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Unearthing What Underlies Elite Domestic Works of Geoffrey Bawa and Valentine Gunasekara

by

Nishan Rasanga Wijetunge

In the ambivalent postcolonial decades, marred with tension and ethnic strife, reverting to once subverted indigenous traditions with the patronage of elites, was explicitly pursued by nascent architects of Sri Lanka. The most celebrated domestic architectural rubrics of the nation's post-colonial period could be characterized as seemingly vernacular-biased *Modern Regional Architecture for the Tropics (MRAT)* of *Geoffrey Bawa*. Its antithesis version of *Architectural Modernism* dwelling on innovative technology and expressionism was followed by Valentine Gunasekara. Each of these rubrics has been defended by academic polemics over the years, labeling them as the most apposite and valid to the contexts of their appearance, and hence to the nation as a whole. In this backdrop, the paper attempts to explore underlying factors behind architectures of the two masters, and the reasons for the apparent success of the latter over the former.

The discussion commences with an induction to the world-wide system of elitism, and addresses its relevance to the postcolonial context of Sri Lanka, promulgating the needs of the newly independent nation. The following advent to Sri Lanka's postcolonial architectural rubrics explores the state of ambivalence of the period, finally leading the way to investigation of factors behind two mainstream domestic architectural approaches of the time.

An Elite-manipulated System

The elites in society are an '*organized minority*', which tends to dominate the '*unorganized masses*' in terms of an array of practices.¹ These could be attributed to their superior intellectual and physical qualities possessed by nature, to inherited or acquired powers, essentially in economic and political spheres.² Through these superior qualities, elites tend to stay at society's forefront

manifesting their prestige, leading the way for masses to follow, while striving to further widen the existing gulf between the two strata. This generic nature of elites as a whole is true, irrespective of their location in the world, whether in a primitive society or the most advanced. In the earlier ages, apex status of the elites was manifested through their royal, noble, cleric, aristocratic or bourgeois positions in society, and in the contemporary world, they prevail in the forms of intellectuals, managers of industry or bureaucrats, making these elite positions in society the real determiners of most life aspects of masses.³ The elites rule, they manage, and are the ideological think tanks that manipulate society, while masses merely go along with what is imposed upon them with minimal resistance. Hence, the elite facilitate new political and economic changes in society, or alternatively, these changes take place because of them and their self-centered actions.*

On the other hand, Pareto's economic dimension⁴ postulates that, economics is the most vital aspect that constitutes elitism; as the elites epitomise their political power to achieve economic edge over masses. Policies derived by the governing elite in turn, affect the economic status of its fellow elites belonging to other non-ruling functional strata, the sub-elite middle class as well as of the governed masses in either positive or negative terms. Either way, the policies of the so-called "governing or political elites" as Pareto⁵ suggests, always strive to complement and reinforce the best interests of its allied elites of "close coalition".⁶ The bureaucrats, managers and intellectual elites who merely possess what their given names suggest, are relegated logically, to immediate lower elite strata of considerably less social influence. Hence, concretization of an inequitable system is attained, which in turn makes and sustains the above structure with the broader intention of assuring its posterity.

On the other hand, it could be envisaged that, from the contemporary world's ensemble of elites, merely the ones possessing some combined level of economic as well as political

* It has to be noted here that political changes may also occur due to social revolutions. In that case, it is referred to as 'circulation of elites', where a faction of elites within the political class itself, replaces the ones at the top.

edge, and occasionally the intellectual edge, become particularly capable of social influence. These abilities consign a place to them at the elite apex as the “political” or “governing” elite. This faction receives the essential cooperation of the much larger “political class” and also of the “functional elite”. The political or governing elite are in fact, placed at the core of the political class. The political class consists of all elite in society with at least some political influence. Therefore, while the political or governing elite that exercise direct political command occupy the core of the political class, the elite factions that rival them for power (and have the potential to reach the elite apex) find their place in its periphery. The sub-elites also known as the “middle-class” is the stratum that makes the liaison between this political class and the masses.⁷

The above structure was explicit in Sri Lanka by the time of its Independence in 1948. A minority of the so-called “post-colonial third culture” as Anthony D. King⁸ refers to them, made up the governing elite along with functional elite groups of their close coalition. Equally, a faction of then Sri Lanka’s Western educated, and perhaps less formidable elite group in terms of socio-economic and especially, political arenas were elites of the day belonging to the political class. They possessed a rigorous drive to circulate the governing elite in the near future. On the other hand, the sub-elite middle class that resembled vestiges of elite traits in varying degrees, yet less formidable, constituted the sub-elite. It is pertinent to mention here that all these groups were largely subjugated by ethnicity, caste and religion.

