

REGIONAL IDENTITY AND REGENERATIVE ARCHITECTURE: REINTERPRETING BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN CONTEMPORARY BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary architectural discourse increasingly emphasizes the need for regenerative approaches that reconnect the built environment with cultural identity, environmental responsibility, and social wellbeing. However, many modern architectural developments continue to prioritize visual image and symbolic representation over philosophical and contextual meaning. This tendency is particularly visible in contemporary Buddhist architecture, where monumental and visually grand structures often contradict the philosophical teachings of Buddhism that emphasize humility, simplicity, and non-attachment to material possessions. This research investigates how Buddhist philosophical principles can inform regenerative architectural thinking within the Sri Lankan context. Drawing from the concept of regionalizing modernism, the study explores how philosophical interpretations of Buddhist teachings can contribute to contemporary architectural design strategies that move beyond purely aesthetic expression. The research adopts a design-based methodology and examines the conceptual development of a proposed Centre for Buddhist Philosophy located in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The project proposes two architectural components a Promotional Centre located near the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and a Knowledge Centre within the Malwatta Temple complex. The design intentionally challenges image driven religious architecture by emphasizing flexible spatial organization, reuse of materials, and the philosophical interpretation of Buddhist values such as impermanence, simplicity, and sustainability. The findings suggest that regional philosophical frameworks can contribute to regenerative architectural strategies that extend beyond conventional sustainability practices. By integrating cultural philosophy, environmental responsiveness, and adaptable construction systems, architecture can promote intellectual engagement, spiritual reflection, and resilient built environments.

Keywords: *Architectural Modernity; Buddhist Philosophy; Cultural Sustainability; Regenerative Architecture; Regional Identity.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture plays a significant role in shaping cultural, social, and environmental relationships within the built environment. In recent decades, the concept of regenerative architecture has emerged as a critical framework that moves beyond traditional sustainability approaches by seeking to restore ecological and cultural relationships within architectural practice.

Despite this growing emphasis on regenerative design, many contemporary architectural developments continue to adopt globalized aesthetic models that often neglect regional identity, cultural values, and philosophical traditions. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the architecture of religious institutions, where visual symbolism and monumental expression frequently dominate architectural production.

In the Sri Lankan context, Buddhist religious architecture has historically reflected philosophical values of simplicity, humility, and spiritual reflection. However, contemporary Buddhist buildings increasingly display an emphasis on grandeur, material richness, and symbolic imagery. This tendency creates a contradiction between the architectural expression of Buddhist buildings and the philosophical teachings of Buddhism, which emphasize detachment from material possessions and the cultivation of intellectual and spiritual awareness.

This contradiction raises an important architectural question: how can contemporary architecture reinterpret Buddhist philosophy to produce built environments that support intellectual engagement and spiritual reflection rather than material representation?

The architectural discourse in Sri Lanka has previously explored the relationship between modernism and regional identity through the work of architects such as Geoffrey Bawa and Minnette de Silva. Their work demonstrates how modern architectural principles can be adapted to local climatic and cultural conditions (De Silva, 1998; Bawa & Robson, 2002).

Building on these ideas, this research explores the possibility of regionalizing modern architecture through Buddhist philosophical interpretation. The study investigates how philosophical principles derived from Buddhist teachings can inform architectural design strategies that contribute to regenerative built environments.

To explore this question, the research examines the conceptual development of a proposed Centre for Buddhist Philosophy located in the historic city of Kandy, Sri Lanka. The project serves as an architectural experiment that seeks to reinterpret modern architectural language through philosophical and cultural frameworks.

This research argues that Buddhist philosophy provides a framework through which modernist architectural principles can be regionally reinterpreted. By translating philosophical concepts into architectural strategies, the study explores how regional identity can contribute to regenerative architectural thinking. The proposed Centre for Buddhist Philosophy is therefore examined not simply as a design project, but as a means of investigating the relationship between philosophy, regional identity, and regenerative architecture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 REGIONAL MODERNISM IN SRI LANKA

Geoffrey Bawa, Minnette de Silva, and Valentine Gunasekara are among the key architects who contributed to the regional adaptation of modern architecture in Sri Lanka. Their work demonstrated how modernist principles could be reconciled with local climate, landscape, materiality, and cultural traditions (de Silva, 1998; Bawa & Robson, 2002; Pieris, 2021). While these approaches successfully regionalized modern architecture through environmental and cultural responsiveness, they largely remained within the formal and spatial language of modernism. This study differs by exploring the regionalization of modernism through Buddhist philosophical principles rather than through environmental adaptation alone.

