

# Teaching and learning the Dhamma through architectural designs in the Buddhist monasteries of Sri Lanka as focused in the undergraduate curriculum

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## Introduction

The purpose of the study is to analyze teaching method and learning strategies reflected in the university curriculum (at the Department of Fine Arts University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka). Here the mechanisms of the Dhamma which are taught and learnt through the architectural designs of the Anuradhapura Buddhist monastic (*vihara*)<sup>1</sup> complex are put into perspective. The study aims to collect details using the evidence of architectural designs particularly, the ancient Buddhist

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1. "The monastery or *vihara* is the most homogeneous and comprehensive unit of religious activity and monastic habitation throughout the history of Buddhist monasticism and Buddhist architecture" (Bandaranayake, 1974: 4). A monastery was called an *arama* or *vihara* (Rahula, 1956: 115).

monasteries which are found in the organic monasteries<sup>2</sup> and *Pabbata viharas*<sup>3</sup> in Anuradhapura. Qualitative research method is followed in this study to analyze how the present university curriculum contributes to teaching and learning the *Dhamma* through architectural designs, which is the research focus of this study.

Data will be collected from multiple sources such as monastic remains in Anuradhapura, epigraphical evidences and written documents as well as the curriculum which is being used at present at the Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

The ancient monasteries in Anuradhapura provide substantial visual evidence for teaching and learning the Dhamma to a great extent. They illustrate the edification of Buddhism through the structural units, location of the different monasteries, relationship between the geometrical patterns and the arrangement of architectural constructions for the contemporary demands of the practice of Buddhism and social needs etc.

The undergraduate curriculum of Department of Fine Arts has been designed to offer 36 courses within four years including the writing as part of the Honors degree in Fine Arts.

Among these 36 courses, four courses on Buddhist architectural designs are taught. As part of the two courses (FNA101,102),<sup>4</sup> architecture is taught for one academic year. Lessons are taught on architectural designs via Buddhist approach. In addition, in the first semester of the second academic year, the social function of the Buddhist architecture is offered under the course title "Sociology

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2. Organic monasteries can be identified as earliest Buddhist architectural landscape of the Sangha. Such as parks, forest groves, leaf huts, caves open terraces simple tree shrines and earthen mounds (Bandaranayake, 1974: 33).

3. *Pabbata vihara* means mountain monastery which was the mountain sites for the location of monastic settlement( Bandaranayake, 1974, 58).

4. **FNA 101: Introduction to fine Arts** "The course will be introduce students to the concept and the phenomenon of art and specifies of different genres of art, course topic will include ; painting,; sculpture; **architecture**; dance ;music; theatre; cinema and television." **FNA 102:** (currently used curriculum)

and Psychology of Arts”.(FNA 210)<sup>5</sup> . In it, a module on the relationship among art, ritual and religion is included. Also in the first semester in the second academic year, the course “Asian Art” (FNA 211)<sup>6</sup> introduces not only Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture but also South and the Southeast Asian architecture.

As per my experience in teaching, I have realized that the students learn Buddhist architecture in a systematic Buddhist approach and that they are conducting enhanced research in Buddhist education. This approach mediates as a teaching material as well as an effective learning strategy related to teaching and learning the Dhamma among the undergraduate. Therefore I hope to apply my experiences in teaching in order to prove the argument of current study.

The religious visual art genres such as painting, sculpture and architecture represent an aesthetic sense as well as a religious sense. The impact of the religious material environment contributes to develop in human thought process and exchange religious realization of different people. In the realm of architecture, it describes this idea through the quality and function of social needs in religious architecture. In the same way it represents the arrangement and visual rhythm of structural elements in religious architecture and thereby emphasizes a sense of whether it is secular or religious. The social context of the physical world represents a certain culture which is consisted of including their religions, customs, language identities etc.<sup>7</sup>

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5. **FNA 210: Sociology and psychology and art** This course will teach the sociological anthropological, psychological and economic aspect of art. Course topic will include: theories of the social function of art; the **relationship between art, ritual and religion** .....”(currently used curriculum)

6. **FNA 211:** In this course undergraduates will be introduced to painting sculpture and architecture of pre-modern South and South East Asia and their influences of Sri Lanka. The course topic will include: History and main feature of Buddhist, Jain, Hindu Moghul and other traditions of South Asia; the history and main features of painting, sculpture and architecture of pre-modern China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Kampuchea and Vietnam.

