

Adaptive Reuse of the American Style House in Sri Lanka: With Special Reference to the Satellite Towns of Ratmalana and Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia

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Abstract

American Style (AS) domestic architecture in suburban Sri Lanka, once a hallmark of modernity and middle-class aspiration during the mid-20th century, now faces an existential threat. This decline is driven by socio-cultural and economic transformations, catalyzed by the state's decision to introduce neoliberal economic reforms (NLER) in 1977. In this context, it is hypothesized that the introduction of NLER created new socio-cultural and economic demands, leading to the AS house gradually losing its domestic function to date. This functional shift, facilitated through the adaptive reuse of these houses for alternative purposes, has led to the gradual erasure of a once-prominent architectural layer from Sri Lankan suburbia, marking a significant transformation in its architectural landscape. This signifies a profound transformation in its architectural landscape. This research ascertains if this is the case.

It adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing case studies as its primary strategy. Delving on 20 case studies of AS houses that have undergone adaptive reuse from satellite town of Ratmalana and Dehiwala-Mount-Lavinia, the research evaluates their current uses in comparison to their original domestic purposes. Subsequently, a phenomenological perspective is employed to analyze the underlying factors driving these functional transformations. The analysis is facilitated through tabulation.

The research was carried out in April 2023. It identifies that 40% of the cases preserved their domestic function, while 60% underwent functional transformation through adaptive reuse. For the 14 types of adaptive reuses established, 9 distinct underlying factors seemed to drive them. In terms of these underlying factors, demands for new Lifestyle Services emerged as the most prominent, accounting for 21.4% of the total cases. Following this, Building Industry Services, Communication and Transportation needs each contributed 14.2% of the total. The remaining categories, including Residential, Employment, Legal Services, Food/Beverages/Goods Services and Education Services, each accounted for 7.14%, reflecting a relatively balanced distribution. The post-NLER underlying factors, reflecting the unprecedented demands of suburban life, were driven by a population explosion that created a shortage of space to accommodate these needs, thereby increasing rental opportunities. The considerable loss of domestic function contributes to the erasure of the AS house, ultimately validating the hypothesis.

Key words: domestic architecture, American Style, middle-class, alternative reuse

Introduction

A new style of houses emerged in the 1960s Sri Lanka as a response to the socio-economic and cultural aspirations of its burgeoning middle-class (Pieris, 2007, 2011). Drawing inspiration from a range of mid-century American suburban models that were popularized there such as the 'Cape Cod,' 'Ranch House' and 'Prairie House', these mimicry-driven Sri Lankan designs became symbols of modernity and upward mobility (Wijetunge, 2022, 2024). For a newly empowered demographic with predominantly rural roots, following the island's independence in 1948, these houses forged a distinct architectural identity that became known as the 'American Style' (AS) (Pieris, 2007, 2011; Wijetunge, 2011).

This epistemologically-based empowerment had been derived through tertiary level education made plausible through state-run universities since the 1940s. Upon completing their education, employment opportunities were largely concentrated in Colombo, often referred to by commentators as Sri Lanka's 'one-horse town' for its dominant role in driving the nation forward across all sectors. This concentration of opportunities compelled the middle-class to migrate to the capital (Perera, 1994).

With the fashionable residential areas of Colombo being economically out of reach and reserved for the elite – the organized minority that exert control over unorganized majority in Bottomore's (1993) view – the middle-class had to settle in the peripheries of the capital city (Pieris, 2007, 2011, Wijetunge, 2011). Since the early-20th century, 'satellite towns' such as *Nugegoda*, *Maharagama* and *Ratmalana* had been developed by the British administration as key residential and commercial hubs on the periphery of Colombo, catering to the growing population and urban sprawl of the city (Urban Development Authority, 2020). Other satellite towns such as *Nawala* and *Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia (Dehiwala-Galkissa)* emerged as key extensions of Colombo during the post-independence period in the 1950-60s, which expanded in the 1970s due to economic liberalization and urban migration (jll.com, 2025). These suburban residential areas had previously been mostly paddy fields or rubber and coconut estates (Pieris, 2011; Wijetunge, 2022).

In the absence of widespread access to motor cars among the Sri Lankan middle-class, the placement of their houses in Colombo's satellite towns was a practical decision. These towns were well-connected to the capital city by a fairly robust public transportation network, including bus and rail services. Although these modes of transport were sometimes perilous, they enabled daily commutes for work and other activities. This strategic location allowed the middle-class to enjoy the benefits of suburban living without sacrificing accessibility to Colombo's economic and cultural opportunities (Wijetunge, 2022; Perera, 1994). The moderate size lots usually not more than 15-20 perches had been subdivided out of lands of aforesaid nature (Pieris, 2007). Akin to the 'Levittown' movement that had proliferated in the US in the 1950s as illustrated by Jackson (1985), The AS neighborhoods also grew in Colombo's satellite towns in the 1960-70s (Wijetunge, 2011, 2022, 2024).

