Post-War Collective
Community library and social recuperation, Ambepussa, Sri Lanka

The project in the rural town of Ambepussa near Colombo, aims to integrate former soldiers into post-war Sri Lankan society. Coming from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds, young men are trained in building techniques through their involvement in the construction of public buildings – as for example in the realization of the Community Library in Ambepussa. Reflecting existing trees, the slender building sits lightly in the landscape and wraps around an inner courtyard, taking full advantage of cross ventilation and daylight use. Rammed-earth walls and recycled materials reduce the building’s ecological footprint.

The project’s vocational training aspect, appreciated is the project's educational aspects and a broader sense: the project would potentially heal collective wounds, build labor workforces, disseminate knowledge, foster sustainable development and strengthen social relations.

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Summary and appraisal by the jury
The jury commends the intention of the project to focus as much on the building process as on the building as physical artifact. The combination of two objectives, pertaining to the term “building” both as verb and noun, cultivates a specific understanding of architecture, one derived from the very structure of its making. Greatly appreciated is the project’s educational aspect, which will contribute – beyond the immediate task at hand – to “capacity building” in a broader sense: the project would potentially heal collective wounds, build labor workforces, disseminate knowledge, foster sustainable development and strengthen social relations.

Sustainability concept
Progress: To overcome general de-skilling of the construction workforce, and to promote the army’s participation in post-war reconstruction, this project explores the possibility of using local building projects as training grounds for skilled development. Frameworks for training are built into the design, an approach that can be extended across the building industry as a policy to build workforce capacity. Innovative use of rammed-earth demonstrates the first attempt in Sri Lanka to use that material for a building of this type and scale.

People: For psychologically, socially and economically destitute soldiers, the building process facilitates a career development path and an opportunity for social integration. The finished building is a repository of knowledge for soldiers and the local community – mainly schoolchildren and women who have been long deprived of accessing such knowledge. For all, the project delivers the possibility of social cohesion and personal advancement.

Planet: Rammed-earth is sourced from an adjacent site undergoing excavation for a playground. Re-used steel sections gathered from dismantled old factories and discarded timber railway sleepers collected from a neighboring train station provide the key materials for structure and floor respectively. Such uses of renewable, recycled, zero-carbon emitting materials and processes are complimented by sustainable environmental planning that includes cross and stack ventilation, and access to natural light – thus reducing the building’s life-cycle cost.

Prospereity: The army’s human resource is assimilated for a social building project through carefully planned on-site training initiatives. This reduces immediate labor costs and produces a skilled workforce, whose training expenditure is internalized within the project. Waste recycling and reliance on free, low-tech, natural resources saves money and long-term environmental costs. Programmatically, access to knowledge is envisioned as a counter to ethnic disharmony and racial conflict, and the vehicle for proper economic development.

Place: The building’s placement on site accommodates all existing trees, follows the scale of adjacent buildings and enhances the natural charm of the landscape. A series of formal and informal platforms for reading are organized in and around the library, its spatial progression unfurls as an experiential journey across diverse volumes, framed views, and blurred definitions between inside and outside.

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