

HIERARCHICAL IDENTITY AND SPACE; A STUDY ON LONG SURVIVING RAILWAY STATION INTERIOR IN SRI LANKA.

SAMARASINGHE A.M¹ & JAYASINGHE S.²

^{1,2}University of Moratuwa, Maratuwa, Sri Lanka

¹ajanisamarasinghe@gmail.com

Abstract

The visual interpretations of railway interior in Sri Lanka continue to maintain its timeworn fashion only with minor changes while infrastructure and furniture design in the rest of the world, experience rapid transformation. This study has investigated interior of twenty railway stations located on the Main Line (Colombo - Badulla) and also has been interviewed with the staff who use this furniture. Moreover, these studies argue the design particulars of the furniture extremely connected to the hierarchy of the staff, within the station.

Keywords: "SLR : Sri Lanka Railway", "Interior", "Railway Furniture", "Hierarchy", "Hierarchy"

Introduction

Despite the fact that Sri Lanka had limited freedom of moment during British rule, the railway system was a magnificent gift from them. Rail transportation system was established in 1864, mainly as an agricultural transportation method, subsequently it was appointed as a vehicle for high-income rich class. Later, it became as a public transportation. (Railway, 1964) Even though many railways have been using electrification systems since the early 20th century, Sri Lanka has been using only diesel traction since steam locomotives were retired. (Carratt, 2002)

Over and the above, the railway system in Sri Lanka, has a massive collection of wooden furniture that has survived for long period is still being use. Therefore, this research emphasizes characteristics of interior that have the ability to continue for a long period. In this study, characteristics of interior are introduced as tangible qualities and emotions of the user create a unique identity of furniture through characteristics.

In the British period, the colonies used to take Sri Lankans under their power. Therefore, they had maintained their crown identity among their employees to make a hierarchical structure in the society. Curiously, Railway stations had hierarchical based on the administration system. It was the westernized elite that adapted from the official regalia of the native component of the colonial administration. However, this administration has impacted on survival of the Railway interior for a long period. (Mills, 1933)

Methods and Methodology

This research employs multiple research methods such as observation, field research, and archival research techniques. To understand the contextual background of the railway stations, the study focuses on the railway stations on the Main Line and observation techniques used to examine the existing railway stations. In addition archival research used to find the origin and the historical facts. Similarly, these two techniques were used to define the hierarchical identity through the characteristics of station furniture. In field research, each selected stationmaster on Main Line had interviewed to identify the perception of railway employees on furniture in the establishment.

Origin and Background of Railway Stations in Sri Lanka

Contemporary use of Interior space in the SLR has a long history and unique identity, which survived a long period. "In the lack of an obvious model or precedent for its form, railway station furniture was

similar to railway architecture” (David Jones, 2000) Therefore this chapter will focus on background studies of SLR in addition to the railway station space.

Evolution

The social and cultural status of Sri Lanka changed exclusively during the 19th and 20th centuries. By destroying Muslim power in the Indian Ocean the Portuguese colonized the country in 16th century. Thereafter the Dutch reached Sri Lanka by invitation from the Sri Lankan king to reduce the Portuguese power. The Dutch they got the power of the coastal area by fighting the Portuguese. During the 16-century the Dutch had become masters in the trade and economy arena among the Europeans, but later the British proved superior among all of them. The Dutch empire gradually ceded to the British. The British got possession of the Dutch colonies through the treaty of 1788. Thereafter the British caught power in the coastal area of Sri Lanka. (.M, 1907)