2.2 REGIONALISM AND ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

Modernism remains relevant in contemporary architectural discourse because it encourages critical questioning and openness to new ideas. Its emphasis on innovation and the challenge of traditional norms continues to influence fields such as art, literature, design, and architecture (Frampton, 1980). Modernism is fundamentally grounded in rational, scientific, and liberal thinking, emphasizing reason and logical understanding in shaping the built environment.

Interestingly, Buddhist philosophy shares similar intellectual characteristics. Both modernist thought and Buddhist teachings value rationality, critical reflection, and a disciplined approach to understanding the world (McMahan, 2009).

In architecture, rationality plays a crucial role as it ensures that design decisions respond to functional, environmental, and social needs rather than purely aesthetic considerations.

Within modernist architectural theory, aesthetic form is considered secondary to the underlying ideology and functional logic of design. Building on this understanding, this research attempts to reinterpret modernism through Buddhist philosophical principles. Rather than being limited by the formal aesthetics of modern architecture, Buddhist principles are used to regionalize and transform modernist rationality into a philosophically grounded architectural approach.

By moving beyond the traditional aesthetic limitations of modern architecture, architecture can shift its focus from the visual “image” of buildings toward their performance and contextual relevance. In this sense, architecture should respond to purpose, technology, economy, and socio-cultural conditions rather than purely visual expression. To truly regionalize modernism, architectural thinking must engage with cultural, material, construction, labor, and environmental contexts (Frampton, 1983).

Modern architecture emerged during the twentieth century as a response to industrialization, technological development, and social transformation. While modernism introduced new construction technologies and spatial concepts, it often promoted universal architectural principles that neglected local cultural contexts (Frampton, 1980).

In response to this limitation, architectural theorists introduced the concept of critical regionalism, which encourages architects to reinterpret modern architecture through local environmental, cultural, and material conditions (Frampton, 1983). Critical regionalism

advocates for architectural practices that resist the homogenizing effects of globalization by engaging with regional identity and cultural traditions.

In Sri Lanka, modern architecture evolved through a process of adaptation rather than direct imitation of Western modernism. The architectural work of Geoffrey Bawa demonstrates how modern architecture can integrate tropical climate responsiveness, landscape relationships, and local craftsmanship while maintaining modernist spatial concepts (Bawa & Robson, 2002).

Similarly, Minnette de Silva emphasized the importance of integrating local culture, climate, and craftsmanship into architectural design. Her work represents an early attempt to reinterpret modern architecture through regional identity (de Silva, 1998).

These architectural approaches illustrate that modern architecture can evolve through regional reinterpretation rather than strict adherence to universal aesthetic principles.

Unlike previous regional modernist approaches that primarily adapted climate, landscape, and materiality, this study explores the regionalization of modernism through philosophical and ideological interpretation. Rather than focusing solely on environmental adaptation, the research investigates how Buddhist thought can serve as a conceptual framework for shaping contemporary regenerative architecture.

2.3 BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

Buddhist philosophy offers a unique perspective on the relationship between materiality, space, and human experience. Central Buddhist teachings emphasize concepts such as impermanence, non-attachment, mindfulness, and simplicity. These principles encourage a deeper understanding of the relationship between individuals, materials, and the environment.

Within Buddhist architectural traditions, simplicity is not merely an aesthetic preference but a philosophical position. The reduction of excessive ornamentation can be understood as a means of minimizing distraction and encouraging contemplation, reflection, and awareness.

Buddhist environments have historically accommodated activities such as meditation, dialogue, learning, and reflection. In this sense, architectural space functions not only as physical shelter but also as a medium that supports intellectual and spiritual engagement.

Contemporary interpretations of Buddhism have highlighted its rational and reflective dimensions, reinforcing its relevance within modern intellectual discourse (McMahan, 2009).