A Post-colonial Necessity

By 1948, the year Sri Lanka received its political Independence from the British Empire, the peripheral position of the newly-independent nations had been concretized through explicit neo-colonial practices of the central Western core.⁹ Such tendencies prevailed in Sri Lanka after Independence, under the auspices of a post-colonial third culture. They, who had assumed political power, resembled their foreign predecessors in every conceivable manner, while being sympathetic to colonial values.¹⁰ However, a political breakthrough came in 1956 when a disparate faction of local sub-elites came into political power in Sri Lanka with a strong nationalist agenda, which was tilted towards the majority. As a reaction against the bitter memories of colonialism, they adopted

socialist slogans of the left wing world order of the time. Despite such biases, the newly liberated different ethnicities of the island, that had been previously suppressed by the colonial heel, had to be unified under one national identity, circumventing the propensity for future tension.¹¹ Within such a backdrop, several nascent Sri Lankan architects felt the urgency for a new architectural identity for the nation, one of an array of logical means to achieve such a seminal fete.

Postcolonial Architectural Ambivalence

If we take a step backwards in time, after the Dutch-held maritime regions were handed down to the British East India Company in 1796, followed by the fall of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815,¹² the British colonial project formally commenced in Sri Lanka. Since the early 16th century to this point in time, Sri Lanka had merely remained one of the conspicuous penetration outposts in the Portuguese-Dutch created Seaborne Empire. The radical capitalist economic policies and gradual democratic reforms imposed by British colonists spawned a new peripheral status for Sri Lanka within the British Empire with its hinterland centered upon London.¹³ Consequently, Sri Lanka that had managed to sustain a modest level of colonial globalization to this point in time, suddenly started to feel its effects more rigorously. Albeit the feeble launching which mainly dwelled on the traditions of the expelled Dutch predecessors, the British building programme perpetuated, and by the time Sri Lanka was granted its political Independence in 1948, the island had experienced three distinctly identifiable phases of British architecture.¹⁴ Phase 3 of British architecture is perceived to be the one where British finally made their mark by curtailing the hybrid Dutch influence of the prior era to a meagre level. In the domestic architectural scene, this was largely realized through the burgeoning influence of the 19th century colonial bungalow they had painstakingly developed in the subcontinent, to a point of culmination by their concluding years.¹⁵

Some scholars argue that the European Colonial projects effected new paradigm shifts throughout the whole of Asia, and the unequal socio-cultural as well as economic exchanges resulted in the emergence of “re-invented” traditions in hitherto unforeseen scales. Certain types of hybrid architectures which relegated local

cultural identities emerged and eventually gained acceptance with time.¹⁶ According to Hobsbawn and Ranger's postulation in Lim and Beng,¹⁷ a colonial power had to invent "tradition" in order to create a sense of historical legitimacy. Hence, the colonial bungalow could be adduced as such an example. Phase 3 saw its finale by attempting to rationalize an ideally-functional and comfortable colonial domestic building for the tropics in the form of Public Works Department's (PWD) bungalow-influenced Tropical Colonial style.¹⁸ It is apparent that, this rubric was largely limited in its use to official houses for civil servants. The other forms of the PWD-driven discourse emerged in the forms of Indic styles, and pseudo architecture, which were largely limited to monumental and civic buildings.¹⁹ Tropical Colonial, almost paralleled the Modernist propagations of the Tropical School of AA (Architectural Association in London), which attempted to derive a streamlined "Tropical Modernism" for the world's dry and humid zones²⁰ - a further evolution of CIAM 8's (8th conference of the Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne International Congresses of Modern Architecture) Modernist avant-garde. This particular rubric indeed became the starting point for the nascent local architects of Sri Lanka to come.