The adoption of AS architecture in Sri Lanka during the post-independence period also reflected an anticolonial sentiment, as it signified a break from the elitist colonial styles that dominated the island's built environment. This architectural form resonated with the aspirations of the newly empowered middle-class, offering a modern, yet accessible alternative to the grandeur of residual British colonial bungalows such as the ones in 'Public Works Department style' (PWD style) (Wijetunge, 2012, 2014, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025). At the time, America was seen as a burgeoning cultural powerhouse and a beacon of world freedom, contrasting sharply with the perceived greed and exploitation of the former British Empire, making American-Style architecture a symbol of progress and independence (Alahakoon in Wijetunge 2011; Wijetunge, 2015). Its use was also an

attempt at architectural decolonization, promoting a distinct identity aligned with modernist principles (Wijetunge, 2022).

Interestingly, most AS houses in Sri Lanka were designed not by professional architects, but by non-architects who relied heavily on pattern books imported from America that were prolific at the time (Wijetunge, 2022). Given this, Wijetunge (2012) and Wijetunge et al., (2024a, 2024b) both establish the relationship that has historically existed between the elite and architectural profession. This very factor, in Wijetunge's (2011, 2012) view, is what deterred the middle-class from approaching architects. On the other hand, the growing popularity of post-war period Hollywood films in Sri Lanka that showcased fine American houses also boosted the aforesaid phenomenon (Wijetunge, 2011, 2012). The pattern books too served as practical guides, helping local builders replicate designs that suited the aspirations and economic capabilities of the middle-class (Wijetunge, 2022). The use of these pattern books automatically injected modernist architectural features, such as the picture window and open-plan layouts etc., which American builders and amateur designers had liberally borrowed from modernist architects to enhance their products (Hine, 2007; Cohen, 2003; Conrad, 1995). These features, adapted to local contexts, benefitted AS houses in Sri Lanka by providing functionality, aesthetic simplicity and modern appeal (Wijetunge, 2022, 2024). The modernist appeal was vital to break away from the status quo of tradition and vernacular (Wijetunge, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010). The designs of AS houses in Sri Lanka were also significantly influenced by the 'Tropical Modernist' experiments that had emerged in the country since the 1950s (Wijetunge, 2014, 2018). These experiments were introduced by locally-trained architects educated in the UK, many of whom were exposed to the teachings of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, key proponents of Tropical Modernism (Wijetunge, 2012). Fry and Drew propagated this style through a six-month course on Tropical Modernism at the Architectural Association in London, and through a plethora of influential projects they executed across newly-liberated Asia and Africa in the 1950-60s (Fry and Drew, 1982). Tropical Modernism was conceived as a necessary adaptation of the modernist *avant-garde* to address the challenges posed by the hot and humid climates of the tropics, where conventional modernist principles were proving inadequate (Robson, 2004). Climatically-induced features such as linear plans, placement of fenestration on opposite walls, breathing features such as cement grills/perforations on walls and louvers (either incorporated into window sashes or in the form of Crittall louvers) were essentially incorporated into AS designs (Wijetunge, 2022). AS's modest house and lot size, petite quality, cheap materiality, Tropical Modernist climatic features, and especially, the incorporation of certain material finishes/motifs resembling past vernacular colonial types, resonated with the middle-class, particularly those originating from rural areas. Such incorporations of nostalgia offered a sense of familiarity and cultural continuity as it did with the American counterparts from the period, while embodying modern aspirations. Consequently, for the Sri Lanka middle-class, it was much easier to relate to the modest AS house, with its practicality, accessibility and cultural relatability as Wijetunge (2010, 2013) tells us, than to the grand and palatial British PWD bungalow. To this newly-educated Ceylonese middle-class that was deeply dedicated to becoming modern, embracing architectural styles and ideologies that reflected their aspirations for progress, independence and cultural renewal made perfect sense (Wijetunge, 2024; Pieris, 2007).

However, the very basic AS architecture adopted in Ceylon was no match for the more sophisticated counterparts in the US (i.e. houses in 'Levittowns'), which incorporated advanced technology and greater luxuries. For instance, while the sophisticated cooling mechanisms in American houses, such as centralized air-conditioning, were not plausible in the Sri Lankan context, simple imported ceiling fans were adopted to complement passive cooling means such as cross-ventilation and shaded verandas (Wijetunge, 2024). Similarly, when modern materials at the disposal of Americans such as 'Applikay' and 'Con-Tact paper' innovations as Hine (2007) tells us were

