

GENIUS OF
THE PLACE:
THE BUILDINGS
AND LAND-
SCAPES OF
GEOFFREY BAWA

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DAVID ROBSON

017

Chairman's Award

*Consult the Genius of the Place in all;
That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall;*

Epistle IV to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington,
'Of the Use of Riches'
Alexander Pope

In 1998, when Geoffrey Bawa suffered a massive stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to speak, it seemed that every vital part of this extraordinary man had been extinguished. But friends soon discovered that he had survived, trapped inside his wasted body, and found ways to reach him. Three years later his condition has barely improved, but he is now at least able to make regular visits to his beloved garden at Lunuganga, some 60 kilometres south of Colombo. There, each morning, he meets with Michael and Arsha, the two young architects who look after his estate, and together they plan the cutting and pruning to be undertaken during the day. Michael points towards the surrounding clumps of trees, Arsha whispers in his ear and Bawa gestures with his good left hand. Only someone who has witnessed this strangely moving charade could credit that the Bawa confined deep within his corporeal prison is still in touch with the garden he has been fashioning for more than fifty years.

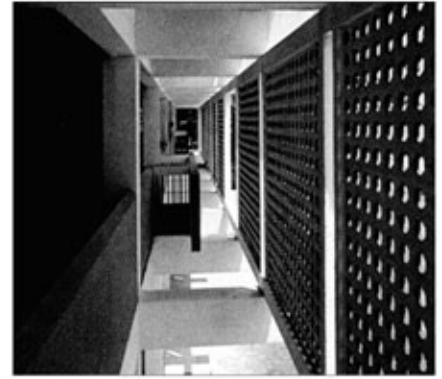
Bawa's final internment could be seen as a cruel parody of his earlier existence. He has always been a very private person, whose life was divided into clearly defined chapters, whose friends were kept in separate compartments, whose inner thoughts and feelings were seldom, if ever, exposed, and whose deeply held architectural beliefs were carefully camouflaged. When asked to

explain his buildings he would usually offer witty ripostes or banal homilies and pretend to hold no truck with theorizing. And yet, over a period of forty years, Bawa succeeded in establishing a canon of revolutionary architectural prototypes for his native Sri Lanka. In the context of a newly independent country emerging from four centuries of colonial hegemony he forged a new architectural identity that drew together the different strands of a complex ethnic weave and exploited a rich history. As the Malaysian architect Kenneth Yeang has said: 'For many of us Asian architects Geoffrey Bawa will always have a special place in our hearts and minds. He is our first hero and guru.'¹

Bawa was born in 1919 in what was then the British Crown Colony of Ceylon. On a map of the world Sri Lanka appears to be a peripheral place on the very edge of the Asian land mass, cut off from centres of power and major trade routes. Its history has been marked, however, both by its proximity to India and by its strategic position in the Indian Ocean between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. India was the source of Sri Lanka's early settlers and of its two main religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, while the ocean brought seafarers from Arabia and China. During the twentieth century, Sri Lanka's population increased almost sixfold and today it stands at about twenty million. Nearly three-quarters of this total are Sinhalese, who are mainly Buddhist; about one-fifth are Tamils, predominantly Hindu; and the balance is made up of Moors or Muslims – the mixed descendants of Arab seafarers – and smaller groups of Malays, Chetties, Dutch Burghers and Eurasians.



Geoffrey Bawa and Ulrik Plesner at
the Shell Bungalow, Anuradhapura,
1960.



Bawa's own family history reflects much of this ethnic and cultural diversity. His grandfather, Amaduwa Bawa, was a Muslim lawyer from the ancient Arab port of Beruwela, who went to London to further his studies and married a Miss Georgina Ablett of Islington. Their son, Benjamin, became one of the most successful lawyers of his generation, and in 1908 married Bertha Schrader, the daughter of a Dutch Burgher called Frederick Justus Schrader and his Scottish-Sinhalese wife. Benjamin Bawa died in 1923 and Geoffrey, who was only four years old at the time, was henceforth brought up by his mother and two maiden aunts.

In 1938 Bawa went to Cambridge to read English. He later studied law in London and, after qualifying, returned to Ceylon at the beginning of 1946 and worked for a Colombo law firm. He soon tired of the legal profession, however, and set off on two years of travel that took him through the Far East, across the United States and eventually to Italy, where he decided to buy a villa overlooking Lake Garda. But the plan to buy an Italian villa fell through and, as Ceylon was slipping out of the British Empire, Bawa returned home and bought a derelict rubber estate at Lunuganga. Here his interest in landscape and architecture was kindled. Making the transition from restless traveller and reluctant lawyer to builder and gardener, Bawa set out on the serendipitous journey that made him independent Sri Lanka's most prolific and influential architect.

The garden project fired Bawa's imagination but laid bare his lack of technical knowledge and in 1951 he embarked on a trial apprenticeship with H H Reid, the sole surviving partner of the British colonial practice

Edwards, Reid and Begg, founded in Colombo in 1923. When Reid died suddenly a year later, Bawa returned to England and joined the third year at the Architectural Association in London. He was the oldest student in the school and is remembered with affection for his striking appearance, his Rolls Royce and his argumentative debates with tutors. Finally qualifying in 1957 at the age of thirty-eight, he returned to Ceylon and became a partner of Jimmy Nilgiria, a Parsee architect who had taken over Edwards, Reid and Begg after Reid's death.

