

## Bawa and Beyond: Reading Sri Lanka's Tropical Modern Architecture

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### Introduction

This paper is about buildings and people, specifically a particular type of built space in Sri Lanka known as tropical modernist, or just tropical architecture. The architect perhaps most associated with this style is the late Geoffrey Bawa, who is one of Sri Lanka's best known architects internationally, modern or otherwise. His work will be familiar to many readers, but in order to set the scene for what follows I start this paper with a passage published two years ago in the English broad-sheet newspaper *The Observer*, in which Bawa's Kandalama hotel [Figure 1] featured in their 'Magnificent seven' of modern hotel design icons around the world. The passage not only offers a sense of the sorts of architectural style and aesthetics that I engage with, but written by an obviously enthused, (probably) English travel journalist, it also points to an onlooker's perspective on some of the characteristics that are peculiar to, and are common across, this uniquely Sri Lankan architectural genre:

From the moment you arrive at the Kandalama hotel after a lurching drive through the jungle of central Sri Lanka, you know you are in an extraordinary place. The entrance is the mouth to a huge cavern set into the mountainside. The huge building is spread along the side of the rockface and covered by rich vegetation that continues to serve as the home for an astonishing variety of wildlife. The hotel was built in the early 1990s by the late Geoffrey Bawa, one of Asia's foremost architects. His effort to blend the massive hotel into its environment, to use the contours, materials and vegetation of the stunning surroundings, succeeds triumphantly.

The passages linking the 160 plus rooms to the cavernous communal areas are open to the jungle, and at night guests share the space with bats, lizards, mongooses, huge moths, and fireflies.

The cool simple bedrooms feel as if they are part of the forest and troops of monkeys shriek and chatter in the trees that brush up against the windows.

One of the hotel's pools is cut into the polished rock of the mountainside; another infinity pool creates the illusion that it merges with a huge man-made lake below, where elephants are led to bathe and fish eagles dive for their food.

From the surrounding area it is unobtrusive; from the inside it feels airy and capacious, with glorious views across some of the most stunning scenery on the island. It is a masterpiece built by one of the great architects of his era. (*The Observer*, April 9 2006).

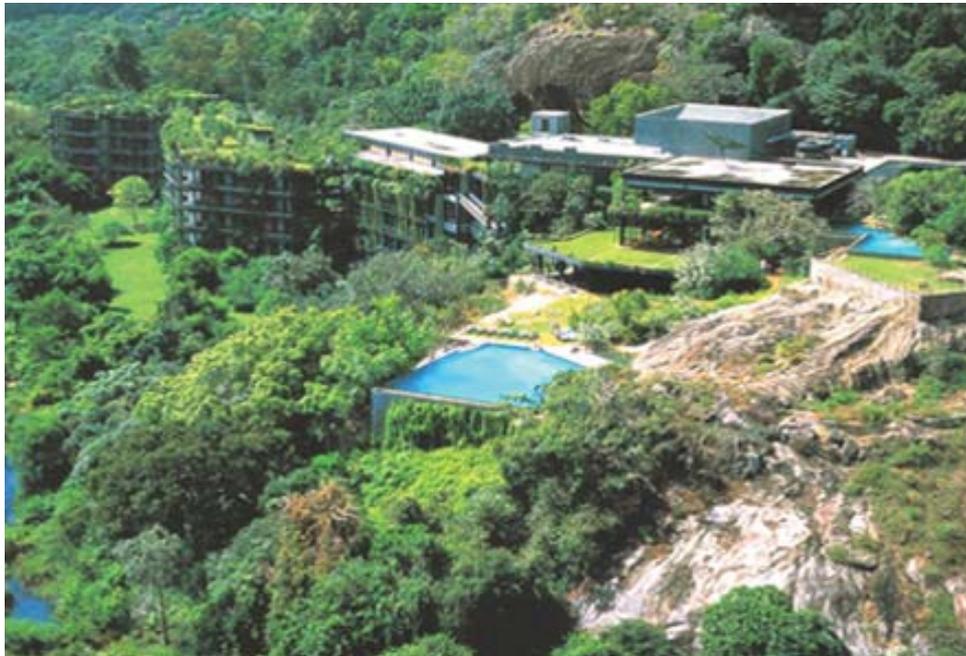


Figure 1. The Kandalama Hotel  
(Source: Bawa Trust Website, <http://www.geoffreybawa.com/sw.php>)

Although Bawa was not the first in Sri Lanka to design and build such spaces, he is regarded as a pioneer and central figure within this significant architectural movement. Today, architects influenced by Bawa's style and philosophy build not only hotels, but also social and public spaces, government buildings and a host of commissioned houses for the country's style conscious middle and upper-middle class. Of course, each of these architects has their own design signature, but there are certain sensibilities and aesthetics that characterize the movement, all of which one can recognize from the description of the Kandalama Hotel quoted above. These are notably, the attention to working with site and context such that buildings become less important than the spatial experience the architect can create; the

necessity to work with and through a 'tropical', super-abundant nature that is always on the move; and perhaps most significantly the concretization of spaces that conflate inside with outside, 'nature' with 'culture'. The other important factor that draws together the breadth and diversity of Sri Lanka's tropical modernist architectural praxis is that their structures seem to have become emblematic of a certain, and powerful, type of Sri Lankan-ness. Guests at Sri Lanka's proliferation of tropical modern hotels, for example, are encouraged to consider the spatial experiences that their hotels afford them as an integral, indeed 'authentic', part of their Sri Lankan experience.

