

This image was missing from the print proofs, sharing it again in case the lithographer has missed it.

# Rendering Place: On the Importance of Archives

Tariq Jazeel

## What Does a Drawing Do?

Some years ago, I was lucky enough to be able to shadow two exceptional young architects who were interning at a Colombo-based firm known for its work in the “tropical style.” I was conducting research for what would become a book on this kind of architecture; a book that attempted to situate the style within its wider social and cultural terrain.<sup>1</sup> One afternoon, the interns showed me some architectural drawings of an estate on which they were working. The drawings looked fairly typical to my architecturally untrained eye. Straight, clean and fine pen lines marked with precision, confidence and apparent scalar accuracy an overhead view of a plot that could have been any location in the world. The whole plan was scored with marks of measurement that authoritatively denoted metered architectural modernity. “It’s dead,” said one of the interns. She elaborated on what she meant, stressing that she did not like the clean, geometric, ruled-line method of architectural drawing, because it purges plans of the spatial fluidity and sense of place that architects in the tropics work hard to produce. The clean, straight line, she told me, does not lend itself to the interplay of inside and outside that is her practice’s preferred aesthetic register. She went on to explain how, as a matter of course, she and her colleagues overscore the clinical exactitude of technical drawings with a free hand and impressionistic pen, lending to them what she referred to as “a kind of shaky effect” that gives the drawings “life.” Drawing like this, she and her companion explained, aims for a detailed yet simultaneously poetic depiction of spatial design. What became clear to me was that for these architects, drawing was not simply representational in any direct or mimetic manner vis-à-vis the plots or buildings on which they worked. Instead, for architects in this region, drawing performs ideas and geographical imaginations, and as such it acts as a kind of interface between viewing subjects. And insofar as it does this kind of relational work, the practice of drawing cannot be pinned down by the clinical instrumentality

<sup>1</sup> Tariq Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity: Nature, Environment and the Postcolonial Geographies of Sri Lankan Nationhood* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

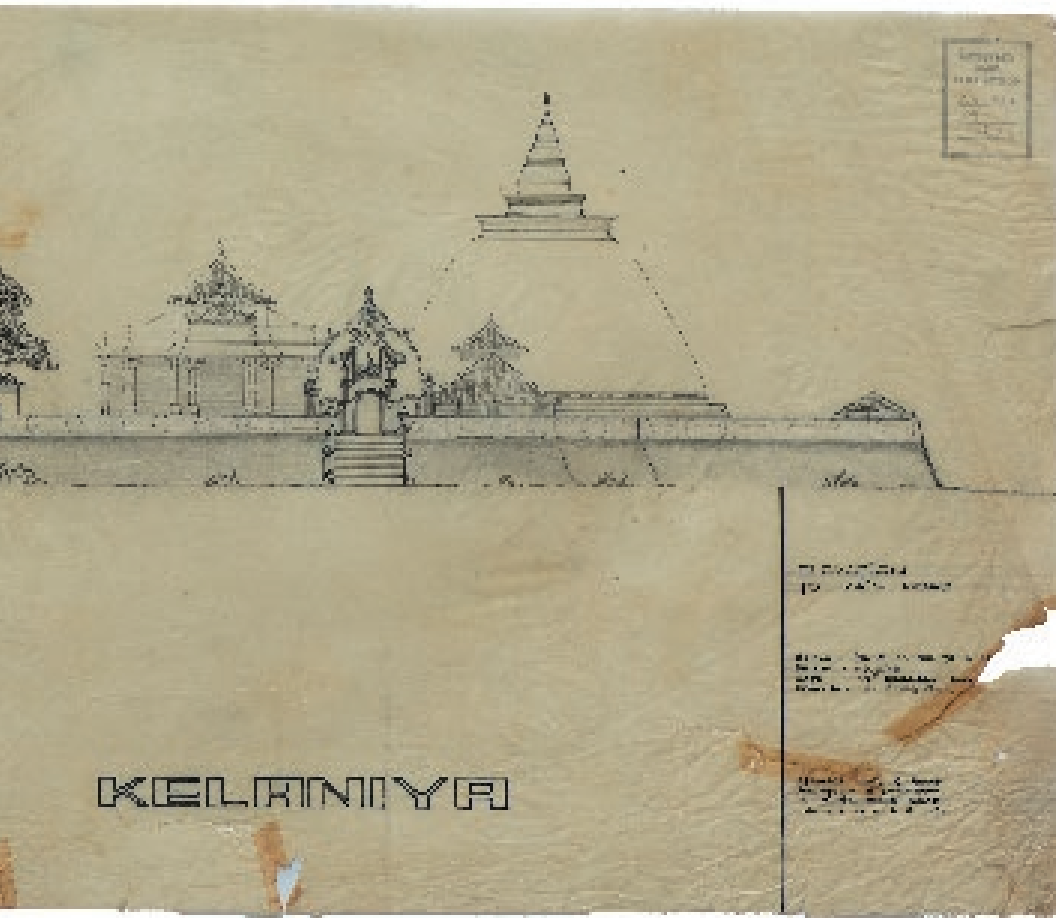


of technical plans. Rather, it articulates ideas, attitudes, poetics and a sense of place.

