

## **Memory, modernity and history: the landscapes of Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka, 1948-1998.**

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses selected Sri Lankan landscapes designed by the architect Geoffrey Bawa between 1948 and 1998, in particular Lunuganga, a landscape garden created by Bawa for himself in the South West coastal region of the island. It assesses these spaces as sites of memory and locations where modernity and history are negotiated.

Bawa's architectural and landscape designs have been amply documented. Prior scholarship has, for the most part, narrated his life's work. However, less attention has been paid to contextualizing Bawa's output in a longer continuum. In addition, this article theorizes Lunuganga in relation to the production of modernity in Sri Lanka after independence and negotiation of the island's relationship to colonial and pre-colonial histories, using this landscape as a case study.

The island of Sri Lanka has a long history of the development of cultural landscapes. The place of water in these landscapes has also been a significant feature. Bawa's landscapes can be located within these traditions. Furthermore, the time he spent in Europe furnished him with an understanding of the picturesque landscape tradition. However, Lunuganga could be described as a site where these (colonial) histories and vernacular traditions re-staged or re-presented the modern in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Conditions of the pre-colonial, colonial, and modern in South Asia are discussed here but Bawa's landscapes can also be 'read' as 'sites of memory', where, although of the modern era, the past is recalled. In the making of Lunuganga, Bawa negotiated his relationship to the past through constructions derived from colonialism. The landscape of Lunuganga references these negotiations between slavish adoption of a universal modern, with its taint of colonial subjugation, the wilful neglect of this troubled past and the pursuit of an uncomplex indigenism and, in so doing, intervenes in the production of modernity in Sri Lanka.

## **Introduction**

This article will discuss selected landscapes designed by the architect Geoffrey Bawa in Sri Lanka between 1948 and 1998. It assesses these spaces as sites of memory and locations where modernity and history were negotiated. The main subject of this paper is, however, Lunuganga (salt river), a landscape garden created after 1948 by Bawa for himself near Bentota, in the South West coastal region of Sri Lanka. This garden has been described in previous architectural publications but will be interpreted here as a process of meaning, constructed and projected or re-staged.

Professor David Robson, the architect's most recent biographer, has described Lunuganga as 'a civilized wilderness, not a garden of flowers and fountains; it is a composition in monochrome, green on green... a landscape of memories and ideas' (2002, 239). This last, open-ended phrase will be used as a starting point to examine issues around the place of memory, modernity and history in relation to the creation of this particular South Asian landscape, commenced at the moment of Independence and developed during the first decades of decolonization in Sri Lanka. Although created as a private domain and possessing a whimsical, poetic quality, the meanings implicit in the landscape of Lunuganga, it will be suggested, address wider cultural concerns. These include the coming into being of a newly-independent nation, that nation's relationship with its own

distant, pre-colonial history as well as the immediate colonial past and post-colonial present.

### **Previous literature**

Bawa's buildings, his biography, his place in the pantheon of modern Asian architects, as well as his contribution to the design of landscape have been amply documented (Brawne 1978; Taylor 1986 and 1995; Robson 2002 and 2007). Prior scholarship specifically devoted to Bawa's architecture presents detailed and carefully researched chronologies of his output. One of the earliest key texts on Bawa was written by the architectural historian, Brian Brace Taylor (1986 and 1995). In his introductory chapter, 'A House is a Garden', Taylor located Bawa within the cultural historical break-up of the modern movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s but also made reference to Bawa's drawing on the vernacular architectural and landscape traditions of the island of Ceylon/Sri Lanka. David Robson's comprehensive, meticulously researched and evocative writings on Bawa's achievements return to themes introduced by Taylor but he adopts a more biographical approach, having known Bawa and gained access to the architect's archive. However, prior scholarship in relation to the architect's output is still at an early and uncritical stage of development that might best be described as 'mapping the field'; Bawa died as recently as 2003. The main focus of these works has been to capture the range and extent of Bawa's architectural achievement and to position him at the forefront of architectural developments in South Asia during the first decades of de-colonization. This slightly celebratory tone is apparent, for example, in a recent text where Bawa is eulogized as an

'Asian guru' (Robson 2002, 261). A significant part of the previous literature has been informed by the methods of architectural history which have directed research and writing along well-trodden paths.