These theoretical perspectives suggest that architecture informed by Buddhist philosophy can contribute to regenerative architectural thinking by promoting mindful relationships between people, materials, and environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology that combines theoretical investigation with architectural experimentation. DBR is an established research approach widely used in architecture and design disciplines because it enables theoretical concepts to be tested through design interventions and spatial experimentation. Through iterative processes of analysis, conceptual translation, and design development,

the methodology allows architectural knowledge to be generated through the act of designing itself.

The Centre for Buddhist Philosophy examined in this study is a conceptual architectural proposal developed as an academic design thesis and has not been constructed. The project is therefore used as a speculative design case study to explore how Buddhist philosophical principles can inform regenerative architectural thinking.

The research methodology consists of three main stages:

1. **Theoretical investigation** of regional modernism and Buddhist philosophy within architectural discourse.
2. **Conceptual translation** of philosophical principles into architectural design strategies.
3. **Architectural experimentation** through the development of a design proposal for a Centre for Buddhist Philosophy.

The three stages are interconnected. The theoretical investigation established the conceptual foundation of the study, the conceptual translation stage transformed Buddhist philosophical ideas into architectural principles, and the architectural experimentation stage tested these principles through the proposed design intervention.

The architectural project used as the primary case study for this research is the proposed Centre for Buddhist Philosophy located in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The project explores how spatial organization, material strategies, and architectural language can reflect Buddhist philosophical principles while responding to regional cultural and environmental contexts.

The framework for this research is partially derived from the philosophical meaning embedded in the Buddhist monk's robe. Historically, discarded cloth used to wrap deceased bodies was collected from forests or burial grounds, cleaned, and carefully stitched together by monks to create their robes. These robes were assembled from irregular fragments of fabric and therefore did not follow a predetermined pattern. Instead, the stitching process produced an organic composition resembling the layout of cultivated paddy fields.

This practice reflects several core Buddhist teachings, particularly the ideas of non-attachment, impermanence, and humility in material use. Although the robe becomes the only personal possession of a monk, its origin from discarded materials emphasizes the absence of material value and the importance of understanding its philosophical meaning.

Drawing from this principle, the research interprets the robe as a conceptual model for architectural thinking. The design approach derives architectural strategies from this practice of assembling humble and reused materials into meaningful compositions. Through this interpretation, architectural form is not predetermined by aesthetic intention but emerges through processes of material collection, assembly, and contextual response.

Four guiding principles derived from Buddhist philosophical interpretation informed the design process:

1. Removal of strong visual clarity and symbolic architectural form.
2. Alternative methods for sourcing building materials and construction components.
3. Flexible and fluid material assemblies that encourage intellectual interpretation.
4. Sustainable reuse and lifecycle adaptability of building components.

These principles form the conceptual framework for translating philosophical ideas into architectural design strategies.

The design principles adopted in this study were not arbitrarily selected but were derived from Buddhist philosophical teachings discussed within existing literature on Buddhist aesthetics, materiality, impermanence, and non-attachment (McMahan, 2009). The resulting architectural strategies therefore emerge from a synthesis of theoretical literature and design exploration rather than solely from the author's personal interpretation.

The framework functions as the primary analytical structure of the research. It demonstrates how Buddhist philosophical principles are translated into architectural strategies and subsequently evaluated through the proposed design intervention. In this way, the framework establishes a direct relationship between theory, design development, and architectural outcomes.

4. CENTRE FOR BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

The proposed Centre for Buddhist Philosophy is located in the historic city of Kandy in central Sri Lanka. Kandy is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage city and serves as one of the most significant Buddhist cultural centers in the country.

4.1 DESIGN STRATEGY: FROM PROMOTIONAL CENTRE TO KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

The design methodology adopts a spatial strategy that moves from provocation to reflection through two interconnected architectural interventions: the Promotional Centre and the Knowledge Centre. These two components are located at two culturally significant Buddhist sites in Kandy: The Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and the Malwatta Temple complex. Together, they function as complementary spaces that support intellectual dialogue, philosophical exploration, and spiritual reflection.