Working first with a young Danish architect, Ulrik Plesner, and then with the Tamil engineer K Poologasundram, Bawa gathered around himself a group of designers drawn from every corner of Ceylon's ethnic maze. In addition to his immediate office colleagues this group included the artist Laki Senanayake, the designer Barbara Sansoni, and the batik artist Ena de Silva, all of whose work figures prominently in Bawa's buildings. After Jimmy Nilgiria's retirement in 1967, Bawa and Poologasundram continued to practice under the title 'Edwards, Reid and Begg' for the next twenty years.

Bawa's early work included office buildings, factories and schools, influenced by the 'Tropical Modernism' of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew and ultimately Le Corbusier. The classroom block he designed for Bishops College in Colombo in 1960 is typical. Another key typology was the private house. For more than a century, Sri Lankan domestic architecture had been dominated by British models, and traditional courtyard forms had been largely ignored and forgotten. The typical British 'bungalow' was a cellular villa, extrovert in concept, which occupied the centre

of a large garden plot. However, the population of Sri Lanka was exploding and Colombo was rapidly being transformed from a leafy Garden City into a modern Asian metropolis. Land prices were rising and plot sizes shrinking, exposing the bungalow type's limitations in providing privacy and ventilation. Bawa instinctively grasped the problem and set out to find a solution.

In his first houses, built at the end of the 1950s, he deconstructed the colonial bungalow and rearranged its constituent parts to create semi-enclosed spaces. There followed a series of 'frame houses' – designed with Plesner and inspired in part by Scandinavian models – in which an orthogonal concrete frame was infilled to incorporate covered terraces, garden courts and planted roof gardens. Initially Bawa's commitment to Modernism drew him to white abstract forms and horizontal roof lines, but he was soon forced to admit that overhanging roofs offered necessary protection against tropical sun and rain.

His first breakthrough came with a house for a doctor, A S H de Silva, built in 1959 on a steeply sloping site in Galle, on the south-west coast of Sri Lanka. Here the deconstructed elements were reassembled on an exploding pinwheel plan and held together by a single raking roof plane. But although the various linked pavilions created enclosed and half-enclosed garden courts, the house remained relatively extrovert and the gardens reached out towards the surrounding landscape.

Bawa's next client was Ena de Silva, the daughter of a Kandyan aristocrat and wife of the Inspector General of Police. She had bought a small corner plot in the Colombo

Top left: Exterior, Bishops College, Colombo, 1960.

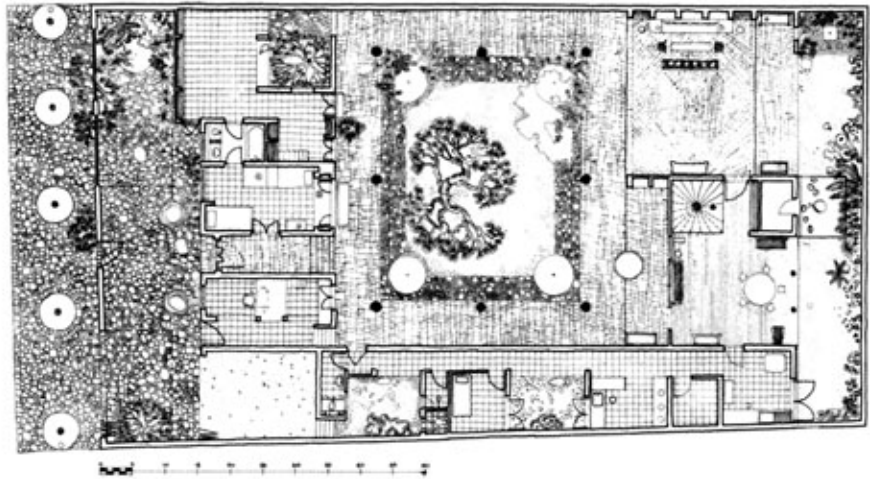
Top right: Brise-soleil at Bishops College.



suburb of Cinnamon Gardens and wanted a house that would be modern and open but embody features of the traditional manor houses she had known as a child. After interviewing several architects she turned to Bawa, whom she had initially rejected because of his dilettante image: 'I had seen him driving around in his Rolls with his scarf blowing in the wind and didn't like the look of him.'² In fact the two became close friends, and Bawa later recalled: 'I remember talking to Ena, seeing her surrounded by all the things she liked – all she wanted was brick walls and a roof. The plan came about largely because she, and consequently I, wanted a private compound that would not be overlooked by neighbours.'³

Bawa's solution employed the same elements as the Galle house but he now

carved them out of a solid form. The result is a totally introspective house that emphasizes void as much as solid and allows a free flow of space from inside to outside. The plan consists of a checker-board arrangement of linked pavilions and small courts, all disposed around a large central court, or *meda midula*, and contained within a limiting perimeter wall. The overpowering presence of the tiled roof and the generally localized palette of materials give this house a vernacular feel, and yet the highly articulated and open plan is totally modern in its effect. Space flows continuously from inside to outside and long vistas range across a series of indoor and outdoor 'rooms' to create the illusion of infinite space on what is a relatively small plot.