A Nascent Profession

By the early 1950s, ideological impositions (as a desperate measure to form a patronizing relationship between the core and periphery) overtly proliferated in the newly-liberated colonies by former colonial masters, and the field of architecture became a feasible field to ensue further Eurocentricism.²¹ Susantha Goonatilake²² validly refers to this "mimicry" as the "imitative syndrome". Consequently, the core institutions by the early 1950s overwhelmingly monopolized peripheral architectural education. By this juncture, Sri Lanka's post-colonial architects were essentially educated in the Western core, owing to the fact that Sri Lanka could not boast of any architectural schools of its own. The profession of architecture at the time was restricted to British nationals. Most of them were employed in the Public Works Department and completed civic works for the government.²³ There was also a small faction that had arrived in Sri Lanka, having won international design competitions organized by the colonial state that had stepped up its civic building program. The reason behind this concession was owing to the fact that

the PWD architects had their work cut out by this time. The newcomers eventually set up firms in Colombo and also started catering to the elite class, where the bulk of their projects were in the domestic realm.²⁴

Sojourn to the Metropolitan centers of the world to study architecture was an expensive affair, only accessible to a faction of locals with the financial stability, namely the ones of elite backgrounds. The number of architects in Sri Lanka remained a handful, until Justin Samarasekera commenced a architecture course in 1961 at the Katubedda Technical College, which eventually metamorphosised to a B.Sc. course by 1971.²⁵ It is also evident that clients of these architects were essentially, the country's elites of some form, as the majority of the new nation state's population was largely rural, and proletariat. The middle class was relatively small.

From such an ensemble of postcolonial Sri Lankan architects, Minnette de Silva was the pioneer to adopt a synthesis between the vernacular and Tropical Modernism, she picked up at the *AA*. She in fact, became the first Asian woman architect to achieve the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) qualification. Explicit in her stance, she coined the term "modern regional architecture in the tropics", as early as the 1950s as Tzonis and Lefaivre²⁶ affirm. Geoffrey Bawa, who qualified a few years later to Minnette - also from the *AA* - appropriated an approach that somewhat resembled Minnette's, and consolidated it to form a noticeable rubric of his own. Valentine Gunasekara too concluded his studies parallel to Bawa, and also commenced with the same Tropical Modernist-biased trend, and emerged later on in his career to produce what is conceived as an antithesis rubric of the former.

Claude Levi-Strauss in his structuralist point of view, uses the terms 'bricoleur' and 'engineer' and defines their roles. Anoma Pieris²⁷ in fact, makes an analogy with these terms and the two disparate architectural approaches (considered to be the two mainstream approaches in the architectural scene at the time) of Bawa and Gunasekera.

Bricoleur

It is ironic that both Bawa and Minette started-off with the Tropical Modernist ideology coupled with the referenced vernacular building practices of their immediate colonial predecessors.²⁸

Clifford²⁹ describes this as the “savage paradigm”, a colonial discussion of a climatically-appropriate native architecture with the desire to rescue authenticity out of destructive historical changes. This approach according to Lico³⁰ was not merely limited to Sri Lanka, but also found its use in other countries of the Asian region. Minnette’s work overtly demonstrated the problems of post-coloniality, which was exposed as a “precarious balance of Eastern and Western cultures than merely an aesthetic resolution”.³¹ An emphasis on sociological experiences of Sri Lanka’s rural life was seminal to her ideology. In addition to Minnette’s canon, as well as to the possible support of his devoted Danish colleague Ulrik Plesner, Bawa however, drew inspiration from a range of regional architectures from Europe, Sri Lanka’s own colonial past as well as its pre-colonial examples of both grand and folk design traditions. The folk elements (i.e. vernacular) that he picked up were largely from the hybrid manor houses of the Kandyan elite as well as the generic house forms of its sub-elites (known as houses of Kandyan farmers or yeomen).^{*} Grand design traditions, which had hitherto been limited to the use in Sri Lanka’s royal palaces, Buddhist temples and to a certain degree in the elite (as well as sub-elite) dwelling forms, assured him direct forms of historical reference. Especially in his domestic projects for elites and sub elites, such grand folk references recurred overtly. This spawned a significant degree of familiarization of his architecture among the masses. However, many perceive that Bawa’s architecture “... has a Western aesthetic sensibility and provided a utopian comfort zone for a clientele facing the many disruptions of post-colonial change, of urban growth, and industrialization”.³²

