

# THE GRAND AND THE LITTLE TRADITION: TRACING THE LINKS OF TWO VERNACULAR BUILDING TYPES IN LANKA

D.P.Chandrasekara

## Abstract

It is accepted that there is a strong link between the vernacular architecture and the grand architecture traditions. The relationship between the two is studied and analyzed in different ways.

The present day architecture/architects often acknowledge the influence of vernacular on the contemporary building designs; the "Little tradition" guiding the "Grand".

On the other hand we see the inspiration of grand architecture paving the path for the emergence of unique vernacular built forms.

This paper will examine the evolution of two significant vernacular building types of Sri Lanka; "Stupa houses" and "Image houses on Stone pillars" and their linkages to built forms of grand architecture. The relationship would be explained with reference to the basic ingredients of architecture; "function", "technology" and "aesthetics".

The Stupa houses of the Kandyan period (15th to 18th century) has a strong connection with the classical architecture of "Watadage buildings" constructed during 7th to 11th century. The former has a simplified the built form avoiding the circular plan form and associated intricate construction technology.

The image houses on stone pillars are considered as one of the finest examples of Sri Lankan vernacular architecture. The

technology and aesthetics of the building has a strong connection with the two tooth relic shrines at Polonnaruwa. The latter belong to the grand style. The both building types have adopted the raised floor construction for different reasons. It protected the murals and other elements of "image houses on stone pillars" from rising dampness & insect attacks. In the case of tooth relic shrines the approach enhanced the significance of the main shrine.

The paper would also attempt to understand the relationship of the architecture of the "Stupa houses" and "Image houses on Stone pillars" with the buildings belong to the folk architectural tradition of the island.

**Keywords:** *Stupa houses, Image houses, Grand tradition, Little tradition*

It is accepted that a strong link exists between the "Grand" and the "Little" or the vernacular traditions. This applies to the field of architecture as well. The relationship between the two is studied and analyzed in different ways.

Redfeild (2008:209-210) explains the interactions between the Little and Grand traditions;

*"The two traditions are interdependent. Great tradition and little tradition have long affected each other and continue to do so. Great epics have arisen out of elements of traditional tale telling by many people, and epics have returned again to the peasantry for modification and incorporation"*

The present day architecture and architects often acknowledge the influence of vernacular on the contemporary building designs; the "Little" tradition guiding the "Grand".

For example, Geoffrey Bawa and Minnette De Silva have been considered as pioneers in searching and consolidating a distinctively contemporary Sri Lankan architectural style. The inspiration from the traditional vernacular architecture of the island is clearly evident in their designs and has been acknowledged by the both architects. (De Silva, 1998) and (Taylor, 1995:13-17). The regional architectural idiom of Geoffrey Bawa had direct links to the Kandyan period (15th to 18th century) vernacular and the colonial vernacular built forms and detailing. Minnette De Silva was particularly impressed by the Kandyan architecture and crafts attempted to make a fusion with the modernity.

The phenomenon of vernacular influencing the grand could be noticed in the works of other architects such as Hassan Fathy of

Egypt and B.K. Doshi of India. (Musgrove, ed. 1992:1395 & 1490)

On the other hand we see the inspiration of grand architecture paving the path for the emergence of unique vernacular built forms. This paper will examine the evolution of two significant vernacular building types of Sri Lanka; "Stupa houses" and "Image houses on Stone pillars" and their linkages to the built forms of grand architecture. The relationship would be explained with reference to the basic ingredients of architecture; "function", "technology", and "aesthetics".

## Background

Sri Lanka has a rich tradition of architecture from 3rd century BC mainly developed after the introduction of Buddhism. The stupas, image houses, other buildings of monasteries, palaces, council chambers of Anuradhapura (5th BC to 9th AD) and Polonnaruwa (9th to 12th AD) kingdoms and the 5th century palace complex at Sigiriya belong to the classical or the grand tradition. By the 15th century the capital was shifted to Kandy located in the central hilly region. The Kandyan kingdom was less prosperous and was constantly attacked by the colonials occupying the maritime provinces. Most of the buildings erected during the period are of the vernacular tradition except for the palace complex and the tooth relic shrine at the capital.