That this young architect's predilection for what she referred to as the "shaky effect" was no idiosyncratic quirk is a point that the texts in this anthology make very clear. She and her companion told me how, at their architectural school, their instructors look and give credit for this kind of "eye" and aesthetic disposition in their drawings. They referred to the technique as *rendering*, a process that merges technical and artistic process, and one which has a genealogy that is associated with the Bawa office. It was Laki Senanayake and Ismeth Raheem who first began to render architectural drawings this way in the early 1960s.<sup>2</sup> They in turn were influenced by Donald Friend, the now disgraced Australian artist and friend of Geoffrey Bawa's brother, Bevis. Their attempt to render grew out of a dissatisfaction with architectural modernism's uneasy relationship with site, where trees, shrubs and other unique features were represented by abstract geometric symbols whose sole purpose was to locate them on a plot.<sup>3</sup> For Senanayake and Raheem, this kind of abstraction was entirely at odds with the concerted attempt at opening houses and structures out, allowing inside and outside to merge, and building with and through trees, shrubs and other site-specific environmental features and indeed the landscape itself, all of which tactics were emerging as the hallmarks of the style of building practice in postindependence Sri Lanka. To render was, for Senanayake and Raheem, a completely different way of attuning viewers with site, intention and the particular kind of spatial experience that the

<sup>2</sup> David Robson, *Beyond Bawa: Modern Masterworks of Monsoon Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 49–60.

<sup>3</sup> Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity*, 154.



Rajamaha Viharaya, Kelaniya, elevation,  
ink on tracing paper, Turner Wickramasinghe  
(attributed), 1968

Ena de Silva House, Colombo, section,  
ink on tracing paper, Laki Senanayake, 1963



architecture engendered. As David Robson puts it, “Senanayake’s section of the Ena de Silva house, drawn in 1962, using an old fashioned dip-pen, is a phenomenological representation which tries to reproduce the emotional experience of inhabiting the space. The drawing blurs the distinction between the inside and outside and represents trees with botanical authenticity.”<sup>4</sup>

*Rendering* is a word that usefully conveys much more than just a style of architectural drawing. To render is also to make, to cause to be or become. And as I have been suggesting, the drawings associated with the Bawa office do much more than the instrumentalist drawings traditionally associated with architectural modernism; they are drawings that play a constitutive role in causing this architecture to be or become what its architects intend it to mean. They are devices that help an architect convey spatial meaning and experience to those who might view the drawing. They are therefore representations that are a constitutive part of built space’s meaning, and should be seen as such by historians of the style and beyond.<sup>5</sup> This, in part, is why the Bawa archives are such a valuable resource for anyone interested not just in the history of Sri Lanka’s architecture, but also how we might begin to situate this form of cultural production in its wider social, cultural and indeed political currents.

#### Architecture’s Expanded Field

As the literary critic Peter Bürger argues in relation to the avant-garde, works of art are never received as single entities but instead within the institutional frameworks and conditions that help to determine the functions, meanings and social effects of those works of art.<sup>6</sup> Like great writers, musicians and artists, architects too work within historical, social and cultural contexts. Indeed, critics and theorists of modernism have long noted the hollowness of any modernist movement’s claim to artistic autonomy, and as I argue below what emerged as Sri Lanka’s postindependence architectural style sits in close proximity to the mid-twentieth-century emergence of Sri Lanka’s Modern Art movement.<sup>7</sup> The Bawa Archives offer us an insight into the broader terrain of architecture conceived, as I would argue we must, as part of the broader terrain of postcolonial modernism in Sri Lanka, a field of cultural production as much as an autonomous style. To this extent, it is not too much of a leap for the critical imagination to connect the process of rendering, considered as a kind of drawing that helps to produce architectural meaning, to a broader textual field that likewise helps to render the work that architecture does in and through society. For if my argument thus far is that architecture cannot be understood through buildings alone, then it follows that the Bawa Archives can show us the historical, social and cultural contexts through which his work came to mean, and be positioned semantically and symbolically, within postcolonial

4 David Robson, Dominic Sansoni and Michael Ondaatje, *The Architectural Heritage of Sri Lanka: Measured Drawings from the Anjalendran Studio* (London: Talisman/Laurence King, 2016), 35.

5 See Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

6 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 12.

7 For example, see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

8 Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 161.

