

An exhibition of the work of Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa opens at the RIBA on March 6 (runs until April 2). *Ronald Lewcock* discusses Bawa's highly individual approach to building and argues that his designs transcend the dichotomy between interior and exterior.

BAWA: ARCADIA IN SRI LANKA

AS designers search for essentials in the art of architecture, it is refreshing to turn to the work of men who have been steadily following their own bent for decades, producing buildings of common sense and quality, and ignoring to a large extent fashionable theories and fads. Britain has its own share of such men, like Walter Segal and more recently Richard MacCormac, but we might wish there were more of them. Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka is such an architect, and one of great distinction.

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, was for many years regarded as "the jewel in the Indian Ocean". After independence in 1948, the former British, former Dutch, former Portuguese colony was judged to have as prosperous an eco-

nomy, based on the export of tea, coconut and rubber, as any country in the developing world. It was soon after that time that Geoffrey Bawa, then 32, put up the shutters of his law practice in Colombo and decided to follow the direction of his private preoccupation, and enrol at the Architectural Association. After qualification, he returned to Colombo to practise as a partner in the firm of Edwards Reid & Begg. His clear-sighted, unprejudiced view of the architecture of the island, with its Buddhist simplicity in the rural and religious buildings, and its colonial practicality in urban architecture, produced some remarkable buildings that are as satisfying today as when they had just been finished.

One house, that for Ena de Silva (1962) initiated an entire-

ly original form of a classic style of colonnaded, courtyard house, with tiled roofs and shaded courtyard paved with riverstones. Its large size is deceptive, for it is built to the edge of its site. This was the architect's first *tour de force*.

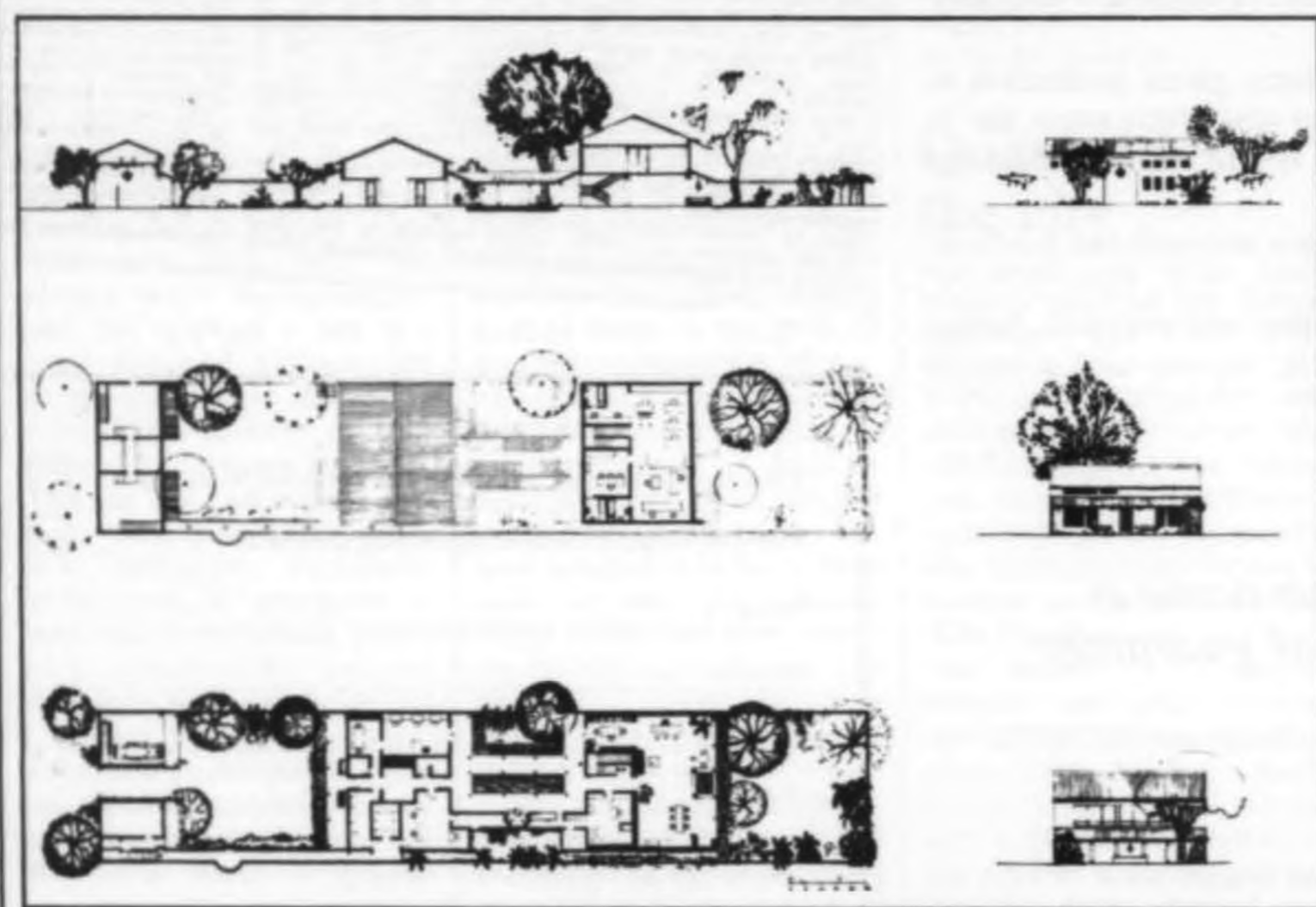
It was followed by a house for a doctor in 1963 which was subsequently acquired by the architect's firm for use as an office. It is altogether grander than the de Silva house, with a formal entrance court, a balanced plan, and a succession of spaces culminating in what is now the architect's office, with a wide garden court beyond.