As Rykwert³³ notes:

“Memory is to a person what history is to a group. As memory conditions perception and is in turn modified by it, so the history of design and of architecture contains everything that has been designed or built and is continually modified by new work ... [Hence] there is no humanity without memory and there is no architecture without historic reference”.

* Mainly, the vernacular of folk design tradition as well as certain aspects of grand design tradition are imbued in Kandyan elite and sub-elite houses. Manor houses, especially articulate more traits of grand design tradition than its opponent.

Eliot³⁴ observes that :

“The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past... the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show”.

On the other hand,

“If one does not hear the past clearly and honestly, it cannot become part of one’s work. Architecture, like the other visual arts, is in the final analysis, the domain of the intuitive mind and eye”.³⁵

Alternatively, it is possible indeed, to seek the synthesis of traditional and contemporary (appearing as binary oppositions) through art. The Renaissance’s architects and artists such as Michael Angelo, Borromini and others, successfully mediated strong beliefs and practices of the Roman church with the mythic imagery of ancient Greece and Rome. However, such a synthesis should not be of a janus-faced nature with the schizophrenic coexistence of two opposing ideas, but one single gesture which should simultaneously be contemporary and timeless as well as “ethnic” and “modern”.³⁶ Hence, elucidation of these disseminations affirm that, this is what exactly Bawa’s architecture was all about. Working with the scarce resources available to him, and with no striking innovation, he had undoubtedly played the role of a *bricoleur*, indeed of a very clever one.* The lure of the picturesque along with nostalgic propensity and romantic imagery of the period had undermined the full potential of technological innovations of architecture. By recreating environments imbued with elite associations of both the indigenous and colonial conditions of familiarity, the vernacular approach had yet again concretized the immutability of elite patronage.

* Consequently, this rubric culminated to become the flagship elite domestic style of the island. Moreover, it became the ideal manifestation of the immutable position of country’s core-oriented elites in the top ranks, while being causative to the posterity of the elite hegemonic system through architecture.

Hence, a potential restructuring of the country's post colonial social sphere was weakened by this rubric, and the socio-economic mobility of the masses was largely hindered. The hybrid local identity it catered for, again, was favoured by the country's Westernized and semi-Westernized elites who themselves were products of colonial hybridity as Bhabha³⁷ suggests. Other than its limitation to an elite clientele, the style was further contained by the rigidity of the colonial structure as well as the ever-present ethno-religious nationalism. The masses meanwhile were either caught up in this nationalist fervour or lost in capitalist practices of the international style.³⁸

If Bawa's architecture is deconstructed, it is convenient to perceive that the slightly altered trends of the modernist avant-garde and a powerful agenda of nature were explicitly imbued in the equation, in addition to overt elite patronage. Menin and Samuel in their phenomenological exploration to the works of Le Corbusier from France and Alvar Alto from Finland (considered to be two of the most prominent figures of 20th century European-instigated rubric of Modern architecture), reveal the underlying inspirations of nature in their works. The sterile architecture of historicism and capitalist pretension in the previous centuries prompted them to direct in a different direction their respective approaches (which appear to be dissimilar from the surface, but possess more or less the same underlying perspectives) to be more humanistic, closely associated with the mystic patterns and forces of Mother Nature with a sacred and metaphysical twist. This was an attempt to unite the human spirit with nature, the place "where it all began".

