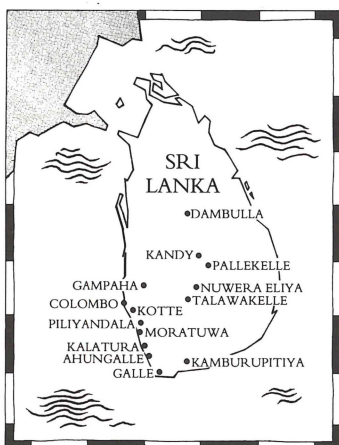


CURRENT ARCHITECTURE IN SRI LANKA

Mimar's correspondent C. Anjalendran assesses the mood of architects in Sri Lanka and their contributions to the built environment during the last three years.

Public opinion exists only where there are no ideas
— Oscar Wilde.



A recent magazine retrospective of five decades of architecture in Sri Lanka identifies the central issue as being the “continuity and the context of the traditional to meet modern lifestyles and aspirations”.¹ The work of Geoffrey Bawa is generally celebrated as epitomizing this ideal, which has been sustained over a large and varied body of work.² Though not obvious, cross references within the same issue of *A + D* (India) suggest that this crystallization took place at the beginning of the 1960s. The restrictions at that time on imports and travel abroad no doubt encouraged this creative impulse. The singular achievements of Geoffrey Bawa during this period should not overshadow the contributions of others such as his then partner Ulrik Plesner, and those pioneers of arts and crafts such as Ena de Silva and Barbara Sansoni, whose individual efforts and unique personalities encouraged and enhanced the totality of architecture.

An important omission from that issue is the versatility of colleague Laki Senanayake. Laki started his career as a draughtsman and provided the inimitable drawings for the early publications of the work of Geoffrey Bawa and Ulrik Plesner in 1966. His rendering of tropical foliage make these drawings ‘feel’ like the buildings they represent, and set a pace for the localized drawing idiom that followed. His work as an artist adorns the buildings of

Bawa, and often becomes an integral part of them. These works include the chandelier of silver palm fronds for the apex of the central chamber of the Parliamentary Complex, Kotte (1982) and the plaster relief palms along with charcoal and crayon drawings of tropical foliage alongside the main timber-cladded stairs of the Triton Hotel, Ahungalle (1982). Laki also does landscaping, giving life and often rescuing the lesser built endeavours of others. More recently he has devoted himself seriously to architecture.

Laki Senanayake achieved his life's ambition when he constructed his idyllic dry-zone retreat in Diyabubula, Dambulla (1989) (1). The house is essentially a thatch-covered open pavilion, built on a timber platform, supported on stone piers amidst large boulders, overlooking and reflected in a man-made lake. This basic shelter, despite its intellectual and aesthetic sophistication, has a populist appeal: so necessary, but rare, in the developing world.

A similar social conscience is reflected in my own designs for SOS Children's Villages, providing care for orphans and destitute children.³ The colours for the SOS Youth Village, Piliyandala (1989) were conceived by Barbara Sansoni. Her colours lead one

through the complex, and the inter-relationship of these hues, make directional movement through this symmetrical building a varied experience (2). The initial phase of the SOS Children's Village, Galle (1991) (3) has 12 ‘family houses’. These simple built forms are organically grouped amidst rock outcrops, avoiding the overhead transformer cables. Extensive use of peach/yellow stone from the vicinity and the surrounding coconut palms give this project a distinctive indigenous character.

Concessions to the vernacular, utilizing tropical sloped roof forms, may be seen in the head office of the State Timber Corporation, Kotte (Kahawita & De Silva/1989). Built along the state drive to the Parliament, the building has sympathetic pyramidal roof forms and a sloped timber fenestration. However, the need for Japanese gardens within the interior courtyards is slightly questionable (4). Such concessions can also be seen in the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation offices, Battaramulla (State Engineering Corporation/1991) nearby. This blends into the lush landscape, and has several varied unexpected spaces within a utilitarian frame (5). The Tyronne Fernando Cultural Complex, Moratuwa (1989), designed by young





1. Artist's retreat, Diyabubula, Dambulla (1989). The upper platform is used for sleeping, whereas the dining area, pantry and a toilet are below. Bamboo tats along the perimeter keep out the wind and rain. (Photo: Laki Senanayake.)

2. SOS Youth Village, Piliyandala (1989). View across the central living-dining hall of this residential campus for 40 youths, with a tree-of-life mural on the end wall by ALD Sirisena. (Photo: Dominic Sansoni.)