However British colonization really affected rapid growth of the economy of Sri Lanka. Tea, coffee, rubber, and coconut were the main profitable export products after a price hike in the United Kingdom in 1880. As a result of agriculture based economy, demand for the development of infrastructure in the estate sector increased. The governor in 1824 showed a massive commitment to develop coffee cultivation in the Kandyan highlands. The problem that they faced was to transport coffee from plantations. Therefore, the British made an extensive transportation network around the country. (Mills, 1933) Railway transport was introduced from 1864 onward as an agricultural transportation system from the hill country to the port city of Colombo. After been established, high-income families used the railway by paying a large sum of money. Trains were arranged for passengers with comfortable dining saloons and seating areas (figure 2) Train interiors and the environment of railway stations were arranged according to the needs of travellers, with more expectation, rail transportation arranged with great comfort to passengers and efficient for good delivery. Somehow in the early 20th century, motor cars were introduced to Sri Lanka, as vehicles for the high-income society. Therefore passenger transportation by train was minimized. However that situation created to the general public to travel by train. Since then, railway in Sri Lanka has been formed as a service oriented organization. (Perera G.)

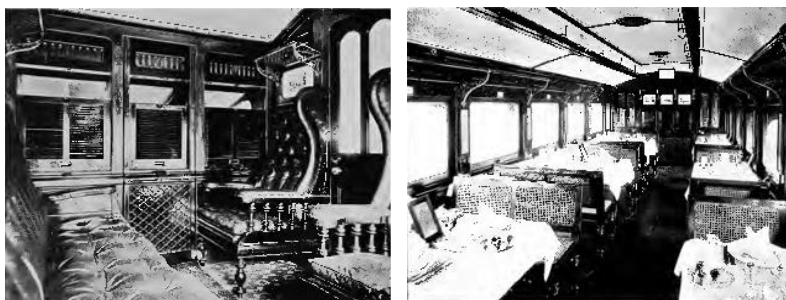


Figure 1, First class compartment in the train and refreshment car (source : Cave,1910)

Distribution of railway lines in Sri Lanka

The railway was established to transport export products from plantation and distributed to meet the different needs of the British. These main railway lines are Main line (Colombo to Abepussa), Matale line (Kandy to Matale), Coastal line (Colombo to Galle), Northern line (Anuradapura to Kankasanturai), Kelani-valley line (Colombo to avissawella), Puttlam line (Ragama to Puttalama), Tincomalee and Batticaloa Line. Such a research needs a thorough observation of all railway stations and employees' perception value of Railway furniture, but due to time constraints this study is limited to observe the Main Line railway stations.

Background Structure of the Railway Station

Building sphere of the railway station

Railway stations built in the 1820s and 1830s were makeshift structures that were sometimes adapted from existing buildings such as small houses, wayside inns, or even timber huts. At the smaller, intermediate-stopping places there was often no station building at all; passengers had to buy their tickets from a local inn, as stagecoach passengers had done since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Later on the single storey, twin pavilion format with central booking hall and decorative barge boards was a formula that was employed in other areas as in the figure 2. (David Jones, 2000)

Sri Lankan railway history goes beyond 150 years. Therefore most railway stations built in the British colonial period still functioning. Even though stations are exposed to unique characters of railway culture, the design of the building was changed in order of the social background. As an example, buildings in the up-country railway line are much more enclosed than the coastal line buildings, considering weather conditions. The British created buildings through the Construction Department, and railway stations were designed by architects who worked there, but some station designs came from Europe. Those architectural drawings still exist in railway department. Therefore Sri Lanka railway stations are visually similar to the architecture used in the European stations as in figure 2.



Figure 2, Station built for the market towns of Appleby, Midland, UK
(source: (David Jones, 2000)

When considering the Main line railway stations, most of them were made of stone or thick kabook enclosed because of the cold weather. Common features could be seen in the hill-country railway line, which were built in the colonial period. Bandarawela (UP) to Badulla (UP) railway station buildings are visually same with pointed and high angled shed roof. Those are single storied buildings with verandahs and metal or timber columns. At this period some station buildings were expanded due to lack of space and some had extended the platforms.