The acknowledgement of nature's repetitive patterns was evident in Corbusier's work with the recurring modular cell. The master also paid homage to site topography and strove for a dialectic of the rigid and nebulous, while infusing his architecture with overt natural symbolism. Conversely, accommodating trends of nature was articulated in Alto's work through a flexible standardization, where he also brought in natural vestiges via material finishes, and also wherever possible reverted to the Finnish vernacular. In addition, both strove though their work to dissolve the boundaries between nature and man-made.³⁹ All such trends of avant-garde Modern Masters are ubiquitous in the works of Bawa, although

he never expressed them as theories. The incongruous pertinent factor however, is the exalting of the vernacular element.

Unite d'Habitation, Marseille, France- Le Corbusier

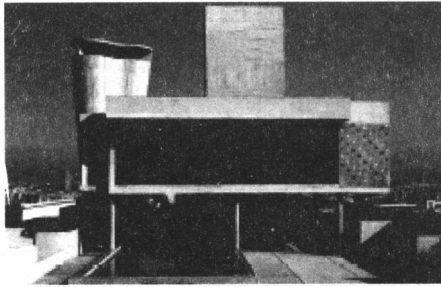


Fig 1

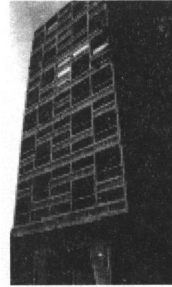


Fig 2

Fig 1 - Plastic forms epitomized in the roof top

Fig 2 - Patterns of façade that resemble cellular structures of nature

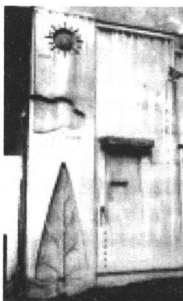


Fig 3

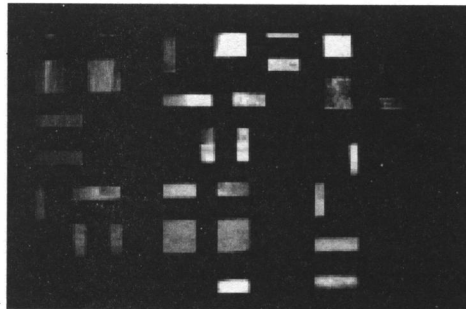


Fig 4

Fig 3 - Façade illustrating nature-inspired relief

Fig 4 - Irregular stained glass patterns of the entrance foyer

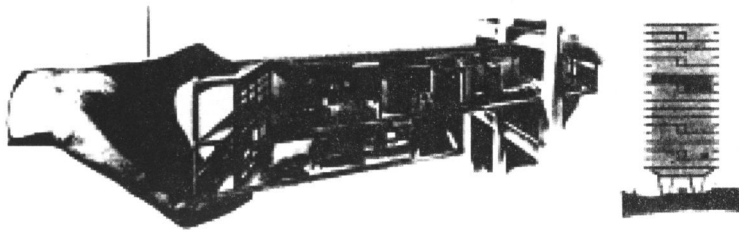


Fig 5 – Standard cellular unit; repeated to make up the building

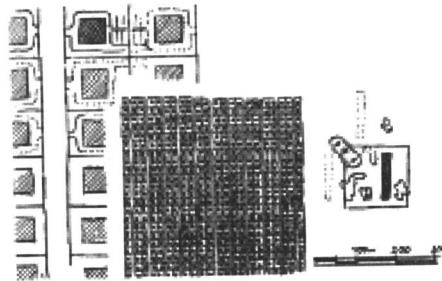


Fig 6 – Cellular structure of city from Le Corbusier's oeuvre Complete Volume 6

Source: S. Menin and F. Samuel, *Nature and Space: Alto and Le Corbusier* (Routledge: London, 2003).