3. SOS Children's Village, Galle (1991). View of a yard between two 'family houses', each accommodating an SOS 'mother' with ten children. (Photo: Nela de Soyza.)

4. State Timber Corporation, Kotte (1989). Pyramidal shapes of roofs, formed around numerous courtyards on the ground and the second floor, help to avoid dominant roof expanses. (Photo courtesy of the architects.)

5. Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, Battaramulla (1991). Recently purchased by another organization, it is hoped that the design integrity of this sensitive building will be retained. (Photo: K. Anandasivam.)





6. House for S.M.A. Hameed, Nawala (1989). View across the wide timber-finished stairs which link the open verandas showing re-use of the client's old doors, windows and columns. (Photo: Vipula Munasinghe.)

7. Ancestral home, Bollatha, Gampaha (1991 and ongoing). The extension was done gradually, depending on the availability of funds, and utilizing local BAAS or builders, and experimental techniques such as (vaulting with) warichchi or wattle and daub. (Photo: V. Basanayake.)

8. House for C. Sri Nammuni, Nuwera Eliya (1989). An unusual cheerful extension of the hill country. (Photo courtesy of architect.)

Dhanjiyan Senanayake, has a double-height external arcade with the white colonnade picked out against the brown of the exterior walls. Inside, one is led through numerous mezzanines, internal courtyards and terraced yards which link the various building levels and volumes. A final example is the Sri Pada College of Education, Kotagala, Talawakelle (Justin Samarasekera Associates/1991), although it is marred by its excessive and somewhat fussy detailing.

Experiments with the vernacular best find their expression, perhaps, in personalized housing. The Hameed House, Nawala (Anjalendran C./1989) (6) is built on a small rectangular plot which rises ten feet along its length. Its blank façade to the access lane is in total contrast to the openness within, with superb views of the surrounding landscape



being securely located above the neighbouring lands.

Houses built by a younger generation include the innovative efforts of Vijitha Basanayake, one of which is the Withana House, Kohuwela (1989). Perhaps his most

enchanting realization – free from client interference – is the extension to his ancestral home, built around a central courtyard pond at Bollatha, Gampaha (1991 and ongoing) (7). He is joined by Probhoda Jayatilke whose low-cost two bedroom house for the Mendis family, Kotte (1990) is simple and effective.

An unusual approach in relation to the exterior can be seen in the holiday bungalow built by Vidhura Sri Nammuni for his brother at Nuwera Eliya (1989) (8). This two-storey cottage in the hill country has a sky-blue concrete frame infilled with exposed cement blocks which is also juxtaposed against the exterior red reaper ceiling and rough concrete columns in purple. All these are in sharp

contrast to the house designed for Aruna Kulatunga, Kotte (1991) by Anura Ratnavibhushana⁴, which overlooks the Parliamentary Complex across the Diyawana Lake. This elegant house closely follows the puritan legacy of the Bauhaus and has installations, double-height spaces and flat roofs relieved by a brilliant patch of colours and abstract murals.

Mention should also be made of two multi-storey buildings which draw inspiration from the houses by the road from the colonial era. These buildings overlook the road rather than deny its presence. One of them is a three-storey building, which, as in the past, has a residence on the top floor, and shops/office



9. Residence with space to let below, Mount Lavinia Junction (1989). The forerunners of this example and next were published at the turn of the 1940s, by Andrew Boyd, who found in them the functional affinity advocated by the modernists. (Photo: Viphla Munastinske.)

10. Four-storey residence, Colpetty (1990). (Photo: Viphla Munastinske.)

11. Conservation of the old law courts, Hulftdurf (1990). There is no evidence for such reddish brown exteriors in the visual records of this period.

12. Hotel Sinbad, Kalutara (converted 1990). The entrance foyer looks onto a terrace with pergola beyond a pool. This pool is framed by a solid plastered sphere at one corner, balanced by a transparent cosmological sphere by Laki Senanayake at the other end. (Photo: Dominic Sansoni.)

13. National Development Bank, Beira enclave, Colombo (1990). Buildings such as those in this enclave designed by architects are quiet, but perhaps have less vitality than the busy hotchpotch of those in the Galle Road, the main artery of Colombo, built mainly by non-architects. (Photo: Nela de Soyza.)

spaces to let, below. It is set back from the Galle Road near the Mount Lavinia junction, and is owned by G. K. L. Serasinghe (1989) (9). The four-storey residence belonging to S. Madanayake (1990) in Colpetty, has a much grander colonnade and frontage (10). Its visual height has been reduced by a basement car-port forming an effective plinth. These examples are often mistakenly attributed to a



11



well-known practice engaged in similar work, but who are now concentrating on resort hotels in the Maldives. They are, however, designed by non-architects: the latter by the owner. Within an urban context these suggest that traditional forms may be reinterpreted rather than ignored.

