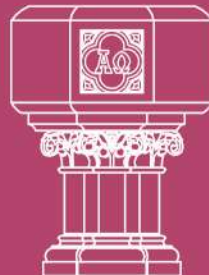


The chronological development of
Baptismal Fonts
in urban churches in Sri Lanka



Sagara Jayasinghe

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Introduction

Baptism is the act of ceremonial cleansing by which a person becomes a member of a Christian church. Although baptism could occur anywhere, the special place for baptism, either a freestanding building or smaller font, is a significant element of every communal church. Therefore, the baptistery or baptismal font has become an ordinary piece of furniture in many Christian churches practicing non-immersive methods, such as sprinkling or pouring of water. The simplest of these fonts have a stone, metal, or wooden pedestal, with a holder that could accommodate different shapes of water basins.

Despite their smaller size, baptismal fonts often intermingle with prevailing architectural characters of an urban landscape. For instance, the signs and symbols prevalent in the baptismal fonts of most Anglican churches in Colombo mostly follow Gothic Revival architectural precedents. The relevant modern historiographical sources on the 19th and 20th-century urban architecture in Sri Lanka reveal that no systematic study on this significant aspect of church architecture has been conducted so far.

Therefore, the main objective of this technical report was to record and analyze the chronological development of architectural characters as well as the current condition and state of preservation of 19th and 20th century Baptismal Fonts in urban churches in Colombo and its suburbs. Under this documentation project, the decorations and motives from the most representative Christian churches from different religious denominations have been systematically recorded as per their chronological development. Architectural measured drawings and graphical data were documented in parallel to understand the integration of the prevailing architectural character of buildings. Further, this documentation can be extended as a record for posterity and a primary tool for conservation and restoration. It can be used to communicate the architectural significance and heritage of surviving baptismal fonts not only to design and conservation professionals but to the public at large.

The study was funded by the Senate Research Committee of the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka under Grant No. SRC/ST/2019/08.

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Locations of the surveyed churches

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3. Christ Church, Galle Face
4. Christ Church, Mutwal
5. Holy Emmanuel Church, Moratuwa
6. All Saints Church, Hulftsdorp
7. St. Lucia's Cathedral, Kothahena
8. St. Andrew's Scots Kirk, Galle Face
9. St. Michael and All Angels Church, Polwatte
10. All Saint's Church, Borella

St. Peter's Church, Fort



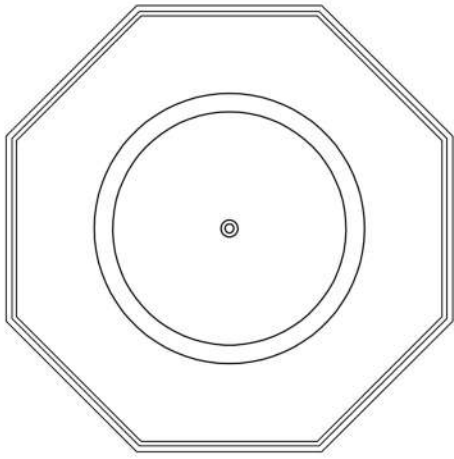
Conversion – 1804, Consecration – 1821
Denomination - Anglican

The history of this location goes back to the Portuguese period. It is said that the Portuguese Chapel of Misericordia was built on the same site. During the Dutch period, first, they converted the building into the official residence for the Governor, and subsequently, it has been used for different secular purposes. During the British period, it was not initially the intention to set apart the building for religious purposes (Beven, n.d., p.253). However, in 1804 the building was converted to a Garrison Church, and finally, in 1821, it was consecrated as the St. Peter's Church, Colombo Fort. The present building is not as it originally stood; several alterations having been done occasionally to adapt it to the purposes of a church.

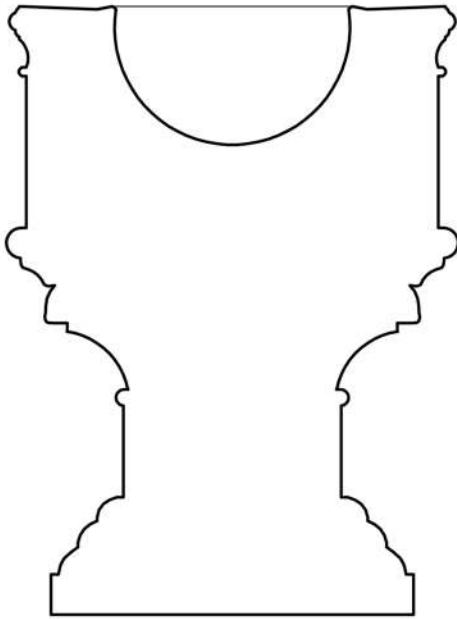
Today, St. Peter's Church has become one of the oldest continuously functioning churches in Colombo.

The appearance of the present Baptismal Font looks not to be coeval with the architecture of the building. Very meager in design. The bowl of the font is octagonal and has a heraldic square in each compartment. It is supported on a shaft or a pedestal of the same form with a thick scalloped molding capital and a base.

