ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN THE CULTURE-NATURE DUALISM: A CASE STUDY OF GEOFFREY BAWA'S KANDALAMA HOTEL

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between architecture and natural environments through an interrogation of the culture-nature question and the possibility of operating in the space between these two polarities. The immensity of this topic is investigated through one fragment of its representation, Geoffrey Bawa's Kandalama Hotel in Sri Lanka. Visually this building engages in a process of invisibility as the boundaries between inside and outside, architecture and landscape are dissolved. This is an approach that is common in green architecture in general and nature-based tourism destinations in particular. However, spatially the building maintains a clarity of separation, denying its connection with the ground. It is this negotiation between the visual and the spatial realm, where one is simultaneously part of and distanced from the external environment, which is the site of its potentiality. It is both literally and metaphorically a space 'between' inside and outside, culture and nature, home and away. The paper concludes by arguing that it is this state of dynamic tension that can challenge traditional representations of human/environment relations as alternatively undifferentiated or ontologically distinct.

Keywords

Architecture; culture; nature; binaries; Geoffrey Bawa.

Introduction: The Culture/Nature Question

The question of the relationship between culture and nature has been a subject of fascination and contention, not only within environmental discourse, but also more broadly within philosophy since the musings of the Ancient Greeks. This Classical period is frequently the point of departure for a critique of the separation of culture from nature in a linear historical narrative that extends from a romanticised primordial past, in which humans and nature were seen to be cognitively and practically in harmony with nature, to the vilified present (Routley 1983, Capra 1985, 1995, Fox 1990, Merchant 1992, Naess 1995, Sessions 1995, Worcester 1995, Farmer 1996, Marshall 1996, Jones 1998, Callicott 1999, Dobson 2000, Hay 2002). Thus, modern society's arrogant disregard for the environment is seen as a progressive unfolding from Platonic soul-body dualism, through Medieval Christian dogma and Renaissance orderings of nature, to its culmination in Enlightenment rationality.

Notwithstanding the inevitable variations in this narrative, recognition of inconsistencies in

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its unfolding, and disputes over the ultimate root of the current environmental crisis, there is little dissent within mainstream environmental discourse on the need to challenge the absolute privileging of culture over nature. The contentions arise over how and to what extent this position can be resisted, resulting in the polar extremes of ecocentric versus anthropocentric attitudes manifest in the dualisms of arcadian/ utopian (Hagan 2001: 48), reversionaries/ progressives (Jones 1998: 237) and planet fetishers/planet managers (Eisenberg 1998: xv). Both positions are variously dismissed for being naïve, in the former case for the practical and ontological impossibility of ecocentrism as well as the privileging of environment over human concerns, and in the latter case for refusing to acknowledge the limits of our technological capabilities to address the scope of the impending environmental crisis.

An alternative position that has emerged within contemporary environmental discourse is to challenge the very foundation of the culture/nature dualism by operating in the space between these two polarities. This paper will contribute to this debate by exploring the potential for architecture to negotiate this conceptual space. Following a review of contemporary theory that looks 'beyond' the culture/nature dualism, I will turn to its architectural interpretation through an examination of Geoffrey Bawa's Kandalma Hotel in Sri Lanka. Bawa might not seem like an obvious choice from which to begin this exploration. Unlike architects such as Eisenman who valorise the dimension of 'betweenness', Bawa eschewed any form of theorising about architecture, particularly in relation to his own work (Robson 2002). Nevertheless, whether

intentional or not, I will argue that Bawa's design for the Kandalama Hotel reveals subtle relationships and tensions that are productive for such an exploration into the territory between culture and nature.