However, discussion of Bawa's architecture and landscapes must also be situated in relation to recent critical literature on Sri Lanka's so-called 'tropical modern' architecture. This literature includes the work of Nihal Perera and the assessment of a 'critical vernacularism' in the post-independence period on the island, as well as texts by Anoma Pieris and others that address the place of the modern in contemporary Sri Lanka (Perera 1999 and 2010; Pieris 2007).<sup>1</sup>

The present article also engages with recent critical writing that has problematized the concept of modernity and the post-colonial condition in South Asia, especially contributions by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Timothy Mitchell and Rebecca Brown (Chakrabarty 2000 and 2002; Mitchell 2000; Brown 2009). In particular these writers variously challenge the notion of a plurality of modernities or alternative modernities that derive from a singular, unified (and Western) modernity. They also argue for the modern as an innately unstable condition and for the central role that colonialism played in the production of modernity. Due to this instability, Mitchell and others suggest that modernity 'must be continually re-staged to preserve an internally unified...presence' (Mitchell 2000, 23; Brown 2009, 10).

Following this line of reasoning, rather than reifying an un-problematically given sense of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial and colonial histories, it can be argued instead that these previous histories simply cannot be erased or circumscribed. Therefore, post-independence Sri Lanka continually negotiates its relationship to the past through constructions originating in colonialism. It then follows that Bawa's architecture and landscapes cannot just be understood as an alternative modernity that references a central, singular, monolithic modern located in Europe. Neither is Bawa's work specifically marked by an over-arching difference or South Asian-ness. Rather, his output can be interpreted as an intervention in or interruption of a totalizing, unified modern through the re-presentation or re-staging of that modern.

Adopting a trans-disciplinary framework that deploys critical approaches to the study of landscape and memory, post-colonial literature and design history, the present article contextualizes Bawa's output by situating it in a longer, South Asian continuum. It also theorizes his works by discussing them in relation to the centrality of colonialism in the production of South Asian modernity, using Bawa's landscape at Lunuganga as a case study. In addition, it suggests that the architect's landscapes (and buildings) participate in and form constitutive elements of the staging of the modern in post-independence Sri Lanka.

## **The Landscape of Lunuganga**

The creation of the garden at Lunuganga has been well documented elsewhere (Taylor 1986; Bawa, Bon and Sansoni 1990; Robson 2003, 2007). The initial purchase consisted of a ten-hectare strip of land (near Bentota) straddling 'two low hills on a promontory jutting out the Dedduwa Lake, a brackish lagoon fed by an estuary of the Bentota River', with a ramshackle bungalow at its centre (Robson 2002, 238). Picturesque, modern and vernacular landscape models are evident in the site at Lunuganga. Bawa re-directed the entrance road to the property, guiding the visitor, in the manner of picturesque gardens in England such as Stowe, to approach the main building from an unexpected direction in order to obtain a pre-arranged view (Robson 2002, 238). At the entrance, there is a surprise view in the direction of Cinnamon Hill and the *dagoba* of a temple located at a distance from the property. During the 1950s, Bawa re-aligned the bungalow, began to level the northern terrace and clear vistas to the lake. The bungalow became 'the hub of the composition', as David Robson suggests, in much the same way as picturesque gardens in England were ordered, the point at which the totality of the landscape makes sense to the viewer. Lunuganga is situated in the island's wet zone and vegetation is therefore luxuriantly tropical, bearing no comparison to the 'well-behaved' flora of English gardens. The clearances of the land and the construction of buildings effected on the site had, of necessity, to take local climatic conditions into account, as vernacular buildings had done and continue to do. During the 1960s and 1970s, Bawa was busy with architectural projects around Bentota and situated his office at

Lunuganga. He began to build structures in the landscape, including a covered bridge over the ha-ha (a standard feature of the picturesque), a small house for office staff and tiny square pavilion on the eastern terrace (known as 'the Hen House'). As David Robson has suggested, at Lunuganga Bawa 'set buildings into their site to create enclosed and semi-enclosed outdoor spaces' (2002, 238). This acknowledgement of local topography and local use of space references pre-colonial, vernacular traditions. The so-called 'Hen House' located on the eastern terrace, composed of an over-hanging, square hipped and tiled roof, raised on four brick piers, with three sides enclosed by wooden lattice-work panels, originates in vernacular examples (such as rest houses or *ambalama*); these examples are not simply copied but re-worked by Bawa to present a structure that is also modern.<sup>2</sup> In 1983, a garden room was built and an ochre coloured Gothic Court on one of the axes of the garden was constructed. To the north of the bungalow, a lawn leads to an undulating wall with picturesque views north and west. Statues and walls and paving have been added over the years to articulate the space and evoke related spaces in Italian and English gardens. The North Terrace is also articulated by a modernist geometric grid of stonework. After a debilitating stroke in 1998, major works on the garden ceased.

