

Sri Lanka: The limited genius of Geoffrey Bawa

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‘Geoffrey Bawa: Drawing from the Archives’ allows an exploration of the rift between the celebrated architect’s vision for nation-building in Sri Lanka and the country’s present reality

Just before 1948 – the year Ceylon gained its independence from the British – and before he earned his great renown, the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, upon his return from Europe, bought an abandoned rubber plantation in Bentota, a coastal town in the Southern Province of what is now Sri Lanka. Over the course of four decades, Bawa transformed it into the sprawling Lunuganga estate of today. The place is named after the brackish Dedduwa Lake upon which the estate rests – the words *Lunu-Ganga* denote salt-river. Michael Ondaatje, the Booker Prize-winning Sri Lanka-born Canadian writer and a friend of Bawa before the architect’s death, has claimed, “If we wish to see a self-portrait of Geoffrey Bawa we will find it most clearly in his own garden and home in Lunuganga.” Bawa was infamously reticent about his work and life, and Lunuganga serves as a manifesto of sorts of his architectural vision. Bawa himself, in *Lunuganga* – a volume he co-authored with the Swiss architect Cristoph Bon and the Sri Lankan photographer Dominic Sansoni – describes the estate as a “garden within a garden”. The larger garden being Sri Lanka itself.

Lunuganga was imagined as a space outside, a “sanctuary” which borders on society, remaining both inside and outside the secular, material world. The garden at Lunuganga is lush, excessive, and decadent. Yet at the same time, it is ordered by a carefully thought-out spatial arrangement, with classical sentries and balustrades that frame and add perspective to the natural flow of the garden. There is a subtle and nuanced interplay between order and freedom. The beauty of Lunuganga emerges from this dialectic; to deploy a Nietzschean metaphor, it seems to strike a perfect harmony between the opposing Apollonian and Dionysian forces. The eclectic design of Lunuganga reflects a melange of architectural traditions. Austere Palladianism with gothic details seamlessly merged with local architectural features in a tangibly modernist architectural diction. This, arguably, “postmodernist” pastiche-like approach to architecture defines much of Bawa’s work. Yet it is at Lunuganga where Bawa seems to have unleashed the full creative force of his vision.

The predominant philosophical and artistic outlook that shaped Bawa’s work is undoubtedly romanticism – a fact that, strangely enough, few of his critics seem to account for. Geoffrey Bawa was indeed a genius, and he was a genius in a particularly romantic sense. He was someone who synthesised many traditions; not only did he break the rules and get away with it, he became the rule itself. Yet, Bawa’s genius was hamstrung, and his designs gradually became repetitive and almost vulgar and platitudinous. Bawa became entrapped in his own genius and his work could not transcend certain limitations that he had set for himself.

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with the larger garden that contains it.

Much of the writing on Bawa and his work is either fawning and laudatory or respectfully and modestly critical. *Geoffrey Bawa: Drawing from the Archives* – edited by the curator Shayari de Silva – belongs, for the most part, to the second category. The book contains several critical essays based on archival materials that include drawings, sketches and photos of Bawa's work, and some of these are previously unseen. Bawa's estate, Lunuganga, figures prominently in *Drawing from the Archives*, as it does in much of the critical work on him. This is hardly surprising given that Lunuganga is a resume of Bawa's life and work. The art historian Suhanya Raffel and the artist and curator Michael Snelling – two contributors to *Drawing from the Archives* – note in their opening piece, "Lunuganga provides a living space that performs Bawa's biography in the most lyrical, poetic and immediate fashion."

