

BAWA AT RUHUNU

1→

UNIVERSITY OF RUHUNU, MATARA, SRI LANKA

Geoffrey Bawa draws upon the long Sri Lankan tradition of assimilating influences modified by an indigenous, simple way of building, and a picturesque response to landscape. He has been able to work directly with craftsmen, making detailed decisions on site to create a series of places that both reflect immemorial life patterns and the day to day affairs of a modern university.

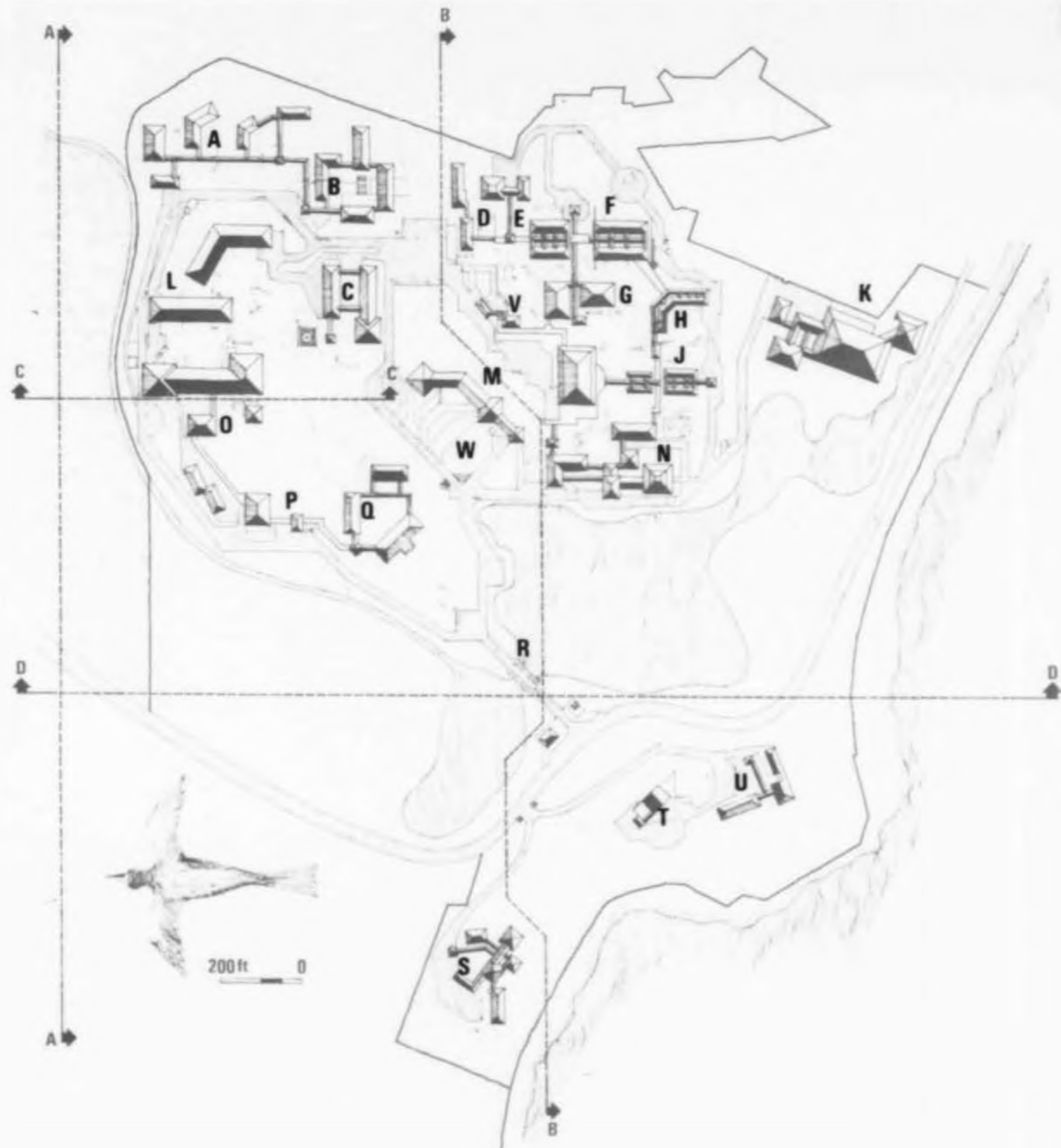


section CC and elevation

layout plan: the site slopes to the south-west towards an artificial lake with the Indian Ocean beyond (bird indicates north)

