	picture windows	√	overhanging porch	√			
	U shaped	√	hip	-	<b>Source of Funding for land and house:</b> Long term Loan National Housing Development Authority		Masonry pattern	√	Glass Louvers	√	vertical fins	√			
	irregular	-	Lean-to	-			other	-	simply glazed	√	Breathing Walls	-			
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for outside ceiling sheets, GI Pipes for slab support, chip board internal ceiling, r.c.c. cantilevering porch, black polished cement floors, , r.c.c. sun shades							<b>Furniture   Accessories   Mod-cons</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces. Light fittings from a latter period No mod cons initially (i.e. ceiling fans, fridges, electrical appliances etc.)								
<b>Designer;</b> A small-time Developer (N. U. Gunasekara)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil <b>Client knew of AS:</b> x   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> √ <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> √ <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> √							<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, drive way is connected with entrance porch, big trees such as mango and flowing plants/ shrubs, lawn and pebbled area Boundary wall and gate added later								
 <p><b>No. 2</b> Ratmalana 3 Bedrooms   20P   1500 sq.</p>	rectangular	√	butterfly	-	above ceiling	-	Rubble (granolythic)	-	French windows	√	. sunshade	√	x	√	√
	L shapes	-	gable	√	-below ceiling	-	brick	√	picture windows	√	overhanging porch	-			
	U shaped	-	hip	-	<b>Source of Funding for land and house:</b> Land-inherited by wife (dowry). House-Bank loan from Industrial Development Board and a state Bank (unknown)		Masonry pattern	-	Glass Louvers	-	vertical fins	-			
	irregular	-	Lean-to	-			other	-	simply glazed	√	Breathing Walls	-			
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for external ceiling sheets, GI Pipes for slab support, internal timber wall paneling and ceilings, red polished cement floors, , r.c.c. sun shades							<b>Furniture   Accessories   Mod-cons</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces. Light fittings from a latter period No mod cons initially (i.e. ceiling fans, fridges, electrical appliances etc.)								
<b>Designer;</b> A draughtsman (Mr. Fernando)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> x   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> √ <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> √ <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> √							<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, drive way is connected with entrance porch, big trees such as mango/ jak and flowing plants/shrubs, lawn and paved area boundary wall and gate added later								
 <p><b>No. 3</b> Ratmalana 2 Bedrooms   20P   1500 sq.</p>	rectangular	√	butterfly	√	above ceiling		Rubble (granolythic)		French windows	-	. sunshade	√	x	x	√
	L shapes		gable	-	-below ceiling		brick		picture windows	√	overhanging porch				
	U shaped		hip	-	<b>Source of Funding for land and house:</b> Bank loan from a state Bank (unknown)		Masonry pattern		Glass Louvers	√	vertical fins				
	irregular		Lean-to	-			other		simply glazed	√	Breathing Walls				

	Plan	Roof	Ventilation holes on walls	Feature wall finishes	Window	r.c.c features	G	P	O	K										
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for external and internal ceiling sheets, red polished cement floors, , R.C.C. sun shades			<b>Furniture &amp; Accessories:</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces, Light fittings from a latter period																	
<b>Designer;</b> A draughtsman (unknown)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> x   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> ✓			<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, flowing plants/shrubs, lawn and paved area boundary wall and gate added later																	
 No. 4 Ratmalana 3 Bedrooms   20P   1900 sq.	rectangular	✓	butterfly		above ceiling		Granolythic		French windows		. sunshade									
	L shapes		gable	✓	-below ceiling		brick	✓	picture windows		overhanging porch	✓								
	U shaped		hip		<b>Source of Funding for land and house:</b> Bank loan from a state Bank (unknown)		Masonry pattern		Glass Louvers		vertical fins									
	irregular		Lean-to				other		simply glazed	✓	Breathing Walls									
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, External and internal timber ceilings, initially polished cement floors (later changed to black terrazzo), , R.C.C. sun shades			<b>Furniture &amp; Accessories:</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces, Light fittings from a latter period																	
<b>Designer;</b> A draughtsman (unknown)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> x   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> ✓			<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, drive way is connected with entrance porch, big trees such as mango/ jak and flowing plants/shrubs, lawn and paved area boundary wall and gate added later																	
 No. 5 Ratmalana 3 Bedrooms   20P   2000 sq.	rectangular		butterfly		above ceiling		Rubble (granolythic)	✓	French windows		. sunshade									
	L shapes		gable	✓	-below ceiling		brick	✓	picture windows	✓	overhanging porch									
	U shaped	✓	hip		<b>Source of Funding for land and house:</b> Bank loan from a state Bank (unknown)		Masonry pattern		Glass Louvers	✓	vertical fins									
	irregular		Lean-to				other		simply glazed	✓	Breathing Walls	✓								
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for external and internal ceiling sheets, black polished cement floors (later changed to black terrazzo), , r.c.c. sun shades			<b>Furniture &amp; Accessories:</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces, Light fittings from a latter period																	
<b>Designer;</b> self-designed by husband)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> ✓			<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, drive way is connected with entrance porch, big trees such as Kaju/mango/jak and flowing plants/shrubs, lawn and paved area boundary wall and gate added later																	
	rectangular	✓	butterfly	✓	above ceiling		Rubble (granolythic)		French windows		. sunshade	✓								
	L shapes		gable		-below ceiling	✓	brick		picture windows	✓	overhanging porch	✓								