It is necessary to note that Bawa was a student of English literature first, a lawyer second and an architect third. As the architect and biographer David Robson notes in *Geoffrey Bawa: the Complete Works*, Bawa chose to study English because it allowed one to "read all the things one wanted to read anyway and still pass one's exams." There is no doubt that Bawa's early training in literary studies shaped his intellectual outlook. Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* could be considered the archetypal romantic, and the epic poem's Satanic romanticism commands that if you do not get the world that you want, you must create it. There is no doubt that Bawa, creator of Lunuganga and various other "paradisiacal" spaces, was inspired by a similar vision. It is also pertinent to refer here to the fraught topic of Bawa's sexuality. The historian Robert Aldrich has noted that Bawa's sexual orientation was "well-known." However, unlike his brother and landscape architect Bevis, who was openly homosexual, Geoffrey was extremely reserved and reticent not only about his work but also about his personal life. Perhaps it is out of respect for this that *Drawing from the Archives* makes no reference to his sexuality at all. However, it is possible that it is his sexual marginality that, at least in part, spurred Bawa to build a world for himself in Lunuganga. This could be even more true about Bevis Bawa's landscape garden and home, Brief Garden, which even more so than Lunuganga strikes one as a pleasure garden and a sanctuary.

Bawa, it appears, sought to create not only a garden within a garden, but a world within a world, which is the ultimate romantic fantasy. In *Drawing from the Archives*, the art critic Jyoti Dhar notes,

From the very beginning, Bawa envisaged Lunuganga as a space for reverie and dreaming – a theatrical setting in which a cast of fictive characters could come and play. We are told that he was inspired by his love of gardens in Europe, which were often filled with mythological sculptures. Critically, Bawa did not transplant this European imagination into a Sri Lankan context; rather, he sculpted a space guided by the local landscape.

The idea that Lunuganga is a "garden within a garden" suggests that Bawa thought of Sri Lanka as an extended garden and, as such, a paradisiacal and utopian space. Dhar notes that Bawa saw Lunuganga as a "microcosm of Sri Lanka itself." The fact that Bawa started creating Lunuganga in 1948, the same year in which Sri Lanka became an independent nation, sets Lunuganga – the garden – on a parallel historical trajectory with the larger garden that contains it. One is even tempted to read Lunuganga as a national allegory, and it could be argued that Bawa sought to extend the garden of Lunuganga to encompass the whole of Sri Lanka through the construction of the numerous resort hotels he designed, and especially through his work on the Sri Lankan Parliament Complex, for all of which Lunuganga seems to have been the original blueprint.

While it could very well be the case that Bawa was inspired by gardens in Europe, there were both

local and regional traditions of landscaping that he could draw upon. Three notable examples come to mind in this regard: Ranmasu Uyana, the gardens located in an archaeological site in Anuradhapura; the ancient rock fortress of Sigiriya; and the city of Kandy, Sri Lanka's last royal capital. As the geographer Tariq Jazeel notes, the Parliament Complex "references diverse architectural times and spaces, and has been described as a cosmopolitan and internationalist edifice gesturing variously toward Mogul Lake palaces, South Indian temples and Chinese palaces."

Bawa's "garden vision" of architecture enables Sri Lanka to be imagined as a utopian space with an optimal balance between culture and nature. Yet the city planners of today have moved very far away from this vision.

Bawa is not the first modern Sri Lankan architect and landscape artist to draw upon this tradition, or on the mythos of Sri Lanka as a lost paradise or garden. Several decades before Bawa set about creating Lunuganga, in the 1920s, the French-born garden designer and writer Maurice Talvande purchased a small island off the coast of Weligama, a town in southern Sri Lanka, and started creating his own "mini Eden", which he would name Taprobane. Count de Mauny notes in his memoir, *The Gardens of Taprobane*, "I christened the island Taprobane, the old Greek name for Ceylon. I like the name; it suits the rock, for its pear-shape outline is like that of a miniature Ceylon." There are several parallels between Count de Mauny's vision and that of Bawa. Both men sought to create their own world, a mini paradise, and they both thought of this mini paradise as representative of the larger paradise that contained it.