key

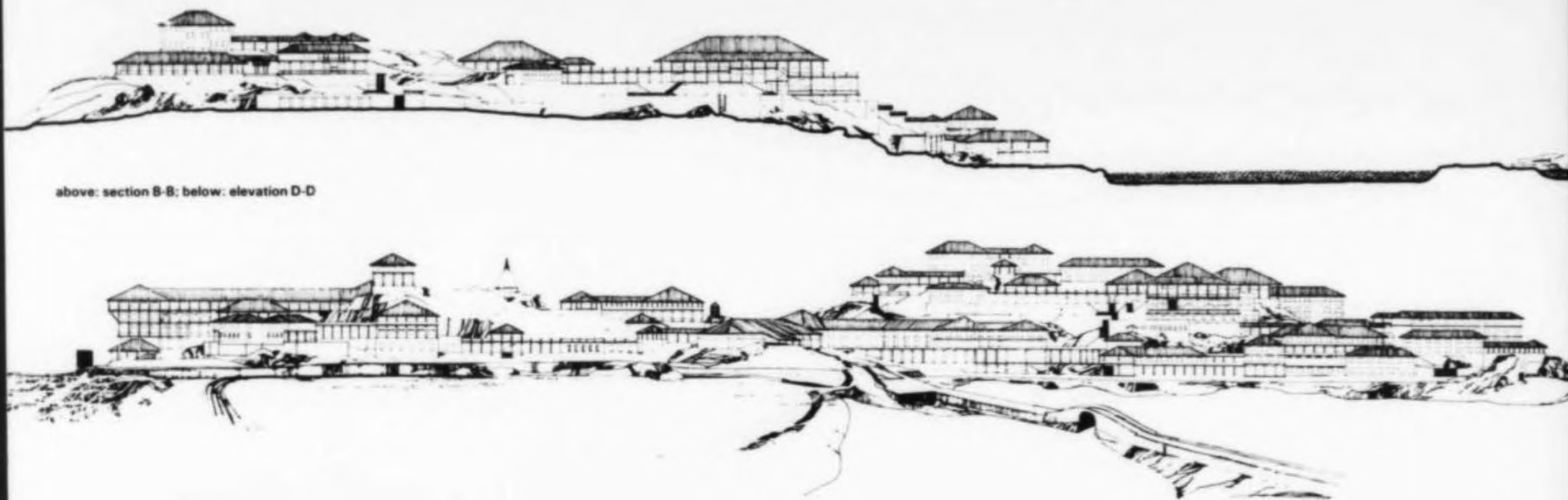
- A, zoology
- B, botany
- C, faculty and auditorium
- D, Sinhala and philosophy
- E, lecture theatres
- F, tutorial rooms
- G, lecture theatres
- H, geography
- J, economics and management
- K, student centre
- L, chemistry
- M, library
- N, administration entrance
- O, physics
- P, science faculty entrance
- Q, mathematics
- R, bridge
- S, bachelor staff
- T, vice chancellor's lodge
- U, restaurant and guest house
- V, coffee shop
- W, open-air theatre



Facing page:
1, the stepped open space at the centre of the site.
2, from the gateway, the university climbs up the slope like a hill town.
This is an early photograph: vegetation will soon bind the composition together. The architect-in-charge was Nihal Bodhinayake.

2→





above: section B-B; below: elevation D-D

**UNIVERSITY OF RUHUNU,
MATARA, SRI LANKA**

**CRITICISM BY
MICHAEL BRAWNE**

3, 4, 5, the whole university is woven together with a network of covered routes, relating interior and exterior and always framing views of the lush landscape.