As with many landscapes, Bawa's garden in South Western Sri Lanka may usefully be described as a palimpsest, a place where the original 'inscriptions' of previous owners, in terms of the organisation of space and traces left on the land, have been effaced to make room for new ones. Bawa altered the purpose



of the place from the production of commodities to the production of an imaginary space or personal cartography (Bastea 2004) where memory traces were re-worked and re-presented. In fact, as David Robson notes, the landscape of Lunuganga was a 'man-made creation, which in its previous incarnations had been a Dutch cinnamon garden and a British rubber estate' (2007, 238). We must also remember that the landscape possessed a prior, local history before European contact with Ceylon in the sixteenth century. Vernacular land-usage and colonial 'structuring' of the land and its integration into the global economic order shaped the topography of Lunuganga. Bawa mapped onto this previously inscribed landscape an imaginary framework that accommodated the previous history of the land, as well as his own cultural background, straddling both East and West, in addition to the idioms of international modernism. The rise and fall of the land, the tree-lined shore of the lagoon, the distant view of the Buddhist *dagoba*, the modernized, colonial-period bungalow, various architectural 'eye-catchers' and a number of ancient trees have been staged to present a landscape of the imagination where a range of different references are made. Lunuganga is not so much a picturesque image as a constructed vision of a picturesque Sri Lanka, a vision filtered through constructions from the colonial past.

### **The pre-colonial and colonial landscapes of Sri Lanka**

The island of Sri Lanka presents a long history of the development of cultural or human-wrought landscapes. Bawa's landscapes make reference to this previous

history, particularly the use of water as a device to anchor the building in its environment. His landscapes (and architecture) also fully acknowledge local topography in that his gardens and buildings incorporate and integrate with rather than erase or remove significant features of the local environment such as rocky outcrops (below the North Cliff at Lunuganga, a stone staircase winds around and is accommodated to a large boulder outcrop in a way that recalls stairways through the Boulder Garden at Sigiriya). David Robson writes of Lunuganga, 'various buildings constructed down the years [such as the Garden Room and Cinnamon Hill House] appear simply to have grown out of the ground, [and appear as] carefully restored remnants of some earlier period of occupation' (Robson 2002, 240). An under-researched aspect of the Sri Lankan pre-colonial architectural tradition is its 'use of location and terrain' (Bandaranayake 2003). This is evidenced, for example, in the 'giri' monasteries of the classic period such as Mihintale, Varana and Vessagiriya (Bandaranakaye 1974, 55). Bawa's choice of the felicitous site of Lunuganga, straddling two low hills on a promontory projecting into a lake and his careful use of terrain in the construction of the buildings in that landscape, these structures appearing 'to have grown out of the ground', references vernacular usages and forms.

The place of water in Sri Lanka's landscapes (either through the incorporation of a natural feature or the creation of artificial 'tanks' or reservoirs) has also been a significant aspect of the natural environment from the island's earliest histories and has been briefly referred to in the secondary literature on Bawa. For

example, Sri Lanka's great historical chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, records the significance of water during the medieval period on a number of occasions, commencing with the foundation myth of the island (with the arrival of Vijaya by sea).

There are many examples of the use of water as major features within the Sri Lankan landscape. These include the extensive gardens of Sigiriya or *Simha-giri* (Lion Mountain) in the centre of the island, created by the patricidal King Kasapya I (477-95 CE) and most probably, given the scale of the works, continued long after his death. As archaeologist, Senake Bandaranayake, has noted, there are three principal gardens which lie along the central east-west axis of the site at Sigiriya (1993, 123-4). These three gardens form a dominant series of rectangular enclosures of different sizes arranged along an axis and are linked to other water features, including a fountain garden and a miniature water garden. The integration of water into the created landscape on the island also includes the development, by Parakramabahu (1153-86 CE), of numerous 'tanks', artificial lakes and the immense hydraulic infrastructure that he caused to be created in the central dry-zone of the island (Lokuge 2007). Among the many reservoirs, waterways and lakes that he constructed during his reign, his most significant legacy is Parakrama Samudra (sea of Parakrama), an immense artificial lake adjoining his capital, Polonnaruwa.

David Robson argues that Lunuganga owes more to English and Italian gardens than to King Kasapya's water garden at Sigiriya (2003, 238). On one level this is arguable in that the landscape of Sigiriya is on a monumental and regal scale. The water gardens are also symmetrically organised. However, Bawa's arrangement of the views at Lunuganga (for example from the North Terrace and south towards the *dagoba*) draws in expanses of water into the landscape and in effect re-structures that relationship of the landscape to the water in a manner not dissimilar to that at Sigiriya.