The pioneering Sri Lankan modernist architect Minnette de Silva visited Count de Mauny's Taprobane Island when she was young. It is extremely likely, therefore, that de Silva's architectural vision and practice was influenced by Taprobane. De Silva in turn was an influence on Bawa. It was de Silva who invited the Danish modernist architect Ulrik Plesner, who would later become Bawa's associate, to come to Sri Lanka and work as her assistant. Over the years, and after being largely forgotten, de Silva has emerged from obscurity to achieve cult status among scholars, practitioners and admirers of architecture. Jazeel's chapter in *Drawing from the Archives* extensively discusses de Silva's archives in relation to Bawa.

Unlike Bawa's works, many of which have survived, very few examples of de Silva's work remain today. Despite de Silva's likely influence upon Bawa, they were in many ways very different architects. For example, de Silva's work was markedly more Corbusian – inspired by the works of the Swedish modernist architect Le Corbusier, whom she counted as a close friend – with straight lines, horizontal windows and stripped, minimalist facades with austere and restrained details. Jazeel traces the affinities between de Silva and Bawa, arguably the two most important Sri Lankan architects of the last century. He writes, "de Silva's architecture then was, just like Bawa's efforts at Lunuganga, a search for the ordinary, for the historical, despite its resolute modernism." De Silva also found inspiration in the art critic and philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy's monumental *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. As Jazeel notes, "what emerged as Sri Lanka's postindependence architectural style sits in close proximity to the mid-twentieth-century emergence of Sri Lanka's modern art movement."

Jazeel argues that the influence of Coomaraswamy on figures such as de Silva and Bawa – and also on the '43 Group, a renowned Sri Lankan modern art collective – locates the work of such artists within particular socio-political parameters. It is sometimes argued that Coomaraswamy's *Medieval Sinhalese Art* establishes a Buddhist-centric canon and tradition of Sri Lankan art, but while it is true that Coomaraswamy discerns in Kandyan art a defining Buddhist temperament, he is also careful to stress that in many ways it was influenced by South Indian art, and that there were many

South Indian architects who lived and worked in the Kandyan kingdom. “Let me be clear in closing that my argument is not to impugn de Silva and Bawa nor to align their work with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism,” Jazeel writes. Rather,

it is to suggest that contrary to much of the rhetoric around postindependence Sri Lankan architecture, their work was never simply outside politics. As forms of artistic modernism – and de Silva and Bawa were certainly among the greatest authors of modern postindependence Sri Lanka – their work was inescapably part of the weft and warp of postcolonial nationhood, despite their own claims to be working beyond the squabbles of nationalist politics. Both were articulating visions of a uniquely Ceylonese modernism.

It is indeed tempting to align Bawa, much more so than de Silva, with the project of post-independence nation-building. The fact that Bawa would go on to create the Parliament Complex, which today houses the Sri Lankan legislature, further cements his role as “an architect of the state”. The researcher Meghal Perera, in her essay in *Drawing from the Archives*, discusses Bawa’s proposals for the development of the Galle Face Green, a beloved public space in Colombo that is now intimately associated with a protest site of the *Aragalaya*, the people’s struggle that brought down Gotabaya Rajapaksa as president in 2022 amid a dire economic crisis, and issued a larger call for political accountability. Perera writes that the Galle Face Green – described as “an urban park at the very heart of Colombo, a 5-hectare strip of grassy land wedged between the city’s commercial district and the Indian Ocean” – is a place where “Colombo’s colonial past meets its visions of the future, watched over by the Old Parliament Building turned Presidential Secretariat and a row of new luxury hotels and malls in various stages of completion.”

Perera notes that Bawa was reluctant to make drastic changes to the Galle Face Green and was of the opinion that it should remain as a public space that is open to all. Bawa’s ‘Report on the Landscaping and Beautification of the Galle Face Green Area’ concludes, “The main thought underlying all these suggestions is that the Galle Face Green, as it is now, should remain open and free as it has always been, and that whatever we do to improve it should be done with great discretion, and in sympathy with its age old ambience of a public space with a wide range of use.” Bawa would go on to create the current Parliament Complex in the same spirit. If at all Bawa’s work and vision could be aligned with the project of nation-building, which in and of itself is no crime, the nation that he imagined was drastically different from the nation that we have today.