The proposed intervention intentionally contrasts with the highly ornamented architectural language of surrounding Buddhist structures. While existing buildings rely on symbolic imagery, decorative craftsmanship, and monumentality, the proposed architecture adopts a restrained language emphasizing material honesty, incompleteness, adaptability, and philosophical reflection.

4.2 PROMOTIONAL CENTRE



Figure 1: Promotional centre at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

The first intervention, the Promotional Centre, is located near the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, one of the most visually saturated and symbolically monumental religious environments in Kandy. The architectural language of this site is characterized by strong imagery, ornamentation, gold surfaces, crafted columns, and monumental forms. In deliberate contrast to this context, the proposed building is conceived as a modest and almost hutlike structure constructed from donated, reused, and locally available materials. This contrast is intentional. After passing through golden gateways and highly ornamental architecture, visitors encounter a structure that appears raw, incomplete, and materially unresolved. This visual rupture is designed to provoke immediate questioning: the building does not communicate through symbolic form but instead initiates inquiry. In this sense, architecture becomes a question rather than a finished visual statement.



Figure 2: Knowledge centre at the Malwatta temple complex

The structure avoids a fixed architectural image. Materials are assembled according to availability, resulting in a heterogeneous composition in which some areas remain uncovered while others are enclosed using improvised material solutions. This condition intentionally reflects Buddhist teachings related to impermanence, non-attachment, and the transient nature of material existence.

All spaces within the Promotional Centre are intentionally informal, adaptable, and convertible. Spatial arrangements are designed to change depending on use and activity rather than remaining permanently fixed. The ground level functions as an exhibition space that can easily transform into a Dharma discussion area. Upper levels accommodate different scales of intellectual exchange, including indoor and outdoor discussions as well as spaces for both individual and group engagement.



Figure 3: Convertible Dharma discussion area/Exhibition area

Meditation spaces within the building are intentionally minimal and sometimes physically challenging rather than comfortable. This design decision reflects the philosophical idea that understanding and spiritual growth require effort and discipline. In certain areas, the building remains intentionally incomplete in Knowledge Centre due to the reliance on donated and reclaimed materials. As a result, environmental conditions such as rain or wind may occasionally affect interior spaces. Users must directly experience these conditions while occupying the building, reinforcing the idea that the search for truth requires endurance, dedication, and awareness.

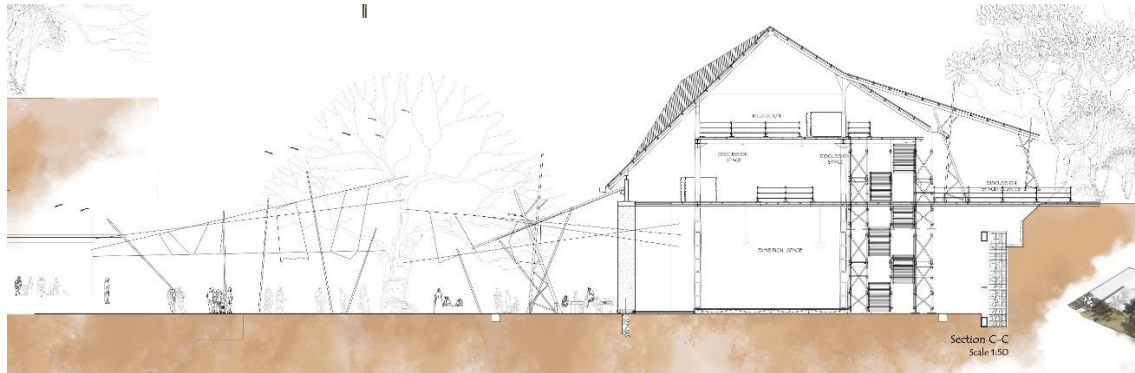


Figure 4: Cross-section of the promotional centre at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic



Figure 5: Front elevation of the promotional centre at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