In 1810, the last king of Kandy,<sup>3</sup> Sri Vikramarajasimha (1798-1815), ordered the paddy fields to the south of the Royal Palace and the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relic) to be converted, for cosmological reasons, into a great lake surrounded by a continuous 'cloud wall' (de Silva 1993, 159). James Duncan has argued that the Kings of Kandy envisioned the city in the light of South Asian sacred texts. Kandy was Mount Meru, the centre of the universe, and the newly-created lake was the Sea of Milk, the name given to the cosmic ocean at the foot of Mount Meru (Duncan 1989, 187). In his western architectural training Bawa would also have familiarized himself with foundational texts (of the architectural profession) and these inflected (although not in a literal manner) his experiments with the landscape of Lunuganga.

Apart from the creation of Kandy Lake, local patronage, and with it the local tradition of incorporating water into the cultural landscapes of the island, ceased

with the intervention of European colonizers in Sri Lanka. However, during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the British envisioned the island of Sri Lanka through western 'forms of knowledge', applying a picturesque aesthetic to the local landscape. They came to the island with a landscape model that they superimposed upon the pre-existing Sri Lankan one. In some cases they 'improved' landscape sites in Sri Lanka's centres of population at Colombo and particularly at Kandy. In 1850, Henry Sirr noted of the British Governors' house at Kandy that it stood,

'in the centre of a large lawn, about which are planted at regular intervals groups of magnolia and palm trees: the park-like grounds cover a large space, and are well stocked with flowering exotics...The park extends to the sides of the hills, and beautiful views of the mountain landscape of Doombera, and the meandering river are obtained' (Sirr 1850, 93-4).

In the planning of their roads and residences in Ceylon, the British often incorporated a picturesque view of water and the wider landscape. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe this process as drawing a feature of the distant topography into the immediate, cultivated landscape setting, much as Bawa was to do at Lunuganga and elsewhere. For example, by orientating a view, he incorporated the *dagoba* of Katakuliya temple (a structure situated well away from the garden) into Lunuganga's landscape. Instead of a Gothic 'ruin' as

an eye-catcher, a vernacular and Buddhist structure is encompassed within the structured landscape of Lunuganga.

In the 1830s, the British governor, Sir William Horton, planned and laid out a road that wound around the hills behind the Pavilion or governor's residence at Kandy (called Lady Horton's Walk). As a contemporary commentator noted 'the rapid succession of magnificent views that meet the eye from this mountain path are most glorious, as the rapid waters of the Mahavelle ganga flow below, the forest-clothed mountains....are to be discerned below' (Sirr 1850, 94). James Duncan has suggested that the British colonizers envisioned the surroundings and the topography of the city of Kandy during the nineteenth century as a romanticised, pre-industrial lakeland landscape (Agnew and Duncan 1989, 192). The British also applied a nostalgic and romanticised vision to other parts of the island, including the coastal capital of the colony, Colombo. Writing in 1843, James Whitchurch Bennett described the prospect of a Europeanized district located around Colombo (or Beira) Lake in similar terms,

'the view of Slave Island rising out of the placid bosom of the water, called the Lake of Colombo, with its pretty houses, bungalows, and other buildings, interspersed amongst stately areca trees...and...palms, affords indescribable pleasure to the newly-arrived European (Bennett 1843, 158).'

Senake Bandaranayake has argued that Bawa's use of water, of reflecting pools and other water retaining structures, used to link the building with its gardens and wider setting, is an echo of the classic tradition of Anuradhapura, Sigirya and Polonnaruva (Bandaranayake 2003). His landscapes should be firmly located in these traditions, particularly structures such as his tourist hotel at Kandalama, Dambulla with its infinity pool which references the immense watery expanse of Kandalama tank [reservoir] or the Seema Malika a modern temple (1976) set on two artificial islands in Beira Lake, at Hunupitiya, Colombo. In addition, it could also be argued that Bawa absorbed what may be described as a European landscape model or the aesthetics of a 'colonial picturesque' (that is, modifications wrought to the natural environment of the island by the British colonizers during the nineteenth century). The landscape model applied by Bawa at Lunuganga is complex as it defies simple categorization in a single, cultural and historical origin. Its modernity lies in the re-presentation of different pre-colonial and colonial models that interrupt a totalizing, unified modern. Bawa's landscape, formed of elements of the local and the non-modern, thereby participates in and constitutes the staging of the modern in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Bawa had internalized different landscape traditions throughout his career. The time he spent in Europe furnished him with a knowledge and understanding of the landscape garden traditions of England and Italy and specific gardens such as Stourhead, Stowe and the Villa Orsini (Taylor 1986, 15; Robson 2002, 238).

The garden at Lunuganga became a site where these European traditions were re-staged. As such, the landscape of Lunuganga, apparently non-modern and non-western, participates in and constitutes the modern in Sri Lanka.