In this paper I pose some questions of Sri Lanka's tropical modern architectural form and style by offering a reading of these often breathtaking and captivating spaces and spatial experiences. Particularly, I speculate on the connections and relationships between these built spaces and society, suggesting what they do in and through society is more than just provide shells that people live in, but function as places that also produce particular types of South Asian natures, and perhaps even particular types of Sri Lankan people. Positioned at the intersection of cultural studies and human geography, the analysis firstly outlines a few thoughts on the postcolonial and cultural geographies of architecture, and on the geographies of nature. The main body of the paper then proceeds to speak to four overlapping themes that tease out some common characteristics running through this architectural genre, whilst speculating on their social and political effects in a central and southern Sri Lankan society where 'nature' is lived, experienced and produced in particular types of ways. Those themes are: *opening out the colonial house; building with (tropical) nature; producing 'Sri Lankan' nature; and representation, built space and the evolution of a genre*. Most of the work in this paper is based on secondary and archival material, interview material with six practicing Sri Lankan architects who remain anonymous throughout, and a week long period spent shadowing two architectural interns.

### **Cultural geographies of architecture and 'nature'**

Recent geographical engagements with architecture have tended to focus on the semiotics of buildings, particularly modernist, rational architectural forms like the skyscraper and the high-rise, and their translation as they re-materialize in diffuse global contexts (see Jacobs 2006; Lees 2001; McNeill 2005). This paper shares such scholarship's postcolonially inflected concern to decenter Europe and North America in the history of modernity, in the story of the skyscraper and the high-rise, to stress, as Anthony King argues in his book *Spaces of Global Culture*, how each repetition of the architectural sign of modernity, how each skyscraper, high-rise or modernist house is different; how each is specific to its cultural and historical conditions of enunciation (2004; also, see King 1984). However, also following King, this paper moves beyond a concern with the merely symbolic to think about the connections between a built environment and the mutual construction of subject and society. Further in the context of my own ongoing interest in spatializing Sri Lanka's cultural politics (for example, see Jazeel 2005a, 2005b), I begin to pose questions around how the spatial discourses and practices embedded not just in this architectural praxis but also in the subsequent life of these buildings, help to shape particular forms of South Asian – that is Sri Lankan – subjectivity, and thus society. In other words, the paper explores how the concretization of these spaces and movement through them actually produces people in certain ways that, I think, are peculiar to central

and southern Sri Lanka, and thus how at some level the relationships between built space and people are irreducibly political.

Central to this task is an engagement with the concept 'nature', moreover with the ways Sri Lanka's tropical modern architects work with or through 'nature'. Recent cultural geographical scholarship has sought to think critically about the concept, specifically the separations that we humans often arbitrarily make between 'nature' and its apparent opposite, super-organic notions of 'culture' (for examples, see Braun and Castree 1998; Castree and Braun 2001; Whatmore 2002). In particular, poststructurally inflected human geographical work (Braun 2002), environmental history (Cronon 1995), and Indian environmental history (Guha and Arnold 1997) have facilitated an understanding of how the meanings we ascribe to Nature, to a 'real world out there', have been partially constituted by text, representation, discourse and their associated practices. Thus, for example, in a city like New York, Central Park's almost taken-for-granted meaning as a space of urban nature in which New Yorkers might escape the spoils of urbanity or things similarly super-organically cultural might be read through particular discourses of 'nature' whose representational history can be traced through the wilderness writings of the likes of John Muir and William Thoreau; wilderness writings and philosophies that the park's architect – Frederick Law Olmstead – himself was inevitably heavily influenced by (see Gandy 2002). In fact, poststructuralist theorists of 'nature' point to the very existence of the word as a linguistic demarcation of a taken-for-granted world that-is-not-cultural, because epistemologically North American and European 'natures' can only be rendered in relation to their opposite, 'culture'. Therefore my interest here in 'nature' as a concept in and through Sri Lankan society emerges partly from approaches across the social sciences and humanities that have variously attempted to undo the seams of settled understandings and workings of the concept itself, but partly also from being intrigued by the way that Sri Lanka's natures cannot so easily be understood dualistically, that is as merely the opposite of culture. More of this below.