9 For an elaboration on this, see Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity*, chapters 5–7.

Sri Lanka. As the architect and architectural critic Jeremy Till contends, although the profession of architecture is often thought of as self-contained and internally defined, “the practice of architecture is a set of external networks, and necessarily dependent.”<sup>8</sup> Built space was, and is, dependent on myriad other registers including, for example, client demand, political economy, planning and zoning regulations, prevailing religious and political currents, taste, its own heritage industry and, of course, mere happenstance. But to say it is merely dependent on those external networks and factors is to underplay the role that architecture historically plays in shaping those complex assemblages of political economy, prevailing religious and political currents, vagaries of taste, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, no architecture can be unpicked from the patina of the culture, society and zeitgeist in which it both emerges and participates. In other words, architecture is in and of this world.

Inspired by the art historian Rosalind E. Krauss’s seminal attempt to place modernist sculpture of the 1960s in a relationship to other nonsculptural forms, the architectural theorist Anthony Vidler has suggested the value of what he refers to as “not-exactly-architecture” for understanding the broader ecologies of architectural practice.<sup>10</sup> If Vidler, after Krauss, teaches us that architecture necessarily exists in a broader “expanded field,” then architecture’s archival traces take on huge significance for anyone interested in the archaeological work of placing built space in the broader contextual histories in which it inevitably and invariably participated. Despite Bawa’s well-known reluctance to speak or write about his work during his own lifetime, indeed perhaps because of it, the intertextual terrain of his “not-exactly-architecture” in the archives offers valuable material for contextualizing an architectural practice.

This begs a question of methodology: how might we go about this kind of archaeological work? In the next section, I offer a few scattered speculations on this methodological question by turning to the work not of Bawa, but of his contemporary Minnette de Silva, whose architectural innovation we know influenced Bawa, and who was much more public about her process, influences and architectural intention. Before doing so, however, I want to point to some of the rare instances where Geoffrey Bawa did speak about his work, for these tantalizing glimpses should tweak our interest, push us to the archives, toward the broader expanded field of his practice, such that we might begin to situate and read his work contextually. The examples I tease out are from the 1990 book *Lunuganga*, a project largely steered by Christoph Bon and Jean Chamberlin and photographed by Christoph Bon and Dominic Sansoni but is punctuated with Bawa’s narrative voice, which at key moments wonderfully elaborates on the aesthetic domain of his estate. Though Bawa, Bon and Sansoni share authorship of this

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Vidler, “Architecture’s Expanded Field,” *Artforum* 42, no. 8 (2004): 142–48; see also Rosalind E. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, no. 8 (1979): 30–44.



Front terrace at Lunuganga, gelatin silver print, Christoph Bon, ca. 1988

very beautiful book, fragments in Bawa's own voice dot the text, making its sumptuous content sparkle. Relatively early in the book, for example, Bawa describes the hard and deliberate work of producing atmospheres across the estate; atmospheres that for all intents and purposes appear, as he stresses, both natural and timeless: 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. Now the eye stops here, travels to the glimmer of the lake beyond, to the slope across a long stretch of rice fields and to the stupa on the crown of the far hill across the lake. In this view the vision of the lake was too slight to be effective and it soon became obvious that a part of the ridge needed to be lowered a few feet to make this whole composition establish itself with a total finality which has not changed and now looks as if it had been there since the beginning of time.<sup>11</sup>

What Bawa describes is a view that extends through and beyond his estate, one that he has carefully choreographed to appear and feel timeless. In other words, he intimates that a crucial part of the architectural labor at Lunugana was geared toward seamlessly settling the estate within its historical and geographical contexts. After all, in the composition's "total finality," neither the spatial extent of Bawa's estate nor its historical parameters are in any sense clear. The timeless nature of this view, as well as its spatial fluidity, is precisely the compositional aim. Just a couple of pages earlier, the book remarks that "Lunuganga from the start was to be an extension of its surroundings – a garden within a garden."<sup>12</sup> And much later – in the very last line of the epilogue in fact – in reflecting upon Lunuganga, Bawa defers to the words of a visiting driver who, upon making a delivery, took the opportunity to walk around the estate. Bawa writes, or is quoted as saying, that "when his bricks

<sup>11</sup> Bawa in Geoffrey Bawa, Christoph Bon and Dominic Sansoni, *Lunuganga* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1990), 13.

were being loaded – [the truck driver] said to me – මේක නං හරි සිද්ධි වැනක් (but this is a very blessed place).<sup>13</sup> In this high-quality, black-and-white English-language book, it is significant that Bawa, Bon and Sansoni leave the last word on the estate to one whom we can reasonably assume to be a working-class truck driver speaking in Sinhalese, for this indicates a folkish endorsement of his gentle modernism. It is, in other words, Lunuganga's very ordinariness in that spatial context that makes it a blessed place. If these fragments of "not-exactly-architecture" hint at Bawa's authorial intention that Lunuganga merge into the environment beyond, they also leave open further questions regarding what kind of ordinariness he aimed at with Lunuganga. From which folk does Bawa seek acceptance and why? And in what historiographical context does Lunuganga's timelessness make sense? In the rest of this essay I elaborate on why and how archives might help us in answering questions of this nature by turning to one of Bawa's contemporaries, Minnette de Silva, an architect who, as I have stressed, was keen to publicly contextualize her own architectural practice.