Top left: Entrance to the A S H de Silva House, Galle, 1959.
Top right: Central court and living room of the A S H de Silva House.

Bottom: Ground-floor plan of the Ena de Silva House, Colombo, 1960.



021

Geoffrey Bawa
View through the living room to
the main court of the Ena de
Silva House



geoffrey bawa
Main court, Goa de 1950s House.





024

Geoffrey Bawa
View from a guest room across to the
living room, Ena da Silva House.



025

Geoffrey Bawa
Staircase, Ena de Silva House.



026

Geoffrey Bawa
Tiled roof, Ena de Silva House.



A further strand in the private house typology is exemplified by the Polontalawa Estate Bungalow, built in 1964 for a Swiss plantation company on a remote coconut estate in the Dry Zone. Bawa and Plesner insisted that the client accompany them on a site visit and then persuaded him to build the bungalow in an area of huge boulders, with roofs spanning from rock to rock: "We discovered a spot full of boulders and we all said how excellent and splendid it would be to build a house there. So we got sticks and string, brought some chairs and sandwiches and set the house out with the contractor, who followed every gesture of our hands."⁴ Growing out of the landscape, the house belongs to a long Sri Lankan tradition of cave temples insinuated between boulders and tucked under cliffs. It employs materials gathered from its immediate surroundings and celebrates the roof as a totally autonomous element.

Contradicting the assertion that Bawa built only for Colombo's elite, in 1966 he designed and constructed a farm school for orphan girls at Yahapath Endera on a rubber and coconut estate near Hanwellla, about 30



kilometres east of Colombo. Its buildings were simple and cheap, constructed from locally available materials, including coconut and rubber timber, clay tiles and coconut thatch. Although he placed them on a formal orthogonal grid, Bawa allowed the buildings to 'run with the contours' in section. Individual buildings were positioned carefully to define open spaces and axes and to regulate vistas. Anura Ratnavibushena, who worked on the project, has described how Bawa generated many of his ideas whilst actually on site, developing them in the evening in sketch sections, usually drawn in biro on squared paper. Although no models were made, Bawa was able to visualize the three-dimensional complexities of the evolving design. Ratnavibushena would then work the ideas up into more finished drawings, which would form the starting point for another round of discussions and sketches.

In 1969 Bawa completed the Bentota Beach Hotel – the first purpose-built resort hotel in Sri Lanka and the standard against which all subsequent hotels would be measured. While offering subtle hints of a lost world of ancient palaces, medieval manor houses and colonial villas, it pandered to the needs of the modern tourist, playing on the senses to create a unique and unforgettable experience. Bawa located the hotel at the neck of a spit separating the Bentota River from the Indian Ocean, and raised it on a mound, which he encased in a rubble podium. Its apparent simplicity belies its spatial complexity and the subtleties of its section. In plan it recalls Le Corbusier's design for the Monastery of La Tourette: the main reception spaces at the summit form an enfilade of rooms around a square courtyard, above which two floors of bedrooms



Top left: Living room, Polontalawa Bungalow, Dry Zone, 1964.
Top right: Dormitory, Yahapath Endera Farm School, Hanwellla, 1966.

Centre: Wash-house, Yahapath Endera.
Bottom: Drawing of the approach to Yahapath Endera.



seem to float, with their balconies facing out towards the sea. From these balconies guests experience the tropical landscape beyond the confines of the hotel – the thunder of the ocean, flashes of sunlight on the swaying palm fronds, the shriek of a peacock, the orange glow of the setting sun as it slips below the horizon. But when they quit their rooms they are confronted by the civilized landscape of the courtyard below, where they smell the spices of the evening meal and hear the chink of glasses and the babble of foreign tongues.

Even when the hotel was new its materials – rough granite, polished concrete, terracotta, dark-stained timber, handloom – gave it a well-worn and lived-in feel, as if it were a building that had been discovered rather than designed. Conceived during a period when building materials were in short supply, it was built entirely by local contractors. Only thirty drawings were produced and many of

the details were worked out on site by Bawa with the craftsmen. Almost all of the furniture was designed in the office and made locally, and the rooms were filled with art works by Bawa's friends.

