A Tribute to Geoffrey Bawa

Geoffrey Bawa is Sri Lanka’s most prolific and influential architect. His work has had tremendous impact upon architecture throughout Asia and is unanimously acclaimed by connoisseurs of architecture worldwide. Surprisingly, however, his architecture is not well known outside the region, and has not received the international attention it deserves.

Bawa was born in 1919 in what was then the British colony of Ceylon. His father was a wealthy and successful lawyer of Muslim and English parentage, while his mother was of mixed German, Scottish and Sinhalese descent. In 1938 he went to Cambridge to read English, before studying Law in London, where he was called to the Bar in 1944. After World War II he joined a Colombo law firm, but he soon tired of the legal profession and in 1946 set off on two years of travel that took him through the Far East, across the United States and finally to Europe. In Italy he toyed with the idea of settling down permanently and resolved to buy a villa overlooking Lake Garda. He was now 28 and had spent one-third of his life away from Ceylon. Not only had he become more and more European in outlook, but his ties to Ceylon were also weakening: both his parents were dead and he had disposed of the last of his Colombo property. The plan to buy an Italian villa came to nothing, however, and in 1948 he returned to Ceylon where he bought an abandoned rubber estate at Lunuganga, on the south-west coast between Colombo and Galle. His dream was to create an Italian garden from a tropical wilderness, but he soon found that his ideas were compromised by lack of technical knowledge.

In 1951 he was apprenticed to H H Reid, the sole surviving partner of the Colombo architectural practice Edwards, Reid and Begg. When Reid died suddenly a year later Bawa returned to England and, after spending a year at Cambridge, enrolled as a student at the Architectural Association in London, where he is re-
memembered as the tallest, oldest and most outspoken student of his generation.

Bawa finally qualified as an architect in 1957 at the age of 38 and returned to Ceylon to take over what was left of Reid's practice. He gathered together a group of talented young designers and artists who shared his growing interest in Ceylon's forgotten architectural heritage, and his ambition to develop new ways of making and building. As well as his immediate office colleagues, this group included the batik artist Ena de Silva, the designer Barbara Sansoni and the artist Laki Senanayake, all of whose work figures prominently in his buildings.

He was joined in 1959 by Ulrik Plesner, a young Danish architect who brought with him an appreciation of Scandinavian design and detailing, a sense of professionalism and a curiosity about Sri Lanka's building traditions. The two formed a close friendship and a symbiotic working relationship that lasted until Plesner quit the practice in 1967 to return to Europe and Bawa was joined by the engineer K Poologasundaram, who remained his partner for the next 20 years. The practice established itself as the most respected and prolific in Sri Lanka, with a portfolio that included religious, social, cultural, educational, governmental, commercial and residential buildings, creating a canon of prototypes in each of these areas. It also became the springboard for a new generation of young Sri Lankan architects.

One of Bawa's earliest domestic buildings, a courtyard house built in Colombo for Ena De Silva in 1961, was the first to fuse elements of traditional Sinhalese domestic architecture with modern concepts of open planning, demonstrating that an outdoor life is viable on a tight urban plot. The Bentota Beach Hotel of 1968 was Sri Lanka's first purpose-built resort hotel, combining the conveniences required by demanding tourists with a sense of place and continuity that has rarely been matched. During the early 1970s a series of buildings for government departments developed ideas for the workplace in a tropical city, culminating in the State Mortgage Bank in Colombo, hailed at the time as one of the world's first bio-climatic high-rises.

Bawa's growing prestige was recognised in 1979, when he was invited by President Jayawardene to design Sri Lanka's new Parliament at Kotte. At Bawa's suggestion, the swampy site was dredged to create an island at the centre of a vast artificial lake with the Parliament building appearing as an asymmetric composition of copper roofs floating above a series of terraces rising out of the water. Abstract references to traditional Sri Lankan and South Indian architecture were incorporated within a Modernist framework to create a powerful image of democracy, cultural harmony, continuity and progress, and a sense of gentle monumentality.

