
GENIUS OF THE PLACE

GEOFFREY BAWA, AN ARCHITECT OF SRI LANKA

PROFESSOR DAVID ROBSON REVIEWS
THE LIFE'S WORK AND LEGACY OF A
MAN REGARDED AS ONE OF THE
MOST IMPORTANT ASIAN ARCHITECTS
OF THE 20TH CENTURY.



*Consult the Genius of the Place in all;
That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall;*
Alexander Pope, Epistle IV to Richard Boyle,
Earl of Burlington, "Of the Use of Riches"

Malaysian architect Ken Yeang once described Geoffrey Bawa as "our first hero and guru". It was a rare tribute from one architect to another, all the more remarkable because it was directed at a man who, having failed as a lawyer, drifted into garden making and didn't become an architect until the age of 38. In spite of this late start, however, he managed to complete more than 200 projects in a career that spanned 40 years.

Bawa was born in 1919 in the then British Crown Colony of Ceylon, the second son of a wealthy Muslim lawyer and his Dutch Burgher wife. He grew up in that tolerant, cultured and cosmopolitan society which once thrived on the shaded verandahs of Colombo's leafy suburbs. In 1938, he went to Cambridge to read English and later studied law in London. Returning to Ceylon after the War he worked for a time in a Colombo law firm. But he soon tired of law and in 1946 set off on a two-year journey that would take him through the Far East, across the United States and eventually to Europe. In 1948, seduced by its Renaissance gardens, he came to a temporary halt in Italy. Ceylon was slipping off the shackles of Empire and Bawa found himself confronted by a dilemma of identity: was he European or Asian? A plan to buy a villa overlooking Lake Garda was thwarted by the machinations of Italian lawyers and, in frustration, Bawa returned to Ceylon.

Geoffrey's elder brother Bevis owned a rubber estate at Brief near Alutgama on the west coast, where he had created a beautiful garden around the old bungalow. He now urged Geoffrey to look for a similar estate that he could transform into a tropical evocation of his Italian dream. The two brothers scoured the countryside and eventually discovered Lunuganga, a derelict rubber estate overlooking a backwater of the Bentota River. In buying the estate Bawa made the transition from restless traveller and reluctant lawyer to builder and gardener. He now identified himself with newly independent Ceylon and embarked on the serendipitous journey that would lead him to become its most prolific and celebrated architect.

The garden project fired his imagination but laid bare his lack of technical knowledge. Friends advised him to study architecture and he enrolled at the AA School in London. Finally, in 1957, he qualified and returned to Ceylon where he became a partner in the near-moribund firm of Edwards, Reid and Begg. Although the eponymous founders were long dead, Bawa continued to practise under their names with his engineer partner Poologasundram for the next 30 years.

To operate as an architect in a newly independent country that was emerging from four centuries of stifling colonial hegemony presented a particular challenge. Bawa set about creating a canon of design prototypes and established a new architectural vocabulary, which injected the tenets of European modernism into a 2000-year-old local tradition of building.

Bawa is probably best known for his many hotel designs, among them the magical Bentota Beach Hotel (1968), a simple square of accommodation organised on three levels around a central pool court, mixing memories of medieval Sinhalese manor houses with hints of le Corbusier's monastery at la Tourette. The dramatic Kandalama Hotel (1992) is a modern belvedere, stranded like some huge Noah's Ark on a remote mountain ridge and smothered by the invading jungle. Bawa also developed new blueprints for tropical living in an endlessly inventive stream of private houses, beginning with the revolutionary courtyard house for artist Ena de Silva (1959) and ending with the simple minimalist Jayawardene pavilion on the Red Cliffs above Weligama Bay (1997).

His more prestigious projects include the Sri Lankan Parliament at Kotte (1979), which sits on an island at the centre of a newly created artificial lake, its cascading copper roofs recalling the fabled brazen palace of Anuradhapura, and the vast campus for the University of Ruhunu near Matara (1984), which exploits the topography to transform a seemingly banal collection of pavilions into an ever-changing succession of spatial incidents.

However, it may be that Bawa's more modest projects will have had the greatest long-term significance: the simple stone nave of the convent chapel raised on a shoestring for the nuns of the Good Shepherd at Bandarawela (1962); the farm school at Hanwella built without imported steel or glass (1966); the staff club for the Madurai Coates Spinning Mills in India, with its rough-hewn stone piers and plundered Chettinad doors (1973); the estate at Batujimbar in Bali which he designed for Australian artist Donald Friend (1973); the office tower for the State Mortgage Bank in Colombo, hailed by

Opposite: The Members
Garden of the Sri Lankan
Parliament at Kotte (1979)
Photography by David Robson



Yeang as “the first bioclimatic skyscraper” (1977).

Bawa’s architecture is remarkable for the way in which it grows out of its site and its surroundings, responding in a natural way to topography, view and climate. It breaks down the barriers separating interior from exterior, building from landscape, and constructs a scenographic continuum in which enclosed rooms, internal open-to-the-sky courtyards, covered verandahs, semi-enclosed loggias, enclosed garden spaces, open landscapes and distant horizons are all linked within a matrix of axes and vistas. All this is accomplished with a simple palette of locally produced materials applied with traditional wisdom and appropriate modern technology. Identifying and respecting “the Genius of the Place in all”, Bawa was able to demonstrate how its essential meanings could be preserved and enhanced in a palpable and memorable way.