unavailable in Sri Lanka, the local counterparts utilized cheaper alternatives (Wijetunge, 2022). Although innovations such as built-in kitchen cabinets, pre-fabricated wall panels and wall-mounted folding furniture etc. as Hine (2007), Cohen (2003) and Conrad (1995) all elaborate as hallmarks of American postwar suburban homes, were largely absent in Sri Lanka, such features inspired local adaptations that catered to middle-class affordability and practicality (Wijetunge, 2022). The AS house also benefited from simplified construction methods made possible by the introduction of new materials such as asbestos, which facilitated multi-directional roof designs, and reinforced cement concrete (R.C.C.), enabling features such as cantilevered protective awnings over fenestrations. These roof designs drew significant influence from Marcel Breuer's renowned 1949 'House in the Museum Garden' at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Breuer's design popularized the concept of the 'butterfly roof,' characterized by its inverted slope, which became a defining feature for many Sri Lankan designers (Wijetunge, 2022). Moreover, pre-cast elements including ventilation bricks and lintels etc., further simplified construction processes of AS houses. The post-war availability of glass enabled wide fenestrations with innovations such as 'Crittall' louvers, enhancing cross-ventilation and thermal comfort. These material advancements not only contributed to the functional efficiency of AS houses, but also reinforced their modern aesthetic appeal, making them highly desirable for the middle-class (Wijetunge, 2011, 2022, 2024).

The AS architecture in Sri Lanka initially spread from Colombo's satellite towns, where it gained popularity among the middle-class. Starting as a domestic architectural trend, the style gradually expanded to regional towns and outstations, becoming a staple for residential projects by the late 1960s-early 1970s (Pieris, 2007). Over time, it also began influencing civic projects such as town halls and government buildings (Wijetunge, 2012, 2014). Despite its widespread adoption, the style faced significant disdain from the traditional elite, who viewed it as lacking sophistication and considered it in poor taste (Bawa, 1985). In the view of these elites, despite the fact that it had lost its place at the helm of global politics as an empire as iwm.org (2025) tells us, Britain still remained at the socio-cultural forefront of the world, representing refinement and heritage, while the nascent US was often seen as culturally inferior, from a humanistic viewpoint (Levine, 1988). Nevertheless, owing to the ever-existing rift between the middle-class and the elite that Jayewardene (1984) reveals, the AS architecture resonated with the aspirations of the newly-empowered former group. They embraced it as a symbol of progress and modernity, further cementing its place in Sri Lanka's built environment (Pieris, 2007). Critical regionalism, as articulated by Frampton (1993), emphasizes the integration of modernist design principles with local environmental and cultural contexts to address issues of placelessness and global homogenization. Given this, the AS houses exemplified this synthesis by combining modern American suburban aesthetics with features tailored to Sri Lankan socio-economic realities. On the other hand, the notion of architectural decolonization critiques the residual influences of colonial ideologies in built environments, advocating for designs that resonate with local cultural identities and aspirations (Stieris, 2022). Thus, the AS houses, with their hybridization of American aesthetics and locally sourced materials, embodied a break from colonial architectural styles. This break aligned with Sri Lanka's post-independence quest for cultural autonomy (Wijetunge, 2022, 2024). In American middle-class neighborhoods, developers ensured the establishment of comprehensive infrastructure, providing residents with all necessary services imaginable. These included not only basic utilities such as electricity, water, gas and sewerage etc., but also ancillary amenities such as grocery shopping, childcare, schooling, recreation and community activities etc. (Hine, 2007). In contrast, in AS Sri Lankan neighborhoods, where individuals procured their own properties without the involvement of developers, only basic electricity and water services provided by the state were available, with other facilities largely absent. Against this backdrop, the Sri Lankan counterpart aimed to foster solidarity among middle-class residents, many of whom had

migrated to the suburbs from rural areas and came from diverse cultural backgrounds, including varying ethnicities, creeds, and castes. In the absence of services such as childcare, as seen in the American model, these neighborhoods developed inter-family support networks. Social activities, particularly those centered on religious and cultural events, also contributed to this solidarity, strengthening new bonds within the community. According to Wijetunge (2022), this sense of solidarity among AS inhabitants further facilitated the decolonization process within the sphere of architecture. Further, to address the lack of day-to-day services, micro-economies emerged within AS neighborhoods, with milkmen, newspaper boys and fish vendors etc. providing essential goods and services to the residents (Pieris, 2011).

Despite many encouraging factors behind the AS phenomenon that lasted over almost two decades, the introduction of NER in 1977 fundamentally altered the trajectory of AS architecture and their neighborhoods. With increased global exposure and access to diverse pluralism of architectural styles, the preferences of Sri Lanka's middle-class quickly shifted. Within the late-1970s and early-1980s, the once-celebrated AS houses began to fall out of favor, leading to their functional transformation and eventual decline (Widyalankara, 2009; Wijetunge, 2012). The hitherto unprecedented international exposure felt by them owing to new employment opportunities abroad, and especially owing to unrestricted imports that inflated the material palette at the disposal of designers and builders underlined this phenomenon (Wijetunge, 2012). In this backdrop, the study aims to illustrate that AS houses in Sri Lanka, in this day in age, are on the brink of disappearing. This study aims to establish that Sri Lanka's postcolonial period domestic architectural styles are fast disappearing, owing to contemporary economic and socio-cultural pressures. The objectives of this study are multifaceted. The first objective here is to catalog the altered uses of AS houses originally designed for domestic purposes, ascertaining how they have been repurposed for a multitude of alternative functions through adaptive reuse. The second objective is to evaluate in a phenomenological perspective, the underlying factors driving these altered uses, focusing on the external economic and socio-cultural forces at play, to have influenced the functional and architectural transformations of AS houses.