7. The practice of architecture emphasizes special relationship, orientation the support of activities to be carried out within a designed environment, and the arrangement and visual rhythm of structural elements, as supposed

Therefore I selected the architectural designs consisting the best visual media for teaching and learning Dhamma, and also art history and aesthetics.

Architecture belongs to the genre of functional visual arts and it is not a representational art like painting, sculpture etc. The Buddhist architectural designs came to be based on the artists' subjective interpretation, but the artists also used those to communicate the message of the

Dhamma. Due to this reason it appears that the Buddhist architectural designs are the best teaching aids and learning strategies of the Dhamma. My argument in this study is that the Buddhist doctrine can be incorporated into the university curriculum. That can be taught better through the study of architectural designs. According to our curriculum at the department of Fine Arts we are teaching visual arts incorporating Buddhist architecture with reference to its architectonic qualities. In this context we introduce to students various types of monasteries in Asia with special reference to Sri Lanka. Among them, in this study I have selected the organic monastery and *pabbhata viharas* on the basis of their natural environment.

### **The contribution of architectural designs of organic monastery in teaching and learning the Dhamma through university curriculum**

The structural unit of the monasteries functioned as a unit of religious activities and monastic habitation of monks as well as laities. Bandaranayake says "it shows throughout the history of Buddhist monasticism and Buddhist Architecture (Bandaranayake, 1974: 4).

After the establishment of the Buddhism in Sri Lanka, during the reign of king Devanampiya Tissa (247-207B.C.), the monks had to

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to the design of structural systems themselves. Appropriateness, uniqueness a sensitive and innovative response to functional requirements, and a sense of place within to surrounding physical and social context distinguish a built environment as representative of a culture's architecture (Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia, 2005:126). ,

dwell in caves which were both natural and manmade.

The famous natural caves in Vessagiri and Mihinthale<sup>8</sup> in Sri Lanka are examples for such caves, and almost 2000 caves are found in ancient Sri Lanka (Gunawardhana, 2010: 31).

According to the Buddhist doctrine, meditation is the main activity of the monks, and therefore they chose to live in the caves forests etc. to practice meditation and reach mental excellence.

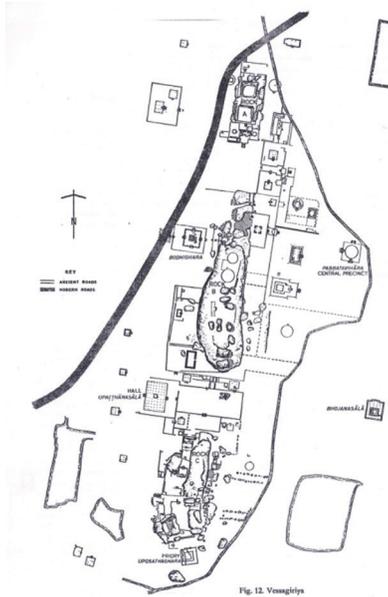
However, for the social necessities of laity, monks had to step out for their caves and preach Dhamma. Consequently, monasteries were set up in villages and the cities. Then with time, various architectural designs were added to the former simple monasteries for social religious needs and customs with them maintaining integrity of the various angles of the unity of monastery complexes In the present study I will first explain how to incorporate the Buddhist architectural designs for the process of teaching and learning Dhamma with reference to caves used for habitation by the monks. Most of the caves were located on mountains or jungles. The monks used the natural resources for their purpose by protecting the environment. The cave is the ideal location for meditation because it has very simple shape with open space. this location depicts the charm and quiet surrounding and then it can be change our feelings of the physical world with *alobha*,(non-attachment) *adosa*,(goodwill) and *amoha* (non-delusion) (see Fig, 2).

Furthermore, the location promotes self- purification, self-control and self-enlightenment of monks as well as devotees (see Fig. 1). These three factors reveal the inner satisfaction of mind of the monks who were living in the caves. It is confirmed by Reverend Rahual's statement "the lay people considered the cave dwelling monks to be more spiritually minded and religious than others". (Rahula , 1956: 112). Even the contemporary Buddhist society also accepts and approves the general view that the natural environment is best

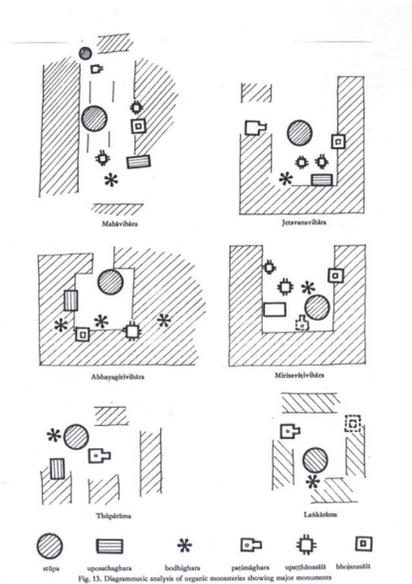
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8. In Sri lank it can be found the caves Mihitale, Vessagiriya, Situlpavva, ( Cittalapabbata) Ritigala, (Arittapabbata) and Rjagala or Rassahela in the Batticalao District)

suited for meditation.