These are not just abstract philosophical concerns about the social construction of 'nature', because much of the work that seeks to understand the differences between 'nature' and 'culture', or the human and non-human in everyday life, actually poses important questions around *how* the human is defined, how the human is composed and what must be *excluded* to make the human properly (Braun 2004: 269). Here, Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist writings on the figure of the animal have been particularly useful. Derrida gives us the word *animot* as a characteristically clever piece of wordplay that phonetically singularizes the French plural for animal (*animaux*) and combines it with the French word for 'word' (*mot*), thereby drawing our attention to the habit of rolling all animal species into one and using this undifferentiated class of non-human being to define the human (Derrida 2002, 2003; Braun 2004: 270). In other words, Derrida's *animot* reminds us that the very use of the word 'animal' does more than innocently signify; specifically, it demarcates boundaries between us and a whole array of non-human life in ways that actually serve to define the human. This type of scholarship has enabled us to scratch the surface of what it means to be human; to place under scrutiny the ethical implications of all those unseen taken-for-granted that effectively draw the lines between humans and non-humans, 'nature' and 'culture'. Part of the theoretical purchase of

this work is that it has also allowed explorations of how the human and society are composed *through* everyday practices: it has allowed us to suppose a world as we know it that is always *in the making*; a world in which bodies and entities are continually composed, dissolved and recomposed through the practices of everyday life.

For example, let us return briefly to New York. For those walks in Central Park, those leisurely excursions in this small piece of material and discursive ‘wilderness-in-the-city’ do not just perform the function of leisure. Both architecturally and in the way the space is used and imagined, Central Park also serves to demarcate and reinforce quite settled understandings about the dualistic relationships between a ‘nature’ that inheres *in* the park and everything that the ‘culture’ of the city outside is not. Think also, for example, of the ways that domestic space is used in a country like England. Most of the year, most people in England do all they can to keep the outside world out; double glazing, draught excluders, central heating, insect repellent and air fresheners, all to keep the non-human world from pervading the home. As well as protecting from the cold (and those who have tried to live in England for any longer than a short, halcyon summer will understand why this is so necessary!) these techniques of habitation also serve to demarcate and reify quite taken-for-granted distinctions that we hold in much of western Europe that there is a natural world ‘out there’ whereas ‘in-here’ there is a cultural world over which we have more control.

But this paper is about neither New York nor England although the examples are useful, because much as I find Derrida’s formulations extremely useful and provocative, being a South-Asianist I worry that the types of Euro-American humans at the centre of these enquiries actually restrict the potential of the analysis. The majority of poststructuralist scholarship on ‘nature’ works the concepts ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, the non-human and the human, through predominantly European and North American registers that seek, for the most part, to grapple with a human body that still centers on a Cartesian subject in which there is a quite Eurocentric mind/body dualism. At the heart of Derrida et al’s analyses is Descartes’ mind/body dualism that we must un-think: the rational human subject that thinks, observes, measures and experiences a natural world ‘out there’ somewhere is the (mostly western) humanity that this scholarship grapples with. But what if the humans at the centre of these enquiries believe differently about nature and human relationships to the natural world? What if we place a different type of humanity under such scrutiny? Effectively, these are the questions that this paper picks up on as it explores the geographies of architecture and nature through a central and southern Sri Lankan society pervaded not only by the sorts of secular discourses of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ familiar to European and North American scholars, but also by non-western, often sacred philosophies. In central and southern Sri Lanka these are mostly Buddhist philosophies that posit naturalistic notions of the inseparability of the human subject from a sacred and universal reality. By teasing out conceptions and experiences of a particular type of South Asian nature through Sri Lankan tropical modernist architecture, this work begins to ask questions of a non-secular Sri Lankan world *in the making*, of how particular types of non-western, South Asian – that is (a particular type of) Sri Lankan – bodies and entities are composed, dissolved and recomposed through the practice and experience of built space.

Following some of the rich manoeuvres made by the Subaltern Studies movement

and Dipesh Chakrabarty in particular (2000), this work not only attempts to get under the skin of particular South Asian realities where gods, spirits and the supernatural have real agency in the world, it also 'speaks to' (see Spivak 1988) those realities by posing important politically inflected questions in the Sri Lankan context about what type of (sacred) bodies and (racialized) entities are composed through experiences of this built space; about how the appropriation, if not design (and that distinction is important) of this built space might at some level be irreducibly political. Although this paper stops short of engaging such questions head-on, it does evoke the prospects of the politics of built tropical modernist space.

### **Reading Sri Lanka's tropical modern architecture**

#### *Opening up the colonial house*

Geoffrey Bawa qualified as an architect from London's *Architectural Association* (AA) in 1957, and returned to Sri Lanka soon after to begin his professional practice. Among his professional influences was Minnette de Silva who also qualified from the AA some years earlier. In Sri Lanka both began to produce buildings that drew on their British professional training and the influences of International Modernism and Brutalism that they had been exposed to in Europe, but simultaneously both were committed to building in ways that provided appropriate cultural responses in a formerly colonial society. This meant engaging with the colonial architectures and building practices that had dominated metropolitan Ceylon and its plantation hinterlands for a good few centuries. But unlike much of the cruder overtly nationalist, post-independent architecture that employed Sinhala and Kandyan symbolism to simply reject colonialism, like for example Wynne-Jones' monument in Colombo's Independence Square built in 1951, Bawa and De Silva were much more attuned to an adaptive approach born from the complexities of living through the transition to independence, and seeing the temporal movement as one of continuity and adaptation rather than rupture. The social and political freedom to imagine, build and play with space was channeled through a desire to design appropriate rather than alternative buildings; buildings that began to open out the colonial house by drawing upon a pastiche of elements of 'good', indigenous design and materials that articulated what architects like De Silva and Bawa perceived as a uniquely Sri Lankan response to the inappropriate elements of colonial and modernist design. Importantly, appropriate design did not have to come from Ceylon's dominant Sinhala historical tradition; on paper at least good design was inherently plural. It was about the opportunities that buildings afforded for appropriate living. As Bawa himself would claim:

I prefer to consider all past good architecture in Ceylon as just that – as good Ceylon architecture, for that is what it is, not Dutch or Portuguese or Indian, or early Sinhalese or Kandyan or British colonial, for all examples of these periods have taken Ceylon into first account (Bawa quoted in Robson 2002: 41).