Theoretical Framework

As the theoretical framework of this study, the ideas of adaptive reuse and phenomenological analysis of architecture need to be tackled. As Douglas (2006) and Conejos et al. (2016) tell us, adaptive reuse in architecture involves transforming existing buildings to serve new purposes, while preserving their structural integrity and historical or cultural significance. This approach promotes sustainability by conserving materials, reducing construction waste, and minimizing energy consumption associated with demolition or new construction. In this light, Bullen and Love (2011) as well as Wilkinson et al., (2009) discern that, while often associated with urban centers, adaptive reuse is equally relevant in suburban settings where underutilized structures, such as old factories, schools, or shopping centers, can be revitalized to meet modern needs. Given this, Wilkinson et al., (2009) and Rohrer (2001) illustrate that houses also present significant opportunities for adaptive reuse, as older or abandoned residential structures can be repurposed into new forms of businesses, co-working spaces, community centers, or multi-family housing, addressing evolving societal needs and fostering efficient land use. From this perspective, Plevoets and Cleempoel (2011) maintain that in both urban and suburban contexts, the adaptive reuse of houses integrates older buildings into contemporary lifestyles, preserving architectural heritage, while introducing modern functionality. According to Bullen and Love (2011), this practice also helps combat urban sprawl by utilizing existing

structures rather than expanding into undeveloped land, offering environmental, economic and social benefits. They further elaborate that by balancing preservation with innovation, adaptive reuse ensures that both commercial and residential structures contribute meaningfully to sustainable and inclusive development.

Phenomenology on the other hand, is a philosophical approach that explores human experience and perception, emphasizing how things appear to consciousness rather than analyzing them through objective, scientific methods. It aims to uncover the essence of experiences by stripping away assumptions and preconceived notions. Founded by Husserl (1931), this idea was later expanded by thinkers such as Heidegger (1971), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Sartre (1943), particularly in the realms of existentialism and architecture. Phenomenology is often compared to peeling layers of an onion to reveal the core essence of an experience. This analogy is most commonly attributed to Husserl's method of 'epoché' (bracketing), where one suspends judgment and preconceived beliefs to analyze an experience in its purest form (Husserl, 1931). However, Merleau-Ponty (1962) also described phenomenological investigation as a means of going beyond surface appearances to uncover deeper experiential truths, emphasizing the embodied nature of perception and experience.

Literature Review

AS architecture in Sri Lanka remains a largely underexplored subject. While Pieris (2007, 2011) is credited with initiating the discourse, Wijetunge (2011, 2012, 2022, and 2024) has conducted the only comprehensive analytical studies to date. Additionally, the only existing descriptive tackling of AS architecture can also be attributed to Wijetunge (2014, 2018, 2020, and 2021). His work delves into various aspects of the style that had previously received little to no attention, providing deeper insights into this architectural phenomenon. In this context, according to Pieris (2007, 2011), the AS suburban house emerged with a distinct identity in postcolonial Sri Lanka, reflecting the socio-economic and cultural aspirations of the country's newly educated middle-class. In this context, Wijetunge (2011, 2022, and 2024) highlights the architectural inspirations drawn from the US in shaping this style. Wijetunge (2012) and Wijetunge et al., (2025) also establish the historical connection between elitism and architecture profession. Given this, Wijetunge (2011, 2012) tells us that this very factor repelled the middle-class from architects, and attracted them towards non-architects. Perera (1994), meanwhile, underscores Colombo's role as the nation's driving force, explaining the migration of middle-class individuals with predominantly rural origins to its suburbs. While Pieris (2007) examines the factors behind the middle-class's settlement in satellite towns on the city's periphery, jll.com (2025) and Urban Development Authority (2020) detail the establishment and evolution of this suburban phenomenon. Pieris (2011) also delves into the original agricultural origins of what was to soon become tracts for AS houses. Given this, Wijetunge (2022), Perera (1994) and Jackson (1985) all highlight the strong connectivity of satellite towns to the capital city, through well-developed transportation networks. They also argue that this connectivity enabled middle-class settlers to reap the benefits of suburban living while maintaining convenient access to Colombo's economic and cultural opportunities. When Pieris (2007) reveals the typical lot sizes of such neighborhoods at the disposal of the middle-class, Wijetunge (2011, 2022) draws parallels between the mid-century American movement with the AS neighborhoods that proliferated in Sri Lanka in the 1960-70s. Wijetunge (2022, 2024) stands as the sole proponent to explore the decolonizing potential of the AS house, which embraced the core principles of architectural modernism. This inclination that countered the enduring British colonial domestic styles that predominantly catered to the elite is also revealed by Wijetunge (2007, 2010). This analysis is set against the backdrop of a postcolonial era