#### A Fish Describing the Water in Which It Swims

Minnette de Silva was the first of her talented generation of mid-twentieth-century Ceylonese architects to begin the process of adapting international modernism to the climate and super-abundant growth of their native tropical environment.<sup>14</sup> She began to practice in 1948 following her return to Ceylon from London's Architectural Association (AA). Unlike Bawa's portfolio however, the vast majority of de Silva's built work no longer exists. As such, any analysis of de Silva's architecture must negotiate its material absence, and it is in this context that we must turn to the importance of "not-exactly-architecture" for a proper understanding of her practice.<sup>15</sup> Our attempts, therefore, to understand de Silva's practice can teach us a lot about how to approach the Bawa Archives.

Having said this, there is no publicly accessible archive of de Silva's drawings or other textual fragments testifying to her practice. However, before she died, de Silva put together a memoir with the help of architect Ashley de Vos, *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, which was eventually published a few weeks after her death in 1998. At once scrapbook, diary, coffee-table book, catalogue raisonné and a compilation of her work and other fragments, it is an invaluable resource for any scholar of her work. It is part bildungsroman, part portfolio, equally committed to documenting family biography, a history of Sri Lanka and her intellectual concerns.<sup>16</sup> It is chaotic, difficult to follow, but also a treasure chest full with de Silva's iterations, thoughts, ideas and glimpses into her main influences, both professional and personal. It remains the only book-length work of nonfiction on Minnette de Silva (at the time of writing), and is a valuable document not

<sup>12</sup> Bawa, Bon and Sansoni, *Lunuganga*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Bawa, Bon and Sansoni, *Lunuganga*, 219.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Minnette de Silva, see Tariq Jazeel, "Tropical Modernism/Environmental Nationalism: the Politics of Built Space in Postcolonial Sri Lanka," *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 27, no. 2 (2017): 134–52; and David Robson, "Andrew Boyd and Minnette de Silva: Two Pioneers of Modernism in Ceylon," *Thinkmatter: Architecture in India* (2015), <https://thinkmatter.in/2015/03/04/andrew-boyd-and-minnette-de-silva-two-pioneers-of-modernism-in-ceylon/> (accessed May 11, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> The combined reasons why much of de Silva's portfolio has not survived materially certainly warrants further and full exploration that is beyond the scope of this essay. While the emergence of a modern architectural heritage in Sri Lanka has overwhelmingly focused on preserving the undeniably important work of Geoffrey Bawa, de Silva's less acclaimed, earlier, and pioneering output has too easily fallen prey to the developer's wrecking ball.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the book, see Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, "Crafting the Archive: Minnette de Silva, Architecture, and History," *The Journal of Architecture* 22, no. 8 (2017): 1299–366.





Spread from *The Life & Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, Minnette de Silva, Tariq Jazeel, 1998

NEW COLLEGE BUILDING  
AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

The problem of the building was to provide a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study.

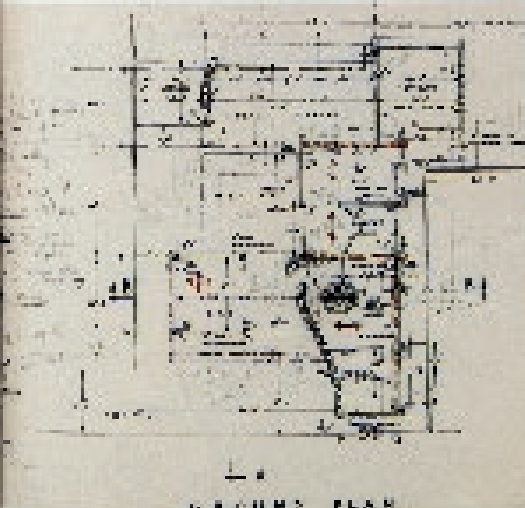
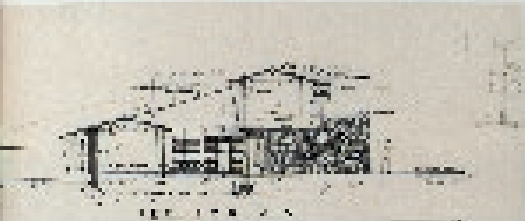
The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study.

The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study.

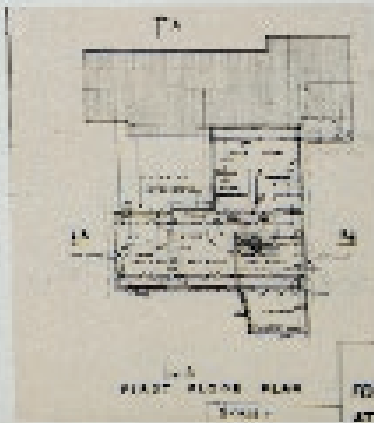
The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study.



View from the study area. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study. The building was to be a place where the student could find a quiet and comfortable place to study.



