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Projecting the New Nation: visual and spatial representations of Sri Lanka at international expos, 1967-1970

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This paper discusses the ‘projection’ of Sri Lanka through visual and spatial representations at the Montreal Expo, Canada (1967) and the Osaka Expo, Japan (1970). It assesses the representation of national and cultural identity in the decades immediately following independence, especially in relation to the negotiation of (colonial) history and modernity.

The Sri Lanka pavilion at Montreal was housed in a building which referenced Sinhala-Buddhist vernacular architecture. The pavilion at Osaka, by contrast, presented a structure of two conjoined modernist white cubes, apparently making no reference to the local. Although ostensibly differing in their architectural structure and interior display, both pavilions sought to convey a visual and haptic experience of an autonomous Sri Lankan national and cultural identity. A significant aspect of the representational strategies of both pavilions was the projection of an imagined pre-colonial and Sinhala-Buddhist history and identity.

The interior of the Montreal pavilion included crowded displays of Buddhist artefacts, art and culture that were reminiscent of colonial exhibitions together with one contemporary Sri Lankan art work. The interior of the Osaka pavilion, whilst superficially more ‘cosmopolitan’ in its layout and display, also recapitulated the manner in which colonialism ‘museumized’ ancient cultures.

The overall message of the Osaka pavilion was oblique, its modernist styling seeming to contradict expression of national identity. Deploying modernism as a representational strategy signified a nation unfettered by colonial historicism. However, the arrangement of the interior and ambiguous intentionality of its design complicated this perception.

In conclusion, both pavilions were attempts to discursively structure a space for the projection of 'postcolonial modernity'. However, each pavilion negotiated the island's histories in differing ways. In both, ideological constructions originating in colonialism were reworked and, at Osaka, contemporized to produce a monocultural narrative that conflated Sinhala-Buddhist identity with the nation state of Sri Lanka.