

International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE)

BEYOND REGIONALISM: THE WORK OF GEOFFREY BAWA IN SRI LANKA

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A survey was conducted on the local reactions of tenants, professionals, authorities and the general population to the projects. Their probable impact is seen in light of the building scene developed by indigenous initiative. An empiric evaluation is made on the success or failure of these attempts to develop a “new tradition” to replace the “present tradition” of inadequate materials (concrete blocks and tin roofs). It is understood that the “old tradition” (where raw earth and thatch predominate) has little possibility to continue except as tourist-oriented pastiche; or, on occasion, for the restoration or conservation of exemplary buildings and sites, once a consciousness has settled in that a historical past is needed to reassure the identity of these nations.

DIRT BY DESIGN (OR THE POWER OF PISÉ)

Laurence Keith Loftin III and Jacqueline Victor

The post-traditional environment is one with neither a past, nor a clear future. The result is a prolonged and prolonging “immediate present.” One of the driving engines for the rise of this immediate present is a radical evolution of building materials. The production of steel, glass, laminates, composites, and polarized surfaces, to mention only a few, results in architecture without historical reference. This architecture of the immediate present seeks new forms for the expressions of these new materials, and vice versa. Innovation is the only recognizable value. This debate is called into question by a material that is omnipresent, malleable, and possessing enduring historical and emotional referents: mud. This paper investigates the cultural, social and stylistic developments of mud architecture in France from medieval times to the present post-traditional environment.

In its first section, the paper examines three different regions in France: Bresse, Auvergne, and the Dauphiné. The structures in these regions will be stylistically described, and their unique construction techniques will be elaborated in some detail. Afterwards, current renovations will be discussed, and their continuing viability debated. The second part of the paper then discusses recent construction and experimentation in France using this material. Recent explorations with this material have resulted in architecture which is rigorously modern (post-traditional), yet which retains remarkable empathetic references to the earth, and to the locale. Traditional French methods using this material will also be contrasted with these current explorations.

The paper will make the point that this material, whose use originally arose out of a culture of poverty, is now the subject of intense scrutiny by professionals and cultural entrepreneurs in France and elsewhere. It is also slowly being recognized by academics and material historians that mud can provide new opportunities for a “sustainable,” ecological architecture that is available to cultures nearly everywhere. In this regard, an architecture formed and directed by the complex technology of mud construction may be seen as countermanding the most deleterious aspects of the post-traditional condition. We will indicate the potential of this material to reassert connections to local building

traditions, place and culture. The paper concludes with a discussion of “recognizable materiality” as one potential link between the traditional and the post-traditional.

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William B. Bechhoefer

[T]his conflict between the new and the old does not exist for all practical purposes, and . . . it is possible to arrive at a vision of a sane architecture which will be neither old nor new but simply true. . . .

— *Marcello Piacentini (1922)*

Contemporary architectural discourse often seems dominated by frenetically sculptural, intensively technological, and relentlessly conceptual work, supported by endlessly complex verbal speculations and explanations. The work of Geoffrey Bawa, however, provides an architectural world of direct and accessible emotional satisfaction, about which Bawa spoke little and wrote less. Working in his native Sri Lanka, Bawa wove together multiple strands of Sri Lankan history and culture, modernist architectural thought, and his own experiences as an inveterate world traveler. Thus his efforts were intimately connected to the physical and cultural landscape of Sri Lanka, even as it opened those landscapes to new experiences brought about by global exchange. As a result Bawa came to be viewed as an inspiration in Asia, where tensions of global and local in a predominately tropical climate seek resolution.

Bawa, who died in May, 2003, considered himself a modern architect, and throughout his career he used modernist principles learned at the Architectural Association in London. However, his exposure to history through travel and study, and his commitment to “good Ceylon architecture,” seem to have made it possible for him to reconcile Europe and Asia in his work, much as in his personal life (as an “in-between”) he, and other Burghers, came to terms with their position in society. Bawa’s extension and reinterpretation of tradition in the context of his affirmation of modernist ideas makes him highly relevant to a generation of architects and clients increasingly concerned with reconciliation of global and local conditions. What is significant is that this discourse is going on all over the world, in both West and East, North and South. In response, Bawa gave lyrical and poetic form to the complexity and contradictions of contemporary architectural quandaries.

Bawa’s work suggests limitations to contemporary regionalist theory in the “postglobal” era that is the subject of this IASTE conference. In particular, dichotomies such as “new and old,” “traditional and modern,” or “local and global” are increasingly unsatisfactory in describing current conditions. Rather than using regionalist theory as a vehicle to discuss Bawa’s architecture, the paper will use his buildings as a means of examining regionalist theory and to suggest its future. Sources for the discussion are the author’s personal meetings with Bawa and visits to his projects, informed by the recent publication of Bawa’s complete works by architect David Robson.