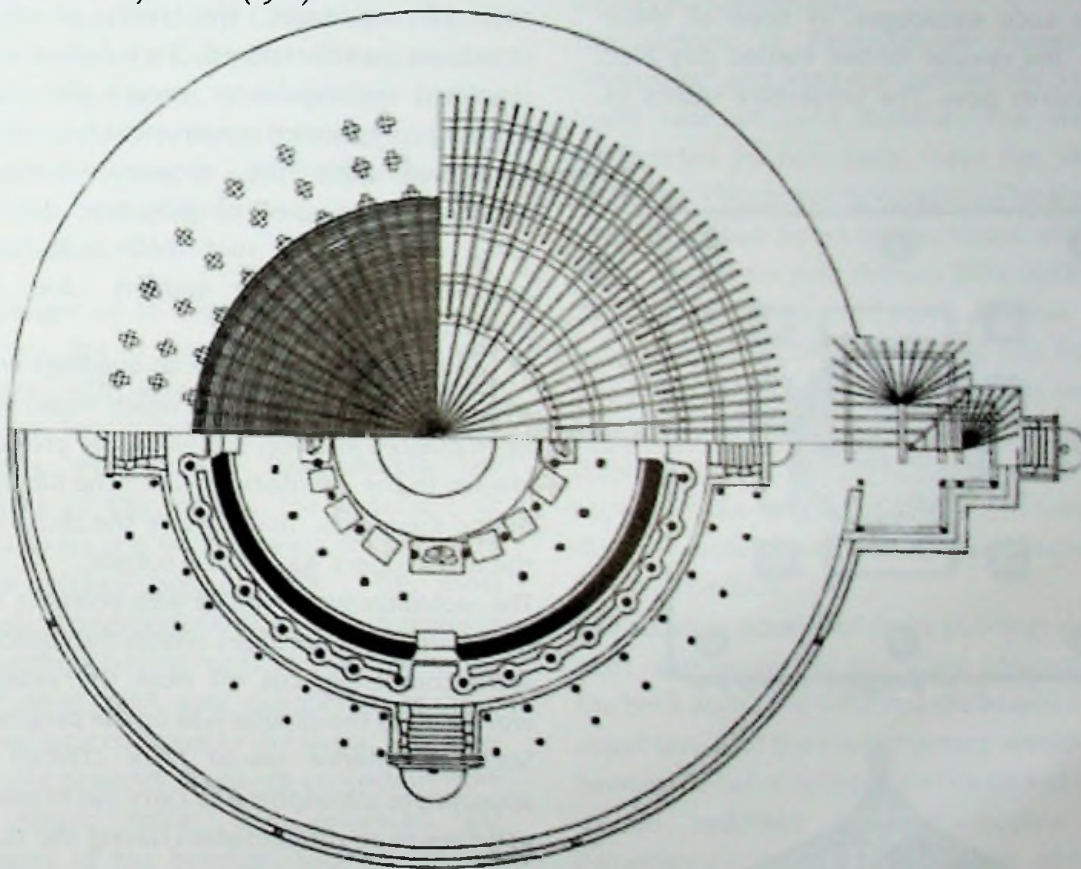


## Stupa Houses

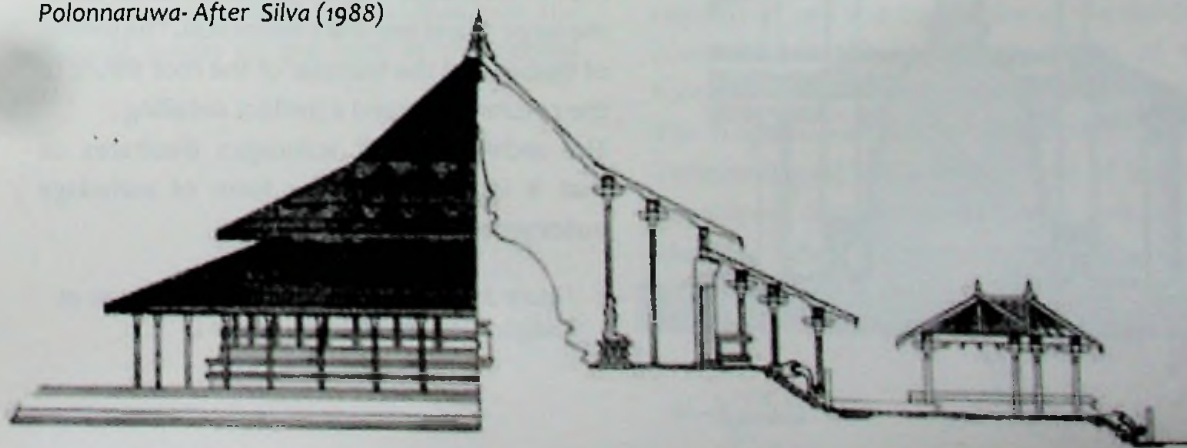
Stupa is the most important religious edifice for the Buddhist. It is solid burnt brick masonry structure generally of the domical shape with a cone on top. The bodily relics of the Lord Buddha are enshrined inside it. The stupas of

Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods are of gigantic size. For example Jetavana and Abhagiri stupas at Anuradhapura were 400 and 370 feet high respectively. (Musgrove, ed.1992:752) However the construction of smaller stupas protected by a roof also became popular during the periods of

Figure 1: Conjectured Roof plan- Watadageya- Polonnaruwa- After Silva (1988)



Conjectured Elevation/Section- Watadageya- Polonnaruwa- After Silva (1988)



Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The buildings were called "Watadages" meaning circular relic houses.

There are more than 14 such examples found in different parts of the island. Lankarama & Thuparama at Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Madirigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Tiriyaya, Rajangana, Lahugala, Kaudualla, Kantarodai, Kandegedara, Devinuwara, Delft, Attanagalla are few such *watadages*. In none of these places the circular timber framed clay tiled roof survives now. The conjecture shows us

the form of the roof supported on the stone columns and the brick wall.

The Stupa houses of the Kandyan period (called *kuludage*) although smaller in size had a strong connection with the classical architecture of *watadage* buildings constructed during earlier phase. There are around 20 such buildings *kuludage* buildings survive