Beyond' the Culture/Nature Dualism

Haila (2000: 157-158) describes the nature/ culture dualism as a 'conceptual prison', arguing from Danto that it is a philosophical problem based on 'indiscriminable', but ontologically distinct pairs. Thus, since both change and humans are part of nature, then the cultural sphere and the actions of humans 'upon nature' are not distinguishable. Nevertheless, this is a distinction that is endemic within environmental discourse. The issue is generally sidestepped by presenting nature as an unproblematised 'other' that is independent of human culture. However, if nature is viewed in this uncritical sense, then there is very little that is truly 'natural' (Soper 1995). For example, the recent intrusions into the boundaries between culture and nature through genetic modification might be viewed as 'unnatural'. However, the widespread changes to flora and fauna that have occurred as a result of more than 50,000 years of aboriginal occupation of the Australian continent through the practices of fire management are less readily dismissed from the natural sphere. The distinction between natural and unnatural interventions appears to be drawn somewhere along a temporal and geographical line. The slow and localised versus the fast and global provides some means of differentiation, but the distinction is inevitably blurred.

The conundrum of the culture/nature division

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is exacerbated when the definition of nature is extended beyond the physical domain. Gold & Revill (2004: 81-82) identify two further dimensions of definitions of 'nature', the social and the philosophical. In the social domain, nature is construed as a model for society in the form of ideal types and fundamental characters, whereas, in the philosophical domain, nature is seen as an unquestionable authority leading to ideas of morality, beauty and truth. In this way, ideas of nature are inherently bound to the cultural sphere as evidenced in the connection of 'nature', 'native', 'nation' and 'innate' to the same etymological root (Gold & Revill 2004).

For Grosz (2001: 96), the problem of defining 'nature' is a condition of its location as the suppressed binary within the culture/nature dualism, "rendering it definitionally amorphous, the receptacle of all that is excessive or expelled from the circuit of the privileged term." This has reached its pinnacle within contemporary theoretical discourse where the outright supremacy of culture has resulted in the almost total erasure of the term 'nature', which must now be written in inverted commas.

All That is Nature Melts into Culture?

It is now almost impossible to conceive of a nature outside of the frame of culture. This position is alarming to many environmentalists, since it permits the construction of everything as 'natural' and excludes the notion of 'wilderness'. However, as Plumwood (1993: 215) notes, the flip side of this argument, which preserves the notion of wilderness through a radical separation of humans and nature, is similarly problematic. Nevertheless, this uncritical ecological naturalism is a position

that has dominated within environmental discourse. The politically motivated counter-directive to challenge the privileging of the natural in discourses of gender, class and race has resulted in "banishing the natural to the category of irrelevance" (Grosz 2001: 97). Several theorists, including Haraway (1991), Soper (1995), and Hagan (2001), are at pains to revive some semblance of an objective nature. Recognising that neither the 'nature-sceptical' nor the 'nature-endorsing' views are sufficient to address our relation to the environment, Soper (1995: 124) argues:

"It is true that we can make no distinction between the 'reality' of nature and its cultural representation that is not itself conceptual but it does not justify the conclusion that there is no ontological distinction between the ideas we have of nature and that which the ideas are about: that since nature is only signified in human discourse, inverted commas 'nature' is nature, and we should therefore remove the inverted commas. In short, it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the 'real' thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier."

For Haraway, the way out of this dilemma is to recognise that our objective knowledge can only ever by partial and situated and that the 'object' of study be conceived as active agent rather than as passive ground for our scientific mastery. Thus, the relationship between our cultured knowledge and our natural environment is one of conversation, not with an anthropomorphic mother earth, but with the trickster 'coyote', which Haraway (1991: 201) presents as "a figure for the always problematic, always potent tie of meaning and bodies." The space for such situated knowledge, for the conversation with the

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agent of nature is, in Grosz's term, the space 'in-between' the culture/nature dualism.

Drawing on the intellectual tradition of Derrida, Irigaray, and specifically Deleuze, Grosz (2001) situates the culture/nature debate in the location between these two conceptual and arbitrary polarities. While the dislocation of binary structures is popular within contemporary theory and particularly within feminist theory, it retains a marginal position within environmental discourse. As with feminist theory, it has the potential to liberate nature from its marginalised status by working from within a potential place of negotiation rather than from the excluded 'other'. However, the reason for the marginalisation of such positions within environmental theory becomes evident when the position of the in-between in relation to the culture/nature dichotomy is articulated.