Standing at the top of a long flight of steps which started within the shade of a colonnade, emerged into the sun, appeared to slide past a series of red tiled roofs and was lost as if running down to the sea, Geoffrey Bawa exclaimed: 'If that view doesn't turn a student into a civilised person, nothing will'. That belief in a way encapsulates the thoughts behind many of the design decisions which have created the University of Ruhunu on three hillsides overlooking the Indian Ocean in the south of Sri Lanka.

The evocative combination of buildings and landscape has for long been one of the hallmarks of Bawa's architecture. It is clearly evident in his own house at Lunuganga where the garden and even the surrounding countryside have been shaped over the years into a series of spaces that relate to vantage points, vistas and routes (AR May 1983, pp57-63). It was entirely appropriate that the recent book devoted to his work should have as its opening chapter a detailed description of that garden.* The same patient exploration of site and buildings can

be sensed in most of his designs. This is true whether it is a whole complex of the most basic sheds at a farm school (AR April 1978, pp212-217) or the entrance hall of a luxury hotel (AR May 1983 pp24-29). No visitor can fail to be moved, for instance, when arriving at the Triton Hotel where at the end of a walled drive and beyond a grove of palm trees in a pool there is a great opening that reveals a cool polished floor, beyond it a blue swimming pool merging as one plane with a green-blue sea stretching to the horizon. The tropical idyll is suddenly turned into reality.

Geoffrey Bawa completed the complex of Parliament buildings on an island within a lake a few miles outside Colombo in 1982 (AR May 1983 pp17-23). It seemed as if it might be the crowning achievement of his career although certain aspects were perhaps not typical of his work. The need to create an enclosed air-conditioned building prevented both that kind of openness which makes the Triton Hotel entrance so memorable and that layering of open and closed spaces, of courtyards