Two projects hold the key to an understanding of Bawa’s work: the garden at Lunuganga, which he continued to fashion for 50 years, and his own house in Colombo. Both were many years in the making and both served as test beds for new ideas. The town house is a haven of peace locked away within a busy and increasingly hostile city, an infinite garden of the mind constructed on a tiny urban plot. The garden at Lunuganga is a distant retreat, an outpost on the edge of the known world that reduces a seemingly limitless landscape to a series of outdoor rooms, a civilised garden within the larger garden of Sri Lanka.

The Colombo house is an essay in architectural bricolage. During the 1950s, Bawa acquired, one by one, four tiny bungalows that lay in a row along a short alleyway at the end of a narrow suburban lane. Gradually he merged them into a single house, replacing the first in the line with a striking four-storey tower and converting the alley into a long, covered corridor punctuated by a succession of light wells. The final result is an introspective labyrinth of rooms and garden courts, which together create the illusion of limitless space. Words like “inside” and “outside” lose all meaning; here are rooms without roofs and roofs without walls, ordered by a grid of axial views to create a cool, subterranean world of verandahs and courtyards assembled from a rich collection of traditional devices and plundered artefacts. Yet the new tower, gleaming white, that rises above the entrance and carport is nothing less than a reworking of Corb’s *Maison Citrohan* and serves as a periscope which rises from a shady nether world to give views across the surrounding rooftops towards the sea.

The garden at Lunuganga sits astride two low hills on a promontory which juts out into a brackish lagoon lying off the estuary of the Bentota River, about 50 miles to the south of the capital. When Bawa first bought the estate in 1948 it was little more than an undistinguished bungalow surrounded by 25 acres (approximately 10 hectares) of exhausted rubber trees. Since then, hills have been moved, terraces cut, woods replanted and new vistas opened up, but the original bungalow still survives within its cocoon of added verandahs, courtyards and loggias. Hardly a weekend passed without Bawa travelling down to Lunuganga to attend to its upkeep; hardly a year without his initiating some new act of colonisation. Thus the garden can be read as an autobiography writ large upon the land.

Lunuganga was conceived as a scenographic sequence of spaces. A country lane leads from Bentota to a causeway over a neck in the Dedduwa Lake from where a first distant view of Lunuganga’s northern terraces can be glimpsed. The road then performs an almost full circle before connecting with a narrow track that crosses a paddy field and climbs up a steep wooded hill to arrive at the southern entrance court.

Visitors, confused and disoriented, are shepherded up the cascade of steps that lead to the south terrace of the house where, like people who have been spun around in a game of blindman’s buff, their blindfolds are removed. The view

Above: The entry stairs up to the south terrace of Lunuganga.
Opposite: The Bentota Beach Hotel.
Photography by David Robson



southward is framed by a corridor of trees and takes in the Cinnamon Hill, punctuated by a single urn on its summit, the lake beyond and a white Buddhist *dagoba* on a distant hilltop; the eye runs down and up through a cone of space and leaps towards the temple and the sky.

To the north of the house, lawns run to the edge of a cliff that looks out across the lake. To the east, a secluded terrace is defined by a series of pavilions: Bawa's office, a hen house and a small gallery. Steps lead down to the Broad Walk and eventually to the Water Garden, with its checkerboard squares of rice paddy. To the west, hemmed in by forest, is the Field of Jars, which leads up to the Cinnamon Hill and the southern edge of the peninsula.

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This is not a garden of colourful flowers, neat borders and gurgling fountains. It is a civilised wilderness, an assemblage of tropical plants of different scales and textures, a composition of green on green, an ever-changing play of light and shade, a succession of hidden surprises and sudden vistas, a landscape of memories and ideas. The whole of it can be taken in with a brisk 15-minute walk, but it requires days to explore its every corner and appreciate its changing moods.

Lunuganga now seems to be so established, so natural, that it is hard to appreciate how much effort has gone into its creation. But this is a work of art, not of nature; it is the contrivance of a single mind and a hundred hands working together with nature to produce something that is "super-natural". Ignore it for a week and the paths will clog up with leaves; leave it for a month and the lawns will run wild; after a year the terraces will crumble and the jungle will return for ever.

The garden was celebrated with a collection of photographs lovingly made by Christoph Bon and published in 1990. Bawa added his own short endpiece to the book:

"For years the garden had grown gradually into a place of many moods, the result of many imaginings, offering me a retreat to be alone or to fellow-feel with friends. An added pleasure has been to observe the reactions of visitors, from the innocent comment of a friend of a friend — 'but Mr Bawa, wouldn't this be a lovely place to turn into a garden?' — to the lorry driver who walked around whilst his bricks were being unloaded and said, 'But this is a very blessed place!'"

In 1998 Bawa suffered a massive stroke that left him paralysed and brought his career to a sudden end. However, he was able to spend much of the five last tortured years of his life in his beloved garden where, gesturing with his good left hand, he still managed to supervise the daily routine of planting and pruning. He died in May 2003 and was cremated in a touching Buddhist ceremony on the summit of the Cinnamon Hill.

Footnotes

Geoffrey Bawa's life and work is celebrated in a major retrospective exhibition at the Deutsches Architektur Museum (DAM) in Frankfurt from 23 July to 16 October 2004. It is hoped the exhibition will visit Australia in the future.

Geoffrey Bawa: the complete works by David Robson (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002) is reviewed on page 79.