The adaptation of the colonial house involved a number of quite simple manoeuvres to make the buildings more climatically and culturally suitable, like clearing away asbestos roofing and bare bulb lighting, rethinking flat roofing and paying attention to the slimy black

mould that grew on walls without drip ledges. This was all accompanied by a realization that the colonial style bungalow, traditionally set apart in generous grounds with clear distinctions between the intimate and private recesses of inside space and public gardens and reception areas on display outside, was no longer suitable for a different style of metropolitan living in fast-growing Colombo where space and privacy were at a premium. Bawa and De Silva therefore reintroduced 'traditional' Ceylonese design elements borrowed variously from traditional Sinhala medieval architecture, Dutch courtyard housing and Muslim row housing; things like generously sloped roofing, overhanging eaves, the incorporation of verandas and internal courtyards, all in order to open the colonial and modernist house, to turn it inside out in order to achieve new styles of urban living with high levels of openness, ventilation and transparency, yet also to preserve privacy.



Figure 2. House designed for Osmund and Ena De Silva, Colombo  
(Source: Bawa Trust Website, [http://www.geoffreybawa.com/preview.php?temp\\_id=55](http://www.geoffreybawa.com/preview.php?temp_id=55))

The house Bawa designed for Osmund and Ena De Silva in 1962 in the heart of Colombo is for many a turning point in his career; the point at which Bawa's work began to exhibit a sensitivity to many of these issues, and accordingly, it offers a good example of some of these features at work [Figure 2]. The house was designed around an internal courtyard – itself a reinterpretation of vernacular Sinhalese domestic space – that afforded a great deal of openness and transparency through the main living areas. The pitched roofs were designed with large overhanging eaves that extend way beyond the structure's walls creating a veranda space that leads one into the internal courtyard, another effect of which is that space flows seamlessly from inside to out. This illusion of infinite spatiality and connection to the outside is accentuated by the alignment of doors and windows such that long through-vistas are created throughout the property.

Importantly however, this was not just stylistic innovation. This new appropriate mode of architectural praxis was also born from the proto-national social and economic context. Sri Lanka's participation in the non-aligned movement through the 1960s had a lasting impact on the development of this architectural genre, as the likes of Bawa and Minnette De Silva built through times of severe shortage and import restriction. Glass and steel were expensive and almost impossible to get hold of, thus for the Ena De Silva house Geoffrey

Bawa had to improvise, and he relied heavily on locally produced materials and locally trained craftspeople; something that remains integral to the sense of vernacularism that one reads in the modernist movement today. The De Silva house assumed a vernacular palette through the use of features like the omnipresent roof triple clad with local tiles, the rough stone floor, and the presence of local mill stones and water urns used for ornamentation. It was this type of considered improvisation and adaptation within a particular South Asian political and economic context that became integral to the development and evolution of a style. As one architect stressed:

...it became Sri Lankan because of the materials used, because back then in the 1960s of course we couldn't import materials. We had to be self-reliant and that political context that we had to go through made sure we had to deal with things our own way (Interview with Anonymous Architect 16.02.05).

Also importantly though, this context did not just influence materials and ornamentation. The De Silvas were adamant that they could not afford imported and unreliable air conditioning systems, as a result the architect had to design a structure that was well-ventilated and cool due to economic necessity. Hence there was also an economic functionality to opening the colonial house out, of bringing the outside in and keeping living spaces as ventilated as possible.

*Building with (tropical) nature: landscape, envelope, site*

If, in Europe, modernist houses had to negotiate the relatively stable characteristics of temperate nature, anything that Geoffrey Bawa and Minnette De Silva designed in Sri Lanka had to cope with the lively, super-fertile materiality of a tropical nature that positively crashes into and engulfs buildings. Bawa's first architectural partner, Ulrik Plesner, had grown up with Scandinavian modernism in the early 1950s, which valued the clean lines of abstract functionalism. However, after a few early experiments (for example, Bishop's College, Colombo 1960), Bawa and Plesner soon became aware that the sharp-edged prismatic forms of abstract modernism were not at all suited to Sri Lanka's environmental extremes of humidity, monsoons and aridity. Consequently, tropical modernism was driven by a process of adaptation and translation. Bawa realized that, instead of trying to achieve crisp whiteness, the architect working in a hot and humid climate should accept the inevitability of decay and exploit the patinas that were unavoidable results when building with tropical nature.