in Buddhist temples of the island. Unlike in the case of *watadages*, the roofs of these structures are still retained. The *kuludage* has a simplified rectangular or square plan form avoiding complicated construction technology connected with the circular *watadages*. *Kuludage* is an open pavilion type building often with a tiered roof. Both built forms avoided the central support due the positioning of stupa.

In terms of the function both buildings were erected to shelter the stupa which would have been painted in color. The *watadage* provided shelter to the devotees as well. The Kandyan period *kuludages* housed only the stupa and the worshippers had to stay outside.

The *watadage* was a shrine with entrance and exit doors. The devotees within the building were completely cut off from the external world due to the circular wall on the periphery. Such an interior would have created an appropriate atmosphere to carry out ritualistic activities or to do mediation having the stupa as the central object. The construction of the roof of *watadage* was a specialized task due to the large spans and the central hub. The joining of timber and the transfer of the roof thrust to the columns demand a perfect detailing.

The architecture of *kuludages* illustrates us that it is an evolutionary form of *watadage* buildings but of less grandeur.

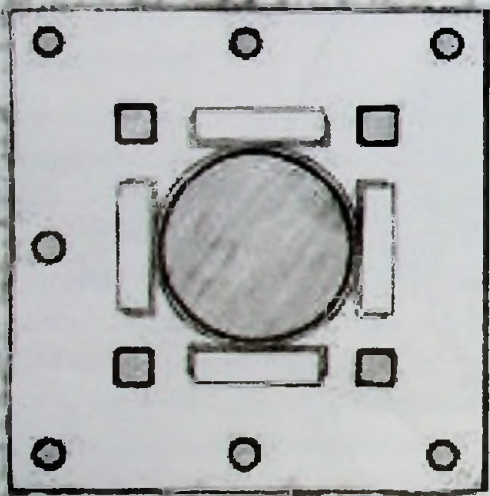


Figure 2: Plan and Section of Stupa House at Kadigomuwa temple



The transformation from "Grand" to "Little" has taken place with the retention of only the core function, reduction of the scale of the stupa and thus the building and the change of plan from circular to square or rectangle.