At the same time the Montessori School for St Bridget's Convent in Colombo (1963) was designed, and a few years later, the Farm School at Hanwella. Both were econo-

mical in their design and construction, yet had considerable character derived from the originality of their design. The Hanwella Farm School, forms a particularly satisfying group of orange-tiled, whitewashed buildings along a low ridge. Here orphan girls were trained in all aspects of farming. It was judged important that the buildings "relate to buildings in the countryside with which the girls were familiar" and which might be repeated economically.

Geoffrey Bawa next embarked on larger projects. The Bentota Beach Hotel of 1969 is sited like a fortress on the banks of a large calm river as it enters the rough sea; it is approached through a podium of rubble stone, executed with the same exquisite masonry of the ancient buildings of the

Top left, Bawa's style: his vintage Rolls-Royce with a traditional Sri Lankan backdrop; left, section and plan of the architect's office, 1963. Opposite page: top right, central courtyard of Bawa's office — perfect fusion of interior and exterior space; left, Bawa's skill as architect, gardener, decorator and collector combine to produce such exquisite set pieces as this courtyard corner; far right, the architect's studio, a world of water, shade and calm which acknowledges the dazzling heat and light outside.



island, then up a flight of stairs into a long space with a ceiling entirely of golden batik, which faces into a wide court and pool. The main rooms and bedrooms of the hotel have fine woodwork and light timber verandahs.

In later buildings he handles reinforced concrete with the same attitudes he has to the use of brick, tiles and timber. The frames are always clearly expressed inside and out, and are used to articulate walls and spaces. The finest examples of

this are probably the Neptune and Triton Hotels (1974 and 1981) with their broad sweeping spaces, though the architect himself is fond of the Serendib Hotel (1969).