	Plan		Roof		Ventilation holes on walls		Feature wall finishes		Window		r.c.c features		G	P	O	K
 No. 6 Katubedda 3 Bedrooms   30P   1500 sq.	U shaped		hip		Source of Funding for land and house: self-funded	Masonry pattern		Glass Louvers		vertical fins						
	irregular		Lean-to			other		simply glazed	✓	Breathing Walls	✓					
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for external and internal ceiling sheets, red polished cement floors (now tiled), GI pipe supports for r.c.c. cantilevering porch roof, R.C.C sun shades					<b>Furniture &amp; Accessories:</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces, Light fittings from a latter period											
<b>Designer;</b> A draughtsman (unknown)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> ✓					<b>Garden</b> Small front and rear gardens, Boundary wall and gate added later Big trees such as Jak/mango and flowing plants/shrubs (Orchid/Anthurium),											
 No. 7 Veyangoda 3 Bedrooms   240P   1500-2000 sq. FT	rectangular	✓	butterfly		above ceiling		Rubble (granolythic)		French windows		sunshade					
	L shapes		gable		-below ceiling	✓	brick		picture windows	✓	overhang porch					
	U shaped		hip		Source of Funding for land and house: self-funded	Masonry pattern	✓	Glass Louvers		vertical fins			x	x		✓
	irregular		Lean-to			other		simply glazed		Breathing Walls						
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for external and internal ceiling sheets, red polished cement floors (now tiled), r.c.c. sun shades					<b>Furniture &amp; Accessories:</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces, Light fittings from a latter period											
<b>Designer;</b> A draughtsman (Mr. Gunasinghe of State Engineering Corporation)   <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> x   <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> ✓   <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> ✓					<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, big trees such as Kaju/mango/jak and flowing plants/shrubs with banana trees, gravel No boundary wall and gate to date (only live fence)											
 No. 8 Emilipitiya 3 Bedrooms   85P   1500-2000	rectangular	✓	butterfly		above ceiling		Rubble (granolythic)		French windows		sunshade					
	L shapes		gable		-below ceiling		brick		picture windows		overhang porch					
	U shaped		hip		Vehicle Ownership: x	Masonry pattern		Glass Louvers		vertical fins			x	x		✓
	irregular		Lean-to			other		simply glazed		Breathing Walls						
<b>New Materials:</b> Corrugated Asbestos roof, Flat Asbestos for external and internal ceiling sheets, red polished cement floors, r.c.c. sun shades					<b>Furniture &amp; Accessories:</b> Mix and match from different eras. Some Scandinavian-looking/designer pieces, Light fittings from a latter period											

Plan	Roof	Ventilation holes on walls	Feature wall finishes	Window	r.c.c features	G	P	O	K
<b>Designer;</b> A draughtsman from the Municipal Council (unknown) <b>Client Brief:</b> Nil   <b>Client knew of AS:</b> x  <b>Client thought if design was novel:</b> ✓ <b>Client thought house was cheap to build &amp; maintain:</b> ✓ <b>Client thought house was environmentally comfortable:</b> ✓ <b>Source of Funding for land and house:</b> self-funded		<b>Garden</b> Spacious front and rear gardens, big trees such as Wood apple/jak and flowing plants/shrubs with Casava trees, gravel No boundary wall and gate to date (only live fence)							

**Table 2: Analysis of Socio-cultural Attributes**  
 Source: Author

H=Husband W=Wife MC=Middleclass PC=Political Class GE=Governing Elite S=Sinhala  
 T=Tamil O=Other BA=Bachelor of Arts  
 B=Buddhist C=Christian H=Hindu NR=Not Revealed G=Govigama K=Karava D=Durava  
 HSC=Higher Secondary School Certificate SSE=Secondary School Certificate

