Serendib Serendipity

The Architecture of Geoffrey Bawa

David Robson and Channa Daswatte

'Serendib': The ancient Arab name for Sri Lanka. 'Serendipity': A word coined by Horace Walpole and inspired by his tale 'The Three Princes of Serendip', whose heroes 'were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of'.

This year marks both the fiftieth anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence and the fiftieth year of Geoffrey Bawa's architectural odyssey. In 1948, as Ceylon was slipping uneventfully out of the British Empire, Bawa returned home after almost ten years of exile and bought the derelict rubber estate which was to kindle his interest in landscape and architecture. The two anniversaries are not entirely unconnected: in making the transition from restless traveller and reluctant lawyer to builder and gardener Bawa was setting out on the serendipitous journey which would lead him to become independent Sri Lanka's most prolific and influential architect.

Bawa was born in 1919, the son of a successful barrister, in what was then the British colony of Ceylon, and grew up in that tolerant, cultured and cosmopolitan society which once thrived on the verandas of Colombo's leafy suburbs. In 1938 he came to Britain and read English at Cambridge. Later he turned to law and in 1943 was called to the Bar in London. In 1945 he returned to Ceylon and worked for a time in a Colombo law firm. However, after his mother's death in 1946 he abandoned the legal profession and set off on two years of travel which took him through the Far East, across the United States and eventually to Europe. Finally at the end of 1947 he came to a temporary halt in Italy and was tempted to buy a farm overlooking Lake Garda. There seemed to be little to draw him back to Sri Lanka: both his parents were dead, he had spent more than a third of his life away from home and, although only half European by descent, he was almost wholly European in outlook and had developed a taste for beautiful country houses, fine pictures and good company. But the plan to buy the Italian farm fell through and he returned to Ceylon where, almost on the rebound, he bought an estate at Lunuganga near Bentota and set out to transform it into a landscaped garden.

The garden project fired his imagination but laid bare his lack of technical knowledge. His growing interest in building prompted a cousin to suggest that he ought to train to become an architect so that 'you can do what you like doing best with other people's money'. This advice seems still to underscore his design philosophy. Bawa designs each building as if it were for himself: he empathizes with his clients and is reluctant to build for people with whom he can't identify.

In 1951 he embarked on a trial apprenticeship with H. H. Reid, the sole surviving partner of the Colombo firm of Edwards Reid and Begg. This British colonial practice had been founded in 1923 by S. J. Edwards after he won the competition to design Colombo's new Town Hall, and remained the most important in the region until the outbreak of the Second World War. After Reid's death Bawa returned to Cambridge and in 1952 engaged a tutor to teach him structural design.

In the following year he applied to the Architectural Association and was accepted directly into third year by Michael Pattrick. This is said to have been one of the most creative periods in the AA's history, and the list of Bawa's contemporaries reads today like a *Who's Who* of architecture. Bawa was the oldest student in the school at the time and is remembered with affection for his striking appearance, his Rolls-Royce and his argumentative exchanges with tutors. During Fourth Year he studied under John Killick and worked with Stuart Lewis and Tony Matthes on a design for housing in Holloway Road (Killick 1956). His final year was spent largely in Rome whence he would occasionally drive at breakneck speed to put in a rare appearance at Bedford Square. He finally qualified in 1957 at the age of 38 and returned to Ceylon where, almost immediately, he instated himself as senior partner in what had become by then the almost moribund practice of Edwards Reid and Begg.

Bawa gathered around himself a group of designers and artists from many different backgrounds who, inspired by a growing appreciation of the depth and diversity of their own culture and traditions, came together to discover ways of making and doing things which would be new and vital and yet essentially Sri Lankan. As well as 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 buildings designed by the practice.

In 1958 Bawa was joined by Ulrich Plesner, a young Danish architect who was to play an important role in the development of the new practice during its first decade. Plesner was a charismatic character who brought with him an appreciation of Scandinavian design and detailing tempered with an interest in Buddhism and a curiosity about Sri Lanka's building traditions. At the time the architectural profession hardly existed

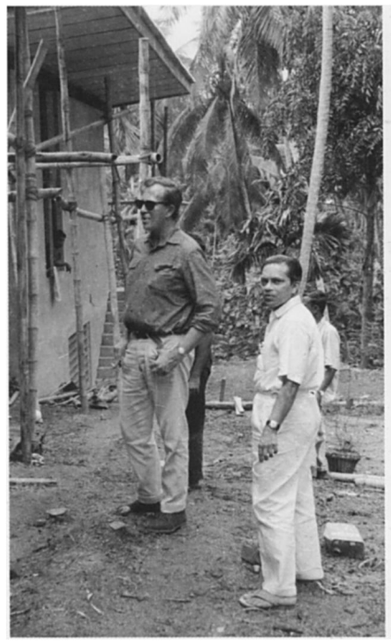
and there was no school of architecture. Bawa and Plesner figured among the group who helped to found the first school and they later helped a number of their assistants to obtain scholarships to study in England and Denmark. Plesner quit the practice in 1965 to return to Europe, and Bawa was joined by the engineer Poologasundram with whom he was to enjoy a fruitful relationship over the next twenty years.

At the end of the 1950s the building industry in Ceylon was still run along traditional lines. Small general contractors submitted tenders based on rates and employed *baasses*, or craftsmen, as sub-contractors. Drawings were simple and graphic and much of the detail was worked out on the site or in the workshop with the *baass unahe*, or 'most honourable craftsman'. Invariably, the design process would begin on the site: Bawa has a remarkable facility for grasping the key features of even the most difficult terrain, and of envisioning complex three-dimensional solutions. On the building site he would sit and stare at the emerging design and then discuss detailed and often radical changes with the *baasses*. In 1970 the practice built Sri Lanka's first modern resort hotel at Bentota from a basic set of about twenty drawings, using local builders and craftsmen, and much of the detailed design occurred on the site as the building was taking shape. Only twelve years later the new Parliament buildings at Kotte were built by an international contracting firm and needed more than three thousand drawings.

During the 1960s imported building materials other than basic steel sections and cement were difficult to obtain. Modern fixtures and fittings simply didn't exist and it was necessary to work closely with the *baasses* in order to produce home-made substitutes. All of this led to a spirit of experimentation and improvisation, and a growing interest in the possibilities offered by traditional methods of construction and craftsmanship.