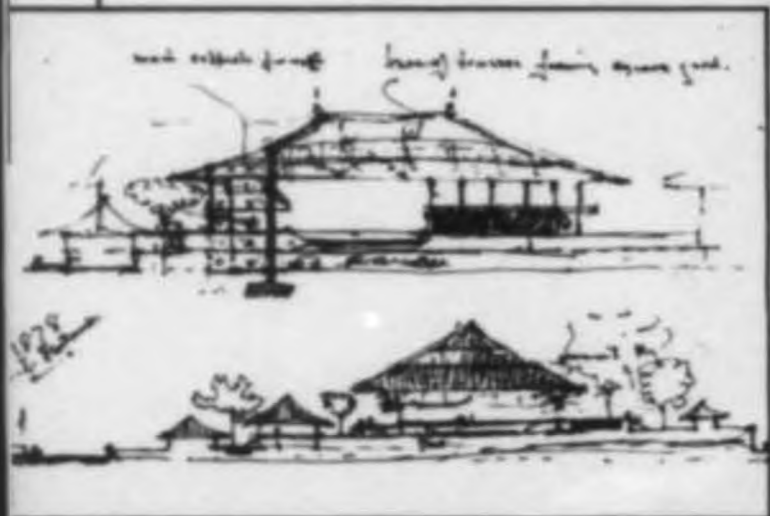
Bawa's designs really start with nature. Tremendous pains are taken to site the building carefully. In the Triton Hotel, one of the latest and most characteristic of his hotel buildings, a curving drive on both sides of the great entrance lake gives a stunning view through an immense

open lobby across a wide swimming pool to the beach and ocean beyond. High inner courtyards on both sides of the lobby are surrounded by corridors and are reminiscent of colonial domestic buildings, with coloured plastered walls and broad white plastered frames around small window openings.

In the Parliament building of Kotte (1982), Bawa has combined his understanding of the traditional architecture of Sri Lanka with the approach

he has developed towards reinforced concrete to give a great structure five storeys high the scale and articulation of much smaller, more familiar buildings. Surrounded by a number of small pavilions demarcating the edge of the island, the Parliament building is approached by a great ceremonial causeway. The relationship of the pavilions to each other, and their placement on the tiered terraces, leads to a cohesive whole.

Below, early sketches for the Parliament House, Kotte, 1980; centre, banners flying over Kotte for a modern and truly regional architecture; bottom, the huge copper roofs of the Parliament pavilions seen across from the man-made lake and architect designed woods – the building was completed in three years; right, the glittering, galleried Parliament Chamber – coming from one of the world's lushest islands, Bawa is unafraid of decoration and colour.



The apogee of Geoffrey Bawa's work so far is undoubtedly his new University of Ruhuna at Matara, which is as yet not complete. Here he has created a skein of stairs and walkways draped over a steep hillside. He has captured every conceivable view, and where there was none, created

his own. One climbs up through the buildings and look down over incredible orange tiled roofscapes below and, beyond, the Indian Ocean. Modern and traditional materials match and blend perfectly, and the whole is organised with the strictest discipline by a highly disciplined mind.

Turning from these grandiose schemes to the simpler buildings does not bring any diminution of quality. In numerous small houses and in such building groups as the Club at Madurai in South India (1974) and the Adult Training Centre at Pilyandala (1981) Bawa shows again how

the skilful use of proportion, materials and colour, combined with the clarity of simple forms, can create tremendous architectural satisfaction and delight.

On another level are the experimental buildings, such as the minimal steel and glass Ceylon Pavilion at Expo 70,



and the project for the Bank of Ceylon in Colombo (1981), which was unfortunately not built.

It is hard to imagine an interior designer ever contributing to a Bawa design. Inside and out everything has been either designed or chosen and placed by him: from furniture and curtains, down to the ashtrays. Bawa also loves landscape design, and it was his enjoyment in making of the garden at Bentota that convinced him that he wanted to train as an architect. That garden continues to grow to this day, pieces of jungle left here and there, but in between 'civilised' by artifacts and plants that lead the eye across expansive lawns. The training he thus gave himself in the creation of deliberate visual experience shows continually in his buildings, which incidentally also attempt to relate spaces and elements back to nature wherever possible. The cumulative effect of this concern with visual connections is that the best of his architecture transcends the dichotomy between exterior and interior, and achieves a unity of building and landscape which is often breathtaking.