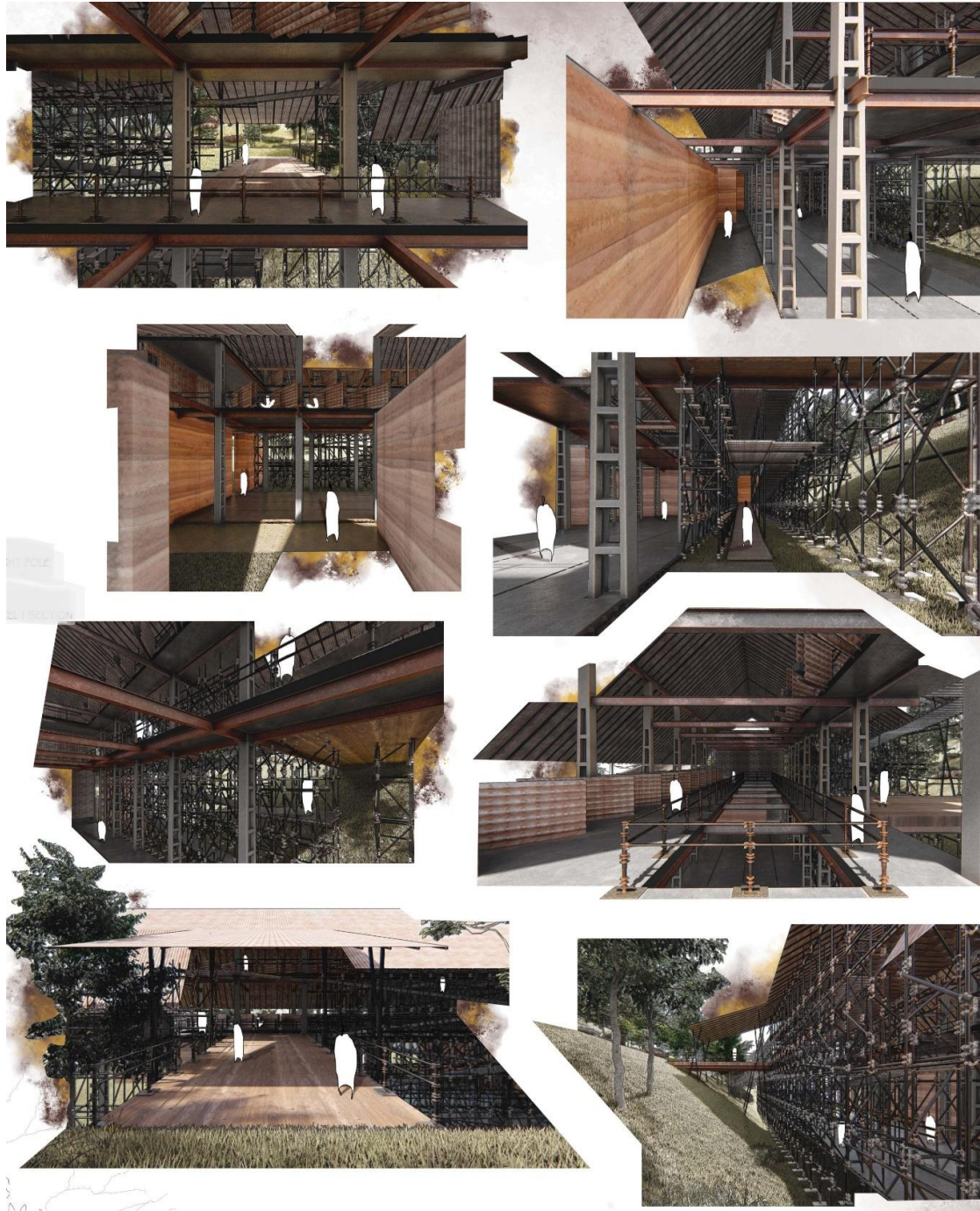


Figure 6: Spaces of the promotional centre at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic

The Promotional Centre therefore functions as the entry point of the architectural journey. It provokes curiosity and initiates philosophical dialogue. Individuals who wish to explore these ideas more deeply are then guided toward the second architectural intervention: the Knowledge Centre located within the Malwatta Temple complex.

4.3 KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

The Knowledge Centre represents the second stage of engagement and provides a more structured environment for learning. Rather than replacing existing educational functions, the building strengthens them. Weekday tuition classes currently conducted on the site continue to operate within the new structure and transform into Sunday school programs during weekends, maintaining continuity with existing educational practices.