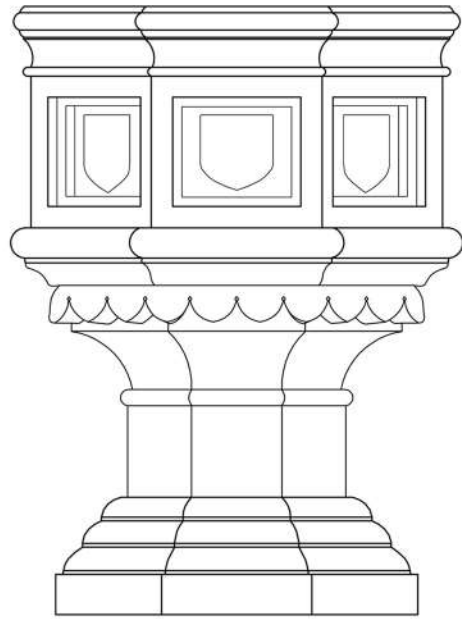




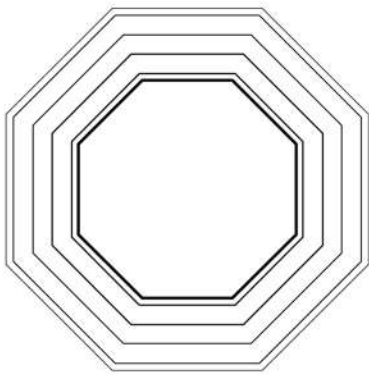
TOP VIEW



SECTION



ELEVATION



PLAN



St. Thomas' Church, Kochchikade

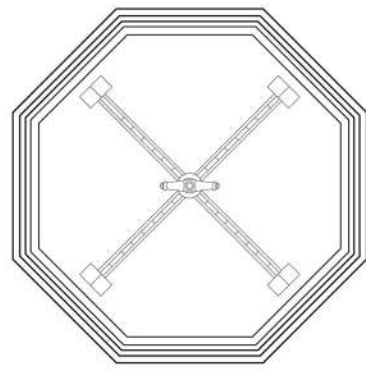


Foundation – 1815, Consecration – 1843
Denomination - Anglican

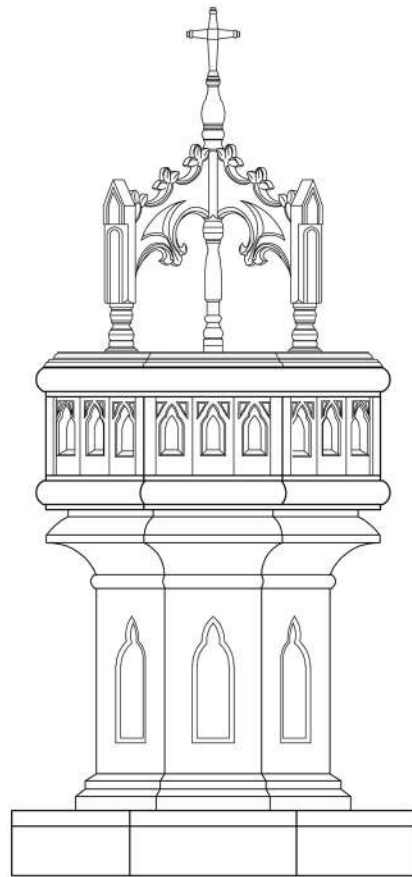
It is believed that a Portuguese Church once stood on the same site of the present church and that Ginthupitiya, by which name the locality is known, is a corruption of "San Thome Pitiya", meaning St. Thomas Plain. (Medis, 1995, p. 328). However, the present church can claim to be the first Anglican place of worship built during the British period. The chosen architectural style was "Modified Gothic" which was very much in contrast with the preceding Dutch Reformed Churches (Jayasinghe, 2015, p.10).

The bowl of the font is externally octagonal with a circular orifice and has a shaft with a capital and a base of the same form. All eight sides of the bowl are paneled, bearing three trefoil arches in each. The shaft, too, is ornamented in the same manner as the bowl but with one trefoil arch. The wooden font cover appears to be a later addition and of lower design sensitivity.

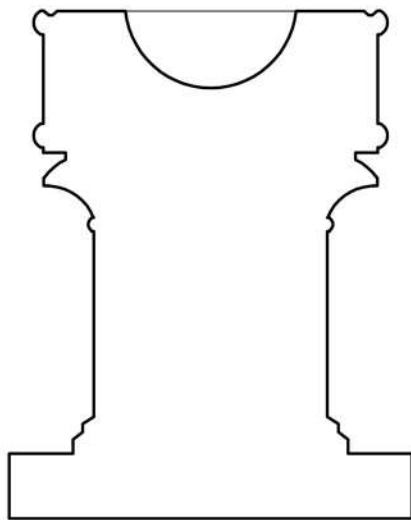




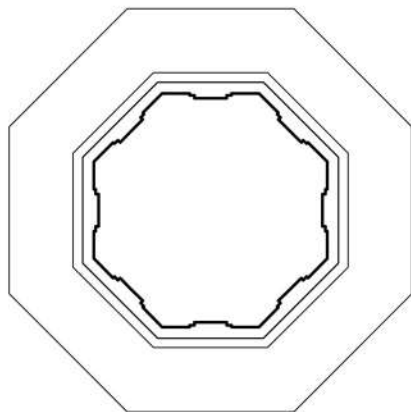
TOP VIEW



ELEVATION



SECTION



PLAN



Christ Church, Galle Face

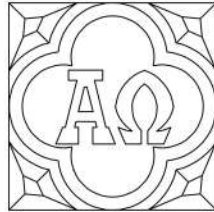


Foundation – 1853, Reconstruction – 1898
Denomination – Anglican

According to the chronicles, after a significant portion of the original church collapsed in 1897 and overlaid on the old plan. The architectural language the present building consists of several Gothic –influenced elements such as buttress, lancet windows, stained glasses, and Mosaic floors. Architectural characteristics remained unchanged, enduring many alterations and modifications made from time to time.