A distinctive and local use of water (either natural or artificially arranged) appears in other works such as his Parliament building at Kotte and many of his hotel projects, such as at Ahungalla and Kandalama. In creating the lake-land setting from marshy ground for the new parliamentary complex at Sri Jayawardenepura, Kotte, Bawa acknowledged local, historical precedent. One architectural commentator has proposed a more general South Asian source for the placement of the building in a watery surround and that 'the grandeur of its conception is based on a traditional device often used in religious complexes and popular with the Moguls [sic]: to place the building on an island surrounded by water' (Scott 1983, 21). Other buildings by Bawa also draw water into their plan and thereby engage the sensory experience of the visitor as well as reference ancient vernacular traditions of building. The first sight of his tourist hotel at Ahungalla, on the south western coast of the island, is a view across a still pool filled with coconut palms extending to a further view through the entrance of the hotel where the sea is glimpsed. As Rupert Scott has written 'the view across the expanse of water, lobby floor and again water, whose reflective surfaces are all identical heights....gives the impression of an unbroken sheet of water' (Scott 1983, 29). Similarly at Kandalama Hotel, Dambulla the building is first seen from the bund [embankment] of a third century tank or lake with views from the hotel



out to the lake (Taylor 1986, 174). Two pools make connections between the building, which hugs the contours of the rocky outcrop on which it is built, and the expanse of water formed by the tank.

### **Landscape, representation and memory**

Writing about the city of Kandy in Sri Lanka, the cultural geographer James Duncan has distinguished between the terms landscape and environment. He writes, 'a landscape...is a culturally produced model of how the environment should look' (Duncan 1989, 186). He continues, 'environments become transformed into landscapes' through the application of 'a particular landscape model', which have 'cultural and historical specificity'. However, he also argues that landscape models are complex 'because they escape their original cultural and historical origins' the result of which produces 'heightened ideological significance' (Duncan 1989, 186). Lunuganga, it might be argued, attains this 'heightened ideological significance' not because Bawa consciously sought to imbue it with political meaning; rather it does so as a result of the experiments he made in the formation of that garden, the re-presentation of historic landscape models and negotiation of his relationship to the past through constructions that originated in colonialism. At Lunuganga, the picturesque landscape model deployed encompasses the aesthetics of the past both located in European gardens as well as Sri Lanka's ancient sites (the latter having been the subject of many picturesquely ruinous photographic representations by nineteenth century photographers such as Joseph Lawton (Falconer 2003, 154-73)). The

relationship of the architecture at Lunuganga with the landscape and the arrangement of space might also be categorized as modern in that components are 'redeployed' or re-presented in a 'modernist manner' (Taylor 1986, 14).<sup>4</sup> For instance, the creation of the 'Hen House' on the Eastern Terrace re-deploys elements of a vernacular structure in a modern manner. More generally, Bawa's garden does not so much present a picturesque image but rather a constructed vision of the colonial picturesque. In other words, the tropical landscape is shaped in the manner of western picturesque gardens but Bawa mixes a range of sources (English, Italian, local) in a way that is modern.

Landscape is best perceived at a distance, hence vision is the main sense engaged. As one progresses through a landscape, the eye acts as a kind of movie camera, arranging 'shots' or 'frames' of unfolding scenes in a filmic manner. In fact, the visualization of landscape has a long history. As the photographic theorist Deborah Bright has written, the taxonomic term 'landscape' derives from European art history and makes reference to early modern painterly practice in Italy, Holland and England. In the aristocratic classical tradition of painting during this era, landscapes were spaces for the representation of noble action and political allegiance. With the rise of a merchant class in seventeenth century Holland, a different sort of landscape developed; this appeared more natural and recorded the ownership of property. English landscape painting of the eighteenth century followed the Dutch model, but more accurately recorded the form of the land and reflected the growing prestige of scientific achievements.

Discussing the representation of landscape over time, Deborah Bright has suggested 'whether noble, picturesque, sublime or mundane, the landscape image bears the imprint of its cultural pedigree' (Bright 1985). Lunuganga escapes this neat and un-problematic categorization as it is a constructed version of the picturesque that encompasses the vernacular.

The architectural and landscape theorist, Jan Birksted, has noted how the history of landscape and gardens has been marginalised from the mainstream of art and architectural history and visual studies due to lack of engagement with the theories and conceptual frameworks of these disciplines (2000, 1). It has been argued that the study of landscape is made more complex due to the need to distinguish between 'the representation of sites' (written accounts and images) and '*in situ* sites as representations' and the interaction between these two modes of representation (Birksted 2000, 2). This article discusses Bawa's landscapes as sites of representation – that is, representation of the architect's negotiations with early modern European cultural histories, with local, pre-colonial and colonial histories as well as the modern. Rather than completely relate to 'modern Euro-America' and thereby reify the historical colonial relation, it is argued that Bawa's landscapes, through their re-deployment of western and non-western, interrupt the concept of an over-arching, singular modern.

