Mr Peter Watts, Members of the Historic Houses Trust and Distinguished Colleagues.

Let us in the first instance congratulate the organisers for selecting such an imaginative and at the same time, a most pertinent subject titled - Who’s Cultural Values? This is a question that can be directed to an individual, to a family unit, to a social group, to an ethnic community, to geographical region, to a whole country, to a sub-continent, or to the whole world.

Someone said that the culture of a nation begins where the society of that country began. Our view is that the cultural values of a country are the sum result of diverse factors, namely of its nature, its existing backdrop and the current pressure towards such influence. The basic elements of any cultural trace are by and large, integral to the nature of such lands. It is also the outcome of the geographical, the geological, other natural resources and the climate.

These “forces of circumstance” exert their maximum influence on such humans that are born or introduced to an environment. Such a culture base is seen best in the earliest forms of settlements in the pre, preparatory and the proto historic periods. The very establishment of such cultures would have been subject to the micro influences of the three factors of (a) nature, (b) backdrop and (c) the prevailing pressures, current to any society whether primitive or otherwise.

Upon such an initial base of an existing backdrop, nature has always had a major influence whether it be the Laplanders, the Eskimos, the Red Indians, the Aborigines, the Veddahs or the descendants of Java Man, Peking man, Neanderthal Man and African Man. The least developed a society is, the maximum is the impact of nature upon this group. Nature, despite its persistently stable rhythm that is characteristic to itself, still, has shown in history certain abnormalities in its human behaviour. For example, tell us the reason why the evolution of man from its elder brother, the monkey, that began nearly 500,000 years BP moved through a long Paleolithic, suddenly burst into a Mesolithic, only around 25,000 to 15,000 BP, and even began to paint pretty pictures for pleasure or for ritual or for religion and then around 10,000 BP man began to settle itself on the river valleys of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus and the Yellow River. This evolution of man behaviour cannot be said to be interdependent but, by and large, to be independent. Tell us again the reason for the movement of the Aryan people from their settled lands to the north of the Caspian to commence a forward march southwards over the Caucasus to form the Mesopotanian people and further on, the Indus civilization? Tell us the reason for the movement of the Semitic people across the Red Sea to Egypt in a spontaneous march out? In more recent times, tell us the unprophetic reason for the movement of the Soviet people away from a central dictatorship into more independent states? In the absence of a rational or a logical reason for such epoch-making movements in the history of mankind, the frailties of man dominate and such phrases as “Forces of Nature” or “Force Majeure” are linked to such concepts.

The latter concept can be expanded to yet another dimension in terms of World leaders like the Buddha, Christ, Mohammed or in recent years Mahatma Gandhi. Our view of such personalities is that they are the products of society born to a time, to a place and to a want, but born with a vision that is boundless. Some, even, link this idea once again to geographical environments such as the bamboo groves of Buddhism, the hermit forests and hills of Hinduism, the desert plains of Islam and the temperate belts and farms of the Christian flock.

With such a backdrop of fundamental reasoning on a broad canvas we will now attempt to illustrate our
concept with an accent on the “Conservation of Regional Heritage” by speaking on “Traditional Design and Modern Architecture”, as the underlaying philosophy to regional heritage conservation in the field of present day architecture with special reference to the members of the Historic Houses Trust in Australia and drawing on our experiences in Sri Lanka.

Traditional Design and Modern Architecture
We do not believe that there is a watertight compartment labelled “Traditional Design” nor do we believe that “Modern Architecture” is a phrase that is diametrically opposed to it. We are, however, apt to use these phrases frequently and very often without giving them the extra shade of thought. Nevertheless, we are able to differentiate these shades of meaning when such thoughts have to be committed to writing. First, let us get our definitions right. “Tradition” in the present context means, “artistic or literary principles based on accumulated experience or continuous usage”. “Modern” means, “of the present and recent times”.