The 1970 elections brought in a left-wing coalition government and heralded a period of economic restraint and uncertainty in Sri Lanka. Suddenly Bawa felt uneasy about his future and even contemplated emigrating. He started looking for work abroad and in 1971 opened an office in Madras on the strength of a commission to extend the Connemara Hotel. This led to a number of other projects, including the design of a staff club in a suburb of Madurai. During this period Bawa also converted a sugar factory on the island of Mauritius into a weekend retreat and designed a group of villas at Batujimbar on the southern tip of Bali. Prospects soon improved on the home front, however, and the new government turned to



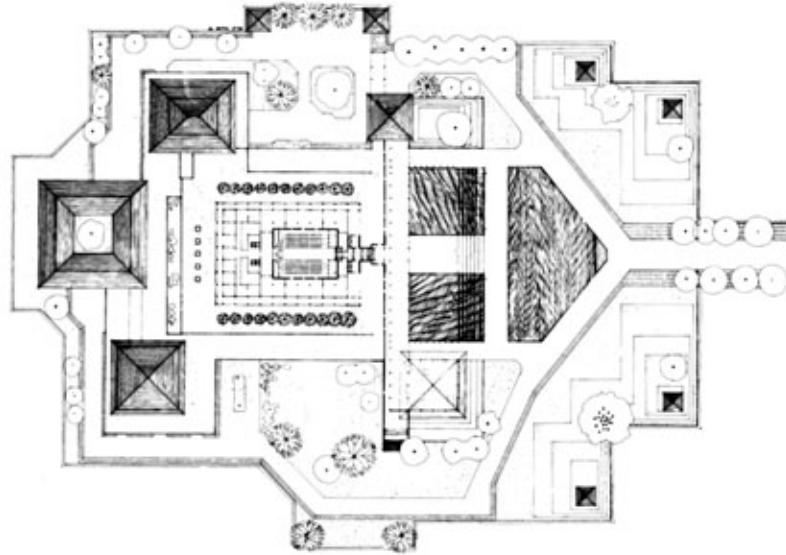
Top left: Aerial view, Bentota Beach Hotel, southern Sri Lanka, 1969.
Top right: View across the pool at the Bentota Beach Hotel.

Bottom left: Interior, Pallakelle Factory Unit, near Kandy, 1970.
Bottom right: Exterior, State Mortgage Bank, Colombo, 1976.

Bawa for a number of public projects that challenged him to address the problem of the workplace in a tropical environment. These included an estate of simple but effective hipped-roofed factory units at Pallakelle near Kandy and a delightful office building for the Agrarian Research and Training Institute in Colombo.

A further project of this kind was the 1976 design for the State Mortgage Bank, described at the time by Kenneth Yeang as 'probably the best example of a bioclimatically responsive tall building to be found anywhere in the world'.⁵ The restricted site for this twelve-storey high-rise, wedged between Colombo's Hyde Park Corner and the southern tip of the Beira Lake, lies across the road from Bawa's childhood home. Its lozenge-shaped plan creates a profile that changes dramatically according to viewpoint, appearing slender towards the junction and much flatter towards the park and the lake. It is capped by a floating concrete canopy that reveals the geometric logic of the concrete structure below.

The 1977 elections returned to power a United National Party government committed to re-establishing a free-market economy. As part of a massive wave of development projects, President Jayawardene asked Bawa to prepare designs for a new Parliament building at Kotte, about 8 kilometres east of Colombo. Bawa was given a totally free hand, with the proviso that the project had to be completed in time for an official opening in 1982. Poologasundram took charge of the management of the programme and at his



suggestion the construction project was contracted to the Japanese firm Mitsui. A special team of architects was established under Vasantha Jacobsen, Bawa's main assistant, eventually producing over five thousand drawings – a far cry from the days of the Bentota Beach Hotel.

Bawa proposed that the marshy valley of the Diyavanna Oya be flooded to create a vast lake and that the new capitol be built on a knoll of high ground, which would become an island at the lake's centre. Its cascade of copper roofs would be seen floating above the new lake from the approach road at a distance of 2 kilometres. The design places the main chamber in a central pavilion surrounded by a cluster of five satellite pavilions, each defined by its own umbrella copper roof and seeming to grow out of its

own plinth, although the plinths are actually connected to form a continuous ground and first floor. The main pavilion is symmetrical about the debating chamber but the axiality is diffused by the asymmetrical arrangement of the lesser pavilions around it. As a result, the pavilions each retain a separate identity but unite in a single upward sweep of tent-like roofs that make abstract reference to traditional Kandyan roof structures.

The new Parliament opened in April 1982 against a background of growing communal tension. Its commemoration stone recorded ironically that the architects were 'Edwards, Reid and Begg' adding, almost as an afterthought, the names of Geoffrey Bawa, Dr K Poologasundram and Vasantha Jacobsen – a Burgher-Moor, a Jaffna Tamil and a Sinhalese Buddhist.

Bottom left: Debating chamber, National Parliament, Kotte, 1982.

Top: Aerial view, National Parliament.
Centre: Plan, National Parliament.



030

Geoffrey Bawa
Exterior views of the University of
Ruhunu, southern Sri Lanka, 1984.



031

Geoffrey Bawa
Exterior and entrance, Kandalama
Hotel, near Sigiriya, 1991.

During the 1980s Bawa worked on designs for the new University of Ruhunu near the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka. The magnificent site straddles two hills, giving views across a lake towards the southern ocean. Comprising 50,000 square metres of buildings to accommodate 4,000 students, it was built by Dutch contractors and took eight years to complete. Bawa's design deploys over fifty separate pavilions linked by a system of covered loggias on a predominantly orthogonal grid, using a limited vocabulary of forms and materials borrowed from the Porto-Sinhalese traditions of the late medieval period. At the same time it exploits the changing topography of the site to create an ever-varying sequence of courts and verandas, vistas and closures. The result is a modern campus, vast in size but human in scale.