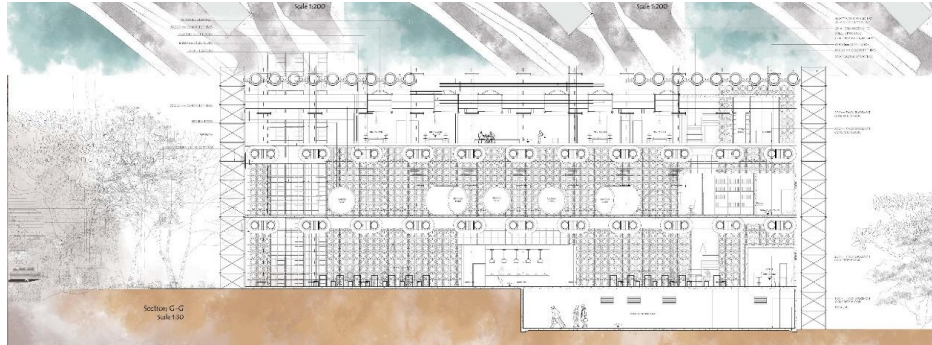


Figure 7: Long section of the knowledge centre at the Malwatta temple complex

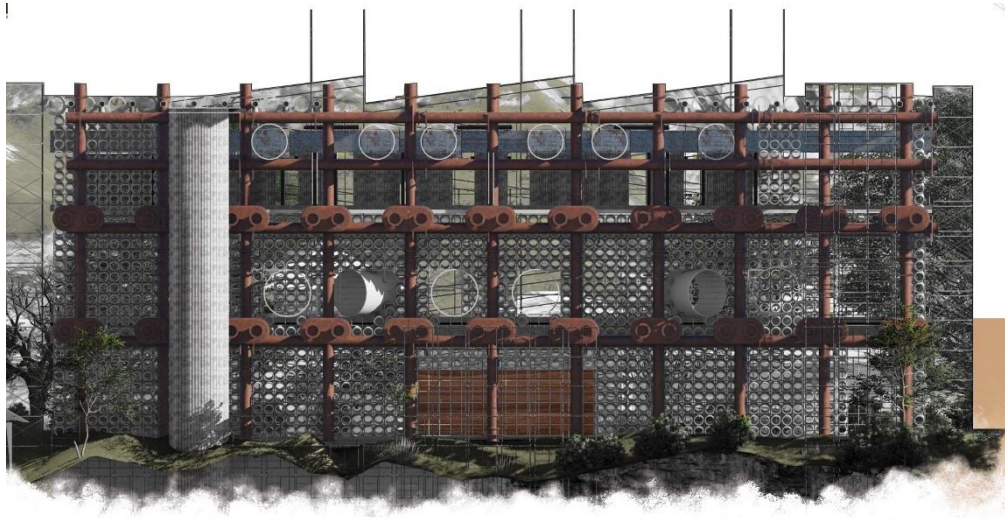


Figure 8: Front elevation of the knowledge centre at the Malwatta temple complex

The upper levels of the Knowledge Centre accommodate spaces dedicated to deeper philosophical engagement, including a research library, study areas, discussion rooms, meditation spaces, and residential accommodation for visiting scholars and practitioners. Individual meditation pods located at the uppermost level provide spaces for quiet contemplation and extended meditation practices.

Learning within this environment occurs not only through formal educational content but also through architectural experience itself. Material logic, adaptable spatial organization, environmental exposure, and spatial sequencing shape how users interact with the building.