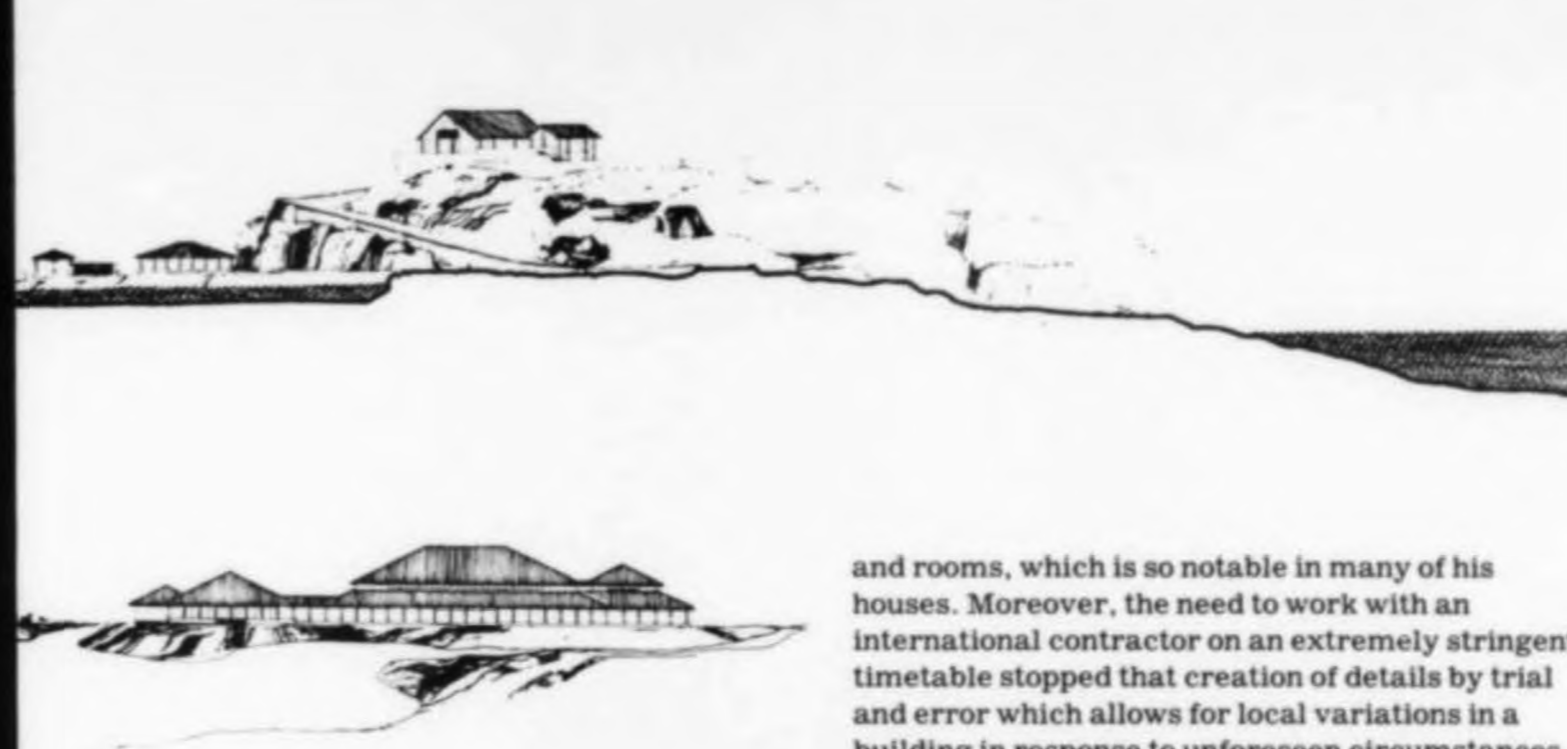


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*Taylor, Brian Bruce: *Geoffrey Bawa* ('Architects in the Third World' Series), Mimar, Singapore and New York, 1986.



and rooms, which is so notable in many of his houses. Moreover, the need to work with an international contractor on an extremely stringent timetable stopped that creation of details by trial and error which allows for local variations in a building in response to unforeseen circumstances. Only current contractual arrangements in the West