Over a period of thirty years Bawa's practice established itself as the most respected and most prolific in Sri Lanka, with a portfolio of work which included religious, social, cultural, educational, governmental, commercial and residential buildings, and in each of these areas he succeeded in establishing a whole canon of Sri Lankan prototypes. Finally, at the end of the 1980s when he and Poologasundram agreed to dissolve their partnership, it was widely assumed that Bawa 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 during the past ten years he has worked from his Colombo home with a small group of young architects to produce a steady stream of fresh designs.

Two projects hold the key to an understanding of Bawa's work: the garden at Lunuganga which he has continued to fashion for almost fifty years and his own house in Colombo. Both have been many years in the making, both have served as test beds for ideas, both take an existing context as their starting-point. 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. Lunuganga, in contrast, 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,



Geoffrey Bawa (*left*) on the site of the de Silva House, 1960 (*see p. 30*).

Entrance steps of Geoffrey Bawa's garden at Lunuganga (*above*), and carport entrance of his own house in Colombo (*below*).

reducing a vast open landscape to a controlled series of outdoor rooms, a civilized garden within the larger garden wilderness of Sri Lanka.

The work Bawa carried out under the aegis of Edwards Reid and Begg has been well documented and his major projects such as the Bentota Beach Hotel (Brawne 1978), the Triton Hotel (Scott 1983), Sri Lanka's new Parliament (Scott 1983) and the Ruhuna University campus (Brawne 1986) will already be familiar to many readers. Critics have portrayed Bawa variously as a tropical modernist, as a romantic, as a vernacularist and as a regionalist. This failure to look beyond simple labels has been made worse by Bawa's own mistrust of theory and his extreme reluctance to discuss his methods or his 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 very 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.' (Brace-Taylor 1986) He is unimpressed by form-making for its own sake: buildings inherit meanings from their milieu and acquire meanings through use. A building grows from an appreciation of the site and an understanding of the aspirations of the client: the rest is movement, spatial manipulation, the framing of views, the choice and disposition of materials, and the play of light.

It is difficult to pin down Bawa's influences. He himself mentions English country houses and their landscaped gardens, the Alhambra in Granada, the forts of Rajasthan, the

Keralan palace of Padmanabapuram, and the buildings of Cambridge and Rome. He also acknowledges his debt to classical Sinhalese architecture and to the later vernacular traditions which evolved from the fusion of medieval architecture with the architecture of the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonists. Inspired perhaps by the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1908) and Andrew Boyd (1947) he and a small group of friends were amongst the first to look seriously at Ceylon's architectural heritage and to treat it as a possible source for a new architecture.

But Bawa was also influenced by the twin heroes of the Modern Movement, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, elements of whose work can be found fused into what seem at first sight to be his most traditional pieces. While most commentators have tended to overlook his more overtly modern designs, preferring to dwell on the vernacular side of his work, it is possible to show that most of his buildings actually include both traditional and contemporary forms in an often surprising but wholly appropriate way.

It is particularly important to place Bawa in a context: not a historic context but rather the context of contemporary Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's population has almost tripled since independence, while its communities have been fractured by bitter political and ethnic disputes. In today's Sri Lanka, Toyota cars vie with bullock carts on the country's narrow roads, young girls in saris operate complex machines in factories making jeans for Marks and 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 the newly independent Sri Lanka and on successive generations of young Sri Lankan architects. In this way his ideas have spread out across the island like ripples on a pond and have provided a bridge between the past and the future, a mirror in which ordinary people have been able to obtain a clearer image of their own emerging culture.

Bawa's architecture is a subtle blend of modern and traditional, of East and West, of formal and picturesque: he exploits the climate and fertility of his native land in order to break down the artificial segregation of inside and outside, of building and landscape; he draws on every twist and turn of his country's colourful history to create an architecture which is fitting to its place, but he has also scoured the world for ideas with which to inform an architecture which is of its age.

To illustrate the range of Bawa's work we have selected three key buildings, one from each of the first three decades of his working career, and three buildings from the fourth and most recent decade. We have tried to avoid buildings that are already well known, and for this reason have omitted larger projects such as the University of Ruhuna and the new Parliament.