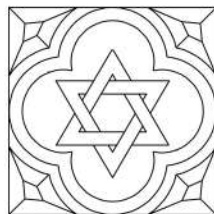
The bowl of the font is supported on a circular pillar with four shafts attached at the angles, all with molded bases and richly sculptured foliage at the capitals. The bowl is octagonal with square panels, four of which are ornamented in low relief with a square and an enclosed quatrefoil with four various symbols.



Alpha and Omega: Denotes the first and the last letters of the classical Greek alphabet, Alpha (Α), and Omega (Ω): symbolizing the "the beginning and the end" as per Revelation 21:6, 22:13. This also refers to the nature of Christ.



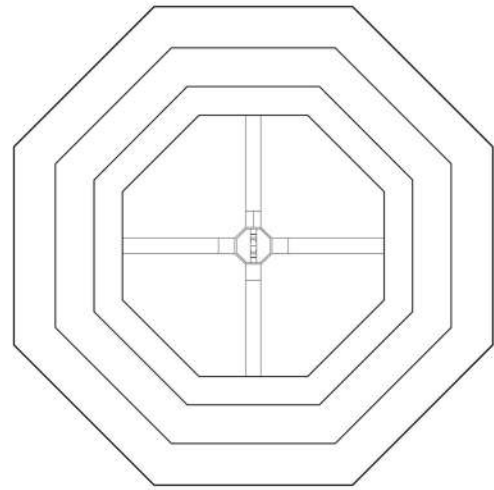
Chi Rho: The earliest form of Christogram, formed by superimposing the first two capital letters—chi and rho XP — of the Greek word ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ "JESUS" in uppercase.



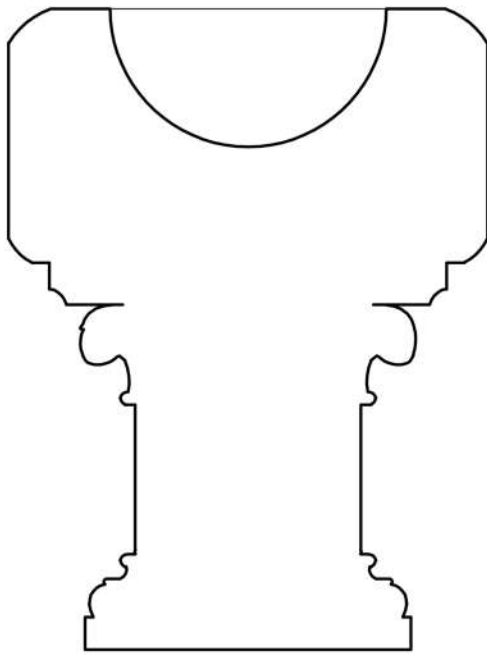
The six-pointed star or Star of David: The six points stand for the six days of creation. The points are also said to represent the six attributes of God - power, wisdom, majesty, love, mercy, and justice. It is also called the Star of David and is recognized as the modern symbol of Judaism.



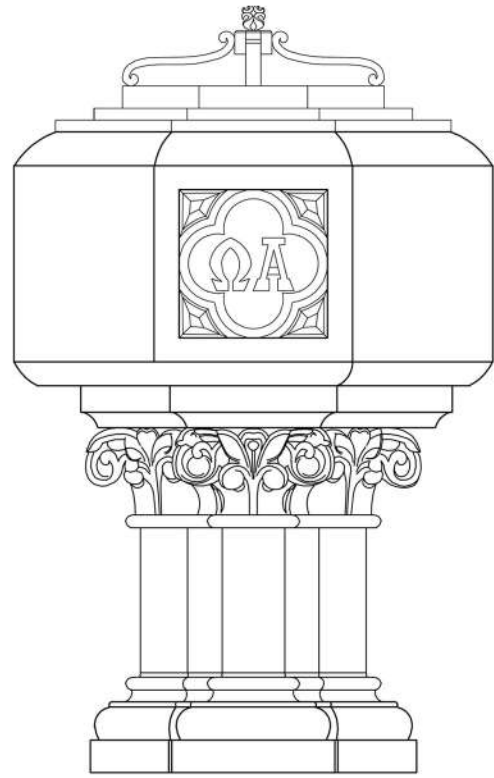
IHS: The monogram is made up of the first three letters of the name of Jesus when written in the Greek alphabet.



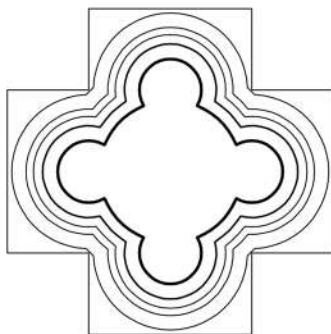
TOP VIEW



SECTION



ELEVATION



PLAN



Christ Church, Mutwal



Foundation – 1852, Consecration – 1854
Denomination – Anglican

Christ Church, Mutwal is the first Anglican Cathedral of the Diocese of Colombo. The architect of the Cathedral was Richard Cromwell Carpenter, the designer of many churches in England and its colonies, (Beven, n.d., p.238) including the Church of St. Mary Magdalene, Munster Square, London. The church is said to have been built from hewn granite brought from England as ships' ballast. The thick white walls with pointed arches, the hammer-beam roof, stained glass windows, and carved wooden chancel screen have made a refined Anglian style interior.

This baptismal font is the most remarkable specimen of an emblematical and inscribed 19th-century baptismal font in Sri Lanka. It is a fine square bowl of large dimensions and externally tapers slightly downwards. A bold text of scripture (John 3:3) which converses the theological point of view of baptism runs on the top edge of the bowl.