During the 1980s, Bawa also designed the new Ruhuna University near Matara, a project that enabled him to demonstrate his mastery of external space and the integration of buildings in a landscape. The result is a matrix of pavilions and courtyards, arranged with careful casualness and a strong sense of theatre across a pair of rocky hills overlooking the southern ocean.

These projects brought Bawa international recognition and his work was celebrated in a Mimar monograph by Brian Brace Taylor and in a London exhibition. A later book by Christoph Bon on Lunuganga served both as a personal tribute to a friend and a beautiful photographic evocation of a garden. But the Parliament building and Ruhanu had left Bawa exhausted and at the end of the 1980s he withdrew from his partnership with Poologasundaram and relinquished the name edwards, Reid and Begg. He was now 70 and it was widely assumed that he would retire to Lunuganga and contemplate his garden. However, the break signalled a fresh round of creative activity and he began to work from his home in Bagattalle Road, Colombo, with a small group of young architects. Together they embarked on a stream of ambitious designs - hotels on Bali and Bintan, houses in Delhi and Ahmedabad, and a Cloud Centre for Singapore. None of these were built but each was treated as a test bed for new ideas.

Some of these ideas came to fruition in three hotels built in Sri Lanka in the 1990s: the Kandalama, conceived as an austere jungle palace, snaking around a rocky outcrop on the edge of an ancient tank in the Dry Zone; the Lighthouse at Galle, defying the southern oceans from its boulder-strewn headland; and the Blue Water, a cool pleasure pavilion set within a sedate coconut grove on the edge of Colombo. All three demonstrate Bawa's concern to 'consult the genius of the place in all', as well as his skill at integrating architecture and landscape, and his scenographic manipulation of space.

One final house, designed for the Jayawardene family in 1997 as a weekend retreat on the cliffs of Mirissa, demonstrates Bawa's unflagging inventiveness. A phalanx of slender columns supports a wafer-thin roof to create a minimalist pavilion facing the southern ocean and the setting sun. Nearly 40 years separate the Jayawardene House from the Ena de Silva House, but they are two points on a continuum, one a distillation of the other.

In 1998 Bawa was tragically struck down by a massive stroke that left him paralysed and unable to speak. A small group of colleagues, led by Channa Daswatte, have continued to work on the projects he initiated before his illness - an official residence for the President, a house in Bombay, a hotel in Panadura - with drawings being taken down the corridor from the office to Bawa's bedroom for nods of approval or rejection.

Looking back over his career, two projects hold the key to an understanding of Bawa's work: the garden at Lunuganga that he continued to fashion for almost 50 years, and his own house in Colombo's Bagattalle Road. Lunuganga is a distant retreat, an outpost on the edge of the known world, a civilised garden within the larger wilderness of Sri Lanka, transforming an ancient rubber estate into a series of outdoor rooms that evoke memories of Sacro Bosco and Stourhead. The town house, in contrast, is an introspective assemblage of courtyards, verandas and loggias, created by knocking together four tiny bungalows and adding a white entry tower that peers like a periscope across neighbouring rooftops towards the distant
Bawa on Bawa

“However much one tries to explain architecture in words, I do not think this is possible as it is only the final built object that can be judged, understood and liked or disliked.”

Geoffrey Bawa has always been reticent about talking about his architecture and prefers instead to build and also to encourage people to experience the built work. However in a few rare interviews and writings he brings forth some insights into the thoughts and processes that seem to define his work.

Bawa has always seen the practice of architecture as an immensely personal thing in which one explores and puts together the various experiences and incidents of one’s own life in response to given circumstances of client needs, site and available resources.

“Obviously the architecture that one does comes out of two things - the need of the person and the types of materials available for use. Ultimately the rest comes out of yourself. You build what you think is an answer and which gives you pleasure. I think we all build for ourselves. At least you know what you want to do. It’s not a theory or an intellectual answer.”