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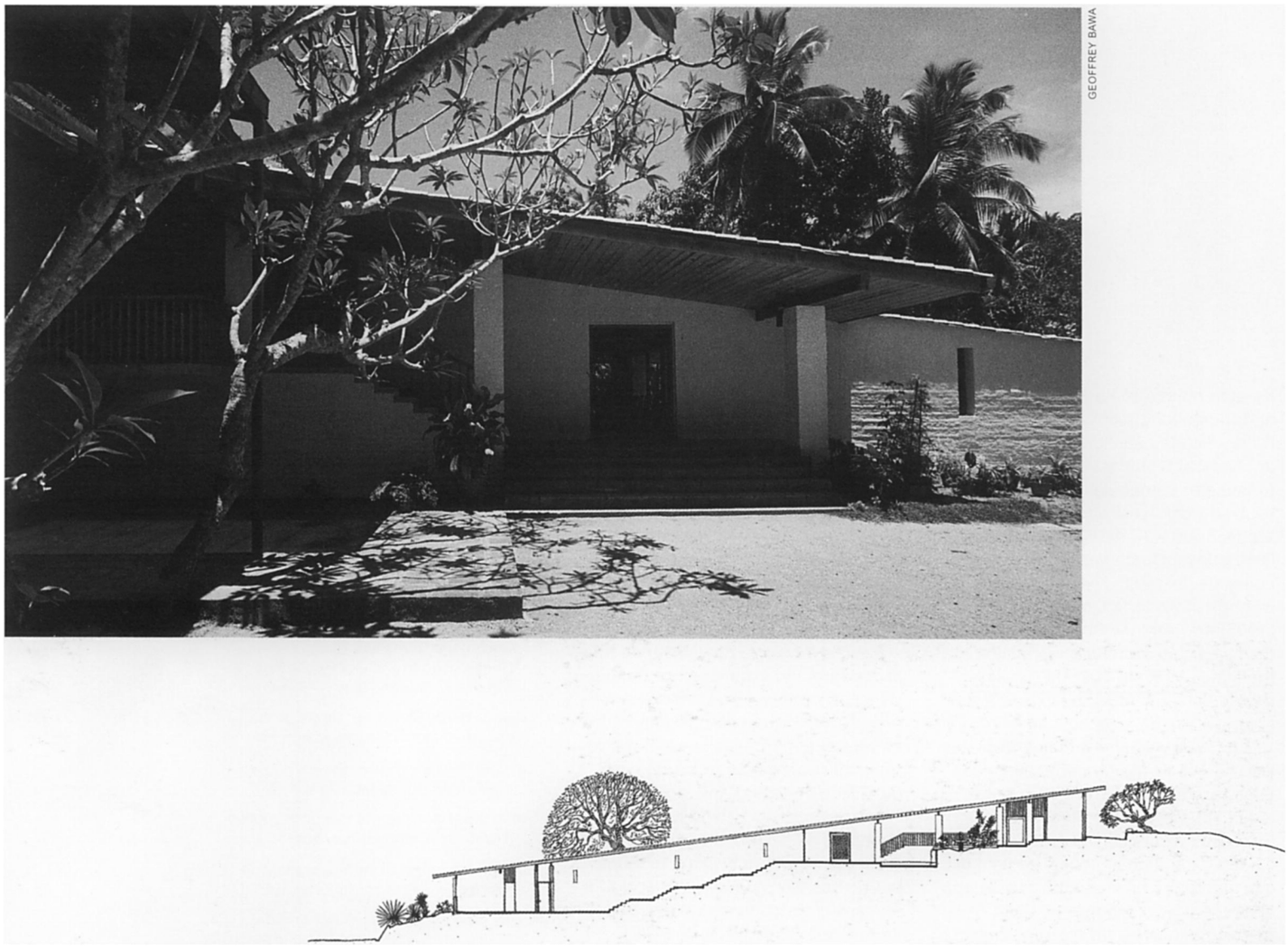
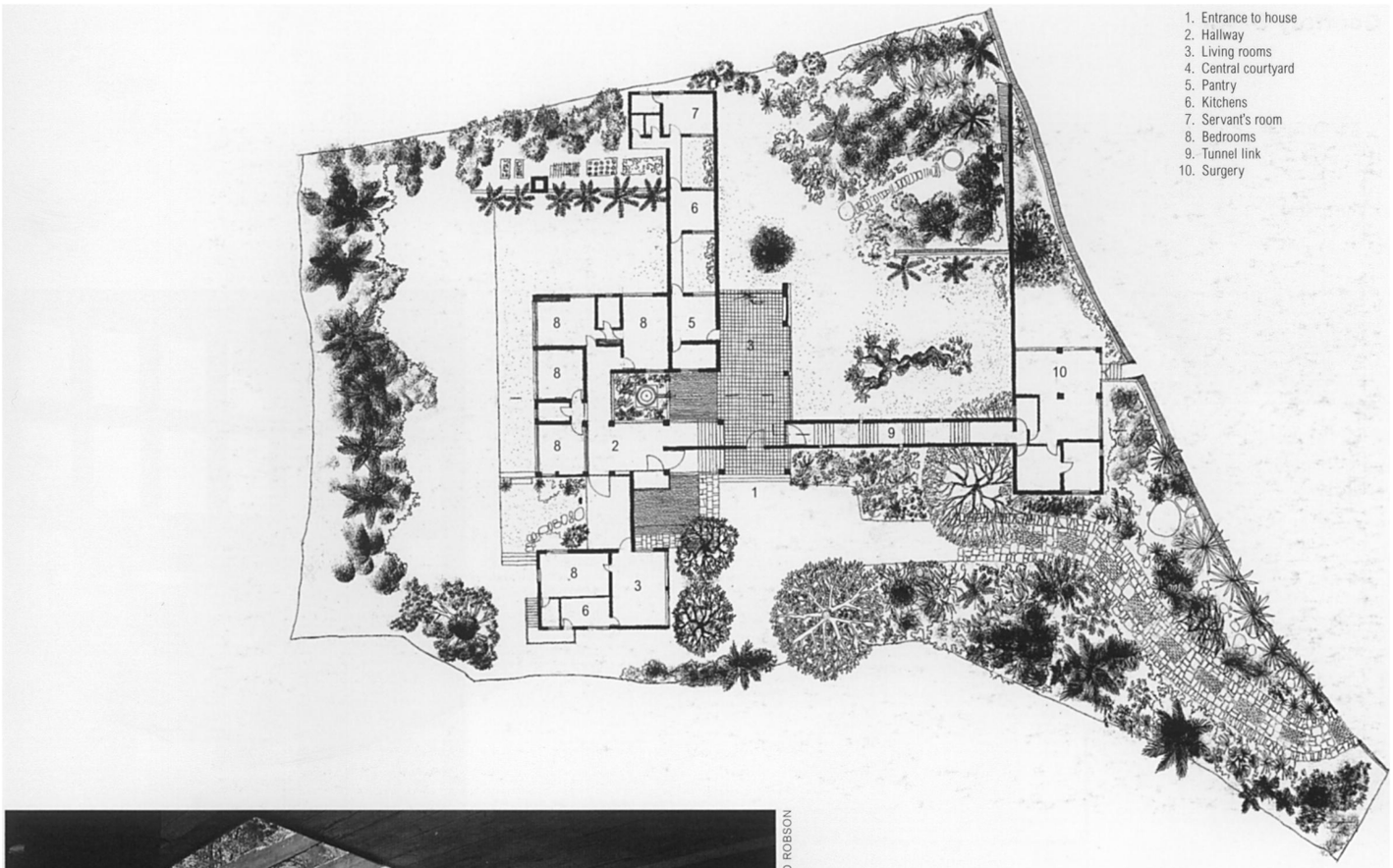


House for Dr A. S. H. de Silva

Galle, 1960

This house for a doctor was built in 1960 on a sloping suburban site in the southern town of Galle. With hindsight it can be recognized as part of an evolving series of designs which began in 1958 with the Deraniyagala House in Colombo. Bawa seems to have gone through a process of deconstructing the colonial bungalow and reconstituting its parts in an apparently informal way to create a chequerboard system of linked pavilions which trap between them small gardens and courts. In Galle the separated elements are still unfettered by a defined boundary but are linked on the steeply sloping site by a single roof plane and by a long raking spine wall.