House No.	Clients' Names H W		Clients' Social Background										No of kids/ Extended Family	Social Class MC/P C/GE
			Ethnicity		Faith		Cast		Origin		H	W		
			H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W				
1	Chulananda Upali de Silva	Gladis Matilda de Silva/ de Abrew	S	O	B	C	K	N	R	Negombo	Bombay (India)	2 0	MC	
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work		H		W								
Education Dept. Certificate (school NR)		Secondary School, (school NR)		Aircraft Engineer, Ratmalana airport		Housewife (Home)								
2	Thalpe Liyanage Hemasiri Wijesinghe	Thalagala Arachchige Dona Chandrawathi Wijesinghe/ Thallagala	S	S	B	B	G	G		Hiribora, Galle	Kurunegala	3 0	MC	
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work		H		W								
B.A., University of Peradeniya		HSC, (school NR)		Industrial Development Board, Katubedda		NIBM, Colombo								
3	Wlihinda Badalge Gunawardene	Lalitha Swarnapali Gunawardene/ Batuwangala	S	S	B	B	G	G		Belideniya, Matara.	Galle (Town)	2 0	MC	
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work		H		W								
Senior Certificate (school NR)		Senior Certificate (school NR)		Clerk, Lands And Land Development Ministry.		Trained Teacher (Mt. Lavinia Girls High School)								
4	Vythilingam Wijenadan	Somolatha Ruwanpathirana	T	S	H	B	N	R	K	Modara	NR	3 0	MC	
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work		H		W								
FCIB, London (place NR)		SSC, (school NR)		Deputy General Manager- BOC		Clerical Staff- Boc								
5	Nagesh Kamal Dias	NR	S	S	B	B	G	N	R	Panadura	NR	3 0	MC	
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work		H		W								
				H		W								

House No.	Clients' Names		Clients' Social Background										No of kids/ Extended Family	Social Class MC/P C/GE
			Ethnicity		Faith		Cast		Origin					
	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W				
			Civil Engineering, University of Ceylon		Secondary School, (school NR)		Civil Engineer @ NR		Housewife (Home)					
6	Meregngnage Milson Antony Krishantas Fernando	Muthuthanthrige Polyn Asilda Fernando	S	S	B	C	K	K	Uyana , Moratuwa	Katukurunda , Moratuwa	2/0	MC		
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work												
H		W		H		W								
NR		SSC, (School NR)		Accountant of Ratmalana Bata Company		Home								
7	Lakshmandas Kasthuriratne	Daya Samaraweera	S	S	B	B	G	D	Veyangoda	Veyangoda	2/0	MC		
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work												
H		W		H		W								
Chartered Accountant, University of Sri Jayawardanepura		B.A., University of Colombo		Deputy Finance Manager, Ceylon Steel Cooperation-Oruwala		Administrative Assistant, Ceylon Fertilizers Company Ltd.								
8	Gunasena Kuruppu Arachchi	Ranjanee Siriwardene-Kuruppuarachchi	S	S	B	B	G	K	Walasmulla	Tangalle	2/0	MC		
Educational Background		Occupation & Place of work												
H		W		H		W								
HSC, (school NR)		HSC, School NR)		Clerk, Paper Cooperation - Embilipitiya		Housewife								

## Conclusions

Ceylon's Nationalist and socialist-oriented political change of 1956 ensued a hitherto-unforeseen upward social mobility, where a nascent 'middleclass' with rural origins was formed, educated, employed and thus, empowered. Prior, during the British colonial era, the equivalent of this was the 'petty bourgeoisie' class that largely lacked such education and exposure. This fleeting social mobility inflated numbers of this class. They in turn, chose to emulate American lifestyle choices as well as their domestic model as against the most fashionable status quo of the time; the British Bungalow. As well as the bungalow, architectural styles from the European 'core' introduced by elitist architects too were overlooked by this middleclass.

The American style architecture had notable physical attributes that were derived using case studies reflected in Table 1. They were their suburban location, site placement, unique design and layout, daring roofs, innovative materiality/finishes, inside-outside relationship, symbolic references, technological innovations and modern conveniences. Such attributes all had underlying factors behind their formation which in fact stemmed from both local and international level circumstances (periodic changes). The same attributes also accentuated the style's appeal among the middleclass in Ceylon.