For example, when he was commissioned to build the Institute for Integral Education at Piliyandala near Colombo, he tackled the inevitable problem of keeping the large lecture theatre cool all year by simply opening it on three sides, setting the rows of seats back from the walls and using detachable woven tats to provide barriers against the south-west monsoons [Figure 3]. Some years previously at the Polontalawa Estate bungalow, he went even further by reducing the structure to a simple roof spanning two existing boulders [Figure 4]. This type of architectural philosophy is perhaps nowhere more apparent than at the Kandalama hotel

[Figure 1], which of course is literally carved into the rock face: a hotel designed to merge with the jungle, for the vegetation to engulf the structure such that site and context merge.

What one finds then, not just in Bawa's architecture but also in more contemporary developments of the tropical modernist genre, is that buildings are designed to settle into their surroundings. Sri Lanka's tropical modern architects attempt not to keep nature out or tame it, but to build with tropical nature, and to build such that five or ten years down the line the inevitable relentless onslaught of engulfing palms and wild grass, and the extremes of heat, rain and aridity do not pose a problem to a building designed to become properly woven into its environmental context. In her work on artistic tropical modernism in Brazil, Nancy Leys Stepan emphasizes that this mid-twentieth century movement consciously attempted to control tropical nature and space to create art and artifacts (Stepan 2001: 210). This is also true of Sri Lanka's tropical modernists whose effort to weave their structures into the surrounding environment must also be seen as a form of control and regulation of space, however, it is worth emphasizing that the desired effect is always something quite different. The desire is to create the illusion that there is little control of nature and space, of structures that exist in harmony with site; timeless structures that seem to emerge from the over-abundant surrounding tropical nature. As one architect put it, "...they're commonplace buildings from commonplace materials... So that they become buildings that ... when you look at those buildings in the landscape they look like they've always been part of that landscape – commonplace" (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).



Figure 3. Lecture Theatre, Institute for Integral Education, Piliyandala  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

What is particularly revealing here is the tension in the use of the word 'landscape'. For landscape is a painterly term which holds within it implications of distanciation, visuality and the scenic (see Cosgrove & Daniels 1988; Cosgrove 1984). Here, however, the term is used quite unproblematically to convey a sense that the desire is to collapse site and structure

into one another, to create and produce their inseparability through ways of dealing with tropical nature that actually provides a challenge to the over-riding visuality of European landscape aesthetics (Stepan 2001: 208). Although the word 'landscape' is used by the above quoted architect to reflect on this built space, s/he was also at pains to point out that one of the fundamental precepts of this architecture is its ability to collapse the distance between subject and the surrounding environment: "Because he [Bawa] firmly believed that buildings were not meant to be seen, but they were meant to be background to people's lives... So if you're in the building you hardly sort of notice they're around" (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).



Figure 4. Polontalawa Estate Bungalow, Polontalawa  
(Source: Archnet digital library  
[http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.tcl?location\\_id=9012&image\\_id=50571](http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.tcl?location_id=9012&image_id=50571))

It should be no surprise then that one of the guiding philosophies of Sri Lanka's tropical modernist architectural praxis that has emerged from this necessity to build *with* tropical nature, is the attention to producing *spatial experience* rather than visually prominent and symbolic structures. This architecture is about building experiences through space foremost; and the fluid connections between inside space and outside space become integral to this process such that the very terms 'inside' and 'outside' begin to come unmoored from their accepted meanings. Many of the design techniques already identified, like for example overhanging eaves, open walled structures and unenclosed rooms, indoor courtyards, and extended through vistas, have all evolved gradually since the late 1960s to become more than just functionalist responses to the need to build with tropical nature. Specifically, they

have become central to the attempt to build certain types of spatial experience, as the same architect stressed:

...the envelope [structure] is not as important as the space you build in. So when you say Geoffrey's contribution, that is ... that your concern with the envelope should not be as much as your concern with the places you live in, what you walk through, what you inhabit (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).

This is clearly identified as a design legacy that pervades this architect's own work:

...a lot of this philosophy comes out in [our] smaller work. Most of our houses look like nothing on earth, it's just a roof and columns, but what it is, it is about moving through the walls, moving past the columns, about the columns, and then engaging the outside, engaging the left space next to the columns and so on. So that is part of the way we work... There is a whole generation of architects in Sri Lanka, our generation and after, who have had to make [buildings this way] (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).

*Producing 'Sri Lankan nature'*

What we have then is an architectural style that not only negotiates tropical nature in a particular way out of necessity, but a genre that also *produces* nature in a quite specific way; or in other words an architectural genre that produces experiences of being in a particular kind of 'nature' that is not easily separated from culture. Sri Lanka's tropical modernist architecture produces ways of living and inhabiting, ways of moving through and engaging fluid spaces, that are at one and the same time human and non-human. In this section then, I offer a few brief examples of these kinds of architectural productions of human connections with the natural world, and highlight some implications of these types of fluid spatiality. As these examples show, this architecture and movement through this built space actually conjure particular types of *bodies and natures in the making*. Those being bodies that do not easily distinguish 'nature' from 'culture', and do so in ways that have over the years become emblematically Sri Lankan.