At the foot of the slope is the doctor's consulting room with an open loggia which was intended to be the patients' waiting room. This is linked to the main house by a long staircase tunnel which serves also as the boundary to the garden and as a pointer to the house's principal private entrance. The main house appears on plan to be a simple rectangle arranged around a central courtyard, though the section articulates the upper bedroom wing from the lower living area. A separate wing runs southwards from the living area along contours between two parallel walls and contains the kitchens, kitchen courts and servants' rooms, while a linked pavilion to the north contains an independent flat for the doctor's sister. Although there are enclosed and half-enclosed garden courts the house remains relatively extrovert and the gardens appear to reach out towards the surrounding landscape. The articulation of the plan elements and their disposition on the slope in relation to open courtyards



DAVID ROBSON

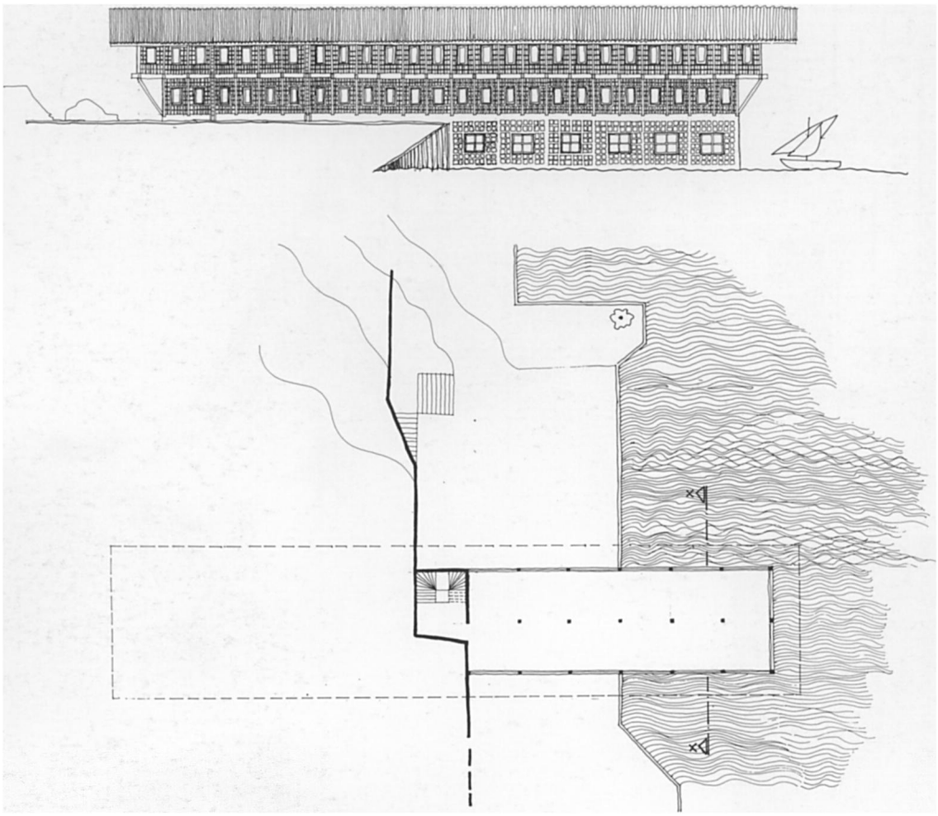
OPPOSITE PAGE: View of main entrance in 1960, and section.

THIS PAGE: Plan, and view of central courtyard in 1997.

and gardens makes good environmental sense: every room benefits from cross-ventilation or from a stack effect through the courtyards which is induced by convection from the roof.

The plan has been compared to Mies van der Rohe's 1923 project for a country house, and there are certainly many similarities: both attempt to blow apart the traditional villa, both make a clear distinction between 'wall' and 'no-wall', and both use continuing wall planes to link inside and outside space and to define outdoor rooms. But Bawa exploits the sloping site to create additional spatial effects, and uses the roof plane to unify the elements and anchor them to the site. He also replaces the solid hearth core with a void: here for the first time he places an open courtyard at the very heart of the plan. Whilst he has arrived at a solution which can be compared to the courtyard or *meda midula* of a traditional Sinhalese manor house he has come to it on a fairly long and circuitous route. In typical fashion he takes one idea and adds to it several others in order to create something which is quite new.

Here was a revolutionary design which offered a new model for the urban house in a tropical city. Although it used traditional materials and made oblique references to traditional forms it established a new relationship between inside and outside space and addressed issues of climate and comfort in a wholly pragmatic way. Two years later Bawa's explorations were to culminate in the Osmund de Silva House (Richards 1966, Brace-Taylor 1986). There the same elements were reassembled in a more formal way within an enclosing wall on a confined Colombo site, and the primacy of the central courtyard was fully established.



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LEFT TO RIGHT: Elevation and site plan, view out through breathing wall (1997), and side view (1997).