GROUP PLAN



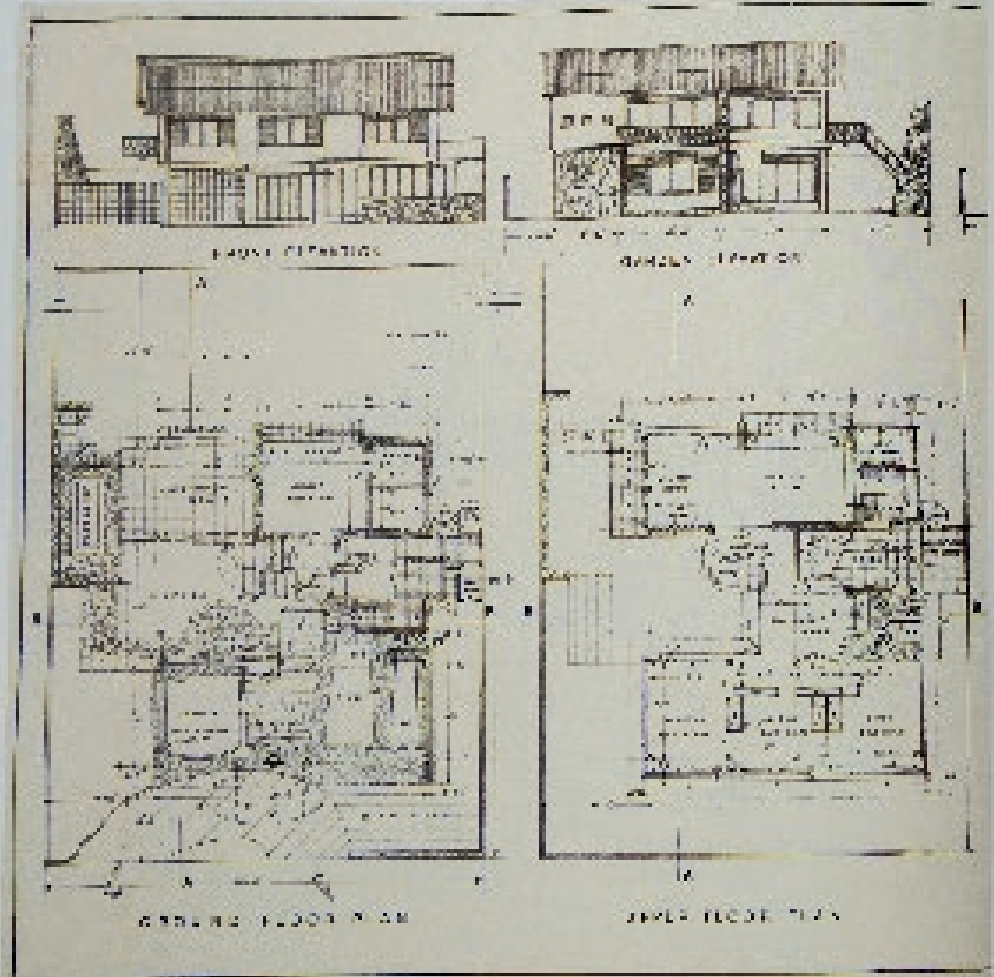
FIRST FLOOR PLAN  
TDB  
AT 200

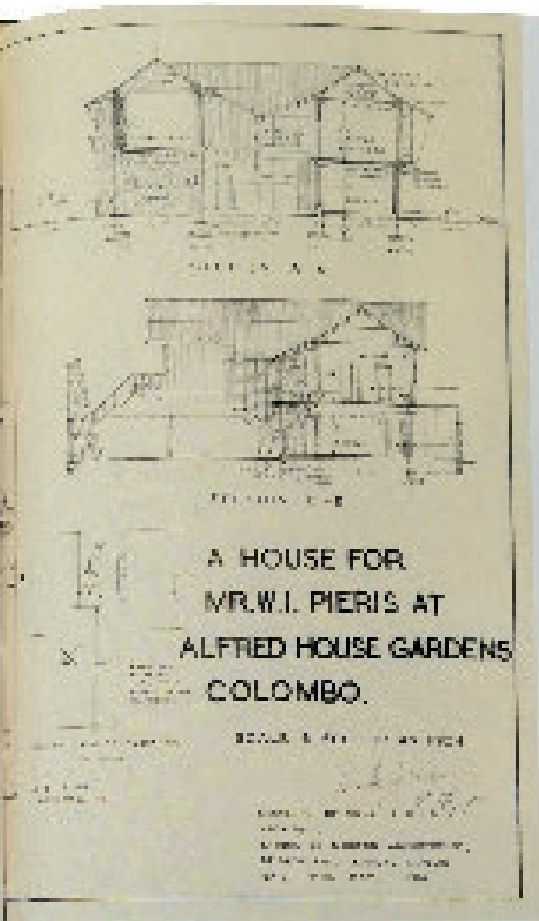
TIERS HOUSE  
 1410 BUNNELL ST. GARDENS, COLOMBIA, 1911-12  
 (Designed by the architect)

High style, classical, and garden, the architect's first and last work in the United States. The house was designed for a wealthy family in the Garden City suburb of Columbia, South Carolina. The architect, who was a student of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, designed the house in the style of the English country house. The house is a two-story building with a central portico and a large garden. The architect's design was a blend of classical and garden styles, reflecting the architectural tastes of the time.