The socio-cultural attributes of case studies in question were also established using Table 1. They were middleclass's empowerment, patronage, cosmopolitanism, social cohesion and sense of modernity; all aiding the style's propagation. They too had both local and international level underlying circumstances (periodic changes) behind them. The same table also confirmed that the American style clients all thought that their modern houses were cheaper to construct and maintain in their economical suburban plots (as against the palatial sites of richer bungalows). Further, the fact that they all thought such houses were environmentally comfortable was established.

Table 2 having scrutinized their backgrounds, with the aid of theories of elitism established the fact that all clients pertaining to the case studies were drawn from the country's nascent middleclass. On the other hand, Table 1 further asserted some valid points. On one hand, the fact that the American style houses were designed by non-architects (draughtsmen /technicians/builders/engineers pertaining to the case studies) was confirmed. On the other, the facts that the clients neither knew of American style as a domestic style (or any other style for that matter), nor did they convey their aesthetic or stylistic preferences to their house designers were substantiated. The designers who had a freehand took it upon themselves to churn out houses as they saw fit. Having been inspired by the American hype at a time of fleeting media and telecommunication, they would have appropriated American house styles out of various sources. Such sources would have been largely U.S magazines and Hollywood films. Their ignorant clients who were not in a social position to reach out to elitist architects were content, as long as the houses felt modern. Hence, sense of modernity presided over the modernist aesthetic of architect-championed core-oriented styles.

Moreover, an overall observation could be made about the vernacular tendencies of the American style. In terms of the vernacular, the American tract house that had a European vernacular base, in Ceylon, replaced in the name of American style a hybrid colonial bungalow version (i.e. PWD style) that encapsulated both European Victorian traits (largely) as well as the Lankan vernacular (to a certain extent).

Ultimately, as the architectural style in question inhibited British colonial lifestyle and aesthetic choices for one more fresh and American, it articulated a strong degree of decolonization on part of its forward-looking and cosmopolitan patrons. The gesture on their part was not deliberate but accidental; as this contingent did not intend to defy any elite-dominated spheres let alone architecture. They simply overlooked the elite snobbery directed at their houses. When new stylistic influences and materials came from outside after open economy, the American style faded away, at the onslaught of international style-fed 'pluralism in design'.

This Ratmalana case study that assessed, mapped (hybridities) and articulated the American style phenomenon paves way to further extend the study into other satellite towns and popular destinations of it, not to mention its application in the rural areas too. The study further throws light into future architectural movements of similar nature to come.

## References

- Abeyasinghe, A. (2022) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 1 October, Colombo.
- Alahakoon, R. (2011) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 12 January, Colombo.
- All Things British (2022) *Andrew Marr's The Making of Modern Britain*. 9 September. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJVEEuzQ-cM&t=16s> (Accessed 06 October 2022).
- Architectural History (2009). *American Style House*. 2 February. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9blinLZgoI> (Accessed 25 November 2011).
- Bawa, B. (1985), *Briefly by Bewis*, Colombo: The Sapumal Foundation.
- Bottomore, T. (1993) *Elite and Society*, London: Rutledge.
- Boucher, D. (2013) *The 1950s American Home, USA*: Blumesbury.
- Budds, D. (2011) February 20, *Restoring Breuer's House in Garden*, dwell: At Home in the Modern world, viewed 20 March, 2011, [http://www.dwell.com/articles/Restoring Breuer's House in Garden - Ideas - Dwell.mht](http://www.dwell.com/articles/Restoring_Breuer's_House_in_Garden_-_Ideas_-_Dwell.mht)
- Cohen, L. (2003) *A Consumer's Republic; The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Conrad, P. (1995) *Our House: The Stories of Levittown*, Pennsylvania: Scholastic.
- Dayaratne, R. (2016) Re-dignifying Vernacular for Constructing National Identity; Elitism, Grand Traditions and Cultural Revival in Bahrain. *ITU AIZ*, 13(1), pp. 127-138.
- de Saram, C. (2011) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 10 January, Colombo.
- de Silva, C. U. (2022) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 1 October, Colombo.
- de Silva, K. M. (1981) *A History of Sri Lanka*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