defined by strong anti-colonial sentiments. In this context, Perera (1994) and Wijetunge (2011, 2015) examine the increasing allure of the United States as an emerging global hegemon, viewed as equitable in its anti-colonial rhetoric. In their view, the alternative architecture the US offered came to symbolize both independence and progress. While Pieris (2007) identifies the designers of AS houses as non-architects, Wijetunge (2011) explores the diverse sources of their inspiration. Hine (2007), Cohen (2003) and Conrad (1995) highlight architectural features borrowed from renowned American architects in the development of the American tract house, while Wijetunge (2022, 2024) examines how these borrowed elements were adapted to the Sri Lankan context, emphasizing functionality, aesthetic simplicity and modern appeal. In this context, while Wijetunge (2022) highlights that the AS house drew influence from the Tropical Modernist repertoire, Robson (2004) underscores the exposure Sri Lankan architects of the time gained through their studies in the West. According to him, the adoption of Tropical Modernism was a logical response to the failures of modernist *avant-garde* architecture in tropical climates. In this light, Fry and Drew (1982) illustrate the widespread dissemination of this climatically-responsive style across the newly-liberated world, while Wijetunge (2022) provides detailed insights into the specific features of Tropical Modernism incorporated into AS designs. He further evaluates the practical aspects that made the AS house appealing to the middle-class, emphasizing the sense of familiarity it evoked through nostalgia. Additionally, Wijetunge (2013, 2022) also distinguishes the AS house, with its aforementioned features, from the residual British Bungalow, which the middle-class was breaking away from. Pieris (2007) and Wijetunge (2015) in this context, justify the middle-class's stance by evaluating their epistemological status and commitment to modernity and progress. When Hine (2007) elaborates on the material and technological innovations of the American tract house, Wijetunge (2022) compares the former with its Sri Lankan AS counterpart, highlighting the latter's relatively modest advancements. Wijetunge further reveals the simpler, more practical alternatives adopted by Sri Lankan designers to suit local contexts and constraints. Such new material and technological advancements of the AS house that affected its functional efficiency and aesthetic novelty that made it palatable to the middle-class is narrated by Pieris (2007), and especially, Wijetunge (2022, 2024). Pieris (2007) recounts the widespread adoption of AS domestic architecture across the island, while Wijetunge (2011) explores its gradual expansion into other realms, such as civic architecture. Despite its growing popularity, Bawa (1985) also illustrates how the elite, viewing it through a humanistic lens, looked down upon this style. While iwm.org (2025) narrates the weakening of British hegemony following World War II, Jackson (1985) notes that the Sri Lankan elite continued to idealize Britain rather than America. In light of Jayewardene's (1984) revelation of a social rift between the elite and the middle-class, Pieris (2007) establishes how the AS house resonated with the middle-class's aspirations, serving as a reactionary force to the elite's preferences. While critical regionalism as discussed by Frampton (1993) is applicable to the AS house, it also marks a decolonization tendency in the perspective of Stieris (2022). How this break aligned with Sri Lanka's post-independence quest for cultural autonomy is then revealed by Wijetunge (2022, 2024). On the other hand, Wijetunge (2022), drawing on Hine's (2007) narration of American tract house neighborhoods, compares the limited infrastructure and services available in the AS counterparts in Sri Lanka. In this context, Wijetunge (2024) and Pieris (2011) both highlight the remedial measures implemented to address these shortcomings, which ultimately contributed to the success of the local adaptation.

Despite the success manifested by the AS phenomenon for almost over two decades, Widyalkankara (2009) tells us that the style saw its decline following the introduction of new-liberal economic reforms, when a new pluralism of styles now at its disposal was embraced by the middle-class. Wijetunge (2011, 2012) delves into the underlying factors that led to this shift.

This study is grounded theoretically, on the idea of adaptive reuse of buildings. When