The architect's design for the house was a blend of classical and garden styles, reflecting the architectural tastes of the time. The house was designed for a wealthy family in the Garden City suburb of Columbia, South Carolina. The architect, who was a student of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, designed the house in the style of the English country house.

The architect's design for the house was a blend of classical and garden styles, reflecting the architectural tastes of the time. The house was designed for a wealthy family in the Garden City suburb of Columbia, South Carolina. The architect, who was a student of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, designed the house in the style of the English country house.





Mr. Pieris' house, Alfred House Gardens, Colombo.



Mr. Pieris' house, Alfred House Gardens, Colombo.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HOUSE AT ALFRED HOUSE GARDENS, COLOMBO.

DESIGNED BY H. J. ...

CONSTRUCTION BY ...

...



just because of its descriptions, drawings and photographs of buildings long since demolished but also for its collected ephemera that enable us to place her work in its wider field of cultural production. As the architectural historian Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi has written, the book is valuable because it is a rare case of a fish describing the water in which it swims.<sup>17</sup>

Feminist and Subaltern historical methodologies draw attention to the importance of reading archives across and against their grains, looking for the gaps, tensions and anxieties in private or quasi-public collections.<sup>18</sup> This disposition is well rewarded when it comes to orienting oneself to de Silva's book. From de Silva's memoir we are able to locate her practice within Ceylon's broader postcolonial and ethnonational social and political currents. Take, for example, her description of the 1954 house she designed in Kolluptiya for Mrs. A. Amerasinghe house; walls are pierced with openings influenced by traditional economically designed air vents. There are few solid walls; the main structure is carried by reinforced concrete pillars with R. C. flat slab floors. The enclosing walls of louvered or sliding doors and windows or wood or wrought iron trellises direct every available air draught into the house. The roof space is utilized as an attic study. Note niches for *pabanas*. Notes: the garden, courts and house flow into each other. Materials: flat slab and column structures, woodwork, jackwood polished, colour light cherry sliding doors and windows. (*Pabanas* are oil lamps which are traditionally used for celebrations and temple lights in Sri Lanka.) During the Pirith Ceremony (the blessing of the house by monks) the priest made us all laugh as his sermon consisted of consolation for the Amerasinghes as their house didn't appear to be finished, of course it was – he just did not think there was enough decoration or walls to hold the thing up!<sup>19</sup>

De Silva's clients, the Amerasinghes, were a middle-class, professional nuclear family, both Buddhist and Sinhalese, but not implicated in the populist Sinhala Buddhist nationalism of mid-1950s Ceylon. The priest and monks invited to bless the house represent a public institution (the Buddhist clergy) of considerable power and far closer to populist nationalism at the time. As such, what interests me about the excerpt above are the lengths to which de Silva goes to distinguish her modern architectural sensibility from the priest's fear that the house did not appear to be finished. Given de Silva describes an encounter that took place just two years before Ceylon's 1956 ethnic riots and Sinhala-only language bill in a historical conjuncture when there was growing popular dissatisfaction with the pluralist policies of the UNP government, her laughter at the priest's incomprehension of the house's structural integrity performs a kind of distancing from the politicized community he represents. At the same time, by his very presence and the fact of his invitation to perform the Pirith ceremony, de Silva describes a mis-en-scène wherein the structure's nonsecular

17 Siddiqi, "Crafting the Archive," 1301.

18 On subaltern history writing, see Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies* (London: Verso, 2000); and on feminist historical methodology, see Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

19 Minnette de Silva, *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect* (Colombo: Smart Media, 1998), 233. For an extended discussion of this description, see Jazeel, "Tropical Modernism/Environmental Nationalism."

essence is actively inscribed.<sup>20</sup> That the Amerasinghes requested de Silva build a shrine room into the house was, we should note, symptomatic of the growing (postcolonial) normalization of Buddhist aesthetics in the former colonial capital, Colombo. In short then, for de Silva the house embodied an architected teleology wherein the sacred, Buddhism, is allowed to become modern and cosmopolitan on its own terms, cleaved from the ethnic absolutism that was creeping across 1950s Ceylonese society.