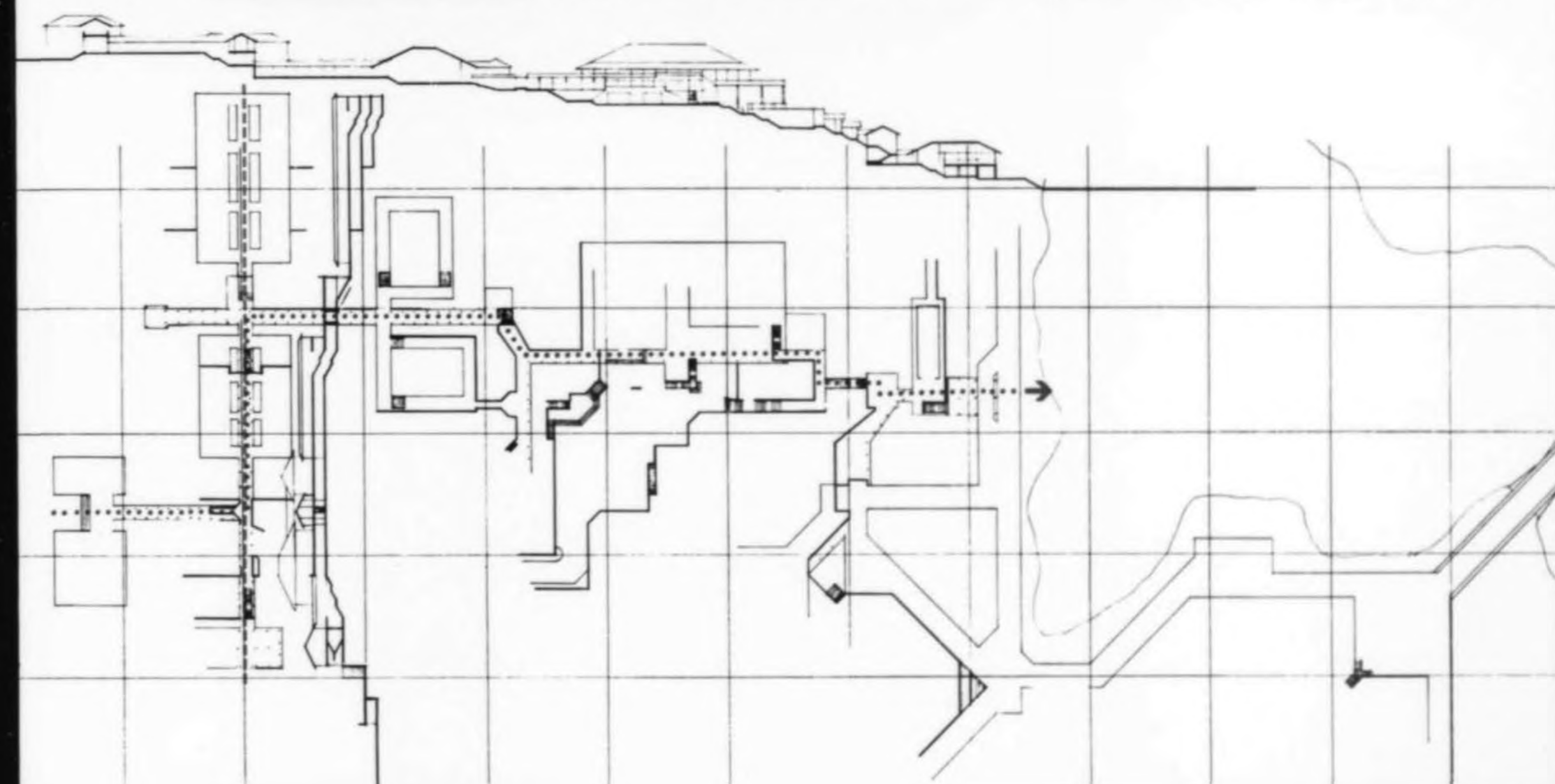
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prevent the continuation of that historical trend where the site and the craftsman working on it are an extension of the design process. To watch Geoffrey Bawa resting on a shooting stick deciding on the height of a dividing wall while workmen move bricks, or having some paving and plants shifted in a court until they appear right, is to be aware of another era as well as one's own envy.

Ruhunu differs radically from the Parliament Building. It is an open group of pavilions placed on the ground as the hillside demands, linked by covered ways, stairs and terraces to make an inhabited landscape. Many years ago when working on the early designs of a new university in this country, it seemed to me that a highly appropriate and flexible solution would be a series of enlarged and linked Robie Houses, each responsive to how the last had been built for its particular needs. But there seemed no way of even drawing this so as to convince a Vice-Chancellor, his committees, the UGC or quantity surveyors working on cost plans and forecasts of annual expenditure. Administrative and contractual methods inevitably limit architectural possibilities.

What can be seen at Ruhunu above its new lake near the sea is an assembly of buildings at domestic or just above domestic scale; occasionally they might be thought part of some minor palace. The 45 or so separate buildings have been put up over six years by an international contractor from the Netherlands who has learned to work with Geoffrey Bawa and his office so that the accidental, the unique, even the apparently idiosyncratic still find their place. It is an architectural as well as a managerial achievement in which Bawa's engineer partner, Dr K. Poologasundram, played an important role.

The buildings differ from each other quite obviously though clearly certain common themes run through them: the importance of the roof, balconies, the preservation of the wall plane and the emphasis of the openings made in it, asymmetry as governing the general arrangement even if locally parts are composed symmetrically and—perhaps



diagrammatic plan and section of main routes



6

UNIVERSITY OF RUHUNU, MATARA



7



8

6, physics building: 'the paradoxical combination of openness with solidity'.
 7, views from the amazing site are exploited whenever possible: this vista greets the visitor emerging from the long covered way at the eastern side of the site.
 8, 9, the buildings differ from each other quite obviously but are united by common themes: roof, balconies, wall plane openings.
 10, the routes widen into small spaces (both covered and uncovered) which are intended to act as social nodes.