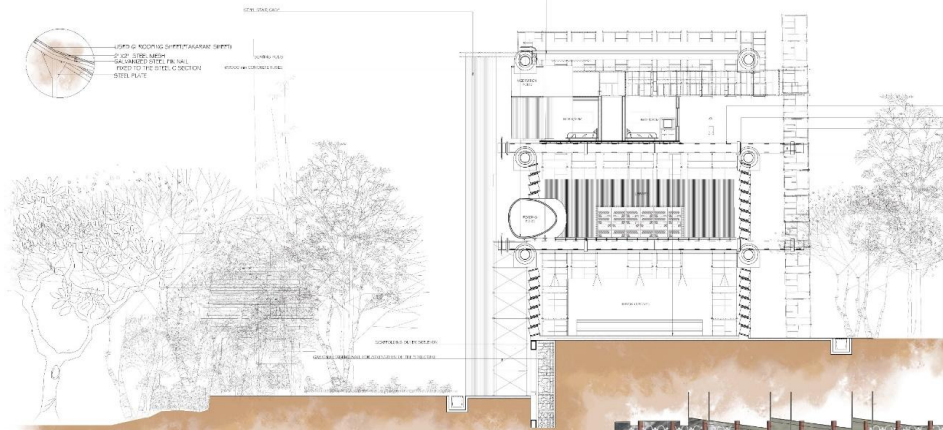


Figure 9: Cross-section of the knowledge centre at the Malwatta temple complex

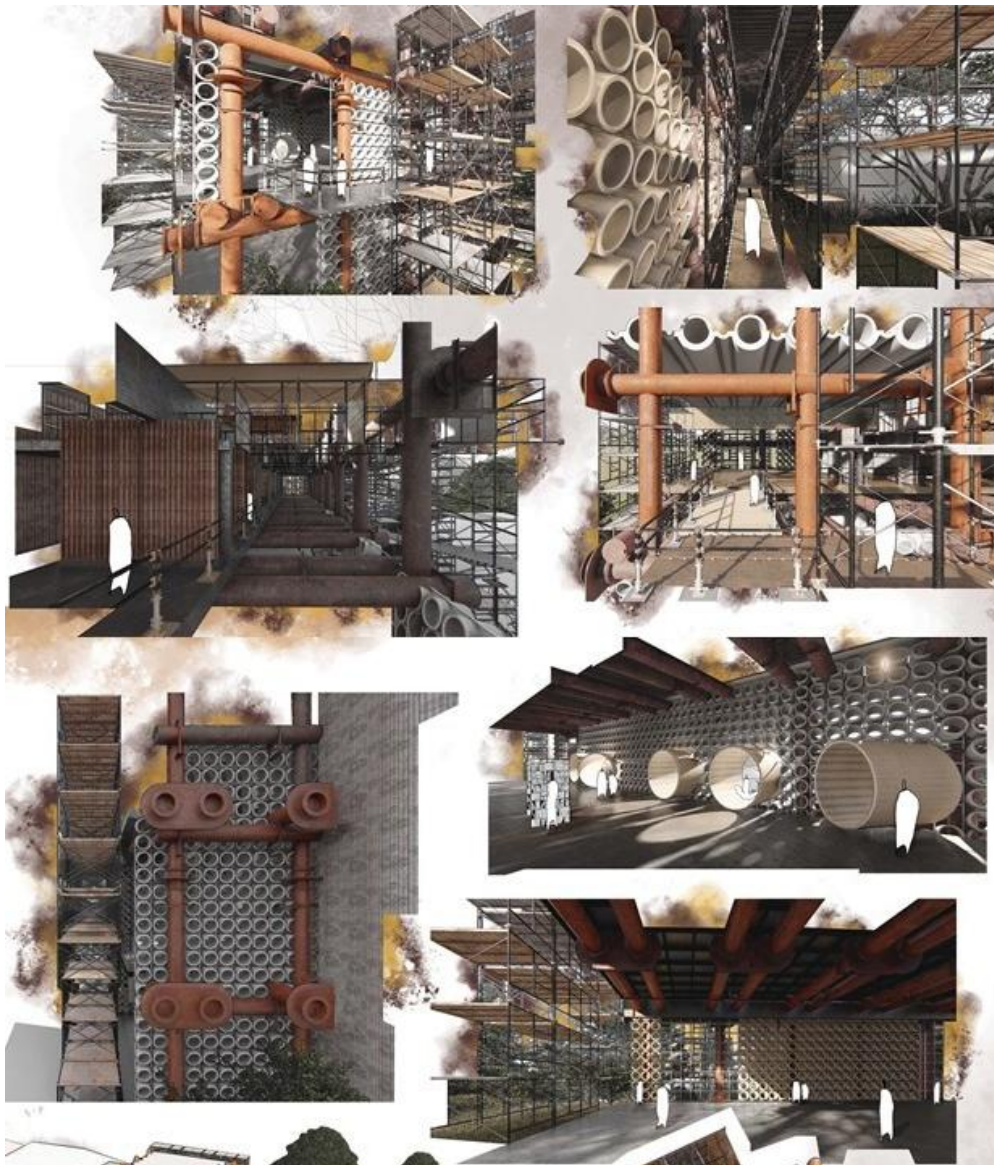


Figure 10: Spaces of knowledge centre at the Malwatta temple complex

5. DISCUSSION

The research demonstrates that philosophical frameworks rooted in regional cultural traditions can play a significant role in shaping regenerative architectural strategies. By integrating Buddhist philosophical principles into architectural design, the project challenges image driven religious architecture and proposes an alternative approach that prioritizes intellectual engagement, environmental responsibility, and cultural continuity.

The design strategies proposed in this study are informed not only by the author's interpretation but also by established discussions on critical regionalism, Buddhist architectural thought, and regenerative design. The project therefore operates as a theoretical architectural exploration situated within broader architectural discourse rather than a purely personal design proposition.

In the Sri Lankan context, where climate, landscape, and spiritual traditions have integrally historically influenced the built environment, regenerative architecture can emerge through the reinterpretation of these deeply embedded cultural principles. The thesis project, *A Center for Buddhist Philosophy - An Ideological Regionalization of Architectural Modernity*, attempts to respond directly to many of the concerns reflected in the theme "Towards a Regenerative Built Environment: From Foresight to Action." Rather than approaching sustainability purely as a technological problem, the project explores how cultural philosophy, regional knowledge, and spatial experience can inform regenerative architectural thinking.

The proposed architectural framework operates through the integration of environmental responsiveness, cultural continuity, and human wellbeing. Climate responsive spatial organization, shaded transitional spaces, passive ventilation strategies, and the integration of landscape are employed to reduce environmental impact while strengthening the relationship between architecture and nature. Material selection also reflects this philosophy. Many building components are derived from reused, reclaimed, or donated materials, demonstrating how Buddhist philosophical values such as restraint, impermanence, and mindfulness can be expressed through architectural materiality while simultaneously promoting sustainable construction practices.

The project also challenges the contemporary tendency toward monumentality in religious architecture by proposing a spatial language that encourages reflection, dialogue, and learning rather than visual dominance. Through the reinterpretation of Buddhist philosophical ideas such as interconnectedness, balance, and non-attachment, the design attempts to create environments that support mental clarity, social interaction, and ecological awareness.