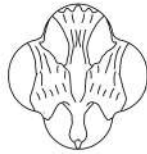
"EXCEPT A MAN - BE BORN AGAIN - HE CANNOT SEE - THE KINGDOM OF THE GOD"



All panels of the bowl are sculptured with high relief foliage and four motifs in an enclosed quatrefoil. It is supported on a central pillar with chevron moldings and four independent shafts at the angles with capitals and bases, resembling other architectural details of the church building.

The motifs are as follows.

EXCEPT A MAN



The Holy Dove: Denotes the Biblical story that the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus at the time of his own baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. (Matt. 3:16)

BE BORN AGAIN



The Cross with a Serpent: Refers to the Biblical story of Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus. In this narrative, Jesus uses the episode of the bronze serpent to explain more precisely what he means by being "born again." (John 3)

WE CANNOT SEE

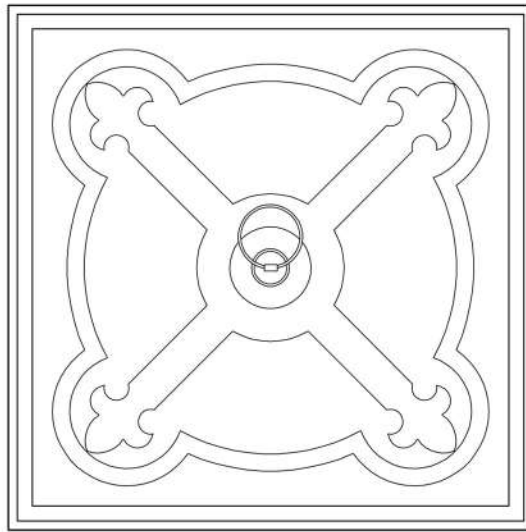


Noah's Ark: Symbolizes the equation of Ark and Church found in the Anglican rite of baptism, and God's promise of salvation and provision.

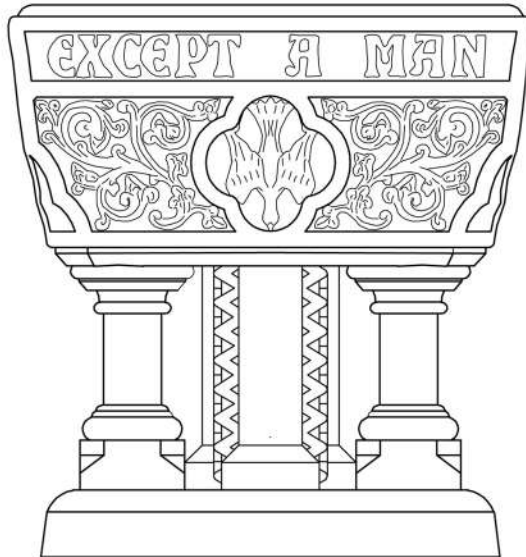
WE KINGDOM OF GOD



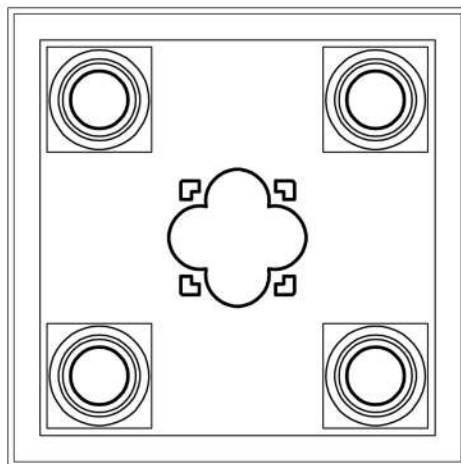
IHS: The monogram is made up of the first three letters of the name of Jesus when written in the Greek alphabet.



TOP VIEW



ELEVATION



PLAN



Holy Emmanuel Church, Moratuwa



Foundation – 1857, Consecration - 1860
Denomination - Anglican

The first British period church building at the site was pulled down in 1857 to build the present one, following the prevailing Gothic Revival architectural precedents. The most prominent feature of the building is the tower, one hundred and twenty feet in height.

The font is elaborately finished and displays a great variety of ornamental moldings typically found in Anglican baptismal fonts in Sri Lanka. The cup-shaped bowl is divided by trefoil arches into five compartments, and the rest is elaborately worked with interweaving foliage. The richly carved wooden font cover is given as a worthy example of the character of the 19th-century ecclesiastical furniture in Sri Lanka.



The trefoil arches are charged with the following symbols.



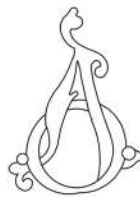
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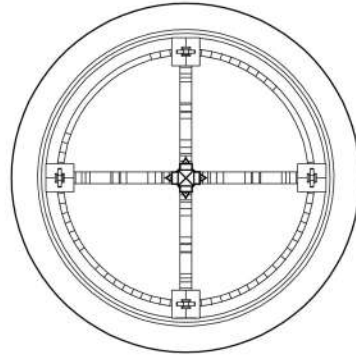
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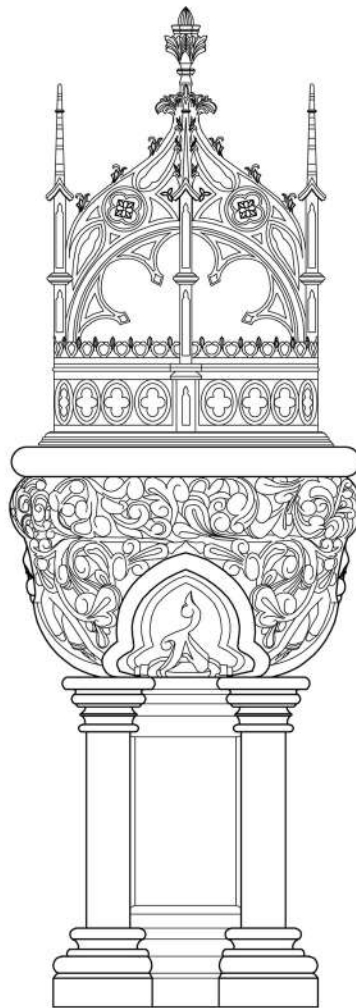
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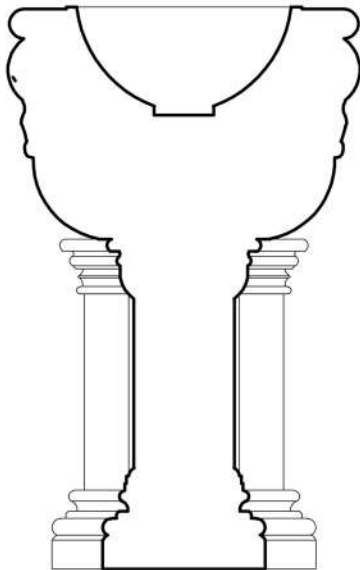
Crozier: An insignia of an ecclesiastical office.