Most of the other Railway station roofs are gable-roofed buildings (figure 9,10,11) with a canopy for the platform. Metal brackets, metal truss, arch pillars, and arch grilles, British iron columns are the common feature that takes the eye on the grand monarch architecture in the colonial era.(Figure 3)

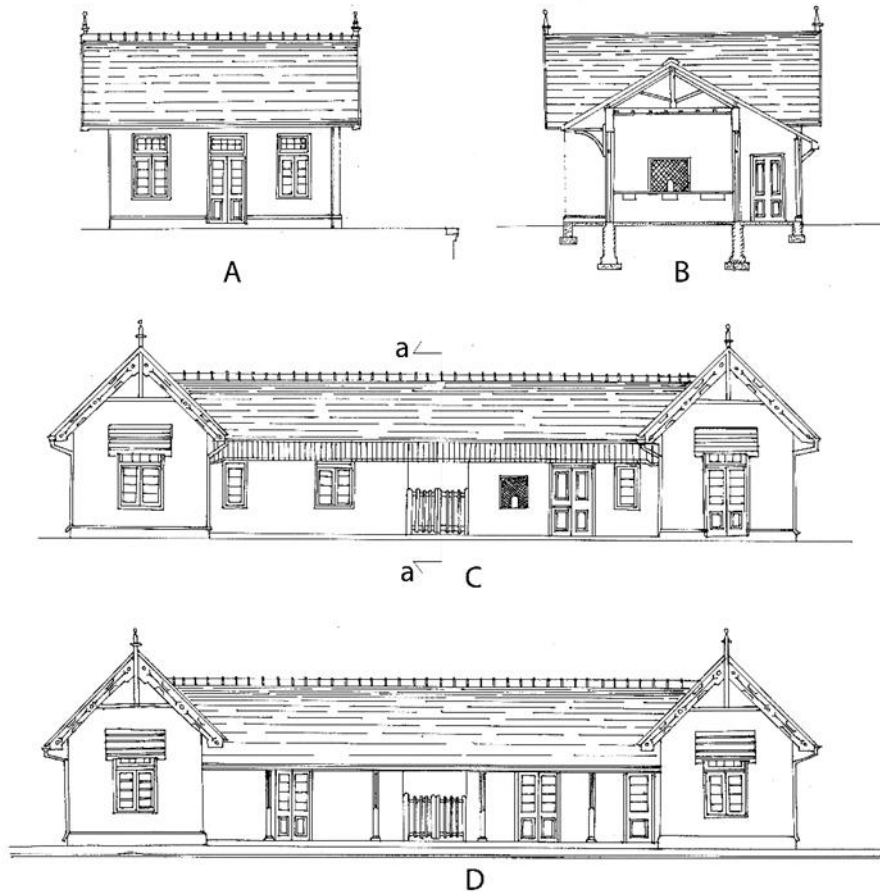


Figure 3, Ella railway station, A; side view, B; sectional view, C; road side view, D; Platform side view (source: Redrawn, survey department, plan no 06997, SLR)

Typical layout of the railway station

Railway track, platform, and roof area is the main three parts in the railway station. Dissanayaka, R. (2010) By providing more priority to railway tracks, the stations obtained linear architecture style. In earlier days, essential building areas were ticketing room (Booking halls), parcel rooms, and lamp rooms. Thereafter with passenger transportation, railway station environment was developed with rain canopies, verandahs, refreshment areas, rest rooms, and sanitary facilities.

Most commonly, every railway station has verandahs in the entrance of the railway station / opposite to the platform and in front of the ticket booking counter. This space would be purposely created to make circulation at the booking office.

For administration convenience, station roof space is separated in to the 3 main parts. Ticketing room, storerooms and stationmaster's room are the three of them. In addition, some stations have office rest room, foreigners rest rooms etc. In most of the stations ticketing room and the stationmaster's room are the prominent spaces even though rests of other rooms are inessential, but in some sub stations the ticketing room and stationmaster's room is placed in the same space. Usually the stationmaster's room is located next to the booking office or near it. However, this administration area was extending with the space availability.

