

## Survey of Matara cultural properties affected by the 2004 tsunami

The trading enclave of Matara, on the southern tip of Sri Lanka, dates from the 13th century and has a particular importance in the colonial history of the island. From the 16th to the late 18th century, first the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally the British used Matara as an administrative center for the export of goods. Ivory and spices passed through the town on their way to Europe, and elephants were exported to the Middle East.

By the early 19th century, the ports of Galle and Trincomalee had eclipsed Matara, yet it remained an important commercial center, with a new class of Sri Lankan entrepreneurs building solid vernacular style houses on the riverbank opposite the 18th century Dutch fort, in an area known as Kumarawatunga Mawatha.

With this mixture of Dutch, Portuguese, British and indigenous architecture, Matara is considered to be of particular historic importance. In recent years the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), in collaboration with the Centre for Heritage and Cultural Studies at the University of Moratuwa, developed a conservation plan for the area. "We were losing some of the authenticity of the heritage buildings due to ad hoc modernization," says Pali Wijeratne of ICOMOS.

To make matters worse, waves from the December 2004 tsunami engulfed buildings in the fort area, and swept upriver to hit Kumarawatunga Mawatha. Although the solid colonial structures largely survived the inundation, many were flooded with seawater and filled with sand. Furniture, vehicles and equipment were destroyed, and in many cases more recent outbuildings housing bathrooms and additional accommodation collapsed.

Based on the existing conservation plan for the district, architecture students from the Centre for Heritage and Cultural Studies conducted a survey of tsunami damage with a grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural

Preservation in February 2006.

The survey covered 31 buildings, including a Dutch church, a Buddhist temple and private homes. While the church and the temple have been partly restored, homes still bear signs of tsunami damage such as salt emerging through walls. One house was demolished.

Few owners have the resources to conserve their buildings properly, and the tsunami substantially added to the challenge. The government gave small grants to some owners, enabling them to do only the most urgent work.

"We have made local property owners aware of the cultural value of their property, but they don't have the funds to do the repairs," says Wijeratne. "As a start, we have given them measured drawings of their property and an estimate of the cost of repair.

"Our project plans to renovate one or two houses, just to show how it's done," he adds. "It's critical we do something of that nature now. Otherwise, some of these historic structures may be lost."





## Survey of the Western Monasteries, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

Anuradhapura is a place of monumental Buddhist stupas and massive reservoirs set amid emerald rice fields, reminders of a major civilization that arose soon after Buddhism came to Sri Lanka in the third century before the current era. The culture was heavily steeped in Buddhist monastic practice, and produced at Anuradhapura some of the most important religious monuments on the island over a period of about 1200 years until its decline in the 10th century.

The scale of the development was immense. The Jethawanaramaya Stupa, 120 meters tall, is the biggest Buddhist stupa in the world and the tallest brick building ever built. Monasteries had capacity for as many as 3,000 monks and evolved sophisticated designs which included ritual, residential and service buildings.

Beginning in the sixth century, Anuradhapura was home to reclusive communities of monks. Until recently, the monasteries in which they lived remained undocumented, occupying an overgrown area on the periphery of the old city.

A survey of the Western Monasteries was

begun in 2006 under a grant to the Sri Lankan Central Cultural Fund by the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The survey is serving as a basis for development of a comprehensive conservation plan and contributing to the documentation of Anuradhapura, only about 25 per cent of which has been surveyed.

The architecture of the monasteries is substantially different from others at the site. The style, which emerged in the sixth century, consists of two buildings raised on twin platforms connected by a bridge. One building, always surrounded by a moat, is likely to have been residential, while its twin would have been a prayer hall. The design took advantage of existing topography, building on rock outcrops where natural depressions provided a water supply for the moat. All 13 complexes were probably built within the space of one century. "This is a completely unique style of architecture. It only exists in Sri Lanka," says Wajira Fernandez, the conservation architect in charge of the survey.

The absence of kitchens, refectories and

libraries found in other monasteries suggests that the monks practiced an extreme asceticism, living by begging and focusing on meditation rather than study, says Fernandez. Decorative carving is almost completely absent from the buildings.

Prior to the beginning of the survey in December 2006, the buildings were overgrown and in an advanced state of collapse. The project is the first comprehensive survey of the site, and includes a digital map using GPS locations, digital drawings of the monuments, photographic documentation and preparation of a technical report on the condition of the site.

Mapping boundaries and identifying encroachments are a top priority. Fernandez says that the site has suffered in recent decades from pilferage by nearby villagers. At one monastery site, all that remain are grooves in the rock showing where the building once lay.

The survey is being implemented through the Central Cultural Fund, Sri Lanka's principal heritage management body, established in 1980 with the Prime Minister as Chairman.