The projects of the early 1980s brought Bawa international recognition and his work was celebrated in a Mimar book by Brian Brace Taylor in 1986 and in a London exhibition. But the Parliament building and Ruhunu had left him exhausted. He missed the direct control he had exercised over his earlier projects and spent less and less time in the office in Alfred House Road. His partner, Pooagasundram, had been offended by Bawa's failure to acknowledge him in the book or exhibition and the two grew apart. After 1989 the practice effectively ceased to function. Bawa was now in his seventies and it was widely assumed that he would retire to Lunuganga and contemplate his garden. Nothing, however, could have been further from the truth. The closing of the office signalled a new period of creativity, and he began to work from his Bagatelle Road home with a small group of young architects to produce a steady stream of fresh designs.

By now Bawa's fame had spread far beyond the shores of Serendib and he received many requests to lend his name to projects in the Far East. He and his young colleagues embarked on a series of ambitious designs: a massive extension to the Hyatt Hotel on Bali; a tropical glasshouse in Singapore; a huge villa hotel on the island of Bintan in Indonesia; a high-rise development in Penang. Requests for private houses also flooded in and Bawa produced sketches for clients in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bangalore and Singapore. None of these projects came to fruition, however, and Bawa treated them as test beds for new ideas, to be used when the opportunity presented itself.

Such an opportunity arose at the end of 1991 when Bawa was commissioned to design a hotel at the foot of King Kasyapa's rock citadel at Sigiriya in the Dry Zone. True to form, he rejected the proposed site and persuaded the clients to locate the hotel some fifteen kilometres to the south, on a rocky outcrop above the ancient Kandalama tank. The site was virtually inaccessible and Bawa had to be carried to it on an improvised palanquin.

In its final design the 160-bedroom hotel is wrapped around two sides of the rock, with rooms facing across the tank towards Sigiriya and Dambulla. The two wings are connected by a cavernous corridor running through the rock from the hotel entrance to the main reception areas. Bawa's use of a starkly expressed concrete frame and a flat roof is ideally suited to the location, and the hotel seems to grow out of its site in a similar way to the earlier house at Polontalawa. The frame supports a second skin of timber sunbreakers, which in turn carries a screen of vegetation, while the flat roof has been transformed into a fantastic tropical garden.



Aerial view, Kandalama Hotel.



Lounge, Kandalama Hotel.

The tectonic form allows the hotel to hug the shape of the ridge, so that its open-sided corridors run alongside the cliff face. In the public areas, the materials used complement the large expanses of naked rock to convey a wholly appropriate feeling of austerity.

Three houses from this period reveal the distance an artist travels in order, it would seem, to come full circle. Built at the bottom of the owners' former garden in Colombo, the de Soysa House of 1990 is a minimalist tower of concrete and glass jostling between a clump of trees. The Jayakody House of 1993 creates a civilized retreat on an awkward Colombo site, ascending from an almost subterranean world of shady courtyards



to a rooftop pool terrace that looks out across the surrounding roofscape. In contrast, the Jayawardene House of 1997 is a weekend retreat on the red cliffs of Mirissa overlooking the sweep of Weligama Bay. Here the visitor climbs a narrow track from the busy main road and, after a final twist, discovers a breathtaking view across the bay framed by a grove of swaying coconut palms. These hide a platoon of black columns and a thin horizontal roof – a simple pleasure pavilion on a stepped plinth facing towards the ocean and the setting sun. Forty years

separate these houses from the doctor's house in Galle, and yet they reveal the same concern with distillation and simplicity.



Left: Exterior, de Soysa House, Colombo, 1990.

Top: Cross-section, Kandalama Hotel. Centre: Exterior, Jayakody House, Colombo, 1993.

Above: Views of the Jayawardene House, Mirissa, 1997.



034

Geoffrey Bawa
Interior and veranda, de Soysa House.





Bawa's last two hotels were executed with the sure touch of a master. The Lighthouse Hotel of 1995 defies the southern ocean from a rocky promontory on the outskirts of the old Arab port of Galle. The sea is inhospitable – huge breakers roll in incessantly from the Indian Ocean – but the views are stunning. The strategy is both to confront the relentless crashing of the waves and to provide contrasting areas of shelter and tranquillity. The lower slopes of the rock are encased in rubble retaining walls, housing the main entrance and services. A massive *porte cochère* leads past the reception desk to a vertical drum enclosing the main stair, which spirals upwards among a swirling

mass of Dutch and Sinhalese warriors sculpted by Bawa's old friend Laki Senanayake. The lounges and restaurants carry memories of old rest houses and planters' clubs, while the furnishing of the terraces and verandas is solid and rugged to withstand monsoons. No single space is self-contained or complete: each is in part the consequence of a previous space and the anticipation of a subsequent one; each retains links with its neighbours and with the outside so that the eye is continually invited to explore the possibilities the building offers.

South of Colombo, the Blue Water Hotel at Wadduwa – one of the last projects that Bawa supervised before his final illness –

Top left and right: Exterior view and main swimming pool, Lighthouse Hotel, Galle, 1995.