The new Parliament Complex was an attempt at breaking away from the colonial past, yet it has ended up embracing a vision of the decadent, excessive and idle Orient.

The United National Party regime of Sri Lanka’s first executive president, J R Jayewardene, which was behind the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy in the late 1970s, commissioned Bawa and his firm – Edward, Reid and Begg – to design the new Parliament Complex in the legislative capital, Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, just to the east of Colombo. Perera notes, “The old Parliament Building, which overlooks the Galle Face Green, was too bound up with the colonial past and too adjacent to a cosmopolitan and economic powerhouse.” Wittingly or unwittingly, Bawa took part in the nation-building project as the new building was meant to mark a break from the colonial past. And it is the Parliament Complex, in many ways Bawa’s most important project, that makes the limitation of his genius most apparent.

The Parliament Complex with its surrounding lake, garden and the Kandyan style pavilions create an atmosphere of excess and idleness. When Bawa was asked to design a parliament, he did what he was best at, creating a resort – which, needless to say, is highly unsuitable for the kind of work that is done in a parliament. The Sri Lankan Parliament Complex is not a space that “affects” its inhabitants to exercise self-control, discipline and austerity – qualities which are essential in the business of running a country – rather it induces one to relax and indulge, as though one is on vacation at a resort hotel. It is also fascinating to compare noted works by Bawa such as the Bentota Beach Hotel (now Cinnamon Bentota Beach) and the Triton Hotel Ahungalla (built at the same time as the Parliament building) which share many architectural features with the Parliament Complex.

The Parliament Complex today is arguably the most infamous building in Sri Lanka. The very sight of it invokes unpleasant associations with not just corruption and incompetence but also violence and tyranny. While it is hardly fair to fault Bawa for the many crises that Sri Lanka has been through since the new Parliament was inaugurated, in 1982, there is no overlooking that it was designed with ill-advised if noble intentions. As David Robson has noted, Bawa envisioned the Parliament Complex essentially as a public space that was to remain accessible to all, with the surrounding pavilions conceived as spaces where the public can gather and participate in democratic debate and discussion. Moreover, the surrounding area was to be developed as a garden city. Robson writes, “Bawa conceived the Parliament as an island capitol surrounded by a new garden city of parks and public buildings. It would form the end point on a long promenade, beginning 8 kilometers to the west in Colombo’s Viharamahadevi Park and following the grand west-east axis formed by Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha, Horton Place and Castle Street before swinging southwards at Rajagiriya.”

Of course, Bawa’s vision was only partially realised. Robson writes, “The opening of the new Parliament was staged against a background of rising communal violence that escalated into a bitter civil war. The continuing troubles necessitated the introduction of strict and highly visible security measures in and around Colombo.” The garden city that he imagined never materialised. “Even the first tantalizing glimpse of the Parliament building that Bawa orchestrated at the turning of the road at Rajagiriya is now obscured by unauthorized developments on the edge of the lake in which it stands.” The Parliament Complex, which was to be a space for citizens to meet their representatives and discuss and debate policy, is now heavily fortified and cannot be accessed without permission.

It is not just Bawa’s vision for the Parliament Complex that has failed, but also his vision for the nation. To understand the limitations of Bawa’s genius, it is important to understand the architectural and philosophical tradition from which he comes. Despite his deep admiration for Bawa, even Robson notes that the Parliament Complex “has the ambience of a restaurant in a resort hotel.” Here, it is crucial to understand whence Bawa’s idea of the “resort” emerges, as this idea has greatly shaped not only the tourist industry but also the very politics of Sri Lanka.