Figure 5. The porch area attached main house at Lunuganga  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

Firstly, I want to highlight a very small detail again in one of Geoffrey Bawa's buildings, this time at Lunuganga, the architect's own private estate and gardens on Sri Lanka's southern coast. Figure 5 shows the porch area attached to the main house, which opens out to spectacular views on two sides, and on another backs on to a planted well. Just behind the concrete seats that are built into the walls separating the porch area from the planted well there is a seemingly inconspicuous detail that highlights the meticulous architectural attention and effort that has gone into creating an enclosed space in which subjects are supposed to experience some kind of bodily connection with the space outside the porch area. It is the very simple method of not enclosing the bottom frames with glass panes, which the architectural interns told me was a deliberate manoeuvre to allow air to circulate around one's upper back, neck and head when one sits in these seats; it allows the body to breathe.

There are countless other examples of features like this in Sri Lanka's contemporary tropical modernist structures where sensorially, physically, one seems prompted by building design to physically merge with the environment beyond the property. Take the infinity pool, for example, where overflowing water levels spill excess water into a trough from where it is pumped back into the pool, crucially of course creating views from within the pool that extend seamlessly to the lake, sea or reservoir beyond. Although by no means unique to Sri Lanka, the infinity pool has become the swimming pool of choice amongst the country's tropical modernist architects precisely because of the powerful illusion it creates, and the ways that the illusion in turn prompts contemplative moments when the outside comes in, when the subject merges with the natural environment beyond.

These types of features offer examples of tactics used by architects to connect inside and outside through experience, to create fluid spatialities, or as one architect put it: "...it's all about that somehow there is no difference between what's out there from yourself, you are part of that and that is as much part of you" (Interview with an anonymous architect 16.02.05). But more pertinently, these experiences actually produce particular types of worlds, bodies and entities, particular types of non-Cartesian, South Asian natures and bodies; bodies that do not objectify an external 'nature out there' in their engagements with the world, but rather

live, and are instantiated, through the experiential accumulation of fluid connections between self and world. For many, those connections with an outside in the experiential moment such that self and world merge, where intuition takes over from the five other bodily senses in the experience of everyday life, hold particular salience within Buddhist philosophy. These types of fluid spatial experience where “you are part of that and that is as much part of you” can be, and as I show below are, often philosophically woven through Buddhist truths about the composition of a cosmic universal reality that cannot be known through reason, logic and objectivity alone, but must be intuitively experienced by the mindful subject who seeks to purge him/herself from cravings and desire (as the enlightenment subject may experience reality).

One of the implications of this then, is that despite Bawa’s architectural secularism, and that of probably most contemporary tropical modern architects, Sri Lanka’s tropical modern built spaces conjure spatial experiences that are often interpreted through a very subtly inflected Buddhist (and by extension Sinhala) religio-philosophical framework. This is an important point that raises the specter of a cultural/spatial politics that works and inscribes itself in the national consciousness merely through the experience of space; another example of how Buddhism pervades everyday life and never dwells far from social reality in these parts of the nation-state.



Figure 6. The view south across Cinnamon Hill, Lunuganga, from the main house  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

Two further examples perhaps more clearly demonstrate how a Sri Lankan, Buddhist nature sits squarely within a tropical modern architectural praxis, and also how subsequently we can suggest that Buddhist bodies are produced through the fluid experiential moments in these types of space that tropical modern architects seek to create. Both examples take us back to Lunuganga, and the first revolves around a view from the back of the main house [Figure 6] south across Cinnamon Hill.

In the far distance (invisible in figure 6 because of the photograph’s overexposure) there is a gleaming white temple in the adjacent hill that seems to gaze over the estate. Figure

7, taken in the middle distance, where the architect has placed a large jar under a tree on the hill, plainly shows the temple nestled into the verdant vegetation that engulfs the hills beyond the estate. Importantly, the temple is clearly visible with the naked eye even from the main house. In a book on the estate, Bawa's words offer a clue as to the natural philosophies woven into the aesthetics that he has consciously composed through this choreography of space:

Over the years moving through the garden as it grew, one saw the potential of various areas which had inherently different atmospheres. For instance, the long view to the south ended with the temple, but in the middle distance was a ridge with a splendid ancient *moonamal* tree and when I placed a large Chinese jar under it, the hand of man was established in this middle distance (Bawa in Bawa, Bon & Sansoni 1990: 13).



Figure 7. The view south across Cinnamon Hill, Lunuganga, from the middle distance (Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

Unsurprisingly, there is no easy distinction to be made here between 'nature' and 'culture'; the "hand of man" seems at home in these naturalized vistas (and there is also a feminist critique to be made of Bawa's masculinizing landscape gaze, but that is not the task of this paper). More explicitly though, the kind of environment that composes this view seems irreducibly Buddhist according to Bawa's testimony: the temple, the stupa, being the integral focal point of a surrounding environment that creates the special atmosphere "inherent" to the place. The stupa in fact comes to signify the naturalistic and harmonious reality in which the estate is set, so if the "hand of man" is established in the middle distance, then the stupa

is positively woven into the environment beyond. This is a view, moreover a sensorial slice, of Buddhist nature.