Villa Mairea, Pori, Finland – alvar Alto



Fig 7



Fig 8

Fig 7 – Exterior entrance view of Villa Mairea; manifesting its affinity to nature through blending

Fig 8 – View of forest from living room; inviting the nature into the interior



Fig 9



Fig 10

Fig 9 – Entrance hall, stair and tupa; establishing natural contiguity via material finishes resembling nature

Fig 10 – Detail of pillar; enabling nature to reclaim built environment

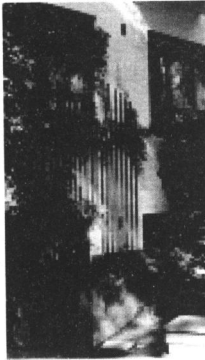


Fig 11

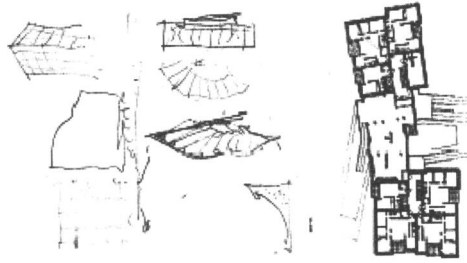


Fig 12

Fig 11 – Detail of basement entrance; illustrating the blurring of built-natural boundaries

Fig 12 – Flexible standardization, inspired by nature

Source: S. Menin and F. Samuel, Nature and Space: Alto and Le Corbusier (Routledge: London, 2003).

The public acceptance of Bawa's architecture eventually came with the auspices of the State-implemented civic projects and the ideological transformations they incorporated. The landing of State commissions throughout his career, irrespective of the political vision of the regime, eventually became Bawa's hallmark.⁴⁰ This constant mingling with the country's political/governing elite guaranteed his success in the precarious field of architecture of postcolonial Sri Lanka. With such patrons, his rubric of *Neo-regionalism* in fact, gave rise to a paradigm shift from Bawa's own facile objectives into an entirely different plane. Its revivalist and traditionalist forms eventually made it conceivable to the masses.*

* According to Peiris, it was regionalism — rigorously backed by the political sphere — which heightened its focus on identity, not the neo-vernacular in its original form devised by its pioneers. Regionalism was then oriented towards an international audience for eventual laudability, and hence failed miserably in the attempt of much-needed decolonization. (Pieris, 2007, p. 11).

Jayakody House, Colombo, Sri Lanka – Geoffrey Bawa



Fig 13



Fig 14

Fig 13 – Exterior entrance; manifesting affinity to nature through blending, achieved by the recurrence of plant troughs. The weathered façade articulates the notions of enabling nature to reclaim the built environment, and further, blurring of boundaries between built environment and nature.

Fig 14 – Vernacular-inspired ground floor Plan; illustrating cellular nature and openness to courtyards via large fenestrations that invite nature in.



Fig 15

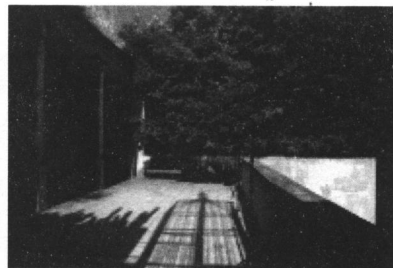


Fig 16

Fig 15 – Interior courtyard; an element picked-up from vernacular. Closeness of building to the saved tree on site, conveys the message of natural contiguity.

Fig 16 – Roof terrace; utilization of natural finishes (timber for columns) and the natural affinity of textured cement rendered and concrete surfaces portray architects intention explicitly. By letting materials weather, the point is further-affirmed.

Source: R. Powell, The Urban Asian House: Living in Tropical Cities: Living in the Tropics (Thames & Hudson, London, 1998).

Engineer Bricolaur

“To rob a people of opportunity to grow through invention or through acquisition of values from other races is to rob it from its future”.⁴¹

This Modernity-instigated Western line of thinking could indeed be perceived as the motto behind Valentine Gunasekara’s architecture. He took inspiration from America, epitomizing exposure of his study tours,^{*} and stints of practices in California. Henceforth, he deviated from the tropical modernist school quite early in his career after assimilating its essence. Freedom of spaces, tectonic qualities, and the rigorous modular articulation of form of his structures were borrowed mainly from American experiments. Gunasekara chose to relegate the industrial aesthetic of the European avant-garde to the appropriation of the landscape-centered American counterpart. In the affluent works of Euro Saarinen, Louis Kahn, Charles and Ray Eames, Paul Rudolph, Richard Neutra, Kevin Roche and others, he saw an effort to mould new technologies into an aesthetic that resonated with a specific geography which he conceived to be a definitive break with the colonial past.

