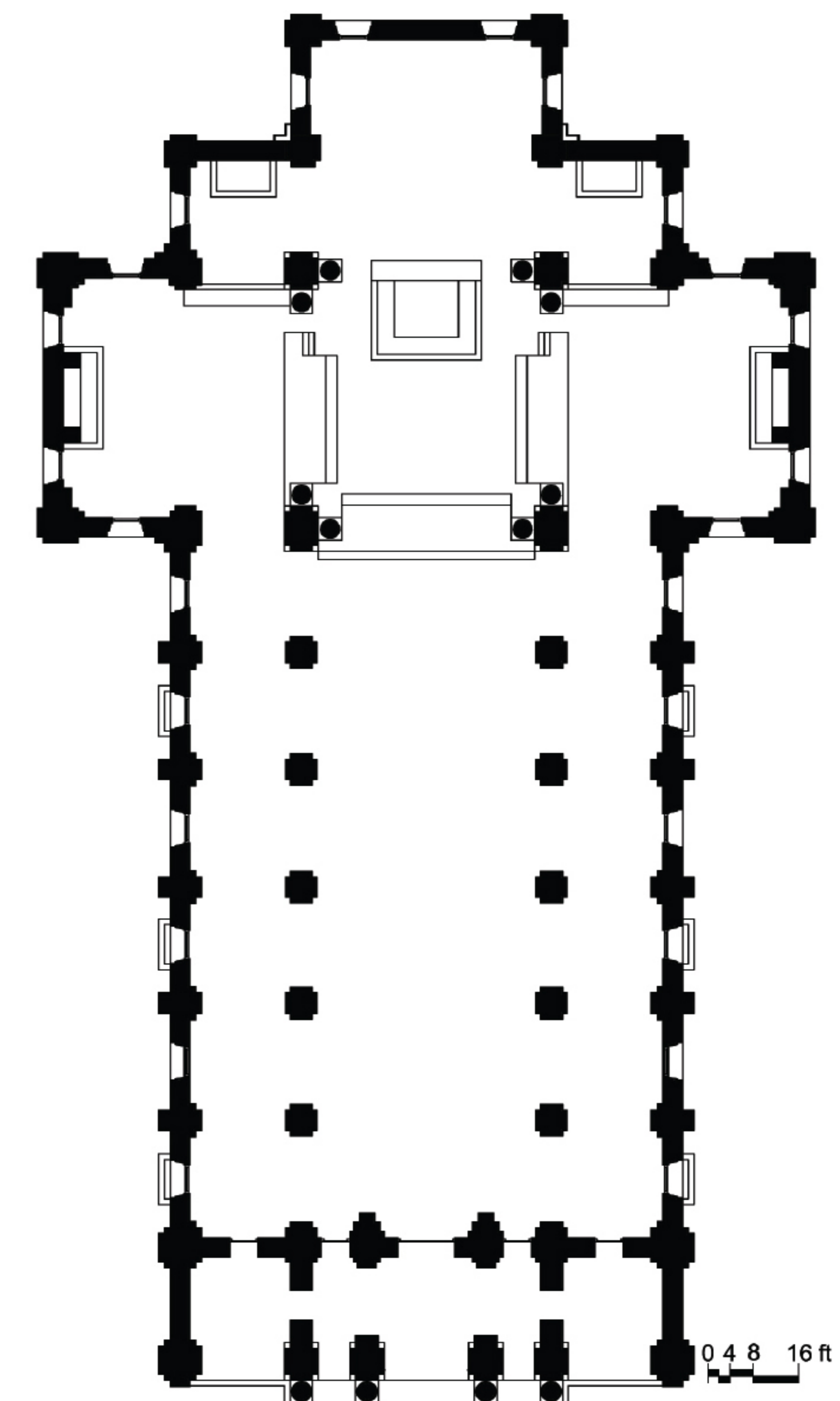


vogue of renaissance

19th century italian-influenced church
architecture in sri lanka
by architect sagara jayasinghe





St. Mary's church in Negombo



St. Mary's church in Galle



St. Lucia's cathedral in Kotahena



St. Philip Neri's in Pettah

The colonial missionary enterprise in Sri Lanka spread over nearly four and half centuries, beginning from the 16th century, with the domination of the Portuguese (1505-1658), Dutch (1658-1796) and British (1796-1948), in sequence. This period is characterised by attempts of each colonial invader to introduce their respective denominations of Christianity with great political motivations, namely Roman Catholic by the Portuguese; Protestant Reformed by the Dutch; and Anglican and other Protestant societies by the British. The most notable typology of the Portuguese churches was the typically longitudinal plan with three naves and a plain front façade. The principal typology of the Dutch churches was the Greek cross plan with high gable façades. With the advent of the British, in addition to the introduction of Victorian Gothic Anglican churches, the revival of Roman Catholic church architecture in Sri Lanka can be attributed to the Italian monks of Sylvestro-Benedictines who brought the Roman architectural vocabularies. The influx of the Sylvestro-Benedictines is a historically significant event, as they undertook the pastoral work of the vicariate of Colombo as their first-ever mis-

sionary involvement outside Europe. Therefore, the churches built by these monks can be considered as the original Italian-influenced masterpieces in Asia.