Landscape has also been historically connected with the processes of memory. The architect and architectural theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa, has suggested 'we

have an innate capacity for remembering and imagining places. Perception, memory and imagination are in constant interaction; the domain of presence fuses into images of memory' (2005, 67). Jan Birksted has also discussed the relationship between vision, memory and landscape,

Since vision appears to be natural, it transforms memory into a seemingly natural experience, an experience present in the here-and-now. The interaction between vision and memory in the landscape is thus capable of generating narrative vision that cuts across the...distinction between the textual and the visual...[in addition] transporting the past into the present, blurring past and present, recreating the present as the past. Vision of landscape has a temporal dimension and thus brings the temporal dimension into the spatial dimension (2000, 3).

Since the 1990s, a growing interest in memory has become evident within the arts, humanities and social sciences. It has been suggested elsewhere that this growth owes much to post-modernist criticism of the notion of history that has, until recently, underpinned Western thought (Kwint 1999, 1). Memory is a problematic word and has been invoked in recent literature as a term to describe a number of different concepts: the individual as well as the collective, general personal experience, the specific act of remembering or the subject of those remembrances. It has also been deployed in connection with nostalgia, tradition, and history. In this article, the term memory will refer to the process of re-working

or re-translating memory traces in the light of experience during the imagining and creation of the garden at Lunuganga. It will also address the nostalgic as well as the modern.

In one sense, the garden at Lunuganga can be understood, paradoxically, as a re-staging of the picturesque, an aesthetic category developed in Europe in the eighteenth century but also transferred to South Asia during the colonial period. Gardens such as Rousham, Stourhead and Stowe incorporated an established feature of the picturesque, namely the overlaying of particular individual and historical associations and narratives in the landscape. Lunuganga can usefully be interpreted as a modern 'metonymic terrain' in which architectural and spatial markers have been arranged over time within cultivated settings (Lewi 2000, 10). Bawa's garden renders a picturesque landscape by what has been termed a technique of picturing, that is, the transformation of found space into recognisable place. However, what makes the creation of Lunuganga so interesting is that the technique of picturing and its transformative properties within the landscape, are more usually found within the dominant schema of colonial vision and evidence the continuation of this powerful form of envisioning into the post-colonial era (Lewi 2000, 10).

### **Bawa's architecture and landscape and the vernacular**

Geoffrey Bawa was born into a wealthy middle class family in Ceylon which had been under British control since the 1796 (Robson 2007, 25-107).<sup>5</sup> His father was a successful Muslim lawyer and his mother was a member of the Burgher community. The Burghers were a distinct racial grouping within colonial Ceylon, descendants of Dutch and local marriages (Brohier 1985, 101-19). Bawa's mother's family, the Schraders, were estate owners with land near Negombo and Aluthgama, close to site of Lunuganga. Bawa gained a place at Cambridge in 1938 and studied for the Bar when he had completed his undergraduate studies, reluctantly practicing law in London thereafter. During his time in Europe, he travelled extensively and familiarized himself with the cultural achievements of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, particularly the architectural and landscape garden traditions of Italy and England (Robson 2007, 26, 32).

As David Robson has written, in 1948, with the creation of an independent Ceylon, Bawa had to decide whether he was a European who happened to have been born in South Asia or whether he was Ceylonese. He chose to stay and make his living in Ceylon but not as a lawyer. In the year of independence (1948) he purchased a disused rubber estate close to his brother Bevis's house and garden which was called 'Brief' and was located near the village of Kalawila, ten miles from Bentota in south western coastal region of Sri Lanka (Sutherland 1994). Bevis Bawa's garden, created between 1929 and 1989, was an inspiring

model for his younger brother Geoffrey and it also acted as a meeting place for a group of local, European and Australian artists and architects in the 1950s. This was a period of great excitement within the arts of the island immediately following independence (Robson 2007, 17). Sutherland describes Brief as an artist's garden comprising a 'series of beautifully composed views and spaces' (1994). In addition to the massing of a wide range of tropical plants for aesthetic effect, the creation of woodland walks and vistas, different spaces in the garden are articulated by figurative sculpture, such as showers, gateposts and fountains created by the noted Australian artist, Donald Friend, who was a friend of Bevis Bawa (Hetherington 2004, 8-16).

Realizing that the law was of no interest to him, Geoffrey Bawa increasingly began to turn his hand in an amateur fashion to the design of gardens and buildings. He worked for a firm of architects in Colombo and, in 1953, began training at the Architectural Association, London before returning to Sri Lanka (Robson 2007, 35-6). As his independent practice grew, he went into partnership with an ex-patriot Danish architect, Ulrik Plesner who had recently arrived in the island.