**Figure 1: The monastic plan at Vessagiri organic monasteries (Bandaranayake, 1974:44) (Bandaranayake, 1974:45)**



**Figure 2. Diagrammatic analysis of showing major monuments**

Another type of evidence that can be extracted from the architectural designs is the writing of inscriptions found on the caldron of the caves. Some of such inscriptions mentioned the names of various donors such as king, queen, ministers and ordinary people, etc. The content of most of such inscriptions put in to perspective the notion of *dana* (liability) in the Buddhism. These caves were usually dedicated to Sanghas who arrived from different areas, or not from four directions<sup>9</sup>. It means, that any monk could use those caves for meditation .There were no particular owners of caves. I teach such terms of Dhamma while explaining the architectural designs of caves. The students learn

9. Vessagiri inscription, Rock C, Cave No. 6. "Yahashini-(Samana) ya lene gagata- anagata- catudisa- sagasa " the Cave of Yahasini- (Samana) [is dedicated] to the [ Buddhist] priesthood of the four quarters , present and not present(Wickramasingha, 1912, Vol,1. 21).

this subject with the help of visuals of the caves and we annually organize a field trip to visit these places related to the curriculum. We must develop pedagogical skills like this even among the university lectures so that they can make Buddhist architectural designs as useful teaching aids for the teaching of Dhamma.

The caves serve as symbolic buildings of the Buddhist art as well as of the Buddhist culture<sup>10</sup>and thereby a spiritual aspiration of the Dhamma. There is an example to prove this fact from Visuddhimagga which mentions about the painted cave called Kurundaka mahalena of Cittagutta therā. According to the story he had been living in this cave for sixty years but he hadn't seen the painting painted on the ceiling and he had never seen the big *naga* tree ( iron-wood) in front of his cave during the sixty years . This story upholds the restraint of feelings of the particular monk, indicating how the monk paid attention to developing the inner self than the outer self.

### **The contribution of architectural designs of *Pubata Vihara* towards teaching and learning the Dhamma through university curriculum**

The structure of the *pabbata vihara* is one of the major vihara complex in Anuradhpura. It is one fine example of my study because its architectural designs teach us some parts of Buddhism, throwing a light on certain segments of the Buddhist doctrines. This kind of vihara complexes are also located on the mountains or hills at provincial level. There are two main parts of the *pabbata vihara*; the inner part and the outer part. In the inner part were placed the sacred buildings such as *stupa*, *Bodhighara*, *uposathaghara* and *patimaghara*. And in the outer part Bhikkus' residential and ancillary buildings. As Bandaranayake observes, "this is the archetypal form of the Sinhalese monastery throughout the entire history of monasticism in Ceylon" (Bandaranayake, 1974:70). According to my knowledge their architectural structures served the three dimensional aspects because they were located on hills or on mountains. In addition, the

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10. This would have served as a stimulus to the spread the Buddhism and the promotion of the good life among the people. (Rahula,1956:114)

architectural designs of *pabbata vihara* can be appreciated for the complex structure, and this complexity created a number of angles both different from inside and outside depending on the various social and religious needs.

However, the location of the four major shrines that can be found in the *pabbatha vihara* includes a rectangular precinct and a quadrangular one. If we consider the located patterns of the four shrines which are found in different areas, they appear to be and were systematized, sometimes the positioning of the four shrines differed. According to Bandaranayake there were three variations of the location of the four shrines<sup>11</sup>. These various structural units express this spiritual understanding of the Buddhism.

Among the four main shrines in the monastic complex, *stupa* is the main architectural design. During the Anuradhapura period it was *pan madiya* ( water- Pavilion –at –the –gate ) located at the entrance of the courtyard. Paranavithana observed in his book of Stupa in Ceylon, 68 page, that there was an inscription at Pankuliya mentioning about a stone *padoni* (foot washer). The content of the inscription reveal that the devotees had to wash their feet and change their cloths.

