Geoffrey Bawa's jungle-festooned buildings of Sri Lanka

From Colombo to the breezy beaches of Galle and the hills of Dambulla, the extraordinary, jungle- festooned buildings of the late Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa are returning to the world's attention

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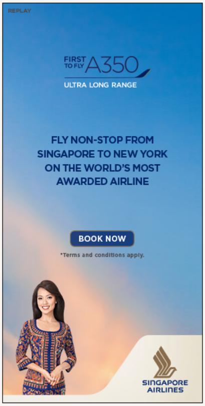
When it was first suggested that she consider hiring Geoffrey Bawa as her architect, Ena de Silva had her reservations. Ena, who would later become one of Sri Lanka's foremost artists and batik designers, had been born into Colombo's elite. She knew what she wanted and hiring Bawa must have felt like a gamble, for Ena suspected Bawa was a dilettante – she had seen him driving around downtown Colombo in his Rolls-Royce convertible, a scarf around his throat and his golden hair streaming behind him. The sight did not inspire confidence.



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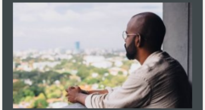

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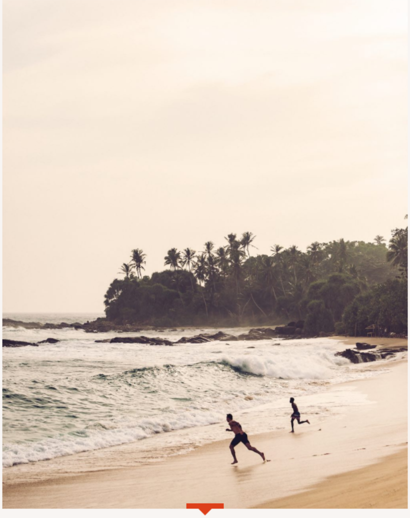
The entrance to Lunuganga

However, the home he built for her in 1960 became an icon of Tropical Modernism. It defied the Le Corbusieresque Modernist trends of the time, which relied heavily on steel and glass, and turned instead to local materials – terracotta tiles for a red roof, resilient satinwood for the columns that held it up and rough, unpolished granite for the floor. A small pond reflected the trees and high windows allowed in the breeze, while a large open courtyard served as the building's heart, anchoring a constellation of rooms. This structure, once so familiar in old colonial homes, needed Bawa to reinvent it for a new era.

Award-winning architect Pradeep Kodikara says some of these choices were a necessity of the country's closed economy, where importing materials was simply not possible. Still, Bawa more than made do. "He captured the imagination of a rising Sri Lankan middle class coming out of independence, looking to the future but proud of their past," Kodikara says. "Here was an aesthetic that captured that mood." The building was so original and radical in its approach that it would contribute to Bawa's standing as one of the greats of Sri Lankan architecture, and eventually, of the world.



Tourists enjoy the beach at Amanwella, a Tangalle resort inspired by Geoffrey Bawa

But if you were to go looking for Ena's house today, it is not where she left it. Instead, some 90km away, it occupies a corner of Bawa's sprawling country estate, Lunuganga, near the coastal town of Bentota. From the sturdiness of its walls and its weathered exterior, it's difficult to imagine this same structure once stood in the noisy, crowded warren of streets in Colombo's old city. But step inside the building and you will be able to find all the evidence you need.

In an ambitious conservation effort, Ena's house was dismantled completely – with every tile, windowpane and brick numbered and transported on lorries – and then later reassembled like a monumental, three-dimensional jigsaw. It took six years, with the task being completed only in 2016. Even Ena's things came along for the journey – her stunning, geometric batik prints dominate the courtyard and adorn the cushions on the sofa. All is as she left it.

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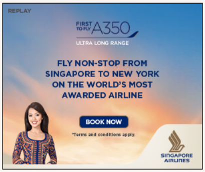

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Ena de Silva's House

It's fitting that in 2019, 100 years after his birth, the organisers of the Geoffrey Bawa centenary celebration are planning to open the doors of Ena's house – and those of a few other Bawa buildings – to the public for the first time. What's more, they've also planned a series of exhibitions, publications and lectures featuring international luminaries that will stretch from May 2019 right through to July 2020.

Born in colonial Ceylon in 1919, Bawa embodied Sri Lanka's rich yet conflicted history – his lawyer father was of Arab Muslim and English parentage, while his mother was a Dutch Burgher of mixed European and Sinhalese descent. At first, Bawa thought he would follow in his father's footsteps, but after a dalliance with law, he turned to architecture, qualifying as an architect at the ripe age of 38. Through the innovative practice he established with the Danish architect Ulrik Plesner, his designs materialised all around Sri Lanka. With a growing reputation came offers from abroad – and Bawa-designed buildings began springing up in places such as India, the Maldives, Indonesia and even Fiji.

Bawa's work was lauded for its blend of the modern and the vernacular, for how fluidly it mixed the formal with the picturesque. He reconciled his pursuit of aesthetics with the pragmatic realities of living in a tropical country where the rain came down like a waterfall and a house needed to breathe if it were to survive the scorching summer sun.