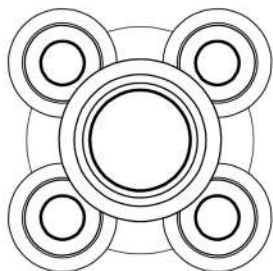
TOP VIEW



ELEVATION



SECTION



PLAN



All Saints Church, Hulftsdorp

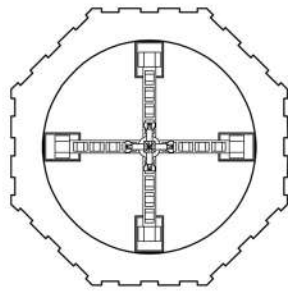


Foundation – 1860, Consecration – 1865
Denomination - Anglican

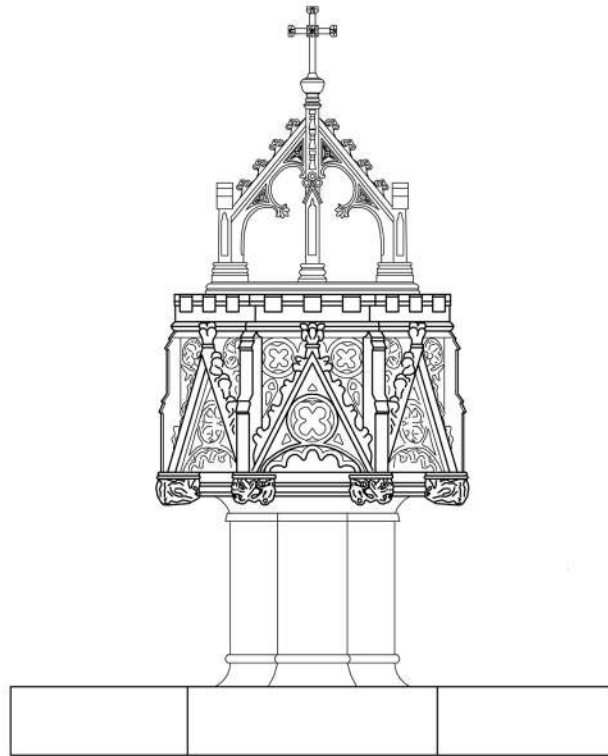
The location is said to be in Portuguese times the site of a seminary and in Dutch times, a court of justice. The architectural style of the present Anglican Church with tall, narrow, pointed windows may be generally described as "Early English" (Beven, n.d., p.260). The roof is very steep and of a commanding height. The spire of the church is said to have been the highest architectural feature in Colombo during that time.

In form, the existing baptismal font mostly resembles that of the Church of St Mary and St. Thomas at Wortham, England. Each side of the octagonal bowl contains a triangular crocketed canopy, the heads of which and the spandrils are enriched with foliated circles. The top of the bowl is doubly battlemented, and the angles have buttresses supported by corbels of foliage. The shaft is also octagonal but too plain in contrast and rests on the large two-tiered octagonal base. The angles of the wooden cover also are ornamented with buttresses with crocketed canopies and across surmounts the finial. The overall decorations and moldings of the font precisely correspond with other architectural details of the church building.