As Pieris⁴² suggests:

“The plastic curvature of concrete, experimented with in tropical climates by South American modernists, suggested an approach that could parallel the linearity of the prairie style that had emphasized the expanse of the American geography... [And]

... The reference to ancient monuments of Incas and Mayas in Californian Modernists suggested ways in which he might approach and reinterpret Sri Lanka’s historic architecture. For Gunasekara, the undulating softness of the tropical geography and interweaving of form and space in the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa would be parallel sources of inspiration”.

* As Pieris (2007, p. 152) explains, Gunasekara received the Rockefeller Foundation Travel Grant in 1965.

In a rapidly globalizing world, Gunasekara recognized the changes in Sri Lankan lifestyles in the process of assimilating Western values. However, he managed to maintain aspects that suggested family gatherings and hospitable spirits, in order to make home life desirable. He stressed the importance of culture to the development of the human spirit and exposed its essential factors of faith, family, community and personal identity.⁴³ However, the culture he had in mind was largely inspired by the hybrid Sinhalese-Catholic culture that he ideologically admired to be more liberal and on par with the socialist sense of communality,⁴⁴ and not the majority's Sinhalese Buddhist counterpart. Despite the fact that his earlier house designs greatly resembled tropical modernism, he went through a metamorphosis that evolved through modernist expressionism to the final form of deconstruction at the end of his career.* One conspicuous factor that could be identified in retrospect was his sectarian devotion to technological experimentation.

Sri Lanka's engineering profession of the 1970s, according to the Sri Lanka Institution of Engineers' *Innovation and Self-reliance; Kulasinghe Felicitation Volume, History of Engineering in Sri Lanka*, 2001 Volume, was an enduring innovative phase, and Gunasekara became one of its great beneficiaries.** With relation to his projects, Gunasekara not only played the part of bricoleur – picking up various seminal architectural influences from an array of mainstream world-wide practices of the time – he also knew exactly what engineering tools to take for each job, to a level of efficacy, making his approach that of an engineer bricoleur. Amidst these groundbreaking approaches, his architecture overtly rejected tradition, perceiving it as a backward step to progress.

* This could be affirmed through a chronological evaluation of personalized houses completed by him throughout his vocation.

** Pre-cast concrete, thin shell structures and industrial methods had reached a point of culmination, and such techniques were appropriated into his repertoire, and his close partnership with engineer Jayati Weerakoon made them plausible. (Pieris, 2007: 152).

However, the brand of architectural modernism that he based his broader aims on had a share of flaws of its own.*

To Gunasekara, greatly appealed, the emerging sub-elite—the “middle class” (i.e. the new class of local professionals, graduates from newly-formed Sri Lankan universities etc).⁴⁵ Gunasekara thought of them as carrying the vitality for self-definition, essential to appropriate economic growth and thus, social mobility via a “circulation of elite” as Kolabinska suggests.⁴⁶ Although, it is their cultural expansion that paved way for a general cultural expansion in Sri Lanka, they never got off to a position where they could threaten the immutable position of the country’s elites.** Despite the fact of being born to a landed proprietor father who had lost his fortune in the great economic depression of the 1920s,⁴⁷ Gunasekara was brought up not in an elite background, but as one of sub-elites. Being an ardent Catholic, his communalist-biased religious views may have prompted him to render his services to

* Although its bold formal expression undermined the colonial metropolitan identities that had previously been hegemonic in Asian cities, it never quite won the hearts and minds of the peoples of the region. This stance could indeed, be blamed on a fallacy, which inculcated the notion of modernism as an “identity-free” rubric. The separation of values from identity—which lay at the heart of the humanist project—appeared incongruous when introduced to diverse and contested geographies, and proved ineffective at many levels. The critique of modernism by that time was on the rise. As per the emerging post-modernist school, “Modernism: the aesthetic of the European avant-guard, is ... an empty universal shell devoid of history and culture, a tool of top-down economic policies whether socialist or capitalist. Its monolithic forms cast deep shadows subjugating a diminished urban citizenry. It was a utopian project that somehow misfired. At the core of its problematic was a Eurocentric humanism, shaped by enlightenment ideology, reinforced by early twentieth century colonialism and disseminated as an apolitical and universal value”. (Pieris, 2007, p. 1)

** Despite the potential to become such a counterforce with time, they merely became the stratum that formed the liaison between the elites and masses, precisely the function of “sub-elites” throughout world history.