For Grosz, nature must be seen as a site of potentiality, becoming, force, and malleability that gives rise to the richness of variety of cultural life. This presupposes the abandonment of the notion of 'limits', which is a mainstay of environmental theory from the doomsday scenarios of Malthus (1798) and Ehrlich (1968), to the more moderate limits of greenhouse gas emissions within the Kyoto Protocol. Questioning the identity, and therefore 'limits' of nature along Deleuzian lines of becoming, is confronting to a field that is predicated on identifying and securing 'real' boundaries to human intervention, despite the inherent dimension of change embodied in natural evolution. To embrace such notions is potentially to open the door to environmental sceptics who argue that global warming is 'natural'. Notwithstanding these oppositions, I would like to explore the

potential for this conception of the in-between in relation to architecture.

Architecture In-Between

Architecture can be conceived as a literal interface between culture and nature since its materiality derives directly from the natural sphere while its form and function are embedded in the cultural sphere (for example see Casey 1993: 112). However, this only perpetuates the culture/nature dualism as an exploitation of the passive 'body' of nature in the service of the needs of 'Man' (Sofoulis in Haraway 1991: 198). For Grosz there is a more poetic rather than literal interface between culture and nature within the medium of architecture. She describes it as "nature's open-ended completion by architecture, the landscape's fundamental openness to architectural rewriting" (2001: 100). Grosz's choice of the word 'landscape' suggests a rejection of the concept of an idealised nature separate from human intervention. For Bookchin (1996), this unfolding of nature into culture through landscape, architecture and technology is the move from 'first' to 'second' nature. Notwithstanding the hierarchies embedded in this terminology, this sense of unfolding or 'open-ended completion', does not position architecture on a continuum somewhere between an idealised culture and nature. Rather, it can be conceptualised in what Soja (2000: 28) terms 'third space', or a space of 'multiplicitous representations'. This is not to say that it erases the binary oppositions, but rather opens up the possibilities of alternatives, of the 'both-and-also', rather than the 'either-or' (*ibid*: 20). The tensions between culture and nature cannot and should not be obliterated. Rather,

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as Friedman (1998:31) argues on the question of moving 'beyond' gender, the critical space must be written as a palimpsest.

This conceptual position does not address ends. It does not suggest how architecture should 'complete' nature, but rather it provides only a framework within which to begin addressing this question. It does, however, have the potential to release environmental architecture from the strictures of arcadian models of nature as purity and reverence, and rationalist models of nature as empirical measurement. This is a position that Wines (1999) argues environmental architecture needs to inhabit. He sees architecture as a 'transition', both functionally, as the gradient between outside and inside, and metaphorically, as a narrative that mediates between its physical and cultural context. It is within this narrative dimension of architecture that I believe this conceptual position is most productive. Like Haraway, Soper and Hagan, I am reluctant to abandon an objective dimension to nature and the environmental limits this imposes on architectural production. The architectural narrative offers opportunities for engaging in a conversation with coyote nature without denying the validity of measures to mediate 'real' environmental impacts.

Since this is an open-ended dialogue, there are no limits to the forms such conversations can take. For some, such as Wines (1999) who articulates the conversation as one of a 'fusion' with nature, it would appear that architecture should ideally represent a seamless transition between culture and nature. However, I would like to adopt a slightly different tack and argue that in order to maintain the critical space as palimpsest, the architectural narrative should

not entirely erase the underlying tensions between the culture/nature dualism. For the built environment this entails not the erosion of boundaries, but the construction of negotiable boundaries that facilitate encounters with difference, permeability, and unpredictability (Sibley 2001). In the remainder of this paper, I would like to explore the enormity of this subject through the microscopic lens of the work of Geoffrey Bawa, specifically the Kandalma Hotel.

Geoffrey Bawa

Geoffrey Bawa is Sri Lanka's most eminent and prolific architect producing a wealth of projects, primarily within his home country, many of which have received international critical acclaim. His lifetime's contribution to architecture was honoured in 2001 with the Aga Khan Special Chairman's Award (Robson 2001).