Entering the sacred precinct with clean feet and cloths meant that before developing our inner purification, we should pay attention to our physical aspects which makes it more comfortable to listen to Dhamma. In addition, there were two courtyards, inner (*valikanga*) and outer (*valikangana*), a *valikangana* refers to a sand court and which was covered with white sand. White color symbolized purity and purification. The inner courtyard was located on elevation higher than outer courtyard and there were four gateways leading to the inner courtyard. Bandaranayake points out that one or two examples can be found with an octagonal base and a lotus petal moulding at the base of the dome of stupa (Bandaranayake, 1974, 75).

This can be linked to teaching-learning of the Dhamma through the symbolic representations of the *stupa*. There are three main

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11. *Vijayarama, Pankuliya, Puliyanukulam Pachinatissapabbata Magulmahavihara and Molagoda* (Bandaranayake, 1974, 73-74pp).

terraces of *stupa*; lower, middle and upper. The lower terrace is fixed with sixteen marks of footsteps at regular points and these points are placed around the *stupa*. When the devotees walk around the *stupa*, they should stop at each of these points and they can kneel down and worship. The middle terrace was used for offering flowers. As Coomarswami explains, three terraces symbolized head, body and feet of the great person. The dome is the head, the middle terrace is the body and the base is the feet. In addition, the *stupa* symbolized Mahaparinirvana (demise) of Buddha. Mahaparinirva sutta of Digha-Nikaya mentions the final conversation between Buddha and Ananda thero at death bed of Lord Buddha, the latter instructed Ananda Thero to inter his relics after his demise inside a *stupa*.

Accordingly, Buddha's relics were interred in a *stupa* and therefore all the *stupas* came to represent the great person. Also three terraces of *stupa* symbolized *thriloka* (spheres of the universe) and in this interpretation the ground represented the earth, the terrace railing is the mid-space and the upper railing is the heaven.(Mital and Ashvin, 1993: 163). There was a *stupaghara* round the *stupa* and it functioned as shelter which was used by devotee for protection from sun and rain.

The ***Bodhi tree*** was another main architectural design of the *pabbata vihara*. This sacred tree had been located near the *stupa*. This symbolized the enlightenment of the Gauthama Buddha.

After the enlightenment of Buddha, he spent seven weeks under the *Bodhi tree* and its neighborhood. In the second week of the seven weeks Buddha taught the world the value of gratitude by standing in front of the *Bodhi tree* at a certain distance and gazing at the tree with motionless eyes throughout the week, because this *Bodhi tree* sheltered Buddha in the cause of attaining enlightenment. Before anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha, the image of *Bodhi tree* symbolized Buddha in the early Buddhist art and many of such images can be found in India. The Bodhi tree cannot be cut as we like and only if there is an unavoidable matter, it can be cut<sup>12</sup>. It reminds

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12. "A branch of a Bo -tree could be cut only if it interfered with a *cetiya* or *patima* (image) or an *asnaghara* in wich Buddha relics are enshrined, or if the

the practical value of the tree such as shade, food, medicine, wood, etc. If we can protect the trees like we do the *Bodhi tree*, we will be able to control the environmental crisis in the modern world. There were shelters around the *stupa* and *Bodhi tree* in *pabbata viaha* monastery complex. Some *Bodhigharas* were circles and some were squares while the *stupagharas* were circles.

In Buddhism the shape of the circle or the wheel, symbolized the first Sermon of the Buddha (*Dhmmacakkapavattana*) at Isipathnarama in Benares. Moreover the circle symbolizes the *Samsara* (circle of existence and continuity). It doesn't have a beginning and end like our life of birth, existence and death.

**Image house (*pattimaghara*)** is the next important construction in the *pubbatha vihara*. The Sri Lankan Buddhist society considers the image house to be a significant place of the Buddhist monastery. After the fifth century, the Buddha image was popularized among the Buddhists. (Rahula, 1956: 128). The Buddha statues of the image house depict various hand gestures and seating arrangements. Thus, teaching and learning the Buddhist sculpture can be explained. The hand gestures and seating arrangements of Buddha and the image house also have symbolic value.

The *Uposathaghara* is another building construction of the *Pabbata vihara* complex. This building was not used for worshipping or following Buddhist rituals but the Bhikkus assembled there to engage in *vinnaya* acts. There were four entrances and four gateways to *Uposathagara*; with guardian figures at the door (*dvarapalakarupas*) (Rahula, 1956, 130).