His approach to architecture has always been one of direct experience and sensibility. The prime concern is always for the life in the sequences of spaces that are created. His architecture does not engage the mind to be clever, but provides a background to an expected and anticipated life.

Essentially Bawa’s architecture engages what is already existing in either a natural landscape of a site or a functional necessity of accommodating necessary social events in a building, with an aesthetic intent which may be enjoyed by the user. He has never theorised about his work, instead has left the theorising to others, although he admits that there is a theoretical content to the work.

“That’s for others to do. You can find strong theoretical ideas in the work. If someone else can just as easily see the point of the whole project, that is the theory.

Such an understanding of theory rises out of Geoffrey Bawa’s long and circuitous journey to becoming an architect at the relatively late age of 37. Before becoming an architect, he had read English and Law at the University of Cambridge and qualified as a lawyer at 25 and gave it up after a short practice of six months. The years between, Bawa participated intimately in the carefree existence of the inter-war years in Europe and Sri Lanka. In those years he discovered the pleasures of life to which architecture - particularly gardens, was an integral part. First a slow grand tour through the Philippines and the United States, and then a long stay in Europe before he returned to Sri Lanka to look for the ideal piece of land to make his own paradise. In 1947 he bought a piece of land which he named Lunuganga (salt river) after the spectacular backwater that surrounds it, and settled down to make of it a garden that embodied the good life he had seen and experienced.

“Create something... allude to that world, not recreate that world - because it was a different world, and you couldn’t do it - be allied to it... it was not tied up to any social structure except people enjoying themselves within their capability. Which was not alien to the life I led before going to England, (such as) at Kimbulapitiya (his grandfather’s plantation in Negombo) and other places. It was marvellous sitting in this long veranda after lunch having endless conversations.”

Here more than anything else shows his inimitable personal approach to moulding his immediate surroundings to give pleasure to its user. The essence of the garden predates his architectural training and nurtured his attitude to architecture without an overt theoretical justification for anything that was done. The process was one of serendipitous involvement with the landscape. A discovered view, a possible lowering of a hill to reveal another, and a building of another stair or another terrace - another sign of the hand of man.

“I like human intervention... like in a landscape when people contrive to mould it to their moods.”

It was enough that what was built or moulded managed to engage the user’s mind in a pleasurable way. The natural environment is seen almost as if it were clay in a sculptor’s hand. This is moulded within its physical limits to produce a series of pleasing vistas, views and spaces. With simple geometric intervention, sometimes a mere line, Bawa ‘civilises’ the wildest stretch of jungle, and the careful placing of an artefact, in the case of Lunuganga, a pot placed in the middle.

Bentota Beach Hotel 1969

Ena de Silva House 1963
distance under a tree, entire mountainsides are brought into focus. By carving out forests, lowering hills and draining marshes a carefully modulated configuration of space that allows for a variety of experiences, moods and even social possibility has been unveiled from what was the wildness of a tropical jungle and rubber plantation. The lessons learnt from these early experiments, which were a direct engagement with building and site to accommodate life, he maintained throughout his working life.

One of his earliest projects, the A S H de Silva house (1965) in Galle uses the sloping site to great advantage. In the Kandalama hotel (1994) project he has made a strict austere building stand out against the dramatic landscape. The vertical lines of the support structure and the horizontal planes of the floors completely devoid of decoration, accentuate the landscape by letting it dominate and take over but with a strong sense of the hand of man still visible in the landscape. In the House on the Red Cliff in Mirissa (1997), he colonises a landscape by inserting into it a grid of columns and a sheltering roof that stands as a mere line in it. Space is seen as a continuum. All spaces adjacent and distant, whether used or unused are involved in the design. Sheltered and unsheltered space blends seamlessly and the room stretches out into the landscape.