Bawa came to his architectural career late in life driven by his passion for landscape design. The purchase of the rubber plantation at Lununga in 1948 marked the beginning of his interest in architecture and landscape and the transformation of this property through large-scale terra-forming to micro-scale pruning continued until his death in 2003. Bawa was particularly concerned with the relationship between buildings and landscape. Indeed, Bawa believed that the two were inseparable (Brawne 1995). For Bawa, it is not only the careful situation of architecture within a landscape but also the embodiment of that landscape within the building; a unity between architecture and place (Taylor 1986). He was strongly influenced

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by the architecture of his native Sri Lanka. For Bawa, 'good Sri Lankan architecture' is defined not in relation to particular styles or historical periods but through its response to place; to light, views, topography, materiality and particularly climate (Bawa in Taylor 1986).

However, Bawa's architecture was not derivative. He returned to first principles, questioning preconceived relationships and patterns of dwelling. Perhaps most notable was his reinvention of the house typology in response to the changing demographics and lifestyles of his clients and to the increasingly tight subdivisions in the expanding metropolis of Colombo. His own house in Colombo is one of the most impressive examples. A row of four terraces has been progressively transformed into a maze of rooms and courtyards that blur the distinction between inside and outside, house and garden. His architecture is an exercise in spatial unfolding through varying degrees of enclosure and proportion and through the careful manipulation of vistas.

Given Bawa's sensitivity to place and his ability to reinterpret vernacular models for contemporary lifestyles, he was perhaps an obvious choice as an architect for the plethora of hotel projects that emerged from the early 1960s in response to the demand for package tourism in Sri Lanka. Over his career, Bawa designed more than 25 unbuilt and 15 built hotel projects in Sri Lanka and internationally (Robson 2002). In Sri Lanka, many of these are situated on the spectacular south-west coast from his first built project for the Blue Lagoon Hotel near Negombo in1965-66 to his last, the Blue Water Hotel at Wadduwa and the Lighthouse Hotel in Galle in 1995-1998. These hotel projects exhibit

a carefully orchestrated sequence of spaces between land and ocean.

Taylor (1986) has described Bawa's architecture as a 'fusion' of the man-made and the natural. However, as the case of the Kandalama hotel reveals, the boundaries between the cultural and the natural are not erased, but are rather held in a state of dynamic tension.

Kandalama Hotel

The Kandalama Hotel was an initiative of the Aitken Spence Group to extend the facilities for package tourism from the south-west coast to the 'Cultural Triangle' in the dry-zone of the country's north-east interior (Robson 2002). It is one of Bawa's last hotel designs, commencing in 1992 and opening in 1995. The 162 room, five-star hotel is located at the edge of an ancient tank or reservoir beside a rocky outcrop near Dambulla and the famous cultural site of Sigirya.

Originally, the clients had planned to construct the hotel near Sigirya itself, an impressive Sinhalese fifth century palace and fortress built around, into and on top of a giant rock. However, Bawa rejected the site and instead opted for a new location with distant views to Sigirya across the ancient Kandalama tank (Robson 2002) (Figure 1). The new site kept Sigirya at a tantalising distance while offering its own topographic dramatism. Here, Bawa could more readily explore his own version of the Sinhalese love affair with picturesque planning, combining water and topology with man-made insertions in spectacular compositions (Robson 2002).

Figure 1: View across the Kandalama Tank to Sigiriya. (Source: C. Owen).

Bawa's concept sought to accentuate his immediate impressions of the site – an impenetrable ridge occupied by an old cave hermitage, opening up to a broad vista across the Kandalama tank to Sigiriya. The dramatism of the view was to be enhanced by compressing the entrance through a narrow cave-like passage, seemingly tunnelling through the ridge (Robson 2002) (Figure 2). On the other side, the visitor would arrive on an upper level of an artificial cliff, separated from but aligned with the contours of the rock face (Figure 3).

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Figure 2: Entrance Tunnel.
(Source: C. Owen).