The last example again comes from my own ethnographic research at Lunuganga. I and the two interns I was shadowing were staying in the Cinnamon Hill house designed by Bawa situated in the estate's grounds a short walk from the main house. Characteristically, the house opens out to the surrounding field and encroaching jungle.



Figure 8. The house at Cinnamon Hill, Lunuganga  
(Photography: Tariq Jazeel)

We spent an evening in the porch area chatting about the estate, our conversations set against a backdrop of flickering candlelight and the sound of cicadas, crickets and other nocturnal jungle rhythms that felt just meters away. Curious, I asked one of my companions how he felt being in a place like this. He was silent for a while, before he turned and asked his friend a question in Sinhala. "Infinity", she replied immediately. He thought a little longer before responding, "I feel like my mind keeps making these connections, one after another and another, to infinity. It's difficult to explain, words can't really explain it. Actually in Buddhism there's a good explanation for this." He then proceeded to tell me a story about the Lord Buddha, the Arahata Ananda and their conversations about the search for the sphere of the infinity of consciousness, after which he added that he felt like his mind is growing and forging connections with something beyond himself. Finally, he added that he thought that this type of thing could happen only in this type of place.

In this brief encounter, it is evident that being in these fluid spaces, being neither inside nor outside, in 'nature' nor 'culture', does more than just provide a backdrop for non-secular, non-Cartesian modes of corporeality. It seems that the Buddhist body is effectively *produced* in and through this mode of spatiality, through the sorts of experiential moments that the built space conjures; space becomes an active agent in producing a certain type

of non-secular, non-Cartesian subjectivity. Far from romanticizing this type of experience, however, I would emphasize the very normality of this type of being-in-the-world. In fact, this is an everyday type of engagement with place that tropical modern built space (amongst other modes of spatiality) in Sri Lanka strongly evokes, in ways that are irreducibly and qualitatively different from spatial experiences in European and North American modernist architectural spaces and natures where senses of inside and outside seem much more clearly defined. What emerges then are questions about what types of bodies and subjectivities are produced in and through what is deemed quintessentially Sri Lankan space, and politically, what role do these spaces play in shaping identities, and in articulating particular forms of racialized, and class specific hegemony through the practice of everyday life?

*Representation, built space and the evolution of a genre*

Non-dualistic conceptions of the natural world, as well as bodily experiences of transcendence, infinity or intimate immensity are by no means specific to Buddhist philosophy and experience. Furthermore, it is fair to say that on the whole, tropical modernist architecture in Sri Lanka has avoided explicit religious symbolism, Buddhist or otherwise. However, these riders do not negate the role that Buddhist discourse plays in this architectural praxis, particularly at the point when pieces of *architecture* enter into the broader parameters of society as *buildings*, subject to habitations, manifold public consumptions, negotiations and processes that make meaning from material form. Here in this last section then, it is important to outline the significant role that representation, discursive frameworks and historical narrative continue to play in the evolution and meaning of Sri Lanka's tropical modernist genre, and by extension the role that representation plays in the inflection of spatial experience. More often than not it is clients that demand *how* architects variously story their buildings, and so the instantiation of Buddhist natures and bodies through the sorts of spatial arrangements and experiences discussed in the last section cannot be understood in isolation from the representational frameworks in which these buildings come to be located.

Steadily since the 1960s, Sri Lankan tropical modernist architecture has become more or less emblematic of Sri Lanka. For example, in some of Geoffrey Bawa's best hotels the more expensive suites come fully equipped with a copy of the glossy, coffee table book entitled *Geoffrey Bawa: The Complete Works*, by David Robson (2002). Lunuganga itself is now open as a 'boutique' hotel on the south-coast, its popularity in no insignificant way due to its association with Geoffrey Bawa and the architectural movement that he signifies. Both these observations indicate that these hotels and the spatial experiences they afford their visitors have come to be perceived as an integral part of one's 'authentic' Sri Lankan experience.

Notwithstanding the types of Buddhist sovereignty that are positioned and articulated as 'host' in these modes of hospitality architecture, it is a truism to say that there is now something stylistically quite 'Sri Lankan' about these specific modes of tropical modernist architecture and the spatial experiences they create. Accordingly, many of the country's better known tropical modern architects are increasingly in demand within the rest of Asia. Crucially then, a desire that spatial experiences stand for Sri Lanka – and a particular type of Sri Lankan-ness – has become client driven. One architect who collaborated with Bawa on the Kandalama hotel spoke about the constant battles they fought with their client, Aitken Spence, to author the space. Whilst he stressed how as architects they wanted to keep the place free from any kind of historical reference, Aitken Spence were fairly insistent that given this hotel was to be

located in the heart of the Cultural Triangle,<sup>1</sup> the space should have some kind of historical referent to the region's Sinhala history; the sort of narratives popular with tourists, but as many scholars have shown, variously exclude in their foundational fictions and narrations of the nation (see Bhabha 1990; Perera 1999; Gunawardana 1995). It certainly seems worth asking then whether the types of spatial experiences that this paper has outlined, also get locked into a chain of association and meaning that mobilizes a certain type of Sinhala-Buddhist Sri Lankan-ness through those client driven pressures to reproduce an emblematically Sri Lankan spatial experience.