Offices for the Steel Corporation

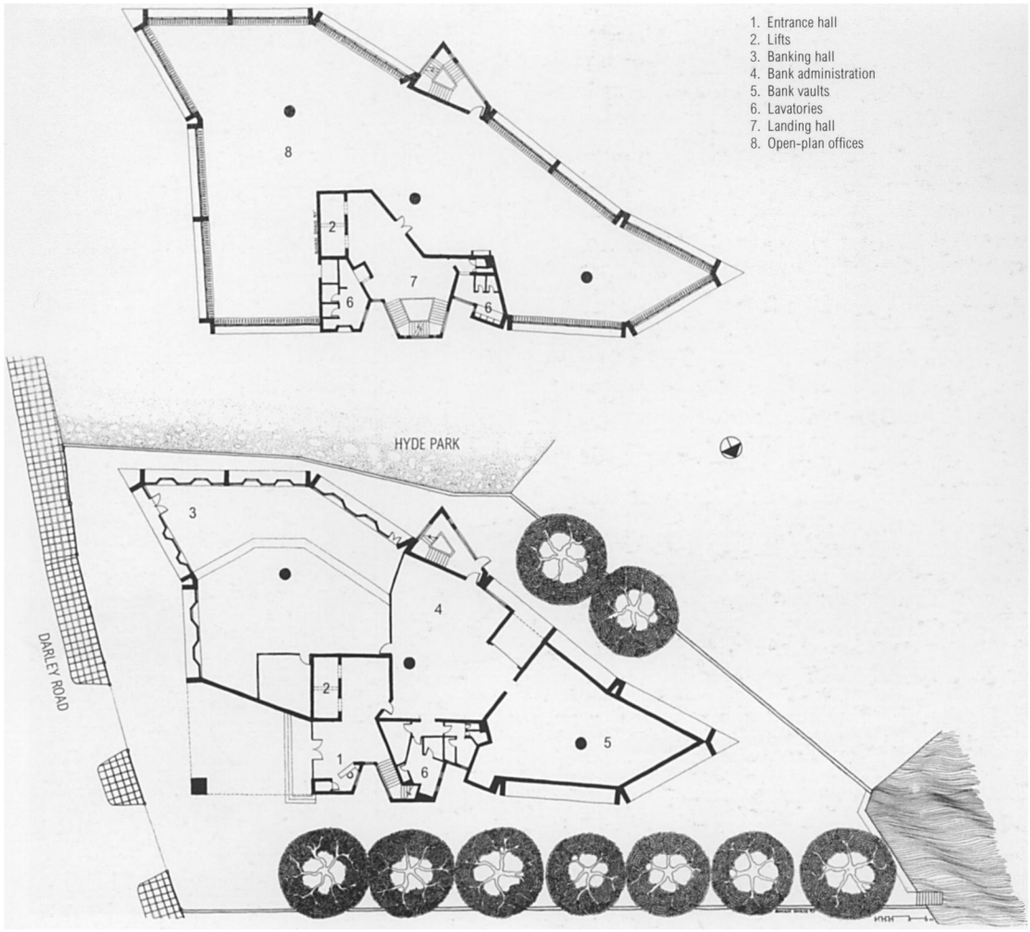
Oruwela, 1968

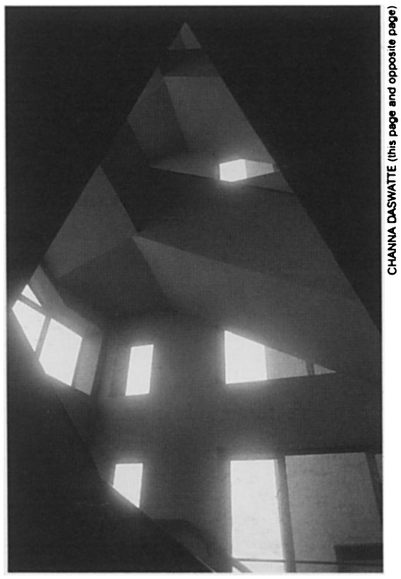
During the 1960s the Sri Lankan government attempted to pursue a policy of non-alignment and signed 'aid and trade' agreements with countries of the Eastern Bloc. The steel-rolling mills at Oruwela were built with Soviet aid, their main function being to convert imported steel billet into reinforcing rod. The site is lost in an area of rubber and coconut plantations about twelve miles to the east of Colombo, and it comes as a surprise when driving along country lanes suddenly to encounter the massive bulk of a rolling mill towering above coconut trees.

The mills require water for cooling, and a large reservoir was established on the site. Bawa was entrusted with the design of the administrative building and decided to place it at right angles to the main rolling mill and to build it out into the reservoir. The building adopts a simple rectangular form but has an outward cantilevering section. This section, inspired by temple buildings in Kerala and Nepal, had been used by Bawa with great effect in the design of a classroom block for Colombo Ladies College two years previously and was to make a stunning reappearance in the Bentota Beach Hotel of 1970 (Brawne 1978, Brace-Taylor 1986). Its obvious practical advantages are that it offers protection from overhead sun and monsoon rain, and permits the use of a breathing wall.

The main structure is of framed reinforced concrete, and the external breathing wall is formed from pre-cast rectangular grilles of concrete which diminish in scale from floor to floor. The original design proposed open-plan offices in order to maximize natural ventilation and lighting. Today the steel mills are in private ownership and the administrative building is in fairly good condition, though the floors of the open-plan offices have been totally subdivided.

Bawa was also responsible for the design of a guest house and a housing scheme for factory workers. The housing consists of rows of back-to-back courtyard houses built along the contours in a neighbouring rubber estate. Each house occupies a rectangular plot of about 150 square metres, and the main habitable rooms open on to a walled courtyard. This simple plan achieved a notional density of about fifty dwellings per hectare and offered an interesting prototype for inexpensive medium-density urban housing.





CHANNA DASWATTE (this page and opposite page)

LEFT TO RIGHT: View from Darley Road (1997), ground-floor plan and typical plan of upper floor, and staircase (1997).

State Mortgage Bank

Hyde Park, Colombo, 1978

This uncharacteristic twelve-storey office building was commissioned by the socialist coalition government of Mrs Bandaranayake to house the State Mortgage Bank. However, it was completed after J. R. Jayawardene's 1977 election victory and subsequently became the main secretariat of the Mahaveli Development Ministry. Surprisingly it has never been published and was even omitted from Brian Brace-Taylor's monograph of 1986, probably because its uncompromisingly geometric form did not accord with that book's emphasis on the vernacular and picturesque aspects of Bawa's work. This fact did not prevent Ken Yeang form observing that '[Bawa's] Mahaveli Headquarters Building is probably the best example of a bioclimatically-responsive tall building to be found anywhere in the world' (Keniger 1996).

The restricted site is wedged between Colombo's Hyde Park Corner and the southern tip of Beira Lake. This commercial district was in former times a residential suburb, and the vestiges of Bawa's childhood home can still be seen on the other side of the road. The lozenge-shaped plan results in a profile which changes dramatically according to viewpoint and is capped by a floating concrete canopy which reveals the geometric logic of the concrete structure below. The tower offers a slender profile towards the junction and a much flatter one towards the park and the lake.

This design appeared just as Colombo was about to experience an unprecedented building boom in its central business district and offered a potent prototype for office building in a tropical city. The aim was to provide a working environment which could be lit and ventilated by natural means, in a building of moderate height which did not impose undue strain on the immediate urban infrastructure. The main elevations face north and south in order to reduce solar gain and to catch the main breezes. Windows are set back from deep-spandrel panels which are designed as air-intake louvres.

Although the office floors were intended to be open, they were partitioned off by the second client, whose expatriate consultants and upper managers all demanded to be air-conditioned. Some initial problems were experienced in monsoon conditions, but there is little doubt that these could have been solved by sympathetic building management. Sadly the building was never treated as a prototype and no attempt was made by the client to monitor its performance or to modify its details. In the rest of Colombo the demands of off-shore property developers and international clients prevailed, and a crop of sealed-glass, energy-guzzling towers sprang up around the main business district.