Douglas (2006) and Conejos et al., (2016) define the idea of adaptive reuse, Bullen and Love (2011) and Wilkinson et al., (2009) discuss its urban and suburban potentials. Given this, Wilkinson et al., (2009) and Rohrer (2001) discuss how the concept is also applicable to the domestic scene with positive impacts. From this perspective, Plevoets and Cleempoel (2011) argue that, in both urban and suburban contexts, the adaptive reuse of houses facilitates the integration of older buildings into contemporary lifestyles. This approach not only preserves architectural heritage but also incorporates modern functionality, ensuring their relevance in a changing environment. As Douglas (2006) and Conejos et al. (2016) tell us, adaptive reuse in architecture involves transforming existing buildings to serve new purposes, while preserving their structural integrity and historical or cultural significance. This approach promotes sustainability. In this light, Bullen and Love (2011) as well as Wilkinson et al., (2009) discern that, while often associated with urban centers, adaptive reuse is equally relevant in suburban settings to meet contemporary needs. Given this, Wilkinson et al., (2009) and Rohrer (2001) illustrate that houses also present significant opportunities for adaptive reuse, addressing evolving societal needs while fostering efficient land use. From this perspective, Plevoets and Cleempoel (2011) maintain that in both urban and suburban contexts, the adaptive reuse of houses integrates older buildings into contemporary lifestyles, preserving architectural heritage, while introducing modern functionality. On the other hand, according to Bullen and Love (2011), adaptive reuse also delivers environmental, economic and social benefits. They further emphasize that by balancing preservation with innovation, this practice enables both commercial and residential buildings to play a significant role in fostering sustainable and inclusive development. This study is also reliant theoretically, on the principle of phenomenology. According to Husserl (1931), phenomenology examines human experience by focusing on how things appear to consciousness, suspending preconceived notions through epoché (bracketing). Heidegger (1971) expanded this by emphasizing its existential dimension, while Merleau-Ponty (1962) highlighted the embodied nature of perception, arguing that experience is shaped by bodily interaction with space. Sartre (1943) further explored individual consciousness in constructing reality. Often likened to peeling layers of an onion, phenomenology seeks to uncover deeper experiential truths (Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), making it a valuable framework in existentialism and architecture for understanding human perception and spatial experience. This study appropriates similar phenomenological approaches by Evans (2003), Rykwert (1982), Temple (2007), Leatherbarrow (2002), Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow (1993), Menin and Samuel (2003) as well as Bandyapadhyay and Jackson (2007) who attempt to reveal the underlying factors of architectural works by scrutinizing their photography and drawings. This research also draws heavily on the phenomenological perspective applied for architectural interpretation by Wijetunge (2012, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025) in previous studies of similar nature, pertaining to the AS. Further, Wijetunge (2013, 2015) has also relied on the same method for other analogous architectural studies.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology, examining 20 randomly selected AS houses within the Colombo satellite towns of *Ratmalana* and *Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia* – adjacent towns where AS neighborhoods are found in high density (Wijetunge, 2014). While a majority of 13 case studies came from the former, 7 were driven from the latter. Further justification for this selection lies in the fact that both these locations feature AS neighborhoods comparable to their American counterparts, unlike the predominantly isolated examples scattered across the Colombo Metropolitan Region, other satellite towns, and outstations (Wijetunge, 2011, 2012, and 2024). The data was collected during a

fieldwork session to provide in detailed information, enabling the tabulation of case studies and covering the following areas:

- a- Locations
- b- External photographic image surveys
- c- Original use
- d- Current use
- e- Driving factors behind adaptive reuse

While factors, **a** and **b** were recorded onsite by the research team, factors **c**, **d**, and **e** were obtained through semi-structured interviews with current occupants, also conducted onsite. During fieldwork, data was recorded pertaining to current occupants (including original owners who were not renting out and occupying) and tenants (who were renting) of the properties. While official ownership or tenancy might involve one or multiple individuals, a single person randomly-selected from each case study was interviewed, chosen from the available options based on their presence onsite at the time of data collection. The intention behind external photographic image survey (b) was to get visual confirmation on the functional change undergone by each case study. The original use (c) and current use (d) was confirmed by the interviewees, while reasons for setting up of the current use (e) was also established by them. Table 01 illustrating external images and aforesaid information is summarized as Table 02, which is then used to wield conclusions. The study adheres to ethical guidelines, refraining from gathering sensitive personal information of interviewees, but on the houses, they currently occupy. The fieldwork was carried out between 20-22 April, 2023.

Case Studies

Table 01 affords in-detailed information about 20 case studies covering their locations, external images, original use, current use, and the driving factors behind adaptive reuse. The order assumed by each case study follows the order they were covered by the research team during field work.

Item No.	Location	Image	Original Use (OU) Vs. Current use (CU)	Rental Property	Owner/ Tenant Still Occupying Property	Driving Factors
1	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Domestic & Fitness Studio	Yes	Yes	- Lifestyle services need - Saving of Rent by owner
2	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Domestic & Architect's Office	No	Yes	- Building industry services need - Saving of Rent by owner
3	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Mini Garment Factory	Yes	No	- Employment need - Rental income by owner
4	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Photo studio	Yes	No	- Lifestyle services need - Rental income by owner
5	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Domestic & Lawyer's office	No	Yes	- Legal services need - Saving of Rent by owner

6	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental Home (with no alterations)	Yes	No	- Residential need - Rental income by owner
7	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Water proofing company office	Yes	No	- Building industry services need - Rental income by owner
8	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental House (approximately half of original house that has been split)	Yes	Yes	- Residential need - central income by owner
9	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Women's 'Hair salon	Yes	No	- Lifestyle services need - Rental income by owner
10	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental Home (with no alterations)	Yes	No	- Residential need - Rental income by owner
11	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Post office	Yes	No	- Communication services need - Rental income by owner
12	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Grocery Shop	Yes	Yes	- Food/Beverages/Goods Services need - Rental income by owner
13	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Communication Shop	No	Yes	- Communication services need - Saving of Rent by owner
14	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Pre-school	Yes	No	- Educational services need - Rental income by owner
15	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental Home (with no alterations)	Yes	No	- Residential need - Rental income by owner
16	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental House (New section added to the side with approximately half of original house size)	Yes	Yes	- Residential need - Rental income by owner
17	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental House (approximately half of original house that has been split)	Yes	Yes	- Residential need - Rental income by owner
18	Ratmalana Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Auto Repair center	Yes	No	- Transportation services need - Rental income by owner