Elsewhere in her memoir, there are clues regarding de Silva's architectural influences. Though we know the universalism of Corbusian classicism inspired her work, she stresses how it was Patrick Geddes's work in India that impelled her toward a genuinely Ceylonese form of architectural modernism. She was inspired by Geddes's notion of *conservative surgery*, which advocated modern improvements sensitized to the roots of regional culture. In conservative surgery de Silva saw a road map for a new, vanguardist Ceylonese architecture offering an avowedly postcolonial departure that walked in step with Ceylon's political ambition toward independence. Conservative surgery held the potential to concretize a rupture with the standardizations of colonial architecture, anticipating many local iterations of modern architecture across the world. And as de Silva put it, Geddes's conservative surgery provided "the perfect counter-balance to the Corbusian classical; the two complementing each other became the foundation for most of my thinking."<sup>21</sup>

De Silva's architecture then was, just like Bawa's efforts at Lunuganga, a search for the ordinary, for the historical, despite its resolute modernism. In this respect, she found architectural inspiration in the ethnicized craft histories and traditions outlined in Ananda Coomaraswamy's seminal 1908 monograph *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, which was a manifesto of sorts for a modern revival of the Sinhala arts and crafts tradition that had much of its historical provenance in the Kandyan Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> (The Kandyan Kingdom being the interior, high-country, monarchical territory where, until the British conquered the kingdom in 1815, a succession of Sinhala kings had held out against European colonization.) Indeed, de Silva's own book pays homage to Coomaraswamy's 1908 text, and to his work, such that we can surmise how, for de Silva, her work not only had a geographical foundation in the former Kandyan Kingdom, it was explicitly congruent with Kandyan aesthetic traditions that were at the heart of postcolonial national imaginations. For example, she emphasizes that, "[m]y parents had kept our roots intact for my generation, but now I had to interpret this in architecture. I decided to live in Kandy, it being the center of Ceylon and the heart of our *national tradition*."<sup>23</sup>

De Silva's equation of Coomaraswamy's historical narrative about Kandyan Sinhala craft with an understanding of the pre-colonial nation-state thought retroactively as Sinhalese was not,

20 In Sri Lanka, Pirith ceremonies are a form of ritual blessing involving chants recited by Buddhist monks and the tying of blessed strings. The ceremonies are typically for both protection and blessing, and are commonly performed in new homes.

21 De Silva, *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, 100.

22 For a critical discussion of the relevance of Coomaraswamy's book in the context of Sri Lanka's postcolonial history, see Pradeep Jeganathan, "Discovery: Anthropology, Nationalist Thought, Thamothersampillai Shanaathanan, and an Uncertain Descent into the Ordinary," in *Violence*, ed. Neil L. Whitehead (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004), 185–202.

23 De Silva, *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, 100 (emphasis mine).

however, entirely of her own making, and this is where we should be careful to place her work in the broader context of modernist discourse at the time. As her book attests, she was deeply influenced by her association with Sri Lanka's '43 Group, and in particular her friendship with the painter George Keyt, who she met through her mother's cousin Lionel Wendt, founder of the group. Through their work, this group of artists advanced their own forms of anticolonial aesthetic expression, which combined distinctively Ceylonese formal and pictorial symbols with European modernist trends such as Cubist pictorial language and Expressionism. Theirs was an attempt to express Ceylonese particularity, but it was a particularity that betrayed the underlying assumption that the contours of the postcolonial nation to come were contiguous with Buddhist (and Sinhala) tradition, whose cultural and geographical kernel was the Kandyan Kingdom. In her book, de Silva reproduces an essay by George Keyt entitled "The Folk Culture of Ceylon," which begins: The survival of folk culture in a small country like Ceylon is astonishing when we take into consideration the later history of the Island. The occasional raids and invasions from Southern India in ancient times were not culturally destructive [...] because the cultural structure of Ceylon was fundamentally an Indian extension. But destructive forces of an alarming nature made their appearance when [...] Ceylon began to stagnate and was finally subjugated by the sweeping domination of three successive powers from Europe. [...]

Largely responsible for the survival of the Ceylonese folk and classical culture was the Buddhist religion, a faith which was somehow preserved through the centuries since Asokan times.<sup>24</sup>

What Keyt suggests here is that the particularity of Ceylonese folk culture is not just that which preceded "the sweeping domination of three successive [colonizing] powers from Europe" but also that which can be parsed from the much more entangled and historically entrenched confluence of South Indian culture. Though benign, this too lives under the sign of "invasion." For Keyt, Tamil cultural, artistic, and formal presence in the Ceylonese polity is marked as arrival and accommodation into a notion of Ceylonese folk culture that he explicitly names as Buddhist. It is important to remember here that historically, island-wide territorial coherence was only achieved when the British conquered the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815, thus bringing for the first time the whole island under a single political administration. Prior to that, the very notion of Ceylon – and by extension Ceylonese folk culture – was politically and culturally chimerical at best. What Keyt, de Silva and other modernists did was to allow the particularity of Kandyan Buddhist and Sinhalese culture to slide over, subsume and discursively territorialise the emergent post- and anticolonial nation.

What de Silva's own archive of sorts tells us then is that for her the ordinariness that postcolonial Ceylonese conservative surgery

<sup>24</sup> George Keyt in de Silva, *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, 144.