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Bawa’s Lunuganga in many ways was the model for the resorts that he would later build, many of which are among the top luxury properties in Sri Lanka today. Lunuganga was imagined as a utopian space, a garden within a garden, a world within a world. It is in many ways a “sanctuary” – a space that is outside, or rather borders, the larger society, and where different rules apply. It is the idea of sanctuary that underpins Bawa’s resort hotels. Strangely enough, this idea has hardly received any attention in writings on Bawa, including in *Drawing from the Archives*.

Resorts are associated with luxury, idleness, decadence and indulgence, but the idea of sanctuary has certain religious connotations. Bawa was indeed influenced by ancient Sri Lankan monasteries, which were, in a sense, sanctuaries. Robson records that Bawa borrowed a copy of the archaeologist and art historian Senaka Bandaranayake's *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture* and kept it for many years. Robson also suggests that this work had an influence on Bawa's design of the Parliament Complex. Although it may seem that the resort is the exact opposite of the sanctuary or monastery, these are all spaces to which one retires or "resorts", where one gets to leave behind earthly worries and be idle. And while resort and the monastery are diametrically opposed, both these spaces are mutually constitutive – and, as such, austerity and excess, indulgence and self-discipline, idleness and labour are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, Sri Lankan Buddhist temples, which are in theory committed to poverty, hold valuable assets, and as such are extraordinarily wealthy. As the historian Leslie Gunawardana has argued in *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka*, monks in Medieval monasteries were also landowners. More to the point, traditionally only two classes of people have been idle and remained outside the processes of production: ascetics and aristocrats.

It is not just the resorts that Bawa designed but also his houses that are committed to these principles. On a somewhat critical note, the historian and curator Shirley Surya writes in her essay in *Drawing from the Archives*, "While it is easy to satirize such homes as pretensions of the nouveau riches, these luxury houses have become hallmarks of modernity and prestige, which the middle class in Bali and other parts of Indonesia aspire to." Surya is referring to the villas of the Batujimbar Estate in Bali, Indonesia, which Bawa designed, but her remark could also be applied to the many houses that Bawa designed in Sri Lanka. His resorts also present, especially for international tourists seeking an exotic experience, a version of the "Orient" that they desire to see.

Surya writes, referring to Batujimbar Estate, "The project's appeal to the outsider elite's specific interpretation of tradition packaged in modernity has inevitably cast doubt on its local or regional relevance – similar to how Bawa's projects have been viewed in Sri Lanka." While Surya is a reluctant apologist for Bawa's "orientalizing" tendencies, it is true that the world the international tourist or the "outsider elite" encounters in a Bawa resort is a vision of the decadent, idle, excessive and unproductive Orient. However, the philosophy that underpins Bawa's architectural vision – which largely produced pleasure houses and palaces for the bourgeoisie – has its roots in religious architecture and landscaping. Bawa's success as an architect rests upon his ability to address a pressing spiritual need, typically at a very high price.

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It is not difficult to see how the application of the idea of sanctuary to the building of a Parliament Complex could be disastrous – especially once it has been stripped of its deeper religious or spiritual meaning and reduced to surface-level decadence, idleness and overindulgence. This becomes particularly clear in comparison with the Old Parliament Building, which is built in a classical-revival style. The Old Parliament Building, with wide front steps that rise above the rusticated floor to a neoclassical portico with ionic pillars, is meant to epitomise the classical values upon which Western democracy is supposed to rest – such as austerity, self-discipline and simplicity. The Parliament Complex, like Bawa's resorts, epitomises the seemingly opposed values of excess, decadence and idleness. The debating chamber of the Parliament Complex, which is adorned with a massive

chandelier of dubious taste (designed by the Sri Lankan sculptor and painter Laki Senanayake) and a gaudy golden ceiling (which tops it all!) is an apt example.