As the architect and writer Ismeth Raheem has suggested, Plesner's contribution to the development of modern architecture and practices of design in Sri Lanka during the first years of independence was significant (Raheem 2008). Ulrik Plesner worked in Sri Lanka between 1958 to 1967, first for the modernist

architect Minette de Silva in Kandy and subsequently with Geoffrey Bawa. Plesner, however, did not simply impose his ideas on Bawa or his colleagues. He was deeply affected by the culture and history of Sri Lanka and learned from historic and vernacular sites on the island. He was also drawn to Buddhism. Plesner's family background and his training equipped him in a unique manner to introduce the principles of design and architecture that developed during the middle decades of the twentieth century in the Scandinavian countries to the island of Sri Lanka. His step-father was Kaare Klint, one of the foundational figures of modern architecture, furniture and lighting in Scandinavia. Plesner also trained as an architect at the Royal Danish Academy in Copenhagen where he was taught by some of the most influential architects of the post-war period, including Alvar Aalto and Arne Jacobsen (Raheem 2008). One of the contributions to the development of the modern made by the Danish and other Scandinavian designers and architects was the careful study of vernacular traditions of design.<sup>6</sup> Rather than reject the material culture and built environment of previous eras, as Bauhaus affiliated architects and figures such as Le Corbusier had done, Scandinavian architects such as Klint conducted meticulous studies of the products and buildings of the past and re-presented what they had learned from these studies as a re-staging of the modern. This intervention in the production of modernity acknowledged that certain historical types of building and object had much to offer in terms of design and functionality. These older forms also possessed a human quality in that they related to the scale of the human figure, they were vernacular, that is they emanated from their locality,



rather than being imposed on it and were made of natural, local materials which engaged all the senses. During his time in Sri Lanka, Plesner disseminated the principles of this vernacularism through his teaching at the newly formed School of Architecture at Katubedde, encouraging his pupils and colleagues to record and study the constructional devices of seventeenth and eighteenth century architecture in the island in order to find solutions to the problems of contemporary architectural design (Raheem 2008). Plesner's influence on Bawa's architectural practice and the development of the garden at Lunuganga was significant. He directed attention to the village-level vernacular of Sri Lanka that referenced an authentic, local core.<sup>7</sup> In a similar manner to the way Le Corbusier found in the authenticity of the contemporary Indian villager an essential element of Indian-ness (Brown 2009, 77), so Plesner and Bawa regarded Sri Lanka's vernacular traditions as possessing an authenticity that was both timeless and modern.

The start of Bawa's architectural career coincided with the end of the 'so-called "heroic" period of the modern movement' around 1960 (Taylor 1986, 9).<sup>8</sup> Bawa was aware of the new trends in architecture and the fragmenting of the old Modernist certainties. As Brian Brace Taylor writes, 'allusions to history, to numerous histories became acceptable again'. There was no sense of post-colonial resistance to alien forms in Bawa's output when he began to produce work as an architect. In fact, he worked initially for a firm of architects (Edwards, Reid and Begg) that had its roots in the British colonial period on the island

(Robson 2007, 36). Rather than turn his back on European culture and ideas, he in fact drew on the concepts of the New International style which was emerging from Modernism. This awareness was also combined with an understanding of Europe's previous cultural history and, with Plesner's guidance, Bawa also re-appraised the historic vernacular traditions (of building and landscaping) of the island of Ceylon.

### **Colonial space, Lunuganga and 'restructuring' the modern in South Asia**

Writing about colonial space, Edward Said has asserted that western imperialism was 'an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control' (Said 1990, 77). As the postcolonial literature critic Shirley Chew has suggested in relation to Said's argument, it then follows that the main concern of newly-independent and de-colonizing nations is the 'local place whose concrete geographical identity must....be searched for and somehow restored' (Chew 2008). One of the key processes of de-colonization was the re-imagining of landscapes from the point-of-view of the native person; 'reclaiming the local place as one remembers it, something of the past is also repossessed and, with this, a sense of who one is' (Chew 2008). In the case of Bawa's landscapes, this process is more complex. His background was moneyed and cosmopolitan. In his early life, he moved (when finances permitted) relatively easily between Europe and South Asia and assimilated himself into both regions. He did not so much reclaim a local place through remembrance as endeavour to re-present the cultural relationship of

some of his generation and class with the west at the moment of post-colonial rupture. This process of memory involved a revision or 'retranslation', as Nicola King has written, of re-working memory traces (of European and Sri Lankan material culture, landscape and architecture) 'in the light of later knowledge and experience' (King 2000, 4).