MICHAEL BRAWNE

Kandalama Hotel

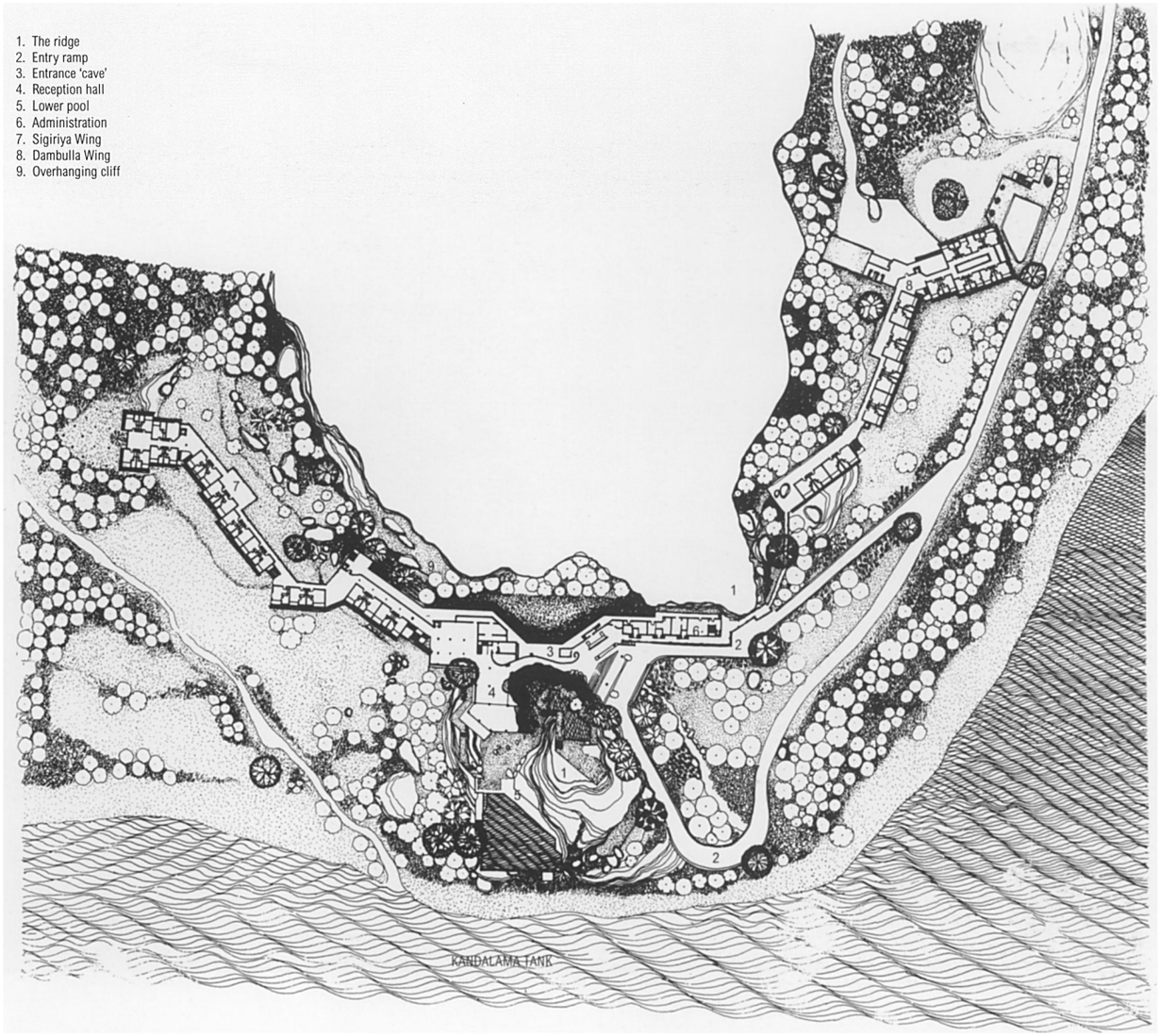
Dambulla, 1994

In 1990 Bawa was commissioned by the Aitken Spence Group to design a hotel in Sri Lanka's Dry Zone which would serve visitors to King Kasyapa's rock citadel at Sigiriya and the cave temples of Dambulla. Having been given a relatively free hand, he chose a site beside the ancient Kandalama Tank at a point where a boulder-strewn ridge advances on to its southern shore. The project encountered some opposition from the Buddhist clergy, and the design underwent several changes. In its final form the 160-bedroom hotel is wrapped around two opposite faces of the ridge, with one wing facing towards Sigiriya, which lies ten miles away to the north, and the other wing facing west with views northwards towards Dambulla and the Matale Hills. The two wings are connected by a rock-faced corridor which runs from the hotel entrance to the main reception areas.

Bawa's use of a flat roof and a starkly expressed concrete frame has surprised a number of commentators, but both are ideally suited to the location. More importantly, this apparent departure from his more familiar modes helps to turn Kandalama into a unique experience: this is no beach hotel on a monsoon shore. And yet the building grows out of its site in a manner which is wholly consistent with earlier projects such as the Polontalawa Estate Bungalow of 1965 or the Ruhuna campus of 1984 (Brawne 1986). The buildings either hug the site, even burrowing into it, or they stand proud and allow the rocky landscape to run under them. The concrete frame is used to support a second skin of timber sun-breakers which in turn support a screen of vegetation, while the flat roof has been turned into a tropical garden. The tectonic form makes it possible for the hotel to hug the shape of the ridge, so that the journey to a room runs alongside an overhanging cliff-face, preparing the tourist for his ascent of the Sigiriya rock.

The materials used in the public spaces are cool and hard, and work with the large expanses of naked rock to convey a wholly appropriate feeling of austerity: one might almost be inside an evocation of King Kasyapa's palace. The rooms seem small in relation to the generous corridors and are conceived of as cells which look out across the tank towards the horizon.

A second hotel has since appeared on the tank's northern shore: its orange Kandyan-tiled roofs scream out from the dry zone scrub. In contrast, when one looks back across the tank towards Bawa's Kandalama, almost nothing is visible: the grey-black tectonic forms melt into the ridge from which they have sprung.



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LEFT TO RIGHT: View over the lower swimming pool towards the Kandalama Tank, drawing of ground-floor plan by Channa Daswatte, façade detail, and sitting room off main corridor.