Figure 3: The Artificial 'Cliff.'
(Source: C. Owen).

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The proposal was highly sensitive to the landscape in which it was situated, offering a heightened sense of the topography of the site whilst concealing the mass of the building along the cliff edge. The building was also to be masked in a blanket of vegetation so that no trace of it could be seen from afar (Figure 4). Nevertheless, the proposed hotel prompted much controversy, sparking active protests and vigorous debate that featured almost daily in the Sri Lankan press. Objections centred on environmental issues and the preservation of cultural heritage but masked deeper and more pervasive moral and political concerns. For example, Sinhala Catholics protested against the perceived desecration of an old Buddhist monastic precinct but simultaneously infuriated Sri Lankan Buddhists by their erection of a white cross on the hallowed site, invoking ancient cultural and religious divides (Bartholomeusz 1995). The privately owned 'Island' paper raised concerns over the effect on the water supply and the site ecology but also argued that the project would promote immorality, while the Government owned Daily News favoured the development as an economic boost to the local community (*ibid*).

Figure 4: Mask of Vegetation. (Source: C. Owen).

Ultimately, economic rationality prevailed over religious morality and the project was not shelved. However, the cultural and environmental concerns did result in some modifications to the design. Most notably, half of the rooms were moved to a new wing above the approach road on the Dambulla side to protect the old monastic site (Robson 2002). The project also embraced environmental sustainability and became the first hotel in Asia to be accredited under the premier international ecotourism standard, Green Globe 21. Kandalama has received numerous other awards for its environmental initiatives including reforestation of the hotel property and surroundings, on-site wastewater treatment, an extensive recycling program and consultation and on-going relationships with the local community providing educational and economic benefits (Green Globe npd).

Visual Narrative

Architecturally, the sensitivity to site is manifest in the vegetative cloak that wraps the entire building and in the physical separation between hotel floors and ground plane allowing a continuous flow of earth, vegetation and water below the building (Brawne 1995) (Figure 5).

This perceptual continuity between land and water is also realised in the internal spatial quality of the building, which remains the most enduring experience for the visitor. From

Figure 5: Separation from Ground Plane. (Source: C. Owen).

every perspective the skin of the building is diminished to the extent that it is perceived as a giant open verandah, wrapping around the cliff face as its rear 'wall' and visually flowing out to the Kandalama tank beyond. A range of strategies is employed to blur the distinction between inside and outside along this edge. The main swimming pool terrace erases the middle ground causing the pool to appear to blend seamlessly with the lake beyond (Figure 6), while the careful placement of the private baths provides the opportunity for a more intimate experience of sinking into the lake from the comfort of your room. The absence of ornamentation, reflective floor surfaces and veils of greenery all serve to further confuse the distinction between building and environment (Figure 7).

The building engages in a process of invisibility as the boundaries between inside and outside, between architecture and landscape, are

Figure 6: Pool and Lake. (Source: C. Owen).

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Figure 7: Veils of Greenery. (Source: C. Owen).

dissolved. This is a common theme in green architecture in general, which Crist (2007: 54) describes as "a lingering battle between architecture's visibility and the advancing impacts of nature." It is also a common image in place-based tourism destinations where buildings are sheathed in cloaks of earth and foliage tending towards an architectural absence (Owen & Hes 2007). However, this does not mean that architecture disappears entirely

from view. As Crist (2007) argues, the process of disappearance becomes bound up with a process of re-emergence and it is the slippery movement between the two that is the very condition for sustainable architecture's visibility. At Kandalama, the architecture slips between emergence and disappearance, or between growth and decay. From one perspective it appears as a natural extension to the site, an inhabited cliff sprouting new life. From another, it

can be viewed as a glamourous ruin overcome by the ravages of nature.