9



10



11, eaves detail used throughout. Bawa piles up the last few courses of tiles to get a thick, rich, ripply edge. The craftsmen suggested the decoration on the cement corners.

12, most of the university had to be designed to be seen from above.

most important of all—the paradoxical combination of openness with solidity. The breeze blows through but there is nothing flimsy about any of the construction.

What of course binds it together is the design of

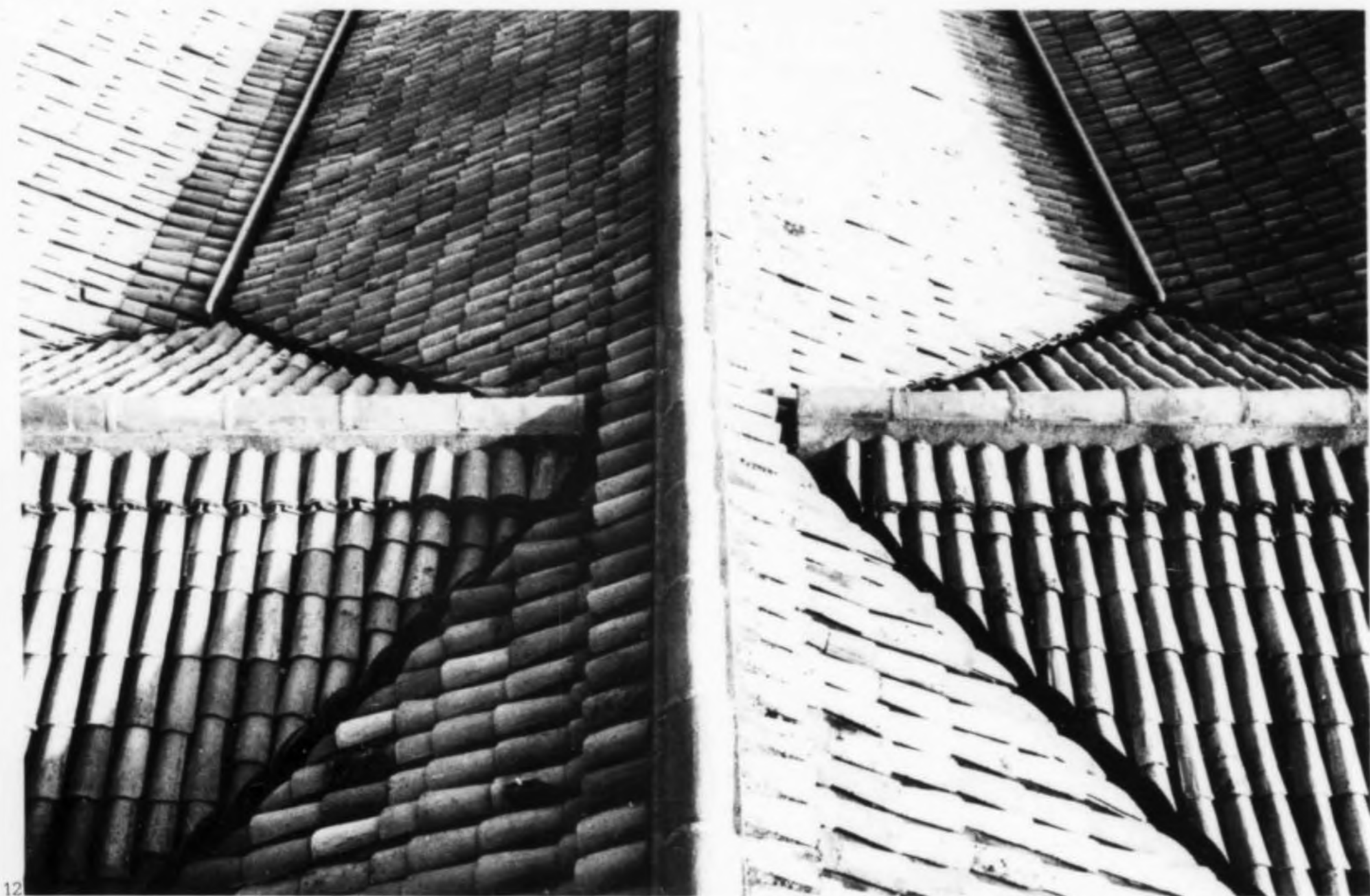
the landscape, that usually vestigial percentage which appears at the end of the Bill of Quantities as 'external works'. It is the long, linking, covered ways punctuated by gazebos, the stone retaining walls, terraces and stairs, trees, shrubs and the new lake between the road and the first buildings which are the fabric which can be embroidered with buildings. Large parts of Sri Lanka have hillsides just like those of the University site; many are terraced with iridescent green rice fields backed by trees. At Ruhunu the terraces have become bigger, more sculptural, but they still maintain that balance between horizontal and vertical which marks so much of the landscape between the coast and the upland tea plantations.