These figures also harmonize with the surrounding of the *vihara*<sup>13</sup>.

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removal of a rotting or an oozing branch facilitates the healthy growth of the tree, like a surgical operation of human body. A branch could also be removed if birds preaching upon it solid the *cetiya*. But no branch of a *Bo-* tree could be cut for any other purpose (Rahula, 1956; 120)

13. "At the entrance to some *uposata-* house like the one at *cittaklapabbata vihara* in Rohana, there were so beautiful and life-like that it is reported in the pali commentaries that a nun young gazing on one or these figures died of intense eternal passion (*anto-rago*) (Rahula, 1956, 130).

A few *pabata viharas* depict the position of the *uposataghara* in line with the image house ( see Fig.3). The above mentioned in the *pubbatha vihara* were located in the inner section of the vihara.

The outer part of the *pabbata vihara* was the residence of Bhikkus. It was located as small and squared *kuti* (rooms) by surrounding the sacred area. These buildings were arranged in a geometrical pattern. If we examine the entire plan of the *pabbata vihara* it reveals a symmetrical pattern in a vertical line. The vertical line may represent the spiritual aspirations (see Figs. 3 & 4). Apart from the residential rooms there were few other buildings such as *bhojanasala*, (refectory *jantaghara* (barth-house) and so on. Also there were natural moat or river around a *pubbatha vihara*.

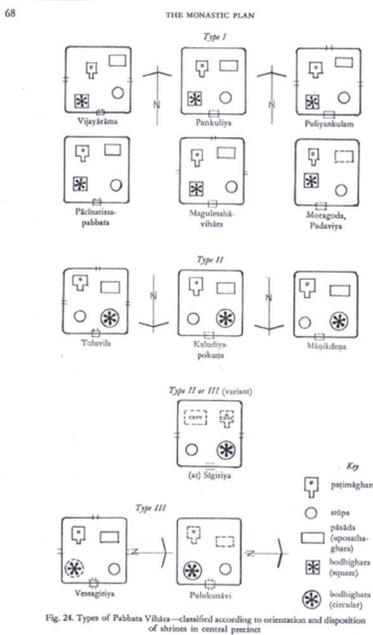


Fig. 24. Types of Pabbata Vihāra—classified according to orientation and disposition of shrines in central precinct

**Figure 3: types of *pabbata vihara* classified according to orientation and disposition of shrines in the central precinct** (Bandaranayake, 1974: 68)

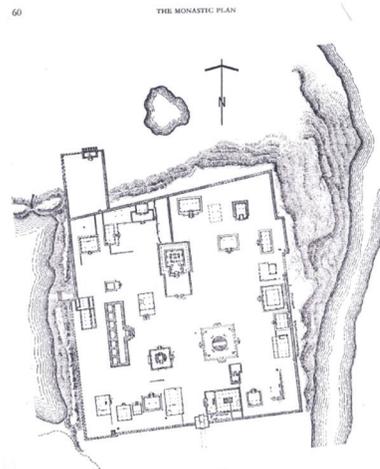


Fig. 15. Pankuliya

**Figure 4: the monastic plan at Pankuliya** (Bandaranayake, 1974: 60)

### Conclusion

As mentioned above, considering the architectural designs in the organic monastery and *pabbatha vihara* we can understand the value of balance and it teaches us through the schematic plan of architectural structure . If we can pay attention to organize our life like this way, it may be peaceful and beautiful. As well as the angles of inside and outside, different units of the building appear as one unit that is harmonized.

The study shows the different architectural forms quite close to one another. The devotee feels the influence of a harmonizing process that binds the parts into different one complete building.

Because of this harmonization of the units of the buildings, the spectator will be able to avoid uneasiness of his vision, and this is a good lesson and a fine example for our life. In addition, the space of the buildings symbolize the balance of the mind and the three currents of birth, existence and death, in our life circle. It means the architectural form serves a practical and psychological purpose. The example of the *stupa* that is centralized in the monastery is the universe. Buddha said that the universe is infinite in every way; extent, duration and so on.

However this construction of caves and *pabbata vihara* reminds of the infinity of the world as well as of our life. The infinity will have two directions as contraction and extension. As

observant of the Dhamma we should always contract and continue our lives with good deeds for the society. These architectural designs thus represent the quality and quantity of the material frame of the physical things. The natural sources of environment can be used as an effective adjustment of the extra strength of the unit of mind. Thus relating such architectural designs in Buddhist culture can be incorporated into the process of teaching and learning the Dhamma within the university curriculum.

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