"Not so much rooms in rooms, but rooms in their context and seeing things a particular room or space. Even as we are sitting here you can imagine how the place will change. One's feelings in a room constantly alter as one moves around it-specifically in the perception of outside and adjacent spaces. What I mean is that when you design anything, say that end wall there - you have to consider seeing through it, past it, around it from all different points of view. The landscape is a moving picture that one is inside of. It is a continuum in which all sides appear simultaneously.

Movement is very important. As you move through a building you are conscious of everything around you - although you may naturally see it in detail... the rooms are merely about orchestrating one's movement, determining how people move through space, because that really is what one does. Arrival being drawn in, discovering, being released to the view. The inter-linked spaces are backdrops to life. It is not a singular devotion to a beautiful view. There is a more intrinsic energy that goes on within the spaces whether sheltered or not.

What is there needs to be taken into consideration. Whether it annoys you or pleases you, it doesn't matter, you have to take it into consideration."

This attitude has meant that Bawa has always been deeply sceptical about form making for its own sake. Shown a design of an airport that had a strong form that suggested a bird and therefore flight and asked if he could do it,

"I don't know... I can never imagine it as a symbol. I can imagine it as a plan or a feeling of going through to an aeroplane. The final form comes from doing it, actually walking through... I have always been against making a shape and then having to be restricted by it.

In my approach to architecture I think my first concern is the arrangement of space. How this is related to the site and the needs of the moment within whatever constraints there are."

Even in his design for the House of Parliament at Sri Jayawardenapura (1982), the building which is in essence a monument and thus seemed to provide the agenda for a strong form, Bawa imagined various sequences of movement through the complex, particularly that of the central promenade that takes the speakers procession from outer veranda to inner vestibule through to the end of the central chamber. Along with the other patterns of movement, the building that results is a complex asymmetric form that breaks down the bulk of this vast complex, and is reminiscent of its historic predecessors in the royal and monastic buildings of Sri Lanka.

A major factor in defining his approach to design and the final design of a particular project is the site.

"Obviously if you enjoy building you can't do it from an office. You have to go to the site because the site is altogether important. Whether it is a big building or a small building you must be involved with the site.

The site gives the most powerful push to a design along with the brief. Without seeing the site I cannot work. It is essential to be there. After two hours on the site, I have a mental picture of what will be there and how the site will change and that picture does not change."

After the initial picture has been established the process of building starts by trying to make others working with him to see the picture too.

"...getting the picture out and explaining to everyone is difficult. It is for this reason that the drawings we make, trees and all the landscape elements are included. They are about the total picture."

From the outset all drawings contain the salient physical features of the site including important trees and boulders and directions of views. The process of design and building is seen as an attempt to get as close as possible to the original picture that has developed in the mind, as possible but with due consideration to how the site itself changes with the new impositions.

"In each project one finds that one's thinking is unconfined. With the particular needs of the building at the back of one's mind one sees the solution as a totality- the site being all important and one sees whatever vision is granted to one as a building set in its surroundings - the building seen from outside, the movement in the building, the whole picture one tries to see whatever anyone using the building would also see and feel. In short, the totality of appearance and movement in and out of the buildings."

This non-formal approach to design is extended to the execution on site as well. For Bawa, ultimate bliss is to see and participate in the
building process directly on site. In an early project Polontalawa (1964) - Bawa and Ulrik Plesner, partner and friend, “...discovered a spot full of boulders and we both said bow excellent and splendid it would be to build a house here. So we pulled some strings and sticks, brought some chairs and sandwiches, and built it with a contractor who followed every gesture of our bands.” He considers this close interaction with the craftsmen and technical personnel directly involved in making the buildings, of the utmost importance.

“...there is also interaction with people and craftsmen - telling them what to do especially with the details. We do much more of this on the site than with drawings. The contribution of the makers, particularly the older carpenters and masons who are passionate about what they do is equal to or more, in some cases than ours. It is always quite obvious they understand when we are talking about a detail on the site.