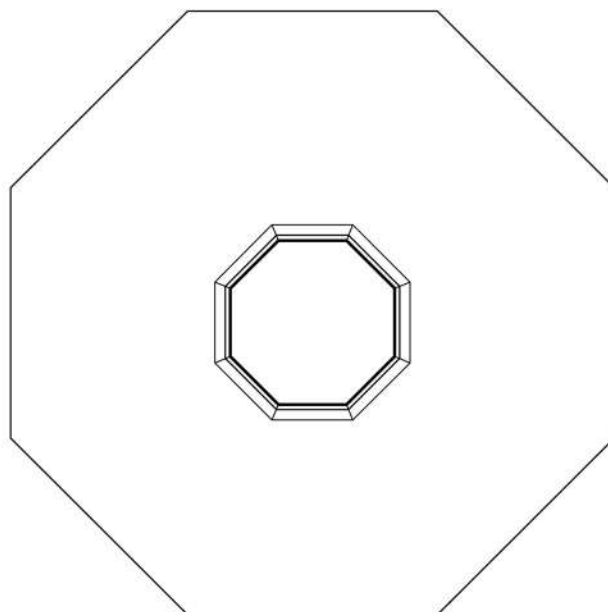




TOP VIEW



ELEVATION



PLAN



St. Lucia's Cathedral, Kotahena

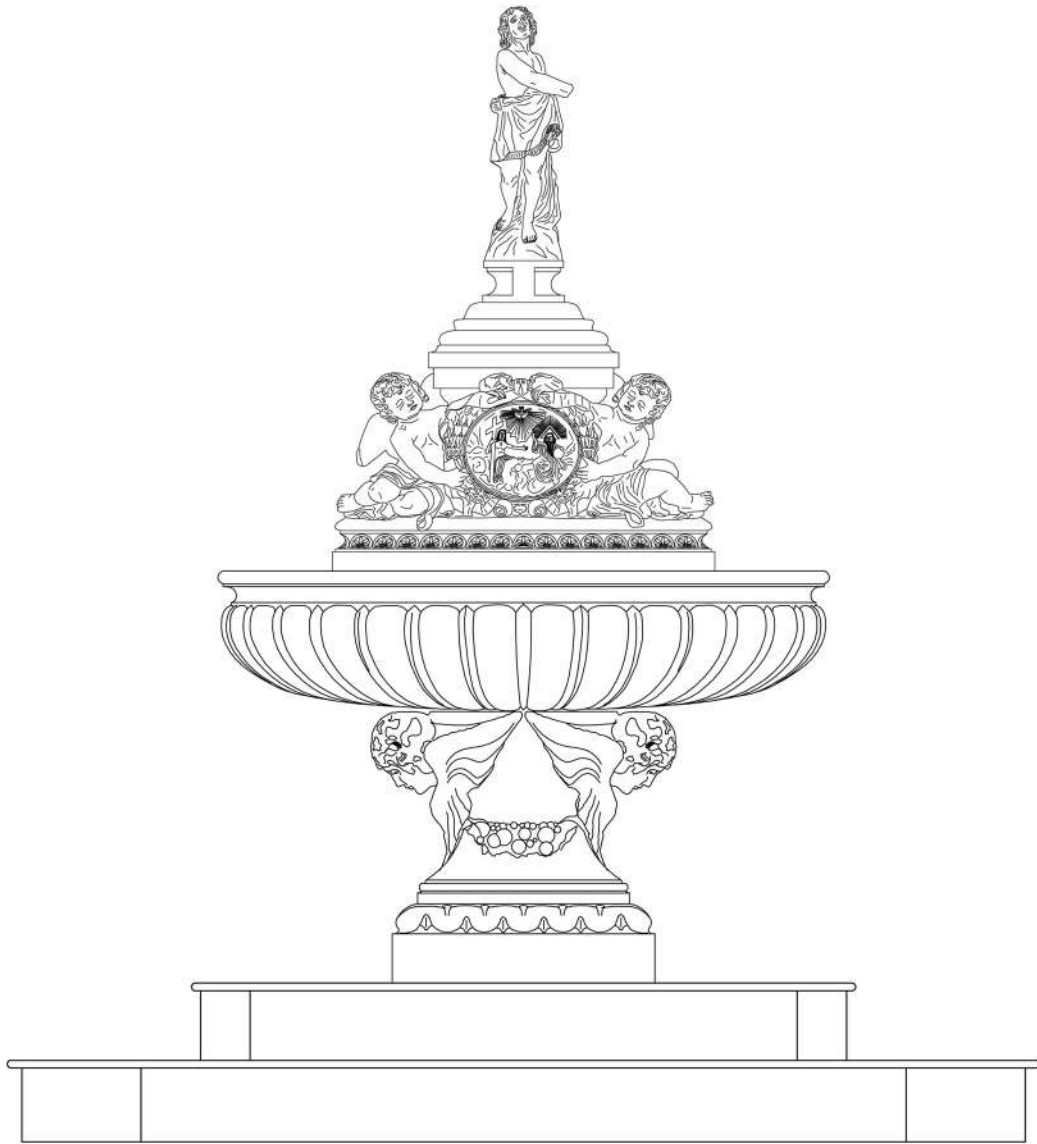


Foundation – 1872, Completed – 1902
Denomination - Roman Catholic

This magnificent edifice is the oldest and largest Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sri Lanka. Remarkably, the builders of St. Lucia's have made an effort to imitate many elements of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican on a smaller scale. The layout of the cathedral appears as a much simpler and minor version of a traditional cruciform basilica plan in Europe. The spatial organization of the building mainly consists of a vestibule, an elongated three-aisled nave, a domed transept, and two lateral chapels (Jayasinghe, 2018, p.856).

This Italianized font of white marble is circular in plan and has an unusual scale and proposition. The design consists of three components: a top figural sculpture, a basin, and a pedestal. The figural sculpture is crowned by a statue of John the Baptist carved with two winged infant figures (cherubs) who hold an ornamental brass medal depicting the Holy Trinity. Though the basin area is extensive in dimension, only a small tub is supplied for the sacramental rituals. The pedestal is again carved with two angels who appear to hold up the structure.