Bottom left and right: Staircase, with figures by Laki Senanayake, and terrace, Lighthouse Hotel.

sits in an uninspiring coconut grove between a railway line and a long flat beach. The design is a reworking of a traditional rest house, blown up to a massive scale with long axes and vast courtyards to create a minimalist palace, a perfect setting for ceremonies and celebrations.

Bawa's health had been deteriorating for some time before he suffered his final stroke in early 1998. At the time he was still involved with a number of projects and work on these continued under the direction of his associate Channa Daswatte. Two of the projects, the Spencer House in Colombo and the Jacobsen House in Tangalle, have since been completed to their original designs, while a third in Mumbai is still on site. In 1997 Bawa's design for a new Presidential Secretariat was approved by the President, but during the following year the site was changed and the project is now being carried forward by Daswatte in the spirit of the original design.

Looking back over Bawa's career, two projects seem to hold the key to an understanding of his work: the garden at Lunuganga and his own house in Colombo. Both have been many years in the making and both have served as laboratories for new ideas. The town house is a haven of peace, locked away from the busy and increasingly hostile city, an infinite garden of the mind constructed like a puzzle on a tiny urban plot. In contrast the estate at Lunuganga is a distant retreat, an outpost on the edge of the known world, which challenges the infinite horizon of the ocean to the west and the endless switchback of hills to the east, reducing a vast open landscape to a controlled series of outdoor rooms, a civilized garden within the larger garden of Sri Lanka.

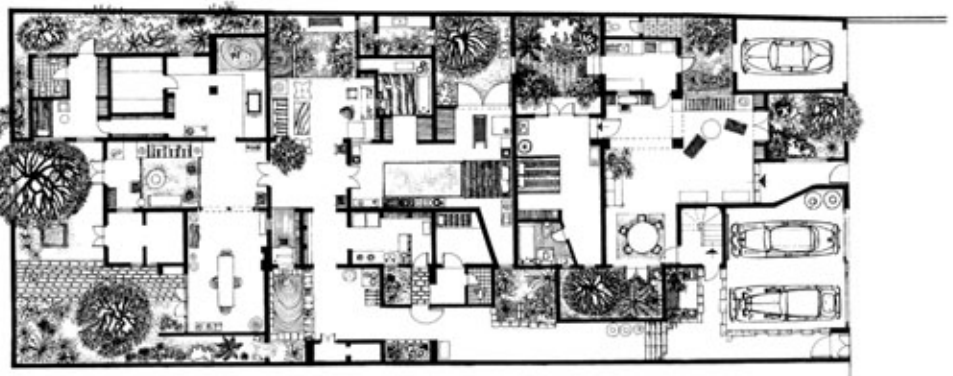
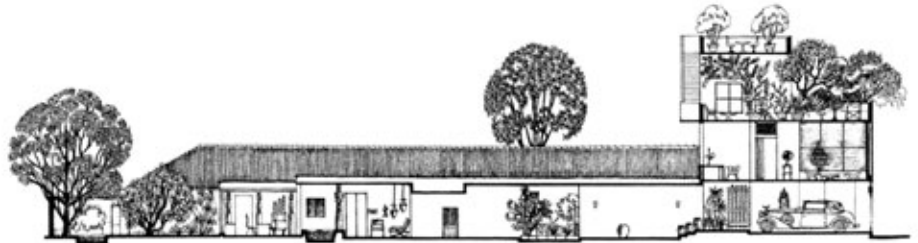
The Colombo house is an essay in architectural synthesis. In 1958 Bawa bought the third in a row of four small bungalows in a short cul-de-sac at the end of a narrow suburban lane and converted it into a *pied-à-terre* with a living room, bedroom, tiny kitchen and room for a servant. When the fourth bungalow became vacant it was colonized to serve as a dining room and second living room. Ten years later the other two bungalows were acquired and integrated into the composition, the first being demolished to make way for a four-storey structure incorporating a library and roof terrace, and the second becoming a guest wing and later the 'home office'.

Over the last forty years the house has been subject to constant change and the



identities of the original bungalows are now all but lost. The final result is an introspective labyrinth of rooms and garden courts that together create the illusion of infinite space. Words like inside and outside lose all meaning: here are rooms without roofs and roofs without walls, all connected by a complex matrix of axes and internal

vistas. If the main part of the house is an evocation of a lost world of verandas and courtyards, the tower rising above the carport is nothing less than a reworking of Le Corbusier's *Maison Citrohan*, serving as a periscope as it rises from a shady netherworld to give views out across the treetops towards the sea.



Top left and right: View from the entrance and central seating area of Geoffrey Bawa's house in Colombo, 1958-68.

Centre and bottom: Cross-section and plan, Geoffrey Bawa's house.



038

Geoffrey Bawa
Views of the main pavilion,
Jayawardene House.



039

Geoffrey Bawa
Exterior and interior of the Blue
Water Hotel, Wadduwa, 1997.