19	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Rental House (with no alterations)	Yes	No	- Residential need - Rental income by owner
20	Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia Satellite Towns of Colombo Metropolitan Area		OU: Domestic CU: Mini Car sale	Yes	No	- Transportation services need - Rental income by owner

Table 01: 20 case studies of adaptive re use
Source: Author (2025)

Summary

Item. No.	New Function	Numbers	Corresponding Colour	Core Driving Factor	Corresponding Colour
01	Rental House	07		Residential need	
02	Fitness Studio	01		Lifestyle Services need	
03	Architect's Office	01		Building industry Services need	
04	Mini Garment Factory	01		Employment need	
05	Photo Studio	01		Lifestyle Services need	
06	Lawyer's Office	01		Legal Services need	
07	Water-proofing Company Office	01		Building industry Services need	
08	Women's Hair Salon	01		Lifestyle Services need	
09	Post Office	01		Communication need	
10	Grocery Shop	01		Food/ Beverages/Goods Services need	
11	Communication	01		Communication need	
12	Pre-school	01		Education need	
13	Auto Repair Shop	01		Transportation need	
14	Mini Car Sale	01		Transportation need	

Table 02: Summary of findings
Source: Author (2025)

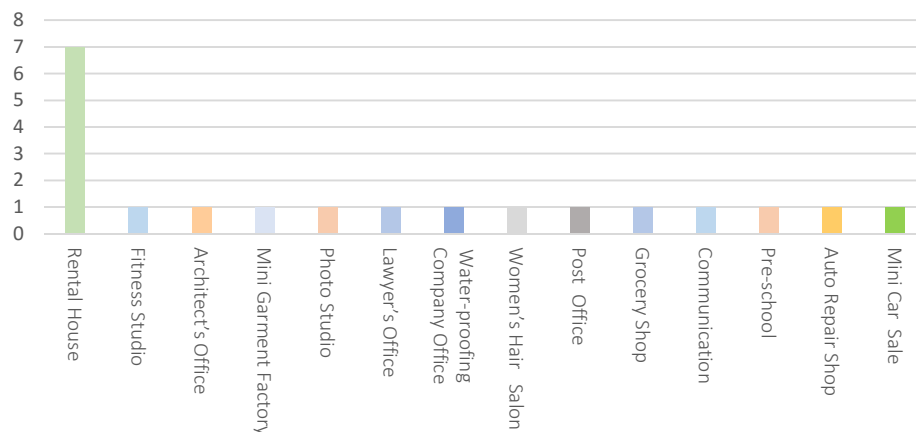


Table 02: Summary of findings
Source: Author (2025)

Out of the 20 case studies (13 from *Ratmalana* and 7 from *Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia*), the following findings are wielded, using Tables 01 and 02. All case studies considered had originally been houses. From the ensemble, 14 new uses such as rental house, fitness studio, architect's office, mini garment factory, photo studio, lawyer's office, water-proofing company office, women's hair salon, post office, grocery shop, communication/print shop, pre-school, auto repair shop and mini car sale were assumed by them through adaptive reuse. The study documented 7 cases of rental houses for domestic use, while the remaining 13 functions were represented by one case each. Further, in terms of the 7 domestic cases recorded, 4 recorded their uses in the domestic realm as rental boarding houses for multiple tenants, while 2 were split in half (approximately) to make them rental domestic house properties meant for other tenant families. Another example recorded adding a newly-built section on its side as an extension, to be rented out to other tenant family as a rental domestic house property. On the other hand, out of the 20 case studies, only 3 properties still remained fully under the ownership of original owners, while the other 17 were rented out in one form or the other. The aforesaid 3 properties doubled as owners' homes, as well as places that facilitate their livelihoods (*i.e.* architect's office, lawyer's office and communication/print shop). While 8 properties still had their owners (3 nos.) or tenants (5 nos.) occupying them despite accommodating new uses as extensions to their domestic function, 12 properties were completely rented out to tenants for whole new functions outside of domestic (elaborated earlier), without them occupying them. In this light, it appears that 40% of case studies still retained their domestic function in some form, while 60% assumed whole new functions, having undergone adaptive reuse. Furthermore, the 14 types of adaptive reuses identified appeared to be driven by 9 distinct underlying factors. The most prominent was the need for new Lifestyle Services, which accounted for 21.4% of the total cases. The second most significant factors were Building Industry Services, Communication and Transportation needs, each contributing 14.2% of the total. The remaining categories, including Residential, Employment, Legal Services, Food/ Beverages/Goods Services and Education Services, each accounted for 7.14% of the total, reflecting a more balanced distribution among these uses.