The most recent conservation of colonial buildings by Ashley de Vos, is that of the old law courts at Hulftdurf (1990) (11). The architectural historian Ronald Lewcock hails these as: "one of the best pieces of civic architecture in Colombo and indeed the whole of colonial Asia", with the reservation that "encroachments in the courtyards *must* be removed, particularly in the Bar Association building which ruins the splendid effect of the front" (his emphasis),⁵ and it is unclear why his advice has not been heeded. It is, furthermore, unclear why these classical buildings have been painted a distracting reddish brown in parts. With no evidence of such a colour in the visual records of this period, is it possible that the designer mistook the ancient underlay which was sometimes this colour for the original overcoat, which in similar instances would simply have been pale shades of white or grey?

12



13



Geoffrey Bawa's singular contribution at the turn of the 1990s, has been his magical transformation of the dreary beach hotel Merivere at Kalutara into Hotel Sinbad (1990) (12); achieved by numerous spatial sleights of hand. The addition of an entrance porch and revisions to the public areas were done on site in true Bawa fashion, with enjoyment and some indulgence, and with little recourse to drawings. All the former awkwardness in design has been turned to advantage or made to disappear. The result is both austere and restrained.

A broader acceptance of the Bawa ideals is perhaps negated by an even wider following of international modernism, often taken up by corporate organizations in the name of progress. Such architecture is perhaps best represented by the enclave along the Beira Lake in Colombo, with recent buildings constructed on land previously occupied by warehouses which have been designed and supervised by local practices. The Chamber of Commerce (Ashley de Vos of Design Group Five/1989), the venue for the famed tea auctions at one end of this enclave, effectively turns the corner. The National Development Bank (Gemunu Fernando of Design Group Five/1990), is a faceted form in glass and concrete, and perhaps demonstrates the first successful use of urban hard landscape whereby the building seems to step down to meet the roadway by the lake (13). Laki Senanayake's massive mural on a large blank façade redeems the Lanka-Libya Office Complex (Mihindu Keerthiratne Associates/1990).

In addition to these, the interior of the most recent Singapore-style shopping complex around a central atrium in the 'Majestic City', Bamalapitiya (Gemunu Fernando of Design Group Five/1991) (14), momentarily transports one into the affluence of developed Asian and Western countries with similar buildings.

All these buildings display a competence in the handling of comprehensive integrated services, at a non-domestic level. This now seems to vindicate the protests against the need for foreign experts in the building boom



14

of the early 1980s, which until now, have not been convincing.

This professional maturity and meeting of international standards may also be seen in the commercial interiors of Nela de Soya (of Justin Samarasekera Associates). These interiors include the initial freshness of the Seylan Bank, Colombo Fort (1989), (15) progressing through the Philippine Airlines, Colombo Fort (1990), Merchant Bank, Colpetty (1991) to culminate in the crisp blue, white and gold interior of the Grindlay's Bank, Bamalapitiya (1991). All these interiors use the tapestries and batiks of Ena de Silva to counterpoint and provide a local exotic ambience.



15



16



17



18

However, despite such competence and maturity, the State continues to encourage foreign investors without utilizing local expertise, no doubt influenced by the massive yet unaccustomed scale. The results may be seen in the proposed twin towers for the Overseas Trust Bank at Echelon Square, Colombo Fort. Designed by foreign architects, and soon to be constructed, these towers are intended to reach beyond the tallest 31-storey cylindrical Bank of Ceylon Tower, which is also solely sustained by expensive artificial services.

14. 'Majestic City', Bimalapitiya (1991). The interior of this Singapore-style shopping atrium features a modern suspended lighting frame as a focal point. (Photo: Nela de Soysa.)

15. Interior, Seylan Bank, Colombo Fort (1989). The daring use of red aluminium extrusions, with triangular shapes above doorways, is complemented by batik hangings by Ena de Silva (not visible here). (Photo: Nela de Soysa.)

16. Distribution centre and stores for the Ceylon Tobacco Company, Kiribathgoda (1990). A store impersonating a Greek temple. (Photo: Vipala Munasingh.)