## Epilogue

The epilogue of *Lunuganga* is a reflection on the importance of archives and the role of the writer in preserving the past. It discusses the challenges of maintaining historical records and the impact of time on memory. The text is a dense, philosophical exploration of the relationship between the present and the past, and the role of the writer in bridging the two. It touches upon the themes of memory, history, and the enduring power of the written word. The epilogue serves as a poignant reminder of the need to preserve our collective heritage and the stories that shape our identity.





aimed at recuperating following the architectural standardizations of the colonial period had particular historiographical and cultural coordinates. In envisioning a future for postcolonial Ceylon that was fashioned from the cultural afterlives of Kandyan Sinhala craft, as well as from historical narratives of precolonial Buddhist purity that accommodated and tolerated difference in the forms of “invasion” and “arrival,” she was part of a broader vanguard imagination shared by, and perhaps most closely associated with, the ’43 Group. Despite the many differences between de Silva’s and Geoffrey Bawa’s styles, I want to suggest the similarities between the historical and environmental imaginations upon which their differing architectural praxes depended. For when Bawa frames the view across his estate by the stupa that lies beyond – that is to say, the gleaming white dome of the neighboring Katakuliya temple – he situates this view within a low-country translation of de Silva’s Kandyan vernacular. That the lorry driver’s compliment to Lunuganga is reproduced and preserved in the Sinhala script in which it was uttered hints also toward the importance of this low-country vernacular, a vernacular that is as aesthetic as it is linguistic.

Let me be clear in closing that my argument is not to impugn de Silva and Bawa nor to align their work with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. This would be a clumsy misinterpretation of my reading here. Rather, it is to suggest that contrary to much of the rhetoric around postindependence Sri Lankan architecture, their work was never simply outside politics. As forms of artistic modernism – and de Silva and Bawa were certainly among the greatest authors of modern postindependence Sri Lanka – their work was inescapably part of the weft and warp of postcolonial nationhood, despite their own claims to be working beyond the squabbles of nationalist politics. Both were articulating visions of a uniquely Ceylonese modernism. My argument here is that it is only by paying attention to the “not-exactly-architecture” that surrounds de Silva and Bawa’s built work that we are able to begin to do the work of placing their architecture, contextually so, within these wider currents and debates. In fact, the Bawa Archives may even reveal to us the editorial decisions that went into the composition of the 1990 book *Lunuganga* upon which I have drawn in this essay. Paying attention to such intertexts, to such ephemera, to this broader textual field enables us to pose important questions concerning not just what their influences were but also what the effects of their work were. What broader social and political debates did the narrative dimensions of their architecture and their building practices participate in, even as we acknowledge their own desire to sidestep politics, or in Bawa’s case to refrain from talking about his practice? These are important questions, particularly in the context of some of the larger commissions that Bawa particularly was involved in: the Parliament building and

the University of Ruhuna, for example. Archives can help us along with these questions, and thus the opening of the Bawa Archives is an invaluable resource for historians of postcolonial Sri Lanka as much as it is for architectural historians.

### Conclusion

Insofar as rendering is a process of drawing, I have suggested in this essay that we can also usefully think of it as a process of drawing out from the archives the manifold ways that architectural meaning is made. Architecture's intertextual ephemera are not incidental to its meaning. All artistic process is in and of the world, and the opening of the Bawa Archives offers an exciting opportunity for the careful historical and archaeological work of excavating and locating the practice of an architect, Geoffrey Bawa, who was famously restrained when it came to talking or writing about his work. The archives offer an opportunity to demystify what so often are his work's unexplainable qualities and sumptuous pleasures. Explanation though is probably not what we should demand. I have an intuition that we should also be content to continue to let his architectural practice delight our senses and still our souls. After all, unlike Minnette de Silva's practice, much of Bawa's work remains and has been preserved. Among others who have been involved in the tireless work of architectural heritage in Sri Lanka, we have The Bawa Trust to thank for the preservation work that means we can, and should where possible, continue to experience his built space for ourselves. But through a reading of Minnette de Silva's practice, and more specifically her 1998 book, I have tried to show in this essay that the Bawa Archives might open toward ways of locating, contextualizing and situating his practice and process in the broader cultural and social terrains from which it emerged, was commissioned and developed through the course of his long career.

But archives, we should remember, are made by humans. They are the result of decisions; decisions about what to preserve, what to discard, what to hide, and what to celebrate. They are thus not only powerful resources for writing history. They are also riven through with power themselves insofar as they are the result of all those decisions taken that bear upon their eventual shape. To this extent, we should approach the Bawa Archives with something like a forensic disposition, attuned to questions about what it contains, why, and what its gaps, silences, connections and disconnections might be. Equally, however, just as I have drawn upon published work on, and by, Minnette de Silva, there is a vast textual field of writing on Bawa and modernism that we can and should also consider an archive of sorts.