In terms of occupational patterns, Table 01 revealed notable findings. Some individuals rent out their house properties entirely to generate income, while others repurpose them as dual-purpose spaces, combining residential use with occupational establishments. In certain cases, owners provide domestic services as a secondary income source, while tenants use these properties to offer various services as their primary income. By living in these houses, both owners and tenants reduce rental expenses, while generating earnings.

Conclusion

The AS houses and neighborhoods emerged as a symbol of architectural decolonization in newly-independent Sri Lanka. The style fostered cultural decolonization and unity among the nascent, epistemologically-empowered middle-class who had diverse cultural backgrounds. AS house was a reaction to the residual British colonial bungalow, which was essentially an elite domain. This elite-favored version remained inaccessible to the broader middle-class for numerous reasons. Although comparable to the developer-centered American middle-class domestic neighborhood movements, the Sri Lankan counterpart was less sophisticated and relied heavily on individual efforts. Its decline following the introduction of NLER marked a pivotal moment in the nation's architectural evolution. The AS style gradually gave way to a multitude of international styles, reflecting broader economic and socio-cultural transformations in the country.

In terms of objectives, each one outlined in the study was achieved. The first objective of cataloging the altered uses of AS houses, originally designed for domestic purposes, was successfully achieved, ascertaining how they have been repurposed for a wide range of alternative functions through adaptive reuse. Additionally, new insights were gained, uncovering the varying and complex circumstances surrounding these cases. All the case studies analyzed in this research were originally houses that underwent adaptive reuse to accommodate 14 new functions; including rental houses, fitness studios, architect offices, mini garment factories, photo studios, lawyer offices, waterproofing company offices, women's hair salons, post offices, grocery shops, communication/print shops, pre-schools, auto repair shops, and mini car sales centers. Among these, 7 case studies retained their domestic function as rental houses, while each of the remaining 13 functions aforementioned was represented by a single use. Of the 7 domestic cases, 4 operated as rental boarding houses for multiple tenants, 2 were sub-divided into two units (one for the owners and one to be rented out), and 1 added a newly-built section (as a rental unit). Out of the total 20 cases, only 3 properties remained fully under the ownership of the original owners, who also used the premises to facilitate their livelihoods (e.g., architect office, lawyer office and communication/print shop). The remaining 17 properties were rented out in varying forms, either partially or entirely. Notably, 8 properties retained dual uses (accommodating both domestic and new functions), while 12 properties were fully repurposed for non-domestic uses, entirely removing the original domestic use. In summary, 40% of the case studies preserved their domestic function in some capacity, while 60% underwent full functional transformation through adaptive reuse, highlighting a significant shift from residential to mixed or entirely new uses. These findings underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of adaptive reuse of the AS in the Sri Lankan setting.

The second objective that is to evaluate in a phenomenological perspective, the underlying factors driving these altered uses, focusing on the external economic and socio-cultural forces at play to have influenced the functional and architectural transformations of AS houses, was successfully achieved. For the 14 types of adaptive reuses established, 9 distinct underlying factors seemed to drive them. Lifestyle Services emerged as the most prominent, accounting for 21.4% of the total cases. Following this, Building Industry Services, Communication and Transportation needs each contributed 14.2% of the total. The remaining categories, including Residential, Employment, Legal Services, Food/Beverages/Goods Services and Education Services, each accounted for 7.14%, reflecting a relatively balanced distribution among these additional uses. These findings highlight the diverse and multifaceted drivers behind the adaptive reuse of AS houses.

Given this, it can be also deduced that these underlying factors stem from the population explosion in satellite towns such as *Ratmalana* and *Dehiwala*-Mount Lavinia, which has created unprecedented new demands associated with the economic and social needs of their residents. Such demands have created a conducive environment for AS house owners to financially benefit, by renting out their properties to fulfill such demands. While some individuals rent out their house properties entirely to generate income, others use them as dual-purpose spaces, combining residential use with occupational establishments. Some owners in fact, provide their professional services at the domestic level. By living in their own houses, the former group save on rental expenses that the professions they render would otherwise demand.

Moreover, when the function of AS houses shifts from domestic to other purposes through adaptive reuse, their external appearance undergoes noticeable changes, making these transformations easily identifiable on the outside. Furthermore, by meeting the aforesaid objectives, the study also concludes that AS houses in Sri Lanka, in this day in age, are under the threat of erasure, contributing to the study's broader aim.

The study's limitations include its exclusion of whether the current owners of the houses are the original owners who commissioned and built the projects, leaving questions about ownership continuity unanswered. Additionally, it only evaluates external changes visible from the outside, determined through an external photographic study. A more comprehensive architectural assessment, incorporating systematic façade analysis and internal spatial studies, would offer deeper insights into the transformations of these houses. Potential future research on adaptive reuse of AS houses could explore the ethnic, religious and caste backgrounds of owners, to gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics at play. Additionally, assessing the educational levels of owners could also provide valuable insights into how socio-economic factors influence the reuse of these properties. Investigating how many property owners now live abroad, having rented out their houses, could further illuminate middle-class migration patterns in Sri Lanka.

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