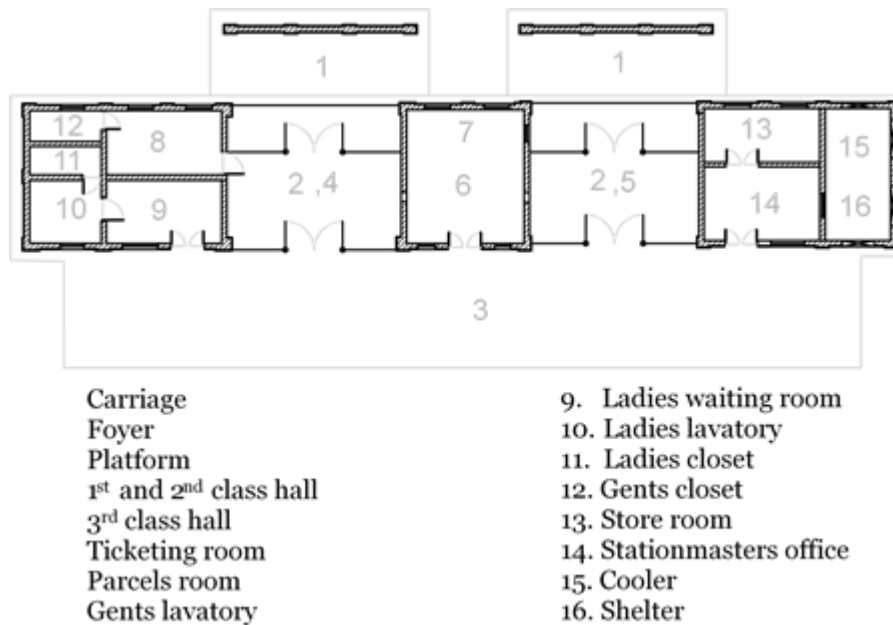


Figure 4, plan view of the Badulla railway station (source: Survey department, architectural drawing no 06342)

Human sphere of the Railway station

The station superintendent is the highest position at the railway station but most commonly station superintendents are only appointed at few stations. In other stations, the stationmaster is the head of the station and they are categorized in order of their grades (SM1, SM2, SM3). SM1 is the one who communicate to higher administration. SM2 and SM3 normally communicated with the people and worked in the ticketing counters. Minor staff sarayer is the next position that directs minor staff. Checkers, ticket collectors, policemen's and DKS are the staff that direct by him. When the passenger collects their ticket from the stationmaster, they have to produce it to the ticket checkers, before enter the platform. The ticket collector is in every station to collect tickets when the passenger enters or exits from the platform.

Class according to the train ticket could divide passengers who enter the platform. In the early days first class night berth carriages were maintained for the benefit of the Members of Parliament, during the period motor vehicles were not available. Then the first class, second and third classes were introduced in order of the economical situations of travellers. (Thibbotumunuwe, 2014) This class system has been continuing since the earlier days of railway travel. There were rest rooms for the first class passengers and that signage were still remains. Even if there is a class system, every passenger space irrespective of class by the contemporary.

Characteristics of Railway Interior Style

“Railway furniture, though by the 1870s a widespread synthesis of influences had been accepted as 'railway style'.” (Jones, 2000) The focal point is to do an analytical study about furniture based on characteristics. This research primarily introduced tangible qualities of furniture as main characteristics. These characteristics, emotions of usage, create an identity of the furniture. This introduces tangible qualities of railway furniture of Sri Lankan and the United Kingdom.

The long wall of ticket window, ticket drawers, pigeonholes and cupboards are introduced as usual features in railway stations. Figure 5 shows a wooden counter, circular centred table, and rectangular table at Settle railway station, United Kingdom with it drawers, which has been used for a long period



Figure 5, Counter, circular centred table, rectangular table, Settle station, UK (source: Jones,2000)

Railway Station Furniture in Sri Lanka

The railway of Sri Lanka has an illustrious history of 150 years. Most of the unique style of railway stations has exquisite furniture. It is said that, some of these furniture had been imported from the United Kingdom; some of them were manufactured in Sri Lanka. However all of this furniture has colonial identity with ornamented Victorian middle class style.