The staff and the grounds of Lunuganga

As a result, his work became ubiquitous on the island. He even designed Sri Lanka's iconic new parliament building in Kotte and was awarded the title of "Deshmanya" – meaning "pride of the nation" – in 1993. It is hard to overestimate his influence in Sri Lanka, where the buildings in his canon served as prototypes for much of what came after. Since his death in 2003, interest in the architect has only grown, driven by a new generation inspired by his approach. His best-known buildings in Sri Lanka are now sites of pilgrimage for architecture buffs from around the world.

I join them on the Bawa trail, looking for traces of the man himself in the brick and mortar he left behind – a mission that will take me from his home in Colombo, all the way down to Sri Lanka's southwestern coast and into the heart of the island's Cultural Triangle.

Shayari de Silva, Curator of Art & Archival Collections, The Lunuganga Trust

When I first meet Shayari de Silva at Number 11, Bawa's home in Colombo, she's foraging through an archive in a climate-controlled room on the first floor – the young Yale graduate is the Geoffrey Bawa Trust's first offcial curator. She unrolls a large drawing of a building, pointing out its detail. "Where other architects ordered such drawings to direct builders, Bawa's were meant to beguile clients," she tells me, referring to the blueprints as works of art.

Today, the Trust is approaching the gargantuan task of preserving the architectural drawings, paintings and objects Bawa left to it. Shayari is joined by architect Channa Daswatte, a member of the board of trustees and one of Bawa's closest collaborators, who eventually takes a break from their discussion to walk around the property with me.

Lovely and labyrinthine, the use of enclosed courtyards and light wells mean that this home cycles through different moods with the passage of the sun. The rooms themselves remain as Bawa intended them: his 1934 Drophead Coupé Rolls-Royce is parked in the garage; the bedroom is preserved with two incongruous stuffed toys his friends presented him with; and he chose the trees that cast shadows on the roof. In a corner, just as you enter, is a black-and-white cushion that Bawa kept there for his black-and-white dog, Leopold. To linger in this place is to understand something of how he lived and what he loved.

A sculpture as seen at Number 11 and the staircase at the Lighthouse Hotel

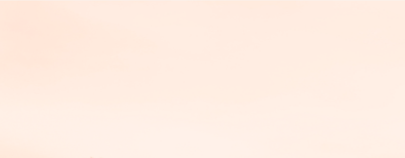
Running as a small private museum, Number 11 welcomed some 48,000 visitors last year. It is possible to book an intimate tour by contacting the Trust and many who follow the Bawa trail start here – later moving on to some of his most renowned creations, including the Lighthouse and Kandalama hotels. If you know where to look in Number 11, you will find the seeds of what lies ahead.

A few hours south of the capital, the lush gardens at Lunuganga are still and quiet. Over the lake, clouds are gathering with the promise of rain. My guide and I go for long stretches without seeing anyone else. Pointing out places of interest, Isuru Randeni leads the way.

Lunuganga was Bawa's magnum opus, a space in which he straddled the line between control and abandon. He allowed the garden to remain a wild, secretive space, where tall trees stand like sentinels and a symphony of hundreds of birds is only interrupted by the rude grunting of monkeys swinging high in the branches overhead.

A leafy nook at Lunaganga

The Trust runs two tours every day, and it is possible to contact them and book a lunch or even stay in one of several buildings on the property. After our trek, I sit down to a dinner table groaning under the weight of a traditional meal: sweet pineapple is stewed and laced with chilli; green leaves and grated coconut are finely chopped into a raw *mallung*, a traditional salad; translucent slices of cucumber soak in a delicate coconut-milk gravy; and caramelised eggplant is paired with tiny onions. There is a bowl full of flavourful, fiery chicken curry and a plate heaped with red rice. It is a reminder that a Sri Lankan meal is a feast. I help myself to the crispy poppadum as darkness falls over the lake.



The Lighthouse Hotel from the beach

My tour of Bawa's most celebrated buildings then takes me even further south to the Lighthouse Hotel, perched on the rocky promontories on the coast of Galle. The sea that borders the 1995-built property and dominates the view is rough yet beautiful, and the hotel itself is located just a few minutes away from the bastion of Galle Fort.

I first encountered a striking drawing *The Portuguese arriving in Ceylon under a cloud*, depicting Portuguese colonisation by the artist Laki Senanayake in Bawa's dining room at Number 11, but here it is reimagined, rising up out of the sketch and into an awe-inspiring sculpture circling the stairwell at the heart of the Lighthouse. Senanayake was one of Bawa's frequent collaborators, and dozens of his paintings and sculptures adorn Bawa's buildings – but this three-storey staircase is perhaps the most famous of them all. At its base, the Portuguese commander surveys the scene through his telescope, while at the top, the Sinhala king – who resembles Senanayake more than a little – sits playing the flute. "Bawa was one of the few Sri Lankan architects who would get his clients to commission artists to produce work for his buildings," says Senanayake. Indeed, Bawa's interest in a building extended beyond its design – he wanted to know how it would be lived in.

Laki's Senanayake beside some of his artwork

From the Lighthouse, we hug the coast as we traverse the long, narrow road to