Bawa's architectural vocabulary has few geographical limits. It is derived from his wide experience of many countries, and – more often perhaps – from the influence of numerous amusing people with whom he has struck a rapport wherever he has been. His influence is spreading, and architects from all over the world seek him out in Colombo, visit his works and are invited to his office.

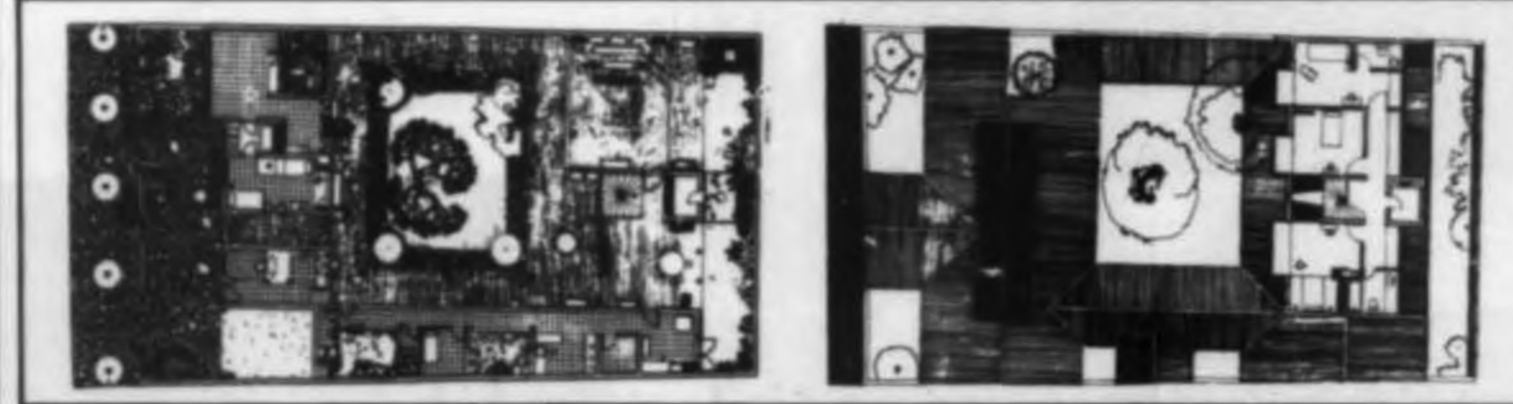
Architectural Review February 1966, August 1970, April 1978, May 1983.
A&U June 1978, June 1982.

Right, plan of the Triton Hotel: the planning of the hotel was largely determined by the long, narrow site: the sea is visible across pools and polished lobby floors from the entrance road; as with all Bawa designs, the building is open to the natural world.



Left, lobby of the Triton Hotel, Ahungalla, 1981, across the pool at night; below, view from under the great projecting eaves across the beach to the sea.





Above and left, elevation and plans of the Ena De Silva house, Colombo, 1962 – Bawa's first major commission. The courtyard was planned around the large mango tree. All materials are local apart from the steel reinforcement for the first floor slab and supporting frame. Walls are of brick and plaster, the roof is tiled. An elephant as well as a tractor was used in the house's construction; left, the main courtyard of the De Silva house; below, the Yahapath Endera Farm School, Hanwella, 1966. The siting of the buildings along a ridge allows far views from all windows. The school is an orphanage and comprises convent, farm buildings, main centre, dormitories and kitchens.



Right, drawings of the chapel at Hanwella Convent; below, interior of the main centre at Hanwella; centre right, traditional pitched roofs providing shade and breeze at Hanwella; lower right, the priest's house with its magnificent roof and deeply shaded verandahs; bottom right, distant view of the orphanage.