17. Gamudawa, Pallekelle (1989). This village reawakening featured a miniaturized Parliamentary Complex, Kotte. (Photo: K. Anandasivam.)

18. The 'all-party conference' house, Ward Place (1989) – a popular architectural tour-de-force? (Photo: Vipala Munasingh.)

19. The cottage of the Cultural Survival Trust, at the back of the Taj Samudra Hotel (1990). This may soon become a museum exhibit of one of the examples of our lost architectural heritage. (Photo: Vipala Munasingh.)

The recently completed Chinese Embassy (1991) has a certain presence, but is finished in antiseptic white tiles and, belatedly, shows the influence of international style. There are also unexpected examples of post-modernism. This occasional occurrence is exemplified by the distribution centre and stores for the Ceylon Tobacco Company, Kiribathgoda (Milroy Perera/1990). Despite its novelty, one questions the need for a reinterpreted, but nevertheless imported, Greek temple with an underplayed pediment and exaggerated columns (16).

It is astonishing, yet important to understand that all this development of the visual environment, and more, has taken place at a time of internal turmoil and strife. In January 1989, the former Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa became the Executive President. The state of intense violence he inherited escalated in the following year with wide-scale 'disappearance', until the leaders of the southern uprising were neutralized by the end of 1989. The withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces by April 1990 took the armed forces to the north and the east to counter the Tamil militants. This led to a period of relative peace and rehabilitation in the south, and construction of buildings related to defence.

Popular aspirations may be seen in the massive participation at the annual *gamudawas* or village reawakening festivities, which coincide with the present President's birthday. These celebrations feature scaled down replicas of famous monuments, which this year at Kamburupitiya, include the medieval timber Audience Hall, Kandy and the British New Town Hall, Colombo, providing instant 'canned' culture for the masses. It is perhaps a pity that some of these buildings from previous years are now being reclaimed by vegetation (17).

The consensus of many may be seen in the house nicknamed the 'all-party conference' in Ward Place, almost opposite the ex-Presi-

dent's residence (1989). This *tour-de-force* has a vast built area in multiple levels compressed in a small site, with every architectural device and detail ingeniously held together and made whole (18). Similarly, the Jayaratne Undertakers (1989), opposite the Kanatte cemetery is a white plastered building with aluminium windows and tinted glass, onto which are tacked strings of European turned balustrades, which have become a flourishing fashion, and which at least seem to provide the necessary symbols for the departed.

The wattle and daub hut for the Cultural Survival Trust in the back yards of the Taj Samudra Hotel, Colombo (19) raises the fundamental question, but does not satisfactorily resolve the need for popularism in architecture. This hut (Ashley de Vos/1990), based on rural homesteads in the dry-zone, has been carefully adapted to suit urban tastes, and is surrounded by bits of cultivation including a traditional *kamatha* or threshing ground and *bissa* or granary, and sits somewhat incongruously in the shadow of the affluent hotel. However, it is rarely visited by the guests and hardly known even by some of its staff. Despite its evocative charm, it is likely, perhaps, to remain merely as an object of curiosity and a relic which embodies the unfulfilled nostalgic yearnings for our fast disappearing values and way of life.

In the past couple of years, there has been a greater leaning towards the vernacular and the Bawa ideal, especially within the younger generation. But this has yet to gain popular acceptance and be incorporated into a design philosophy. (M)

NOTES

1. See 'Trends and Transitions – a review of styles and influences on the built form in Sri Lanka (1940-1990)' by Anjalendran C. and Rajiv Wanasundera in *Architecture & Design, India*, Vol. VII. No. 2., March-April 1990.

2. See *MIMAR, Architecture in Development*, Concept Media Ltd., No. 19., March 1986; and *Geoffrey Bawa* by Brian Brace Taylor, Concept Media Ltd., 1986 reprinted 1989. See also the recent publication on Bawa's 40-year old garden: *Lunuganga* by Geoffrey Bawa, Christoph Bon and Dominic Sansoni, Times Editions, Singapore, 1990.

3. See also the Hermann-Gmeinder School, Piliyandala (1985), named after the founding father of SOS in *MIMAR* 20, June 1986.

4. For Anura Ratnavibhushana's own delightful house overlooking the Bolgoda Lake see *MIMAR* 26, December 1987.

5. From the unpublished 'Report on the listing and preservation of historic buildings and zones in Colombo Urban Area' by Ronald Lewcock, submitted to Habitat, August-September 1980.

C. Anjalendran is a Sri Lankan architect in private practice in Colombo.