The dictionary meaning of “tradition” alone provides a much wider spectrum of meaning and interpretation for the phrase “traditional design”. With this meaning at hand, the phrase is no longer the stagnant and stilted silhouette of a senile specimen. Instead, it seems more fluid or even volatile, and in a sense spatial in concept. In our view, tradition is the sum total or the mean average of accumulated experiences with continuity and usage. As such, no isolated gimmicks could amount to tradition or “traditional design”. For example, although we once saw a goat being utilised to drag a plough at a circus we cannot say that there was a tradition in Sri Lanka to use goats for ploughing. It would require a hundred goats to plough the land a thousand times before we could even consider accepting this practice as a fact of tradition. In the same way, with the building trade, or in house designs, a tradition is something that has to be tested out with time and thereafter, found to be collectively acceptable to the people. Wattle-and-daub is considered a traditional form of construction and regarded as a local building technique, but say, Buckminster Fuller’s dodecic domes are still not a tradition in this country.

Let us now examine the progress of a design that is newly invented and which gradually turns out to be accepted as a tradition. In the post-second world war years we saw the birth and the growth of a tradition of the so-called “American-style roof”. Whatever the accuracy of the term be, the style has come to stay, at least for a generation. The two ingredients to a tradition, “accumulated experience” and “continuous usage” have been established with the asbestos “American style roof”. We do not for a moment cast any value judgement on the good or the bad properties of a tradition. Some consider the “American style asbestos roof” to be a good tradition, but these are value judgements with points for and against each product or design. However, our faith in human nature and in the values that they are able to uphold collectively, is still within our spectrum of trust and therefore we do not discard such a convention as bad, even if we personally may not contribute to its adherence.

The process of a design becoming a tradition is, indeed, a devious one. A design in itself can be viewed philosophically to fluctuate within three dimensions. First, the dimension of “Time” in a stratified cultural sequence. Second, the question of “Place” in terms of its geographical identity of hot or cold, dry or humid, hilly or coastal, rocky or sandy etc, and third, in the context of “Person” and in the same sense as an autographed painting.

In terms of “Time” the buildings of ancient Egypt can find no parallel with the edifices of the same country that were constructed in the 20th century. In the same way, the term “Place” could vary, with “Time” and “Person” remaining fixed. And finally, “Person” can vary independently of the other two dimensions. Corresponding tests are carried out continuously in design competitions where the site and the client’s brief are the same, but where tow architects would submit two distinctly different sets of plans. In short, any variation in design, whether it is ancient, modern or futuristic, is found to depend on the three factors of “Time”, “Place” and “Person”. In terms of these three variables, traditional design is one that shows consistency (not a constant) in the end product, despite the fluctuations of “Time” and “Person”.

Let us investigate this point further. “Time” is variable...
and in the context of a tradition it covers a distinct variation. So is "Person" for, in terms of a tradition it has a consistent change. But as we mentioned earlier, the end products are not the same but are similar in character or have a traditional design with intrinsic values that are common. Therefore, what are the reasons for the end products being similar in character even in finding a common denominator in design. First of all, the dominant constant is "Place". With "Place" as a constant in a building design, one immediately encounters certain dominant impositions on the designer such as:

(a) The economics of the construction in relation to the materials available in the "Place"

(b) The economics of the constructional techniques in relation to the craftsmen available in the "Place".

One can be a Prince Regent and build an Indian Pavilion in cold Brighton, but the factors of economics of both materials and labour do not permit such extravagance in the designs of everyday use which we call traditional.

Does this mean that traditional designs do not change? Emphatically no, the designs change but they move as fast or as slow as the people. Wars, revolutions and inventions change traditions fast, and the house designs follow such social changes in sympathetic rhythm. The two world wars of this century, the Industrial Revolution of the 19th, the Social and Economic Revolutions of the 20th, all have had their impact on society, however wild, primitive or distant human settlements may have been from the loci of such nuclear lasts, or from the centres of rapid changes in traditional modes of living and house building. The industrial revolutions brought Sri Lanka the products of Portland, steel and glass. The social changes on the domestic front are being implemented fast in a quick evolution avoiding the sparks of a bloody revolution. The traditional "Valavvas" are being subdivided, and the serf's cottages are being given a facelift. Traditional conventions are being replaced by legal statutes. And thereby, the old order of economic and social controls under the guise of "tradition" is fast changing to the new order of legal conformity under punitive pressures. The new order, with its controls on the economics of building is, indeed, the tradition of today and the buildings planned and built to this yardstick will in many ways be the "traditional designs" of this era, which we today would call "modern architecture" and which the historian of tomorrow will label as the "traditional designs" of the 1990's.