Through Bawa's landscape at Lunuganga, one can also interrogate the place of the modern in near-contemporary Sri Lanka. Summarizing the writings of the Indian art critic, Geeta Kapur, the design historian Saloni Mathur has reminded us that the 'modern' has also had a career outside the physical geography of the West (Mathur 2002). Kapur does not subscribe to the notion of 'the modern' as a type of linear determinism emanating from Europe outwards. She also rejects the spatial narratives of modernism, the notions of 'centre and periphery' (Mathur 2002). Kapur argues that 'we should see our [ie South Asian] trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream and in their very dis-alignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international' (Kapur 2000, 297). In the case of Bawa's landscapes (and also his buildings), local forms are accommodated and modern idioms have been adapted to local conditions to 'restructure' or re-present modernity within the history and cultural conditions of post-colonial Sri Lanka.

## Conclusion

What now for Bawa's garden at Lunuganga? Although a trust has been established to oversee Bawa's legacy, David Robson has argued that it would be best for Lunuganga if it were left to return to nature rather than suffer the indignities of mass tourism (Robson 2003, 240). In fact a number of up-market tour companies promote the garden as an exclusive holiday destination.<sup>9</sup> Lunuganga has also developed an 'afterlife' through its representation in a number of high quality photographic books, particularly Geoffrey Bawa, Christoph Bon and Dominic Sansoni's nostalgic and atmospheric black and white images (Bawa, Bon and Sansoni, 1990). Citing the works of Fredric Jameson and Raphael Samuels, the historian Elizabeth Buettner has suggested that in 'deracinated postmodern circumstances the allure of disappearing worlds, environments "at risk," and nostalgia' for the fragile relics of the past 'can become readily enhanced' (Buettner 2006,14). How Bawa's landscape at Lunuganga will be perceived in the future cannot be foreseen; what is more certain is that perceptions will change, as will the evolving postcolonial conditions that determine how such 'artifacts', created on the cusp of independence and decolonization, are interpreted and made sense of, by ex-colonizers and ex-colonized alike.

Bawa's negotiation of the ideals of a European picturesque and international modernism, as well as South Asian vernacular traditions of building and landscaping have been described elsewhere as the development of a 'regional

modernism' (Robson 2007, 258). What has been less acknowledged in these works is the creation, by Bawa, of 'sites of memory' where, although of the modern era, previous histories are recalled and re-presented to new effect (Nora 1989, 7); these are not un-problematic histories but refractory ones, as they cannot be erased. Bawa negotiated his relationship to history through constructions that originated in the colonial past. The making of Lunuganga can be interpreted as an externalized working out of memory processes or personal experimentation within the 'laboratory' of the landscape. As Pierre Nora has suggested 'memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces...and objects' (Nora 1989, 9). Bawa's negotiation of the past is complicated as it references 'modern Euro-America' as well as vernacular forms and histories. His landscapes, particularly Lunuganga, negotiate between slavish adoption of the material achievements of western modernity, with their taint of colonial subjugation or provincialism, the wilful neglect or rejection of this troubled past and adoption of an un-problematic indigenism. Through this negotiation Lunuganga (and Bawa's other landscapes) can be interpreted as an intervention in or interruption of a totalizing, singular, unified (and western) modern through the re-presentation or re-staging of the modern in contemporary Sri Lanka.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussions about the place of the modern in contemporary Sri Lanka see also the work of Pradeep Jeganathan (1995), Catherine Braun and Tariq Jazeel (2007 and 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For a vernacular examples of such *ambalamas* at Kurunegala and Karagahagedera see Lewcock, Sansoni and Senanayake (1998, 72-3).

<sup>3</sup> Kandy was the last independent state in the island until its capture by the British in 1815. This act brought the whole of Ceylon under a unified control for the first time in its history.

<sup>4</sup> Although Taylor refers to the arrangement of the interiors of Bawa's buildings with this phrase, it can also usefully be deployed to describe the relationship between the architect's exteriors and interiors, between landscape and architecture.

<sup>5</sup> The biographical information on Bawa that follows is taken from David Robson, *Beyond Bawa* (2007).

<sup>6</sup> This interest in vernacular design in Scandinavia had its origins in the writings and theories of the English Arts and Crafts movement.

<sup>7</sup> Plesner was not the first to direct attention to Sri Lanka's vernacular building traditions. Andrew Boyd, an English planter turned architect, had written about these in 1947 (Boyd 1947, 25-40).

<sup>8</sup> That is an image of architecture and design fostered by the Congres Internationale d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) with Le Corbusier as its notional head.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in *The Guardian* travel section in March 2010, the firm 'Experience Sri Lanka' offered accommodation at Lunuganga and promised 'light-filled spaces [that] look onto the lake, rice fields, hills and magnificent garden'.