‘At the end of the eighteenth century many references are made to calamander, nedun, satinwood and jak.’ (Joseph Pearson, 1928, p. 83) As a result of that most of the railway furniture made locally was constructed in hardwood mentioned earlier. Some furniture was made in the United Kingdom from oak or rosewood. Apart from wooden furniture metal was used as structures in some platform benches.

In this research interior within this large space is divided in to two main categories; furniture used by the administration and furniture used by the public.

Characteristics of furniture

In this field research, the administrative space in railway stations can be defined as the working space of station employees. Ticketing room, storeroom and stationmaster’s room could be introduced as common space of the office environment. According to administrative work some furniture was arranged for a specific purpose and it is common in most railway stations on the Main Line. Plan-view of Badulla railway station (figure 5) is symbolically used to give a better illustration about the furniture layout in railway stations on the Main Line. To analyse the Hierarchical representation through furniture in station interior, is mainly describe about the table tops, and seating facilities.

Due to some reasons, the railway station administration maintains hierarchy within the station environment. The uniforms are one way of expressing their hierarchical order and another way is the furniture tradition they maintain. Rather surprisingly, the new generation of the railway staffs also

maintain certain hierarchical order by their uniform and by the usage of furniture. In the closing years that furniture was being in the same position.

Even the larger space of the stationmaster’s room, could contain little more than a larger table, and a chair to use. The table at the master room is has well maintained unique qualities which are highly present its’ hierarchy as in the table 1. Mostly common master table (table 1- image 2) is large enough to accommodate necessary documents. When comparing to the other working surfaces in the administration space, tabletop facilities at stationmasters’ room have highly ornamented legs, surface moldings, cornices, drawers, and some have rotatable access.

The ticketing room consists of a wide space in order to maximize working capacity. Furniture in this area mainly focuses on working capability. Tabletop facilities also allocated according to the usability of the staff. Therefore those tables have a height that goes with the counter level. Especially these do not have any motifs.

Tables in storerooms and used by other staffs are less in motifs, those are small in size, and it has simple wooden frames. But in sometimes there are some highly ornamented discarded tables used by minor staff.

In addition to the furniture in administration staff rooms, ladies and gents’ waiting rooms have been over done with motifs of furniture. Those waiting rooms were certainly made for first and second-class passengers. It is separately marked on the station layout drawing that was drawn in the station plan. In the large space in the public area, worktop facilities are only located at the waiting rooms. That might because of the hierarchy that passengers maintain in the station space. Compare to the gents washrooms, ladies washrooms have more railed and carved dressing tables. It could possibly seen in the dressing tables in table 1.

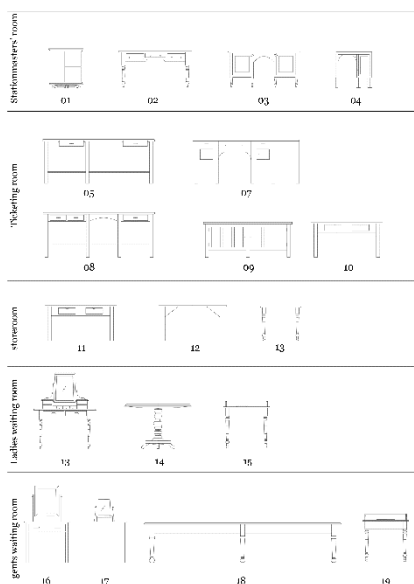


Table 1, seating facilities in station interior

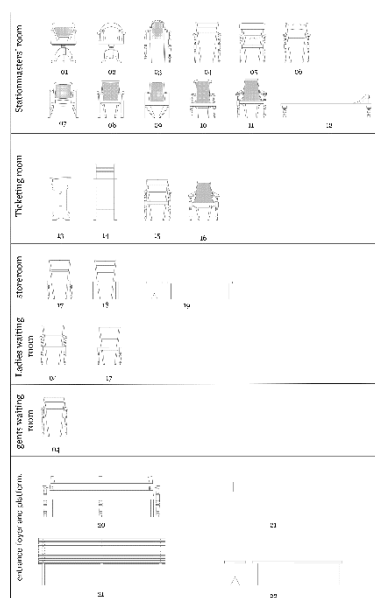


Table 2, Tabletop facilities in station interior

The master chair, other visitor’s chairs, and easy chairs are the main types of chairs in the room. In every station, the stationmaster has a visually higher positioned chair, which indicates his position. Decades ago the stationmaster had a revolving chair made out of wood (table 1- image 1,2) but now there are only a few chairs remaining. Even though those chairs were replaced with new ones, most of stationmasters