...Sometimes quite often, they do much better than you expect them to. This trust is reflected in the buildings. The trust is also limited to one’s intentions, which you must hold up to these craftsmen.”

In other words the design is limited or extended by the knowledge and the resources of the craftsmen and technology available.

“If what you want to build can’t be built by you yourself, then you go to a master of that particular trade and say: “How do you do this?” Then they will tell you and then you have to work within those limitations.

The use of materials available in a locality has been of particular importance in his work throughout. If you go to a tropical island, the architecture should be a way of building that comes from the island itself and from the people themselves.

A close look at all the buildings he has been involved in shows a great variety of attitudes to materials. The early buildings done through the firm of Edwards, Reid and Begg of which he became a partner in 1958, shows a textbook approach to the use of concrete. At St Thomas’ Preparatory School (1964) and the Bishop’s College (1965) simple concrete frame structures hold wide sunshades, corrugated roofs and breis-soliel. These early experiments made use of the ideas he was exposed to at the AA.

“For St Thomas’ there was a possibility of using reinforced concrete, which I was trained to do in a certain way and decorate in a certain way, using people who could, like Anil who was a good sculptor...”

From these early experiences and experiments with frame structures, Bawa moved easily into the use of local materials available around him and the assembly of which was not conceptually dissimilar.

At the farm school he built in Hanwella for the Good Shepherd congregation in 1966, Bawa has achieved a humane modern complex of buildings using available local skills and materials - brick, plaster, coconut rafters and Jungle posts. Mosaic work of broken plates donated by a nearby ceramic factory cover the walls. At the offices for the steel corporation (1967) he uses the potential for pre-cast concrete panels to great effect to build an airy breathing pavilion jutting out into a large pond. In the clubhouse built for Madurai Coats in Madurai, local stone splitting techniques and masonry skills are used to good effect along with recycled doors from old Chettinad houses.

“I have built in India, Indonesia and Mauritius. They are all different in essence, from what I do in Sri Lanka because all the materials used and the methods of construction are established in those countries. If you take the local materials and the general fee of the place into account, which I enjoyed doing, the resultant building automatically becomes regional. I do not make it regional and I do not take regionalism as a creed. I just build what I am asked to build. What frightens me is that regionalism is thought to be a lessening of civilisation. It is not! Philip Johnson’s house in Connecticut USA is as regional as a mud but in wherever it lies. It is not a good thing to say, but it all comes from a lack of general education.

Each project is a very particular response to a culture’s in-particularly in respect to the materials. Understanding Bali is very different from South India. Stone is the material of South India and timber of Bali. Most decisions are obvious in that way. At least obvious to me. Design encompasses a cultural sensitivity. I respond to it through the site and the materials of the site. Any other response is bogus to me.”

All this also implies the importance that is made to climate in the work. The material used and the forms that the craftsmen are capable of making have in them an intrinsic respect for the climate that they are in.

Materials and building techniques are seen as a consequence of availability and economy. There is no conscious effort to build in a vernacular or regional style but is a direct response to the climate and culture of the place. Through this attitude to architecture and building, Bawa’s work links the modern period to a continuum of history and building traditions of the regions and places he works in.

Bawa’s skill at using the resources around him has also extended to people. From the brilliant mind of his long time partner, Dr K Poolagasadaram and a host of other architects, engineers and designers, master masons and metalworkers whose collaboration Bawa enjoys, he uses extensively and to advantage.

The essence of Bawa’s work, the product of this process, is one in which form is articulated as a function of movement and experience of the context, either as grand landscape or tight urban space, enveloped in the materials and skills available to him. Architecture is seen as a line that defines and marks the presence of man in the landscape and then dissolves into the background to make way for life. Channa Daswatte (October 1998)

Geoffrey Bawa passed away on May 27, 2003. He was 84 years old.