- De Silva, N. (2015) 'Assembling Smallness: the American small Industries Exhibition', Ceylon 1961', B.A. Dissertation, Princeton University.
- Dharmadasa, K. N. O. (2003) *Patriotism; A socio-classical Analysis*. [Deshanuragaya: Samajavidyathmaka Vighrahayak] Boralessgamuwa: VisidunuPrakashakayo.
- Dias, N. K. (2022) Interviewed by M. Wijeratne. 4 October, Colombo.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2002) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, London: Pluto Press.
- Fry, M. and Drew, J. (1982) *Tropical Architecture in the Dry and Humid Zones*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company.
- Gandhi, L. (1998) *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Goodman, N. (1988) How Buildings Mean. In N/ Goodman & C. Elgin (Eds.), *Re-conceptions in philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Gunasekara, V. (2011) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 24 March, Colombo.
- Gunawardene, H. (2022) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 2 October, Colombo.
- Hine, T. (2007) *Populuxe*, Woodstock & New York, The Overlook Press.
- Jayatilleke, R. L. (2004) *How C W WKannangara resisted the Bastions of Reaction*, Daily News, viewed 20 March, 2011, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2004/10/15/fea01.htm>
- Jayawardena, V. K., 1983. Aspects of Class and Ethnic Consciousness in Sri Lanka, *Development and Change*, 14, pp.1-18.
- Jayawardene, S. (1984) 'The Work of Geoffrey Bawa: Some Observations Towards a Historical Standing', M.Sc. Dissertation, University College London.
- Johnson, R. E. (1994) *Wealth and Poverty*, Sociology Department, Brigham Young University, viewed 20 March, (2011) <<http://www.kateandneil.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Wealth-and-Poverty.pdf>>
- Levittown Pa. (2003) Available at: <http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/a.html> (Accessed: 2 February 2022).
- Manawadu, S. (2011) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 15 January, Colombo.
- Media Ownership Monitor Sri Lanka* (2018) Available at: <https://sri-lanka.mom-gmr.org/en/media/tv/> (Accessed: 4 February 2022).
- Obeyesekere, M. (2007) Sri Lankan Politics and Caste Challenges. [Sri Lankawe Deshapalanaya Saha Kula Abhiyoga], Ja-Ela: Samanthi Poth Prakashakayo.
- Peiris, A. (2007). *Imagining Modernity: The Architecture of Valentine Gunasekara*, Sri Lanka: Stamford Lake (Pvt) Ltd.
- Peiris, A. (2011) Tropical' cosmopolitanism? The untoward legacy of the American Style in Postindependence Ceylon/Sri Lanka. *Singapore Journal of Tropical geography*, 32(3), pp. 332-349.
- Perera, M. C. N. (1994) 'Decolonizing Ceylon: Society and Space in Sri Lanka', PhD Thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton.
- Robson, D., Gormley, A. and Sonawane, D., 1984. "Aided-Self-Help Housing in Sri Lanka 1977 to 1982", A Report Prepared for the Overseas Development Administration of the United Kingdom. Sri Lanka: HMSO.
- Ruskin, J. (1989) *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, New York: Dover Publications, (Based on the Issue Published in 1880 by George Allen, Sunnyside Oprington, Kent; First Published in 1849).
- Silva, K. T. (2005) The Caste, Class and Social Conflicts in Sri Lanka. [Kulaya, Panthiya saha Lankawe Samaja Gatum] Boralessgamuwa, VisidunuPrakashakayo (Pvt) Ltd.
- Siriwardene-Kurupparachchi, R. (2022) Interviewed by W. G. H. M. Wijeratne. 8 October, Colombo.
- Smith, A. D. (1991) *National Identity*, London: Penguin.
- Sri Lanka Institute of Architects, 2011. *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Publication of the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Architects.

- Ssenyonga A. B. (2006), 'americanization or globalization? viewed 21 March 2011, <<http://www.websites\Americanization\Americanization or Globalization Global Envision.mht>>
- Town and Country Planning in Sri Lanka* (2013) Available at: <https://townplanninginsrilanka.blogspot.com/2013/02/colombo-development-plan-history.html> (Accessed: 13 September 2022).
- UDA (2008) City of Colombo Development Plan (Amendment), Colombo: Government Press.
- Wijesinghe, T. A. D. C. (2022) Interviewed by M. N. R. Wijetunge. 2 October, Colombo.
- Wijetunge, M. N. R. (2012a) 'Domestic Architecture of the Sinhalese Elite in the Age of Nationalism', PhD Catalog, Nottingham Trent University.
- Wijetunge, M. N. R. (2012b) 'Domestic Architecture of the Sinhalese Elite in the Age of Nationalism', PhD Thesis, Nottingham Trent University.
- Wijetunge, M. N. R., 2011. Kandyan Elitism as an Eastern Brand of Elitism and Formulating Kandyan Elite Domestic Architecture. *Built Environment*, 09(1), pp.21-36.