Silva (1988:93) acknowledges the existence of similar *kuludages* in Tibet and Nepal but argues that development in Sri Lanka is independent.

*"It is likely that small thupas with elaborate paintwork required shelters. These were evolved independently in Sri Lanka and in Tibet, to meet the local requirement. The watadage can be regarded as the fore runner of kuludage, but the later growth represents a declining phase after the former ceased to be in vogue after the twelfth century."*

The designs of the *kuludage* buildings have variations. The shorter stupas had a basic type *kuludage* with single pitched hipped roof rested on four columns. The stupa houses at Ahugoda, Pangamuwa, Palapathwela are examples of this variety. The *kuludages* at Gadaladeniya and Deldeniya are covered with double pitched hipped roofs. The most interesting architectural form of *kuludages* is the buildings having roofs at two levels. The upper level roof was supported on four columns located closer to the stupa. The lower level roof provides adequate protection from the climatic forces and enhanced the aesthetics of the building. Such designs at Kadigomuwa, Kobbekaduwa, Dambadeniya, Gampola accommodate taller stupas with the additional height of the roof at the central part.

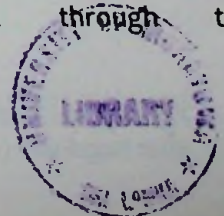
## The tooth relic shrines of Polonnaruwa and the Image houses on stone pillars

The image houses on stone pillars are considered as one of the finest examples of Sri Lankan vernacular architecture. The technology and aesthetics of the building has a strong connection with the two tooth relic shrines at Polonnaruwa.

The shrines at Polonnaruwa named as "Hatadage" and Atadage" housed the sacred tooth relic of Lord Buddha. The shrines constructed by two kings, have the similar floor plan. They are of two storied. The ground floor was used as an image house and the upper level as the relic shrine. (Silva, 1988:243) The sacred tooth of Lord Buddha was considered as the most important relic for the Buddhists of the island. It was always kept in special shrine located closer to the palace complex under the direct supervision and security of the King. The practice was followed during Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kote and Kandy periods.

The super structures of these buildings do not exist now except for the stone columns and the brick walls. The floor and the beams of the upper level and the roof structure would have been made out of timber as in the case of other storied buildings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods. The steep stairway provided the access to the first floor level. The remains at site and conjecture of the building communicate the imposing nature of the tooth relic shrine buildings at Polonnaruwa.

The image houses built on stone pillars (called *Tampitaviharas*) are a unique type of building developed during the Kandy period. Its identity is created through the



constructional techniques adopted. The main structure of the building rests on several stone pillars avoiding any direct contact with the ground. The heights of the pillars are generally about three feet. The inner sanctum is located at upper level enclosed with clay walls and

entered through a small single door. The walls coincide with the timber beams below. A narrow verandah runs right round the structure with a timber balustrade fixed in between the wooden columns. More than 60 such image houses on stone

