

Nineteenth century Catholic Church architecture in Sri Lanka: Evolution of a tropical model [Conference-Abstract]

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Abstract

Sri Lanka has been ruled by three consecutive Euro-Christian nations for nearly 450 years from 1505 to 1948. During their conquests they attempted to introduce their own denomination of Christianity to the country, i.e., Portuguese – Catholic, Dutch – Reformed and British – Anglican. Thus the architectural typologies of the churches built by the colonials differed. The most notable typology of the Portuguese churches was the typically longitudinal plan with three naves and a plain front façade. The principal typology of the Dutch churches was the Greek cross plan with high gable façades. The preferred architectural style of the British churches may best be described as the Victorian Gothic. With the advent of the British in the beginning of the 19th century the persecution of Roman Catholicism imposed by the Dutch came to an end. This triggered off a revival that gave rise to a new architectural programme reflecting more indigenous and tropical characteristics in church architecture. The ultimate form generated in this programme, was articulated mostly by the integration of two side verandahs. It is particularly noteworthy that the retrofitting of these new elements resulted in the evolution of the preceding Portuguese typology. This paper intends exploring the origin and the development of this particular model of church architecture, created as an alternative to the tropical church. The spatial progression and building techniques in selected three architectural examples of 19th Century Catholic churches are systematically observed and analyzed in the light of their adaptations to the oriental religious practices and environmental conditions.