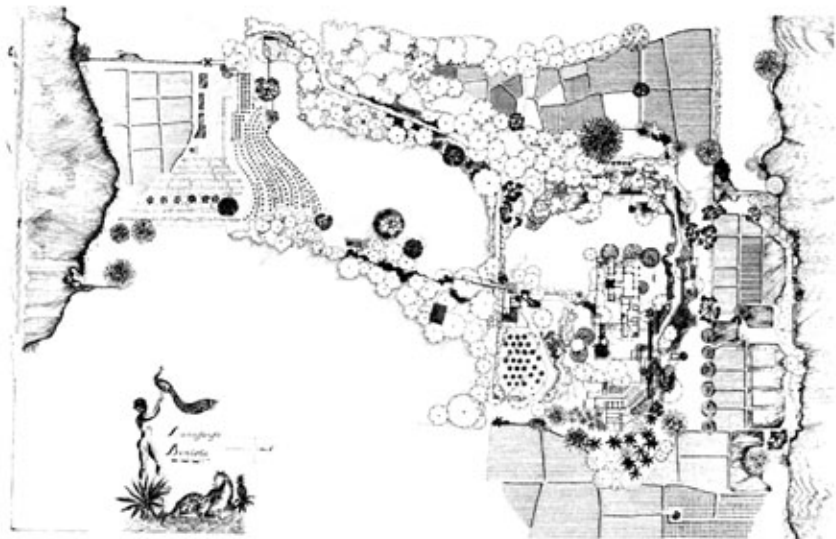
The garden at Lunuganga sits astride two low hills on a promontory jutting into a brackish lagoon off the Bentota River. In 1948 there was nothing here but an undistinguished bungalow surrounded by 25 acres of rubber trees. Since then hills have been moved, terraces cut, woods replanted and new vistas opened, but the original bungalow survives within a cocoon of added verandas, courtyards and loggias. Looking south from the main entrance terrace, a corridor of trees frames a view of a large urn in the middle distance marking the summit of Cinnamon Hill and pointing to a distant Buddhist temple. The area to the east of the bungalow has been transformed into a series of interconnected terraces stepping down towards the lake's edge and framed by a guest house, an office pavilion and a sculpture gallery. To the north a lawn runs from the foot of a spreading aralia tree towards the undulating parapet of a steep cliff, offering views across a water meadow towards the lake.

This is a civilized wilderness, not a garden of flowers and fountains; it is a composition in monochrome, 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. Works of art are carefully placed to form objects for contemplation, punctuation marks on routes, pointers or distant beacons: a leopard lies in the dappled shade beside

the lake, guarding the water gate; a young boy beckons on the edge of the cliff; a grotesque Pan grins up from the edge of the paddy.

Lunuganga seems to be so natural, so established, that it is hard to appreciate just how much effort has gone into its creation. Hardly a year has passed since 1948 without some new element being added, some new area being colonized. The various buildings constructed over the years appear simply to have grown out of the ground, carefully restored remnants of some earlier period of occupation, messages on a palimpsest. Nor is it apparent how much work is needed to maintain such careful casualness. Ignore the garden for a week and the paths and staircases will clog up with leaves; after a month the lawns will run wild; in a year the terraces will start to crumble; and in two or three years the jungle will return.

After the passage of more than fifty monsoons Sri Lanka has lost its innocence and Bawa has grown old. As he sits in his wheelchair on the terrace and watches the sun setting across the lake it may be that he reflects on his achievements. Perhaps the garden had simply been waiting for him to discover it beneath a canopy of jungle? But this is a work of art, not of nature: it is the contrivance of a single mind and a hundred pairs of hands, working with nature to produce something 'supernatural'.



Plan, Lunuganga Estate, southern Sri Lanka, 1948-present.



041

Geoffrey Bawa
The Broad Walk, Lunuganga.



042

Geoffrey Bawa
Path, Lumbanga.