CHANNA DASWATTE

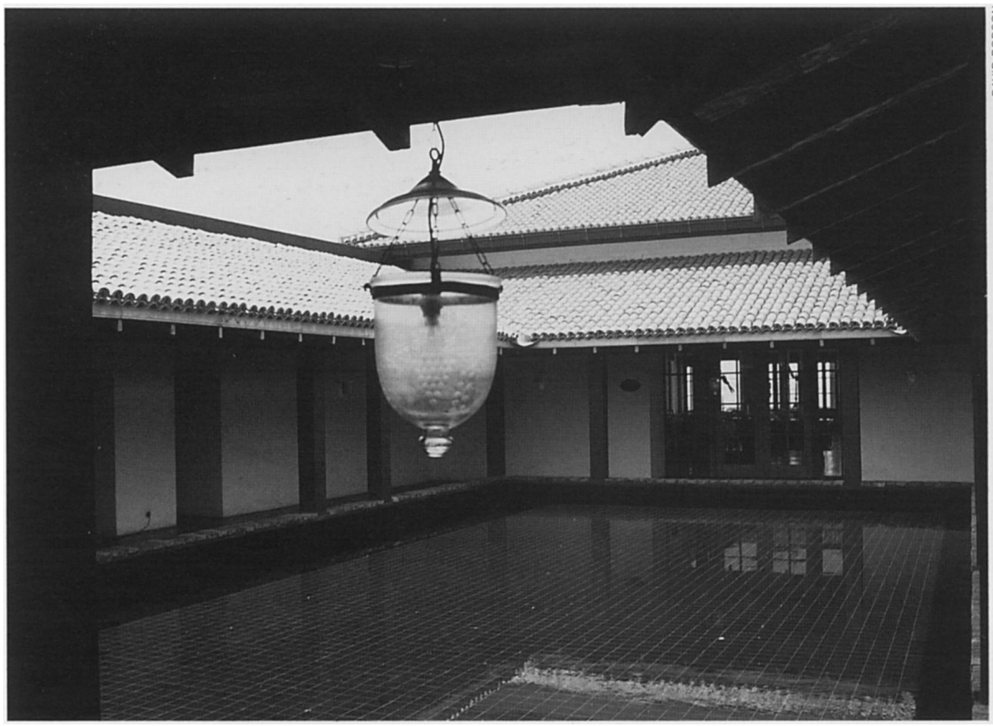
The Lighthouse Hotel

Galle, 1996

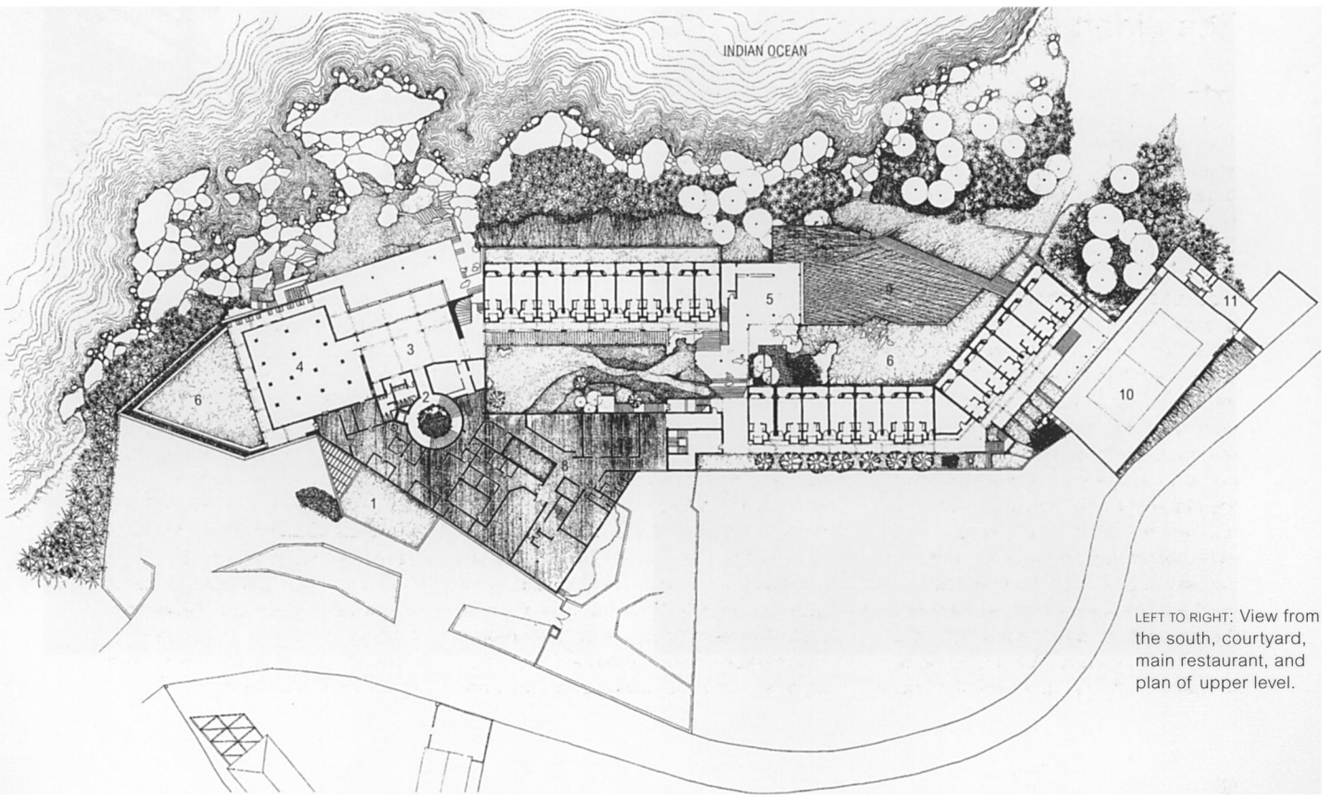
The Lighthouse Hotel carries something of the spirit of Kandalama back to the edge of the ocean. The site is a rocky promontory, once occupied by a magistrates' circuit bungalow, which sits tightly between the main road and the sea about a mile from the charming old Dutch seaport of Galle. Here the sea is inhospitable – huge breakers roll in incessantly from the Indian Ocean – but the views are stunning. The main entrance and reception buildings hug the southern tip of the ridge and offer views towards the Galle Fort. The lower slopes of the rock are encased in rubble retaining-walls, which house the main entrance and service points. The first floor is finished in samara-coloured render and the upper floor is recessed behind a delicate colonnade. A massive *porte-cochère* leads past the reception desk to a vertical drum within which the main stair spirals upwards towards the principal lounge level and the upper restaurant level. The staircase itself has been designed by Bawa's old friend Laki Senanayake and is conceived as a swirling mass of Dutch and Sinhalese warriors re-enacting their encounter at Randeniya in 1630. 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 the buffetings of the Southwest Monsoon. The first three-storey range of hotel rooms hugs the edge of the shore and runs northwards from the main reception areas. At the back of the site a parallel service block encloses a long courtyard of clipped grass punctuated by outcrops of bare rock. The second range of hotel rooms steps back towards the road to create an open area with lawns and bars and pool between it and the ocean.

The strategy is both to confront the relentless crashing of the waves and to provide contrasting areas of shelter and tranquillity. 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.

The hotel was built by Herbert Cooray, a successful developer and hotelier who had previously worked as one of Bawa's contractors. The designs were produced by Bawa and Channa Daswatte with a small group of assistants working from Bawa's home. Detailed execution was entrusted to the developer, though Bawa was retained as design consultant throughout the project and made regular visits to the site.