In this sense, the thesis demonstrates how regional philosophy can guide the creation of built environments that regenerate both ecological systems and cultural meaning. Although the project focuses on the specific typology of a centre for Buddhist philosophy, the underlying design principles have broader relevance. Similar approaches could inform the development of educational institutions, cultural facilities, and community spaces within Sri Lanka. By translating philosophical foresight into spatial strategies, the project illustrates how architecture can move beyond theoretical discussions of sustainability and contribute practical design approaches toward the development of regenerative built environments.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This research examined the relationship between regional identity, Buddhist philosophy, and regenerative architectural design within the context of contemporary Sri Lankan architecture. Through the case study of the proposed Centre for Buddhist Philosophy in Kandy, the study demonstrates how philosophical concepts can inform architectural strategies that move beyond conventional sustainability approaches. Rather than relying solely on technological solutions, the research highlights a design approach that integrates ecological awareness, cultural continuity, and human wellbeing within architectural practice.

The findings suggest that regional cultural knowledge and philosophical traditions can provide meaningful insights for addressing current environmental and social challenges in the built environment. By reinterpreting Buddhist philosophical principles such as interconnectedness, balance, and mindfulness within modern architectural frameworks, architecture can support environments that encourage intellectual reflection, environmental responsibility, and social resilience. In this sense, architecture functions not only as a physical intervention but also as a medium that shapes human awareness and relationships with the surrounding environment.

Although this research focuses on the typology of a Centre for Buddhist Philosophy, the underlying principles extend beyond a single project and suggest a broader architectural framework applicable to other building types and contexts. Ultimately, the study highlights the potential of philosophy driven architectural approaches to contribute to regenerative built environments that are both culturally meaningful and environmentally responsive, demonstrating how regionally grounded design thinking can help move architectural practice from theoretical foresight toward practical and transformative action.

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