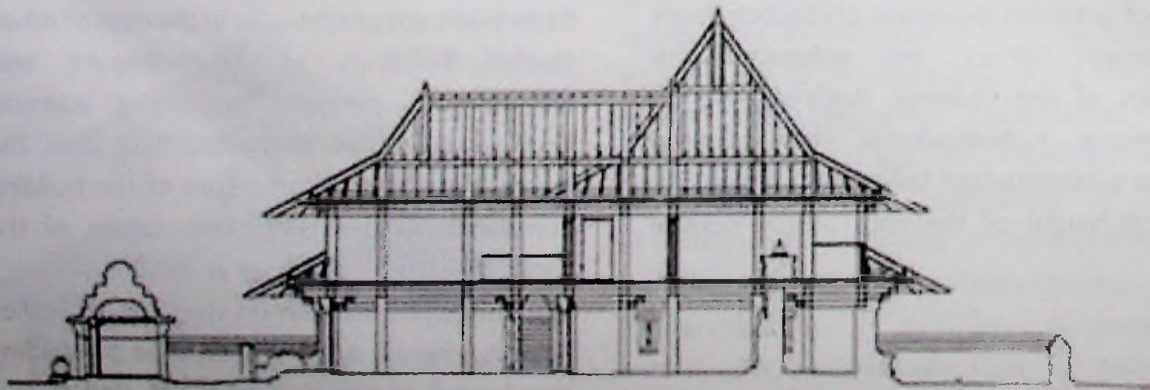
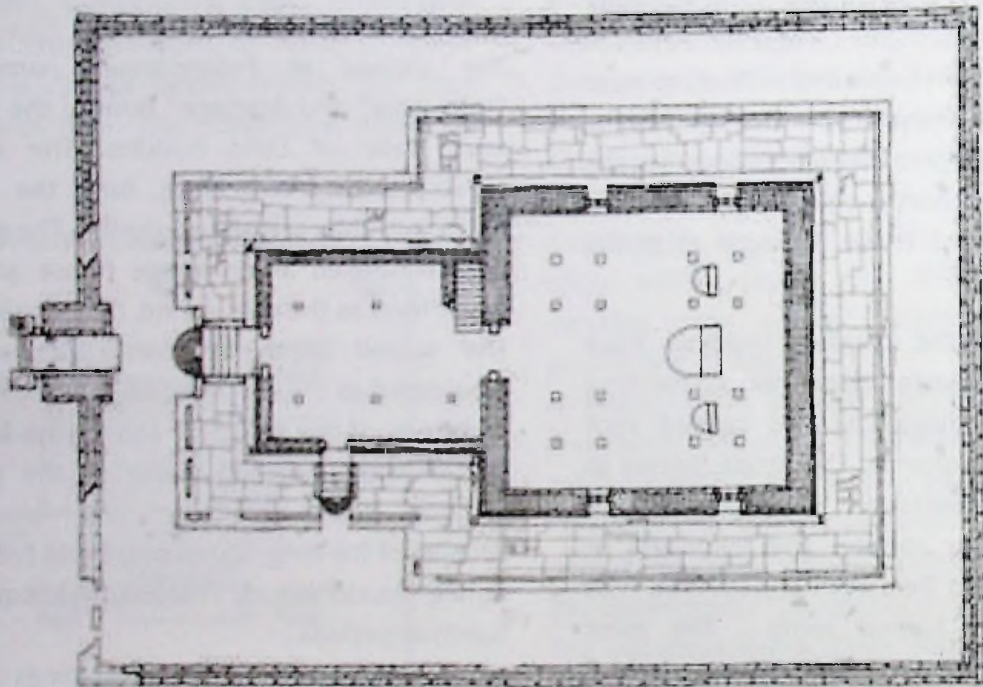


Figure 3: Plan and conjectured section of Hetadage Tooth relic shrine at Polonnaruwa-  
after Nagakawa (1992)



pillars are found in the village temples located mainly at Kandy and surrounding districts. These buildings are 150 to 300 years old now. The building including the roof still remains with very little latter modifications or additions. The image of Buddha in sitting posture is kept directly opposite the entrance door. The inner surfaces of the walls are covered with mural paintings depicting the "Jatahaka" stories.(previous incarnations of Lord Buddha). The scale, proportions and the materials used makes the image houses on stone pillars a vernacular building type.

*" Tampitaviharas are typically single storied buildings: the short stone pillars do not make the lower level high enough, both in visual terms and functional terms-to use for any ritual or residential purpose-in order to consider the image house as a two storied structure..... The construction methods and the materials used - timber, wattle and daub and minimum*

*use of stone, as opposed to the extensive use of stone and brick in earlier periods display a direct application of popular tradition."*

(Chandrasekara and Silva 2002:13)

Both building types; tooth relic shrines at Polonnaruwa and the image house on stone pillars have adopted the raised floor construction for different reasons. It protected the murals and other elements of the image houses on stone pillars from rising dampness & insect attacks. In the case of tooth relic shrines the approach enhanced the significance of the main shrine.