1. Porte-cochère
2. Staircase rotunda
3. Lounge
4. Restaurant
5. Bar
6. Terrace
7. Kitchens
8. Services, with conference and seminar rooms above
9. Swimming pool
10. Tennis court
11. Squash court



LEFT TO RIGHT: View from the south, courtyard, main restaurant, and plan of upper level.

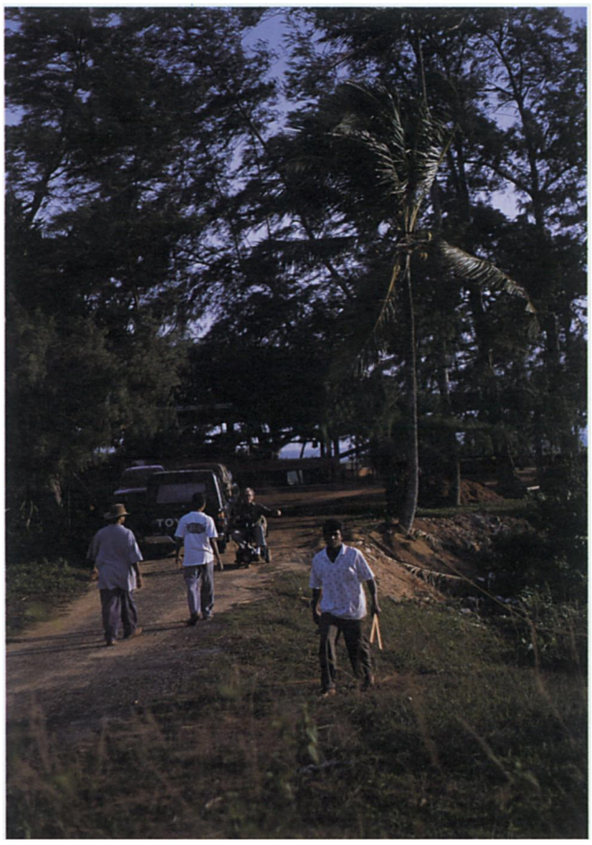
Jayawardene House

Red Cliffs, Mirissa, 1997

The Jayawardene family invited Bawa to design a replacement for an old coconut estate bungalow perched high on the red cliffs which frame the eastern side of Weligama Bay. The site lies at the end of a steep track which heads off from a nondescript gateway beside the main Galle-to-Matara road. After a short climb the noise of the traffic is left far behind and a final twist in the track reveals on the right side a breathtaking view westwards across bay and in front a grove of coconut palms, silhouetted against the southern sky. Closer inspection reveals that the coconut trunks are harbouring a platoon of black columns and that a thin horizontal roof is floating amongst their fronds. A simple pleasure-pavilion stands on a stepped plinth facing towards the place of the setting sun. The roof is a galvanized steel deck which slopes gently southwards and is supported on three rows of six concrete-encased columns: there are no walls, no doors, no windows, no shutters. The raised section of plinth is a place for sitting, while the main floor is occupied by a huge dining table. An enclosed stairway leads down under the raised section of the plinth to a half-buried area containing service areas and bedrooms which communicate with lower courtyards.

The house is conceived by Bawa as a minimalist intervention which colonizes the sweeping landscape through the simple expedient of inserting into it a grid of columns and a single line of roof as a gesture by the hand of man.

Although the Jayawardene House is separated in time from the A. S. H. de Silva House by almost forty years, they are two points on the same journey. Both consist essentially of a roof which hugs a landscape and excludes sun and rain while admitting cooling currents of air. It may be that one is simply a distillation of the other, or that it takes forty years to gain the confidence to strip things down to their bare essentials.


DAVID ROBSON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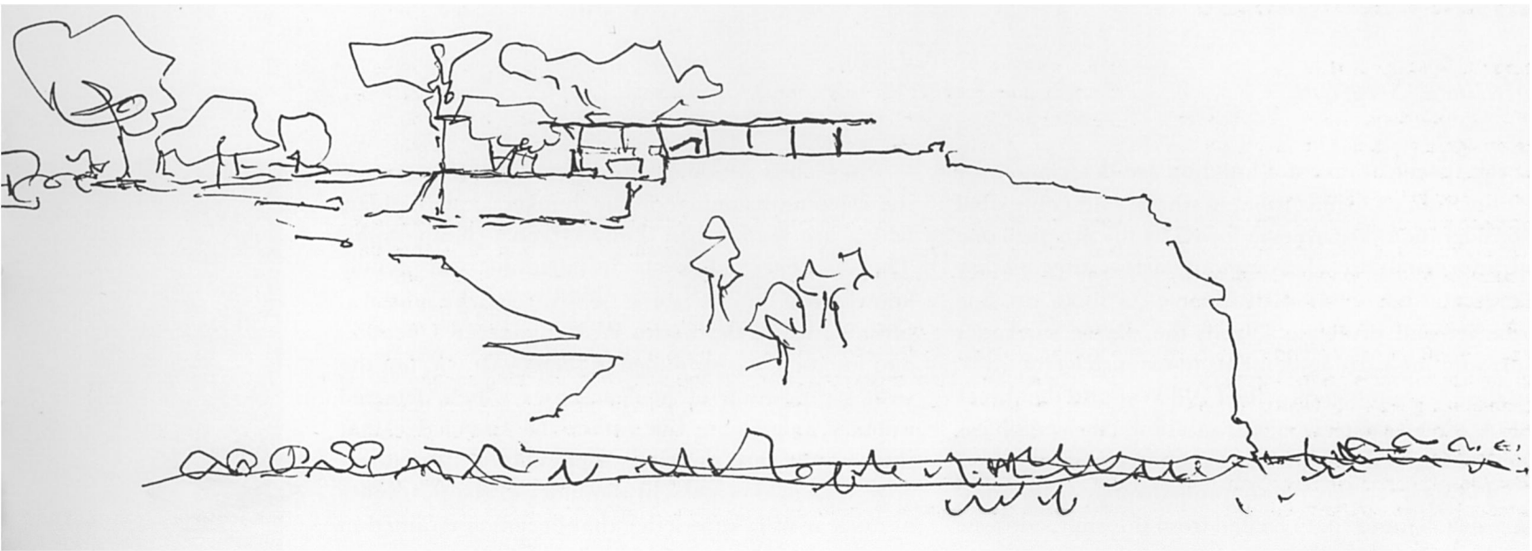
Geoffrey Bawa setting out the approach in September 1997 (the house is in amongst the trees), and corner detail.



CHANNA DASSANAYAKE

Early conceptual sketch by Bawa, and view of the main pavilion.