Spatial Narrative

The question of imagery within the field of green architecture remains contentious (Owen 2007a). Sustainability cannot be made 'visible' by identifying a universally identifiable style and indeed, as Crist (2007) concludes, any such effort is likely to result in its disappearance. However, it is similarly dangerous to explore the image alone in relation to architecture, which is inevitably concerned with the broader bodily experiences of place. In the case of Kandalama, it is the contrast between the visual blurring and the clarity of the spatial organisation that is the most striking feature of this resort, and underlies its 'visibility'. The 'cliff' of accommodation wraps, but remains physically separate from, the rock face while simultaneously denying its connection with the ground. With the obvious exception of the hotel entrance, it is relatively difficult to gain access to the outside. Only a pool terrace extending from the main foyer level invites one to venture beyond the boundaries of the 'cliff'. Otherwise guests are carefully contained within the clearly demarcated building edge. Terraces snake around rock faces and hover close to the ground plane but resist a direct physical connection with the world outside.

Kandalama has been described as an ocean liner marooned on a mountainside (Robson 2002: 201). On board the 'ship in the forest', the visitor is at once visually connected with the outside world and physically disconnected from it. To fully interact with the world 'out there', the visitor must disembark – an experience that is heightened visually and spatially by the tunnel-like quality of the entrance (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Embarking and Disembarking. (Source: C. Owen).

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Architecture as Threshold

Kandalama maintains a certain ambiguity and an unwillingness to entirely dissolve the boundary between culture and nature. It does so, not only through its visual identity, through a negotiation between emergence and disappearance, but more particularly through the contrast between the visual and the spatial realm, where one is simultaneously part of and distanced from the external environment.

The building can be seen as a liminal or 'between' space both physically and metaphorically. Physically, it adopts the architectural strategy of the verandah, the threshold space between inside and outside, public and private. The verandah is a common architectural device and one of the core elements of Sinhalese architecture (Robson 2002). However, here, the manipulation of scale reverses traditional hierarchies, with the generous verandah occupying central stage and the cellular rooms relegated to a position as ancillary space.

Metaphorically Kandalama can be seen as a threshold between two realities – the familiar internal world and the external world 'out there'. Pritchard & Morgan (2006) describe all hotels as a form of liminal space in that they facilitate this negotiation between 'home' and 'away', from the 'known' to the 'unknown'. Such spaces, together with their common location on the similarly liminal space of the beach, facilitate the suspension of 'normal rules and conventions' and indulgence in the excesses that typify tourist experiences (Pritchard & Morgan 2006). However, such liminal spaces and their 'out of normal' experience also offer the opportunity of a more reflexive engagement with place and

a re-framing of human-environment, or culture-nature relationships.

Conclusion: The Narrative Dimension - A Space of Potential

Architecture is both a product of and condition for our relationship to the world. It does not simply address societal visions, but its very manifestation may also serve to limit and structure the forms that these visions may take (Dutton 1996). In this way, architecture not only provides a visible record of changing cultural ideals and social practices manifest in built form as a "spatialization" of history, it also plays a powerful future formative role in imagining other possibilities (Davidson 1996).

Specifically, Kandalama represents an example of how architecture can move beyond traditional representations of human/environment relations as alternatively undifferentiated or ontologically distinct. The building challenges the culture/nature divide, not by collapse into an apparently undifferentiated whole as an uncritical absorption of culture into nature, nor through privileging the surpressed binary as an apologetic response to place. Rather, it maintains a space of dynamic tension, or what Ockman (2004: 233) has described as an 'edge condition', or a continuous "oscillation between the ontologies of architecture and landscape."

This is a productive place for architecture to inhabit. In particular for environmental architecture it offers the opportunity of moving beyond the limitations of sustainability discourse predicated on minimal impacts to a more positive 'regenerative' agenda, which challenges the separation of subject

and object – or culture and nature – and reconnects environmentalism with a socio-political dimension (Owen 2007b).

This does not mean that environmental architecture need abandon its foundation on sustainability principles such as energy and water efficiency. Working in the space between culture and nature does not entail rejecting any sense of an objective nature in favour of a culturally constructed 'nature'. However, escaping the strictures of the conceptual prison of the culture-nature divide, a space of possibilities emerges for the narrative dimension of architecture. This is not a space for answers, but a space for further questions.

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