Upali de Silva House, Mt. Lavinia, Sri Lanka – Valentine Gunasekera



Fig 17

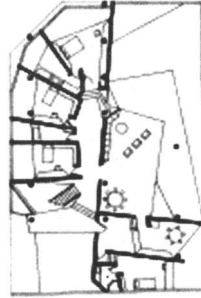


Fig 18

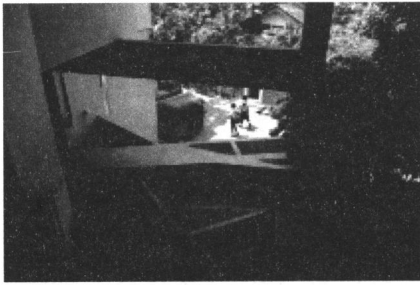


Fig 19



Fig 20

Fig 17 – Exterior façade; plastic and expressionist forms, depicting vestiges of irregularities in the landscape. The rugged form itself resembles a rock face in the nearby Mt. Lavinia beach. The recurrent repetitive elements of construction makes possible a contiguity with nature’s pervasive patterns.

Fig 18 – Ground Floor Plan; manifesting an organic empathy rather than the rigid forms of industrial avant-garde. It is composed having being inspired by a fishbone.

Fig 19 – First floor staircase landing and plant troughs; openness of the façade invites the nature in, while unevenly grown plants on facades enhance natural affinity. This makes possible an analogy between the structure and the moss-covered boulders that is pervasive within a close proximity.

Fig 20 – Criss-crossing staircase flights break the rigidity of geometric form and adds a touch of architectural deconstruction through unevenness.

the newly-emerging middle class, rather than to the elite. Perhaps, his very own family history continually reminded him of the precarious position of capitalism that he learnt to doubt, and may have felt some sort of solidarity with the more stable middle class. The non-alliance with the sub-elite, and especially the governing elite, eventually took its toll through the relative lack of State commissions in his career, and thus, the public acceptance which was vital for the success of his rubric. The only area his architecture was successful in could be considered as the religious realm of the closely-linked Catholic community of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

The architectural stance of Bawa could be conceived to have had a rather fervor-less start. He later learnt how to navigate his way through the turbulent political history of his nation of birth. The key to his success was not aligning himself overtly with either religion or culture, but the patronage of country's conservative governing elite, and their fellow elites in coalition (the two factions that constituted the elite apex). His affinity to nature came unintentionally, first, via referencing to works of the Modernist avant-garde and more seminally, by reverting to Sri Lanka's once-relegated indigenous vernacular and high cultural traditions, conceived as a move in opposition to the concluding phase of British colonial architectures. The former tendency, he had attained from his *AA* sojourn, and latter, via the influence of his senior, Minette de Silva. At the culmination of his career, such factors earned him the title as the most prominent and successful architect of the country.

Gunasekara conversely, was ideologically triggered by dogma, as well as by California modernist pedagogy. With socialist ideals revived through his devotion to Catholic faith, Gunasekara strove to cater for the newly emerging sub-elite middle class rather than the elite. The circulation of the elite class that he perhaps strove for, never materialized in Sri Lanka. Most prominently, his sole reference to nature came from expressionist modernism derived for the Americas, by Americans, and the local population miserably failed to recognize it as it lacked cultural or traditional references. Hence, Gunasekara had committed the ultimate architectural transgression in Sri Lanka by jettisoning its familiar vernacular and high cultural traditions.

Finally, it could be postulated that nature, indeed, was acknowledged and articulated in the works of both these architects, yet in two disparate manners.

Endnotes

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