0 3 6 12 inch

ELEVATION

St. Andrew's Scots Kirk, Galle Face

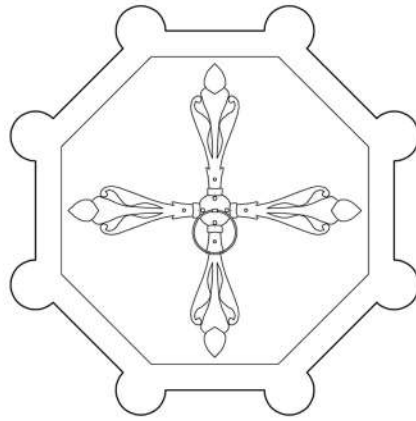


Foundation – 1906
Denomination - Presbyterian

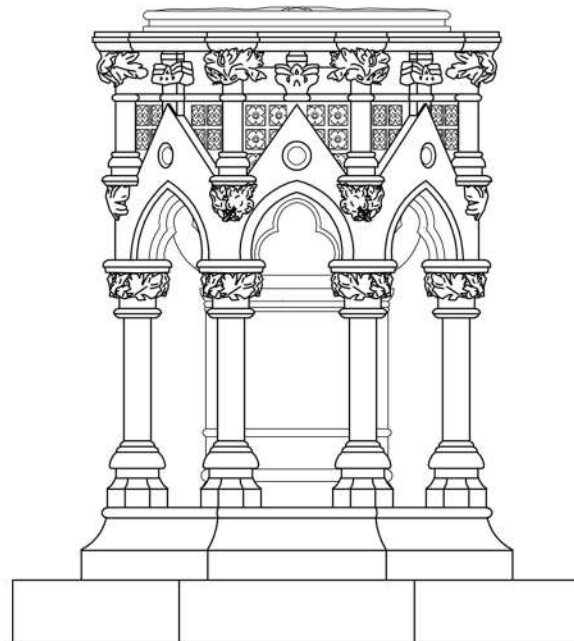
The architectural style of the building is typically Scottish but also consists of some Gothic inspired features like stained glass windows and pointed arches. The church retains its original name to date and emphasizes its Scottish tradition by maintaining the old phrase 'Kirk'. Today, St. Andrew's has become one of the most iconic ecclesiastical buildings in Colombo.

The architectural characters of the font are coeval with the building and significantly ornate and rich. The bowl of the font is octagonal with a circular orifice. It has shafts at the angles with foliage on the capital and the corbel. It is supported by a central round pillar and eight free shafts with foliage and a decorated base, resting on a heavily molded base. Tracery windows with a triangular canopy interconnect all shafts and the spandrels are enriched with foliated squares. All shafts are finished out of pink marble. The font is a worthy specimen of the early 20th century with characteristic moldings and details.

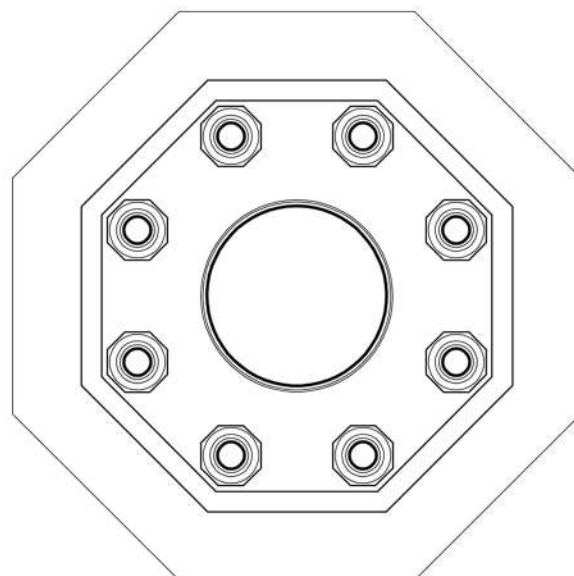




TOP VIEW



ELEVATION



PLAN



St. Michael and All Angels Church, Polwatte



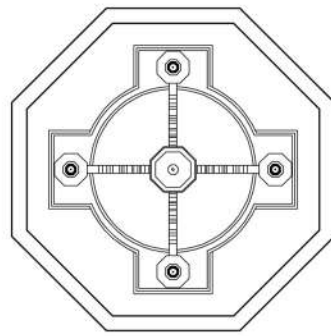
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Michael_and_All_Angels_Church,_Polwatte

Foundation – 1918, Consecration – 1922
Denomination - Anglican

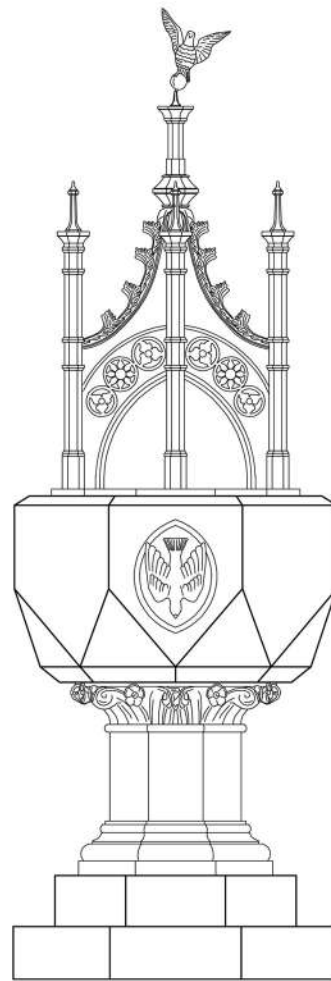
The church is a magnificent building of stone and mortar. It stands as another testimony to the rich architectural heritage of English Reformation churches in Sri Lanka. The architectural language mostly resembles that of other Anglican churches around Colombo. The noble proportions of the nave, extensive arches, and the introduction of a broad ambulatory complements the general sense of space.

The bowl of raw granite is supported on a central shaft of the same form with a foliated capital and molded base. The chamfered top angles of the bowl bear a Biblical inscription. The angles under the bowl are chamfered downwards, forming eight pentagonal panels. One of which bears a low relief image of a descending dove. This imagery is often used as a symbol of baptism, signifying that the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus at the time of his baptism. The original wooden cover with crocketed ribs still remains and a figure of an ascending dove surmounts the finial.