placed them in their room. They always maintain certain hierarchy among the chairs beside the master table. Normally the master chair has bit more motives than the visitors' chairs. Those visitors' chairs have some specialty, than the chairs how used by the other staff. Commonly minor staff members discouraged to sit on the visitors' chairs without any acceptance. In addition to the stationmasters' common chairs, the easy chair is an essential item in the resting area in the room. The purposes of those chairs are more to extended the general purpose of sitting. Considering the job profile, the stationmaster has to stay day and night in the station, therefore this might be a welcome place for resting. Visually most of those chairs are rattaned woven on the top of the timber structure. Backward angled seats and backrests are common feature of it. (table 2, image 7-11) It is said that, armless chairs were come to placed in the ladies rest rooms for the reason of huge farthingale dress made it impossible the use of armchairs. In time passed those armless chairs were used by the minor staff at the stations. (table 2, image 15) There are two types of seating facilities that is placed in the public spaces. One is the individual seating spaces and the other is the usual seating accommodation for the majority of the passengers. Single seating facilities are only at waiting rooms. That furniture was quite similar to the armchairs (table 2, image 4,17) in the stationmaster's room. As mentioned earlier, armless chairs (table 2, image 17-18) came to be placed in the ladies rest rooms by the reason of huge farthingale dress made impossible the use of the armchairs. However furniture at waiting rooms, which have raised features more than the furniture in administration spaces.

It might be the reason that the Sri Lanka railway used to provide more comfort to passengers who travel by train. On the other hand, there are benches that contribute as usual seating accommodation at platforms for the majority of people. Those seating arrangements are commonly made out of wood strips and basic wood structures but those are not in the same hierarchical level of furniture in resting rooms. Corollary, the platform furniture and the rest room furniture might be designed for the two different communities when the railway was constructed. Those two communities could be divided though the wealth or the caste in the society. However time been, those timber furniture was used as in the earlier without any hierarchical order in the society.

Conclusion

When considering the style of railway interior in Sri Lanka, there is a hierarchical order, in their placements. Comparing with the furniture in the administrative space, high quality ornamented furniture could be seen in the stationmaster's room. Those are comfortable compared to the furniture in other station interior. Ticketing room furniture was mainly focused on the functionality than the comfortability. Storeroom and furniture used by minor staff are mostly made out of unpolished wood and no motifs. In the public spaces are having different types of furniture, which represent the hierarchical order but has less furniture, compared with office space. Public area furniture could divide to, two main parts such as furniture in platform and furniture in waiting rooms. From these two types of furniture, waiting rooms have high quality and more detailed. Those furniture motifs are represent the hierarchy more than the furniture in the stationmaster's room. That might because; the passengers who were wealthy enough to buy 1st class or 2nd class tickets only used restrooms.

Compare with the United Kingdom railway furniture in the 19th and 20th centuries, they have similarities to the style of SLR furniture, but those do not reflect any hierarchical order. In the British colonial period, they used to established classes of administration to attract the general public to work under them. It might be the reason for hierarchical representation in furniture. Therefore, this research was initiated to study the affection of hierarchical order as a reason of furniture surviving for long periods, in order to the qualitative research among station administration, they avoided expressing about the hierarchical order as a reasons of the long survival of furniture. Conversely, station administration adores by using those old dated wooden furniture as high comfort. On the other hand they represent this furniture as a native interpretation. Therefore the survival of furniture was created through the perception of the administration. Those perceptions create identity; manipulate hidden aspirations of the hierarchical order in colonial administration.

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