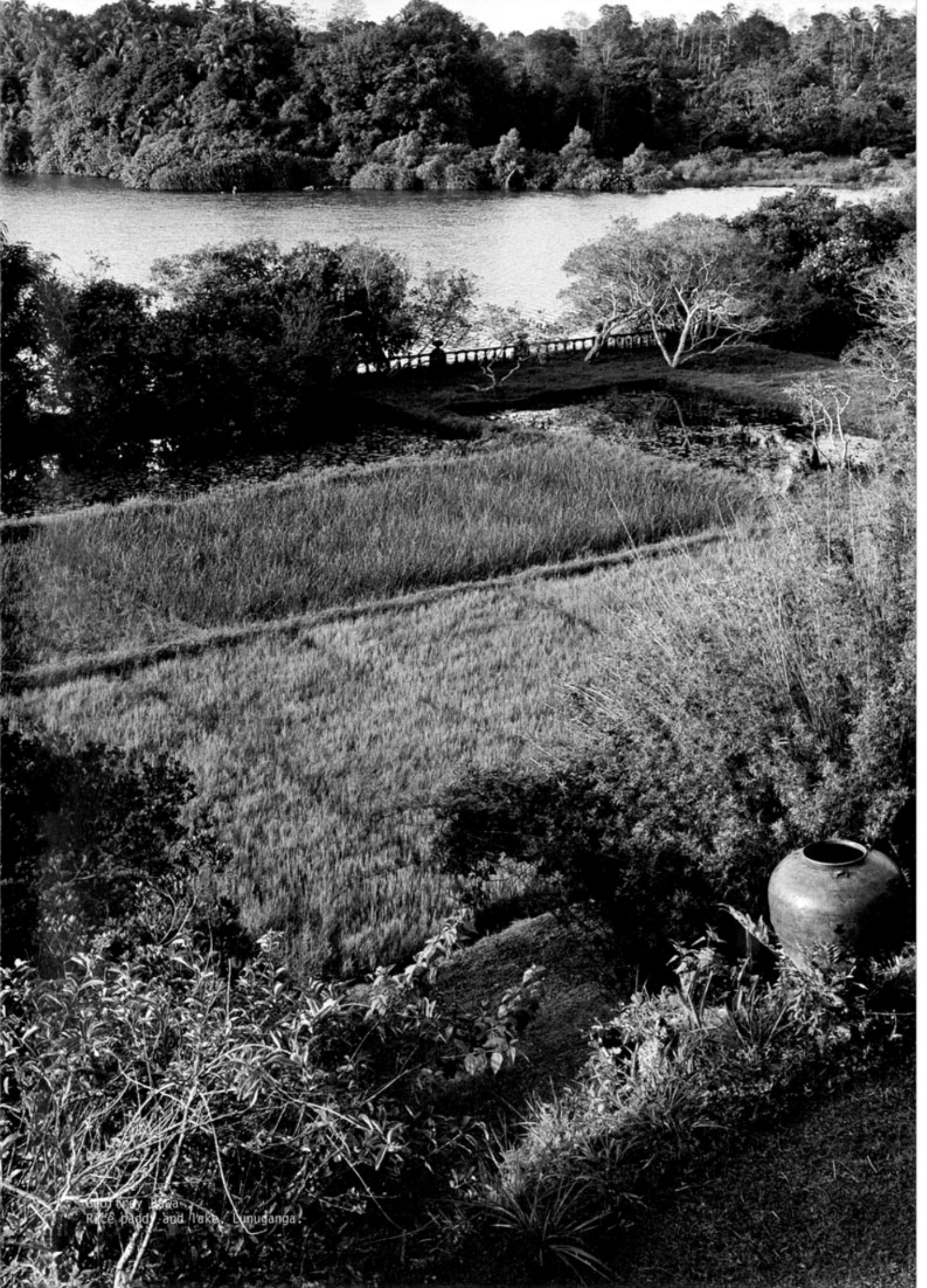


Photo by Bawa
Rice paddy and lake, Lunuganga.



Geoffrey Bawa
View from the main terrace,
Lunuganda.





ND46

Geoffrey Bawa
The Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation



Notes

- 1 Kenneth Yeang, quoted by Michael Keniger in *Bawa: Recent Projects 1987-95* (Brisbane, Queensland Chapter of the RAlA, 1996).
- 2 Ena de Silva in conversation with the author.
- 3 Geoffrey Bawa in conversation with Channa Daswatte.
- 4 Geoffrey Bawa in conversation with Channa Daswatte.
- 5 Kenneth Yeang, quoted by Michael Keniger in *Bawa: Recent Projects*, op cit.
- 6 Geoffrey Bawa, 'Ceylon, a Philosophy for Building' in *Architects' Journal*, 15 October 1969.

Critics have portrayed Bawa as a Tropical Modernist, a Romantic, a vernacularist and a regionalist. The failure to look beyond labels has been exacerbated by Bawa's own extreme mistrust of theory and reluctance to discuss his methods or influences. He has written: 'When one delights as much as I do in planning a building and having it built, I find it impossible to describe the exact steps in an analytical or dogmatic way...I have a strong conviction that it is impossible to explain architecture in words - I have always enjoyed seeing buildings but seldom enjoyed reading explanations about them - as I feel, with others, that architecture cannot be totally explained but must be experienced.'⁶

It is difficult to pin down Bawa's influences. He himself has spoken of English country houses, Italian gardens, the Alhambra in Granada, the forts of Rajasthan and the Keralan Palace of Padmanabhapuram, and has acknowledged his debts to Sinhalese classical and vernacular architecture. But

he has also been influenced by the twin heroes of the Modern Movement, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, whose work resounds through what at first sight seem to be Bawa's most traditional pieces.

Bawa's work should be viewed in the context of a country whose population has almost tripled since independence and whose communities have been fractured by bitter political and ethnic disputes. In today's Sri Lanka, fast cars vie with bullock carts on the narrow roads, young girls in saris sew jeans for Marks & Spencer, and farmers gather in the evening under the village tree to watch the latest American soap on *rupavaheeni* - 'the picture from heaven'. Although it might be thought that his buildings have had no direct impact on the lives of ordinary people, Bawa has exerted a defining influence on the emerging architecture of independent Sri Lanka. In celebrating the island's rich history and cultural diversity he has developed a new architectural language, truly of its place.

Top left and right: The office pavilion and sitting room, Lunuganga.

Bottom left and right: Views of the guest house, Lunuganga.



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Geoffrey Bawa at Lunuganga in 1990.