It is significant that Sylvestro-Benedictines commenced construction of a large number of massive churches in the vicariate of Colombo during the first two decades of their mission. The best examples of churches built during this period are St. Philip Neri's Church (1862) in Colombo, St. Mary's Church (1870) in Negombo, St. James' Church (1873) in Mutuwal, St. Mary's Cathedral (1876) in Galle and St. Anthony's Cathedral (1877) in Kandy. The finest of these is the present cathedral of Colombo: St. Lucia's (1889) in Kotahena. The historical correspondences of the Sylvestro-Benedictines exchanged between Colombo and Rome reveal that, from the beginning of the mission, they had commissioned to build the monumental churches, more or less favouring the ecclesiastical architectural models that were in vogue in their 'mother land'. Baracatta quotes, "The church in Sri Lanka had begun to think big, and the Italian missionaries went in for monumental churches, in keeping with the magnificent

churches of their own land." Indeed, this architectural approach was appropriate to the prevailing situation of the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka. The relief from persecution against Catholicism and the establishment of several Protestant denominations by the British encouraged Catholics of the deep-rooted missions of the vicariate of Colombo to rebuild their churches in this splendid style as an external manifestation of their faith.

It is apparent that, by this time, the religious space of the Roman Catholic Church hitherto occupied by Goan missionaries with their decidedly Indo-Portuguese influence had transformed to an Italian missionary influence, with a distinct preference for Renaissance architectural vocabulary. Two distinct types of spatial characteristics can be seen in the early churches of Sylvestro-Benedictines. The first type: the church of St. Philip Neri's in Pettah, where the rectangular ground plan was articulated by a broad nave, vestibule (or narthex), two tall square towers at either side of the vestibule and the two lateral chapels at the head of the nave. The second type was developed as a perfect model for fairly larger churches. The ad-

opted architectural model was characterised a cruciform ground plan with a three-aisled nave and domed transept. The clearest examples of this type include the churches of St. Lucia's in Kotahena and St. Mary's in Negombo.

One of their new ecclesial priorities had been the rebuilding of the old church of St. Philip Neri's at Pettah into a large and beautiful place of worship in a style more appropriate to the capital of the island. Therefore, St. Philip Neri's is the first church built by Italian missionaries in Sri Lanka, and served as an important paradigm for latter church builders. The spatial organisation of the church mainly comprises the vestibule, nave, square towers, lateral chapels and an elevated choir above the vestibule. The main portal of the vestibule is formed by a lintel and supported by two simple Doric columns and topped by a filled-in, semi-circular arch in imitation of a triumphal arch. The elevated choir is lit by two oculus. According to typological classifications, the main façade is a modulation of three floors and five spans: of which, three spans correspond the central nave and the other two the towers. This façade typology would become a common module in

later churches. Although the original architectural details of the interior of St. Philip Neri's are well preserved to-date, it seems that the sanctuary in particular was subject to a major liturgical overhaul under the current ecclesiastical administration. By following the available historical images, it can be supposed that the original sanctuary space was a semi-circular form with an ambulatory type path. It is further noticed that the façade and the exterior have been exposed to consequential modifications over many decades.

At the time of British occupation, St. Lucia's Kotahena was the headquarters of the Catholic Church of Colombo. With the installation of the first Vicar Apostolic of Sri Lanka in 1838, it was elevated to Cathedral status. Subsequently, after the transformation of administration from the Goanese to European regime, the title of "Cathedral" was formally given to the church of St. Lucia, and the St. Lucia's Cathedral presumably became the first church, outside the old Portuguese dioceses, to be decorated with such honorific. Today, the Cathedral of St. Lucia's can be presented as the closest replication of an Italian edifice in their architectural

programme. Particularly, the façade of the cathedral was reported in the chronicles as a replica of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. The floor plan of the cathedral appears as a much simpler and minor version of a traditional cruciform basilica plan in Europe. The spatial organisation of the cathedral mainly comprises a vestibule, elongated three-aisled nave, domed transept and two lateral chapels. The four large piers in the center of transept mark the crossing, which bears the great dome and four surrounding smaller counterparts.

Although the number of doors in a façade usually corresponds to the number of aisles inside, it has an additional two small square-top doors at either sides of the central round-headed door. It seems that the five portals and respective balconies at the vestibule also correspond to the same exception. In addition, the vestibule features an order of four Corinthian columns topped by a triangular pediment. Furthermore, the seven statues of saints adorn the balustrade of the façade. Therefore, it can be understood that the builders of St. Lucia's have made an effort to imitate many elements of St Peter's in a smaller scale.❶