The evolution of Tooth relic shrine buildings to the image houses on stone pillars has taken place through an intermediate stage. The relic shrine at Dambadeniya period constructed during the 13th century is considered as an important link between the two building types. (Silva 1988 :244)

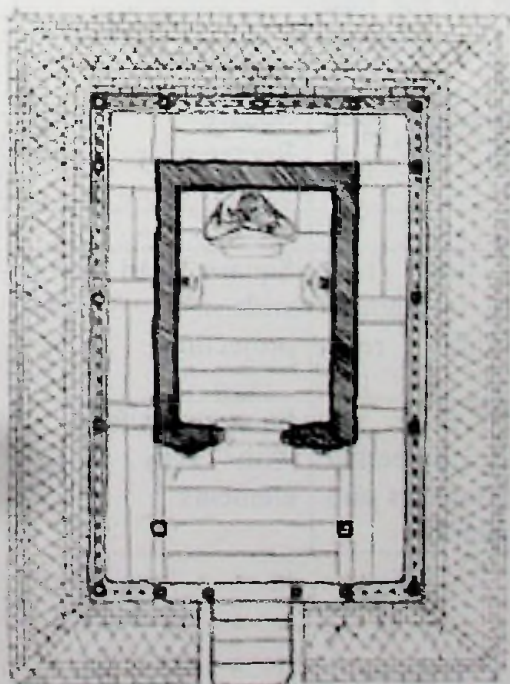


Figure 4: Plan and Section of image house on stone pillars at Hulugalla

Though smaller in scale the relic shrines at Dambadenitya resembles the architectural form of Polonnarwa tooth relic shrines. The image houses on stone pillars were developed when the main statue was shifted to upper level and the lower level of the building was left out without a specific function.

The image houses on stone pillars have maintained distinctively local character with the pitched clay tile roof as the most significant feature and the scale relating to the context of a village temple.

The paper illustrates the development of two Sri Lankan vernacular building types of little tradition influenced from architecture of grand tradition.

The first example of the stupa houses has retained the function but the built form has subjected modifications.

In the evolution of the grand architecture of the Polonnaruwa tooth relic shrines to the vernacular image houses on stone pillars, we could notice the continuation of the architectural language and the technology.

The case studies demonstrate the transition from grand to little could happen in different ways. It could be the direct change of scale or the modification of the form through intermediate phases or evolution of the architecture responding to the core functional requirements.

	Function	Technology	Architectural language and aesthetics
" <i>Watadage</i> " stupa houses of the grand tradition	Provide shelter to the stupa and devotees	Complicated without a middle support for the roof and intricate detailing	Circular plan form
" <i>Kuludage</i> " stupa houses of the little tradition	Provide shelter to the stupa only	Simplified open pavilion	Square or Rectangular plan form
Tooth relic shrines at Polonnaruwa of the grand tradition	Worship of the most important tooth relic of lord Buddha	Raised floor (two storied) to signify the tooth relic shrine	Square plan form with front projection
Image house on stone pillars houses of the little tradition	Worship of Statue of lord Buddha	Raised floor to provide protection from dampness and insect attacks	Square plan form with only basic elements



## References

- Chandrasekara, D.P. and Silva D.M.K.D (2002) *Architecture of Tampitaviharas in Sri Lanka*, Colombo
- De Silva, Minnette (1998) *Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, Smart Media Productions, Colombo
- Musgrove, John.(ed) (1992) *Sir Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture*, CBS Publishers, New Delhi
- Nagakawa, Takeshi. (1990) *Ancient Architecture in Sri Lanka- Studies on Planning and Restoration of Temple Architecture in the Late Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Period*, Tokohshi,
- Redfeild, Robert. (2008) *Social Anthropology*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey
- Silva, Roland (1988) *Architecture of Early and Medieval Sri Lanka, A Study of the Thupa, Bodhimandala, Uposathagara and Patimaghara*, Durk:Krips Reppro Meppel.
- Taylor, Brian Brace (1995) *Geoffrey Bawa*, Thames and Hudson