Another architect spoke of a hotel project for another hotel corporation at Koggala Lake. The brief was to come up with something that utilized the lake and was, in his client's words, "very Sri Lankan". The ambitious and captivating design that the architect presented involved tree houses, decking and pavilions floating on the lake; the inspiration and template of which was one of Martin Wickremasinghe's early works, *Apē Gama* ('our village'). The architect stressed that the narrativization of the design, its connection to all that Wickremasinghe and his work signify, was a major factor in convincing his client of the viability of this ambitious design. Again, for tourists (foreign or domestic) who use this hospitality architecture, tropical modern spatial experiences become locked into a chain of meaning and association that evokes a certain type of Sri Lankan-ness, and this generation of meaning and association is driven primarily by corporate clients.

But this client driven pressure also presents a major challenge to the development of the architectural genre, with some architects who are closely associated with the classical modes of Sri Lankan tropical modernism that emerged with Bawa and Minette de Silva stressing that when they try to innovate, to develop new concepts, clients will tell them in no uncertain terms that their plans are too modern, or not Sri Lankan enough. One architect, for example, testified that "... [clients have] an idyllic idea of Sri Lanka that has been processed through South-East Asia which is now coming back to us because that's what we do, which is a waste for me, it feels like I'm going back in time to something that we've done, meanwhile we need to get on with it" (Interview with anonymous architect 16.02.05).

On the other hand, some contemporary architects known for building more modern and abstract structures and using more contemporary building materials than the vernacular stones, clays and woods preferred by other tropical modernists, employ the sorts of Sri Lankan-ist, tropical modern discourses that this paper has outlined to story their buildings. Even though their structures may evoke more Brutalist design aesthetics and appear stylistically very different to the architectural tropical modernism sketched in this paper, the factors that architects themselves use to draw these disparate buildings into a common genre are the common discourses about the fluid spatial experiences these structures afford the client. It is a certain type of spatial experience wherein 'nature' and 'culture' merge, and inside space flows seamlessly to outside that is deemed 'typically Sri Lankan', thereby is used to knit stylistically diverse buildings into a common *genre*. One architect who I spoke with stressed that although he favors the straight line over the curve and contour, steel over stone, conceptually he perceives little discrepancy between his building philosophy and that of other tropical modernists within Sri Lanka because of the attention he pays to opening the house, to getting the garden on the inside, and to having that fluid link between the inside and the outside. For him, this is what makes his structures "very tropical and very Sri Lankan" (Interview with anonymous architect 21.02.05). Conceptually then, the important point to take from

these notes around representation and meaning, are that the ways space is storied, either historically or aesthetically, play a major role in producing the nexus of meaning in which Sri Lanka's tropical modernist built space and subsequent spatial experiences become located.

### Conclusion

If, as social scientists and other scholars, we open ourselves up to the idea that 'reading' architecture can involve more than just an engagement with the semiotics and symbolic meanings of built structures, then we can begin to see and more cautiously speculate on what buildings actually do in the world as we move through them. In this paper, I have teased out the notion that Sri Lanka's tropical modernist buildings actually produce people and society in certain ways that are irreducibly *different* to ways that modernist structures in Europe or North America might do. Reading contemporary Sri Lankan architecture then becomes a task of engaging not just with architectural intention and authorship, but also with the ways that buildings are used, negotiated with and lived in; what they do in and through society once they become part of the worlds we inhabit.

This analysis has pointed to the ways that philosophically a very different type of 'nature' is materially lived with and engaged in Sri Lanka than in Europe or North America. Here, as will be evident by now, I do not just mean a tropical as opposed to temperate 'nature'. I mean a Buddhist 'nature' that is irreducible to philosophical investments in the exclusivity of an objective bio-physical world 'out there', with super-organic 'culture' rendered as this 'nature's' opposite. What the practices around this built space effectively produce are Buddhist 'natures' from which the human subject is inseparable, connected to, part of, woven into. Reading the complex connections between Sri Lanka's tropical modern architecture and Sri Lankan society allows us to see the ways that those and similar philosophical discourses are made material, produced, in the practice and experience of everyday life in ways that also inevitably shape people. One final and important word though. In the interests of fostering progressive forms of plurality within the contemporary nation-state, and because of a belief in the open generosity, plurality and ceaseless creativity in the current community of contemporary tropical modernists, it is disingenuous and of dubious political logic to cede what have been ostensibly secular modes of architectural praxis to the hubris of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and that is not the intention of this paper. However, this paper does trail clouds of political connotations, and I hope it does raise political questions of the practices that surround Sri Lanka's tropical modern built space. At the very least this paper suggests we take more seriously the constitutive relationships between built space and society.

### End Notes

1. Cultural Triangle constitutes an area defined by the Sri Lankan government linking three historic towns within which many archeological sites are located.

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