As Perera has noted, the new Parliament Complex was an attempt at breaking away from the colonial past, yet it has unfortunately ended up embracing a vision of the decadent, excessive and idle Orient drawn straight from the colonial imagination. It is fitting, then, that Sri Lankan parliamentarians behave as though they are in a resort – living in idleness and luxury while plundering the resources of the country – rather than occupying themselves with the serious business of running a country. It is hardly farfetched to suggest that the resort-like ambience of the Parliamentary Complex encourages, and perhaps even induces, this behaviour, even if the building alone cannot bear full responsibility for it. In how it evinces the architectural characteristics of Buddhist temples – especially of the Kandyan kind, with their pitched roofs and pavilions – the Parliament Complex seems to also align itself with the ideological interests of Sri Lanka's dominant Sinhala-Buddhist majority.

“Change is inevitable and Bawa's recommendations need not be viewed as perfect, desirable or aesthetically pleasing merely because they were never realised,” Perera states in concluding her essay. “Neither are they examples of design that should be blindly applied to the space immediately as if to rectify a past wrong. ... It is about opening the possibility of an alternative urban form through examining the shadow histories and untaken paths. This challenges the tyrannical inevitability of urban development and the immutability of the present. The landscape is instead a malleable fabric, shaped before, shaped now and reshaped continually.”

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It is in this way that Bawa's genius was limited. He was entrapped in his genius in the sense that he could, in the end, design only one kind of building. After his early breakthroughs, such as the Ena de Silva house and the Polontalawa Estate Bungalow – *Drawing from the Archives* does not nearly give enough credit to Ulrik Plesner, who worked with Bawa on both projects – Bawa was essentially doing permutations and scaled-up versions of the same thing. Towards the end of his career, Bawa grew frustrated with being thought of as a romantic “regionalist” and sought to build more minimalist structures, such as the many houses he designed in his late period and his penultimate project, a pavilion-style house for J R Jayewardene's grandson, Pradeep Jayewardene, in Mirissa.

The successors of Bawa, such as C Anjalendran and Channa Daswatte – the latter has written the epilogue to *Drawing from the Archives* – still seem to operate in Bawa's all-encompassing shadow, despite perhaps their best efforts. But Bawa's legacy must be transcended, all the while absorbing the best that it has to offer. There is still much to be learnt from Bawa's work, especially when it comes to city planning. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka today is moving away from Bawa's regionalist vision to embrace an enervating and indistinctive neoliberal architectural aesthetic of vulgar skyscrapers and gaudy, often unoccupied towers. Bawa taught us to build commonsensical and aesthetically pleasing buildings which could be built economically, with courtyards and interior pergolas that let in air and light, preventing the need for wasteful air-conditioning. The genius of his ideas rests in the fact that they are easily replicable, at modest cost and with the use of locally sourced materials. Laying “Sinhala tiles” over asbestos sheets to repel heat, an ingenious technique attributed to both Bawa and Plesner, is a case in point.

Bawa's “garden vision” of architecture enables the entirety of Sri Lanka to be imagined as a utopian

space with an optimal balance between culture and nature. Yet the city planners of today have moved very far away from this vision. The Colombo skyline today is dotted with gaudy, highly exclusive skyscrapers built at an enormous cost, often with foreign investment. Beautification projects, such as the Arcade Independence Square and the Race Course Mall, have replaced the notion of public space with that of consumerist space, available only to those who can spend. Colombo, aesthetically, is hardly different from any other developed city in the Southasian region, and largely lacks distinction. Moreover, many of Sri Lanka's cities today look dilapidated, with Kandy being one of the more notable examples. The once "cosmic" city of King Sri Wickramarajasinge is now a sordid dump, with unfinished construction projects that exacerbate the bad traffic and dangerously high levels of air pollution. Unless there is a major shift in policy, it seems unlikely that Sri Lanka will go back to the principles introduced by Bawa, which at their best can help us create eco-friendly, efficient, economical and aesthetically distinctive cities.

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