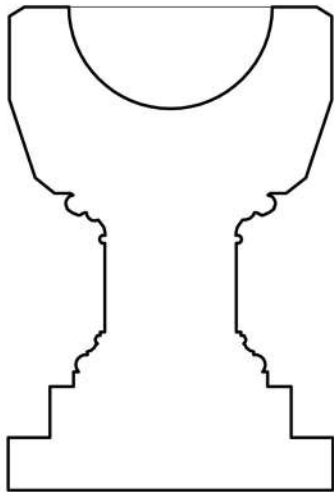




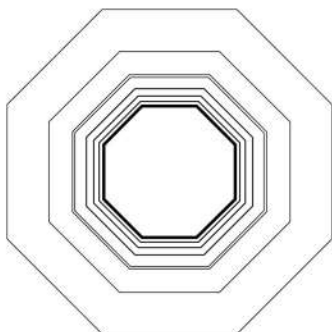
TOP VIEW



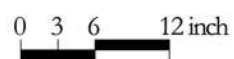
ELEVATION



SECTION



PLAN



All Saint's Church, Borella

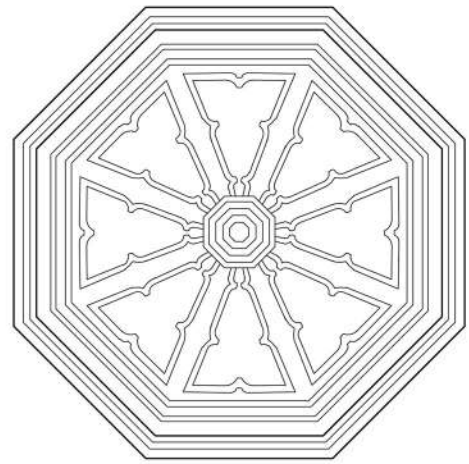


Foundation – 1935
Denomination - Roman Catholic

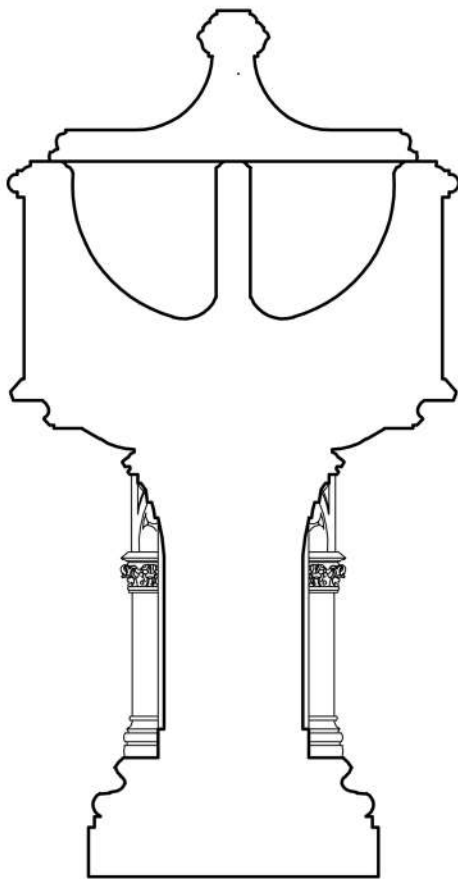
All Saint's, Borella stands out among other Roman Catholic churches around Colombo for its distinctive architectural character. It is synonymous with the Gothic style and consists of buttresses capped with pinnacles and ornamented crockets at the outside and ribbed vaults and pointed windows inside.

The font is a rich example of good design and craftsmanship, portrayed by its proportions and detailing. The whole font is in an excellent state of preservation. Both bowl and font cover is octagonal in plan. Each compartment of the bowl is enriched with a double trefoil-headed recess arch, except the front one, which bears a descending dove, a well-known emblem of baptismal iconography. It is supported by a central pillar of the same form and eight clustered shafts with foliage and decorated bases and rests on another heavily molded base. The bowl, font cover, and pedestal are all white marble, and the circular shafts are finished out of pink marble.

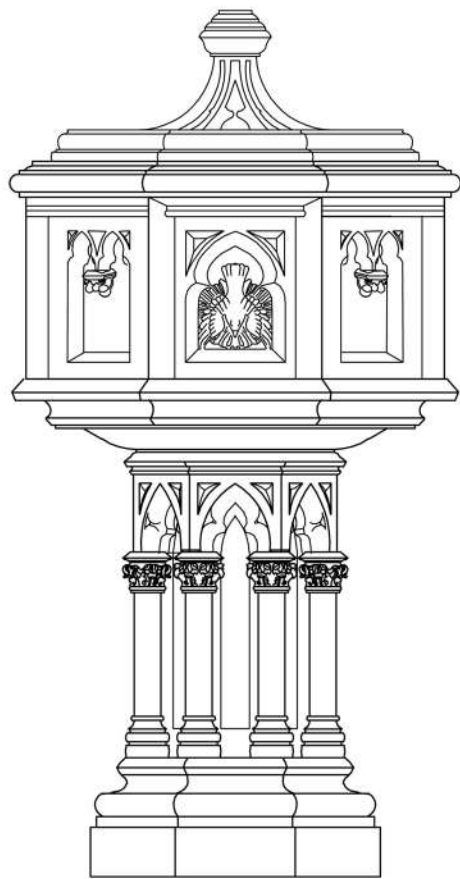




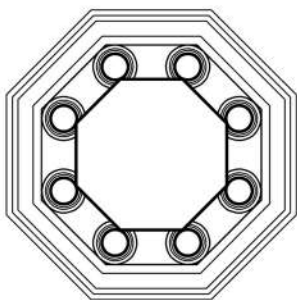
TOP VIEW



SECTION



ELEVATION



PLAN



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