The irregular stepped composition could of course be related to what can now be seen among the ruins of the great cities at Anuradapura and Polunaruwa or at the foot of the rock outcrop at Sigyria. To ascribe direct historical influences, however, would in my view be wrong. Just as I believe that stylistic labels of 'critical regionalism' or 'contextualism' or 'historicism' would be inappropriate. Not just because they are extremely difficult to define but because they would be both wrong and right. Of course the attitudes that lie behind these labels are an influence but they are not necessarily a sufficient and only explanation.

There is a long-standing building tradition in Sri



elevation A-A



12



13



14



15

13, almost archaic rubble retaining walls are often needed to cope with the changes of level as here at the terraces of the lecture theatre.

14, colonnaded perambulatory of the department of geography: 9in gap in valley creates soft internal light.

15, 'The emphasis on openings'.

16, entry to library.



16

UNIVERSITY OF RUHUNU, MATARA

Lanka which is an amalgam of a wide range of influences: Buddhist architecture from India, building methods of the Mediterranean brought by Muslim Arab traders and Portuguese colonists, Dutch and British modifications of European styles. All of these are superimposed on and modified by an indigenous, simple way of building in the tropics with mud, mud brick and woven palm fronds. Geoffrey Bawa is part of that tradition; he knows it and uses it.

It would be fair to add that this might not always have been the case. During a conversation in 1982 just before he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects, Geoffrey Bawa was outlining a proposal he had to send Sri Lankan students of architecture on a study tour of India. They would perhaps start at the marvellous palace complex of Padmanabhapuram in Kerala, sit under the red sandstone roof of an open pavilion at Fathepur Sikri, have tea at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay and eventually reach the carved stone city of Jaisalmer at the far end of the Sind plain. And then Bawa added almost as an afterthought, but nevertheless as an important aspect of such a journey: '... and they need not even see a single modern building.' It is I suspect not a comment he would have made in 1957 on his return from studying in England or even more than a decade later when designing the Ceylon pavilion for Expo '70 at Osaka. That move, however, is part of a general shift in architectural thought and of our views about appropriateness of models. The completed buildings at the University of Ruhunu show thus how successfully that general shift has been adapted to the conditions of a tropical island and the peculiarities of those hillsides at the edge of the Indian Ocean.

The students' journey also included tea at the Taj. This was not a flippant remark made just to amuse but, like the belief in the civilising influence of the seaview, is part of a deep-seated commitment to the idea that architecture plays an important role in making our lives fuller and richer; that tea at the Taj will not be the same as tea elsewhere and that somehow the simple act of having tea will be celebrated by the surroundings in which it occurred. To watch the new students at Ruhunu open their leaf-wrapped parcels of rice and curry and have lunch under a great roof—partly covering a terrace, partly a withdrawn cave—with a view of red roofs, palms and the sea is to have that belief strongly reinforced and to see its results produce just such a happy celebration.