We wish to place on record another aspect of design whether one calls it "traditional" or "modern", two terms which as we have already shown, are not more different than "cow meat" from "beef". Design in architecture is a characteristic that is personal and intrinsic to varying degrees. It can reflect the personality of an individual, it can express the collective self of a group or it can be identified with the characteristics of a nation. Let us examine this thesis more closely. If we watch a barber at work, he studies the personality of his client and creates a hair style that is personal and individual to him. In the same way, if we examine a groundsman prepare a cricket pitch he waters, cuts and rolls the ground to serve the team that plays upon it, and therefore, satisfies the collective personality of the group. Likewise, a supreme court judge listens patiently to the points for and against an accused, and finally records his judgement that will, no doubt, conform as closely as possible with the justice of the nation. Let us apply this theory of personality to architecture. The spectrum of architectural building can be viewed from the following three angles:

(a) A bachelor's house used by an individual.
(b) A sports club meant for a group of members.
(c) A building like the Fort Railway Station intended for the whole nation.

As such the sensitivity and responsibility of architects should be directed as midwives would be to their clients. Let their genius be in assimilating the relevant soul of the “individual” or of the “collective client” and in full possession of this inner life, breathe out the new creation and spell out its details. Scholars have often posed us the question of "National Architecture" and our view is that a type, as described, of intrinsic and sincere understanding of the personality of the client, and the architecture that blossoms out of such depth, is the purest form of "National Architecture". If the clientele stems from the deeper depth of its own soil, a
sympathetic architect will, no doubt, be able to create an architecture that is truly national using the materials and craftsmen in and around such construction. The term “National Architecture” has in recent years been abused more often than not. Clients and designers have frequently moulded conventional column tops or placed a brass design upon a door or even incorporated a “makara” across a lintel and have called such architecture “National”. Interior decorators of this type have quite correctly been referred to by Frank Lloyd Wright as, inferior desecrators.

The so-called “International Architecture” is a first cousin of what we referred to as “National Architecture”. It is a question of designing for a group whose personality is more universal than national and therefore, international. Such designs breathe an air of non-alignment, and in a spiritual sense are non-conformist. One might soon find the second cousin to this architectural family in a “Universal Architecture” with space stations designed for the various planets.

So far, we have purposely avoided getting ourselves tied up with the so-called knots of traditional “pekadas” and “petiulu”, “gonas” and “biralu”, “makara” and “hamsaputu”. These are, individually very beautiful, but their indiscriminate application does not produce “Traditional”, or for that matter “True Architecture”. Architecture, if you like, can be subdivided or analysed into four components for critical study. Function, structure, ornamentation and aesthetics are the ingredients that constitute architecture. First a building must satisfy the functional needs. Be it a dog’s kennel or a railway station, it must initially meet the function expected of such a construction within economic feasibility. Secondly, the structure must stand up during a reasonable period and weather satisfactorily, while the constructional techniques and the materials used should be economically feasible. The ornamentations constitute the obvious additions or deliberate effects achieved in a building with a view to pleasant character. Some would purposely expose the skeletal and structural frame to achieve such ends, while others may introduce a completely foreign object like a sculpture or a canvas to highlight certain areas, or to realize three dimensional unity. Aesthetics constitute the overall achievement of the whole composition. A building is considered to be aesthetically successful, if the various spaces flow harmoniously one into the other with functional efficiency. Some architects have used the patterns and designs of the structural members to advantage, and have thereby, harnessed a sense of sincerity in expression. Colour, form, texture, etc. are elements of ornamentation that either make or break the aesthetic composition of any building. At one end of the spectrum of the building types are those that are nearly 100% functional such as factories, stores, etc., and at the other end are those that are almost 100% aesthetic such as monuments and memorials. But each type retains some element of function, structure, ornamentation and aesthetics.

We have, in a sense steered a course that has touched the philosophy of architecture upon which we have to hinge our national designs. There are many more facets to this precious gem of architecture, which was vividly expressed by Ruskin when he called it the mother of all arts. The facets that we have been able to touch upon, although briefly, include the concepts of “Traditional Architecture”, “Modern Architecture”, “National Architecture”, “International Architecture”, “Elements of Architecture” and “Personality in Architecture”. but all this is useless if we do not design in truth and build in beauty.

Thank you.