

A Tribute to Geoffrey Bawa.

Some fifteen years ago when Geoffrey Bawa was in New Delhi to judge an international competition I was dispatched by Architecture+Design Magazine, armed with a list of leading questions, to interview the great architect at his hotel. Mr. Bawa politely made me remove the batteries from my tape recorder and declined from voicing opinions on anything remotely controversial. In the event nothing could be reported of the interview to A+D. But we struck up a conversation which rambled on, and in the course of which, he told many tales and shared many thoughts and observations. I remember, particularly, him observing that we architects often forget how important sounds are in our experience of a place – what we wish to hear and what we would rather remove from audible range- he was referring to the sounds of nature – of birds, of rain, flowing water, rustle of leaves; and sounds of people – of conversation and laughs and children playing.....

Later on, as one became a serious student of his work one learnt how architecture was for him primarily an experiential art.

He might have called it “an art of the inhabited space”, to be felt and enjoyed in the course of day-to-day living, by moving around and through spaces, seeing and experiencing what they reveal or hide, their moods changing with the light and with passage of time.

It would be an art for an empathetic imagination of the designer. An imagination which would be able to experience a place he conceives through the eyes of the many visitors who would come and go, and every kind of occupant who would use it.

It would also be an art of conversations with landscapes in the making of places within them, and of appropriating the pleasures and delight offered by natural settings and their cycles of change.

And equally this art would be founded on good sense and rationality of adopting time-tested ways suitable for practical comfort and convenience that are eminently buildable with the resources at hand.

This would make, I think, a wholesome Geoffrey Bawa design guide for an architecture free of ostentation and pretension, to be kept in our pockets constantly, without recourse to elaborate theory or the fanfare of manifestos.

But even so the student would ask “what makes Bawa’s architecture so special?”

Its special quality may lie, perhaps, in the deployment of a simple and direct method with exceptional skill. If it was the method that held the potential of correctness and inevitability in a design proposition, it is consummate skill honed by fine judgment that would bring forth the qualities of place and object with elegance and wit.

The method would draw inspiration not only from the tried and tested vernacular architecture of tropical coastal lands with their cross-cultural traditions, but with equal freedom it would take advantage of new materials and modern techniques.

The success and ready appreciation of this architecture by its host community was due to its ability to extend an inherited aesthetic sensibility - while it responded appropriately to the new needs and aspirations of contemporary life.

It accomplished continuity with change with seemingly effortless ease.

Through the sixties and seventies Geoffrey Bawa, leading a group of young colleagues at Edward Ried and Begg, had built a repertoire of contemporary prototypes for almost every kind of building – homes, schools, institutions, hotels, which spawned a wide following amongst many young designers – many of whom he would have taught at the Katubdda Technical College.

The new tradition was now achieving the status of a cherished cultural treasure at home, and also as a model of an appropriate contemporary architecture beyond the shores of Sri Lanka.

With the opening up of the economy in the eighties came the most significant commissions and public recognition. The work was now known and published widely, and with it grew a circle of friends and admirers across the continents. The RIBA hosted an exhibition of his work.

In 1990 when A+D introduced the architecture of Sri Lanka to the architectural community in India, Geoffrey Bawa's practice was already at its zenith. The New Parliament crowning his achievement in the public domain, The Ruhunu University, and Triton Hotel, were exemplary demonstrations of the Geoffrey Bawa method and skill applied to large projects.

Of the many awards and honours that he received from several quarters, I mention only a few. In 1993 he was bestowed the title of Deshmanya, the highest honour of the Republic of Sri Lanka.

In 1996 the Great Master's Award for South Asian Architecture promoted by the Indian Architect of the Year Award was given to him in recognition of his contribution to architecture in South Asia.

Later, in 2002, a few months after he was taken ill, he was awarded the Aga Khan Award in recognition of a life time's achievement in, and contribution to, the field of architecture.

It is customary and befitting, when we acknowledge a person's greatness to cite instances of public acclaim, but if we were to elicit a deeper understanding of his work, we should return to the person himself and try to get a glimpse of what was close to his heart and may underlie his creative genius.

To conclude our tribute to this great architect and remarkable person, I propose to dwell briefly on his lifelong project – his home and garden at Lunuganga.

It all started when Geoffrey Bawa, already an England-returned barrister-at-law, joined with his elder brother Bevis to help him build his garden at Bentota. This enormously pleasurable experience resulted in two important decisions – to train as a professional architect – which he became at the age of 38! and to purchase Lunuganga Estate where he would build his own garden.

To my mind Lunuganga is the home of Geoffrey Bawa's beliefs and values: It is the making of a "world within a world" in idealised seclusion, and yet paradoxically, establishing a true belonging with a land and its history. A combination of natural settings, buildings and pavilions, which evolved over a period of 40 years; it was a constant activity of shaping, adding and altering, living out, as it were, a romance of a gently changing world of peace and tranquility, in a place of great natural beauty whose nuances were closely felt and understood deeply.

Of the pleasures of human intervention in a landscape - he wrote “I have always enjoyed visual pleasures and nature had often provided marvelous scenes and settings, but equally often human imagination and invention had emphasized this beauty with the line of a balustrade or the formation of a lake. Water was enormously important in any view. Water and the play of light and shade were what gave me most pleasure, and that pleasure enhanced by a line of wall or building – geometry with nature.”

The social setting of this lived dream was a society of generosity and acceptance, where sophisticated and educated men and women with widely differing ethnic origins had learnt to weave the many strands of their inheritance into an elegant way of life with, as someone said, “great style and humorous balance”. Geoffrey Bawa himself is quoted as saying once, when talking of the making of Lunuganga that “It was not tied to any other world except people enjoying themselves within their capabilities.”

The places and rooms made in this inhabited landscape respond also to the many rituals of gracious living attended by simple comforts and conveniences – rituals of arrival and reception, of bathing, of shared meals and convivial conversation, or solitary study and contemplation.

And the objects that form an integral part of these rituals of daily life, or stand by as companions, speak of layers of association with distant pasts, of remembered friendships, and above all of a kinship with the minds who moved caressing hands to fashion their characterful presence.

Ironically, they speak also of ageing, and of the inevitable passage of time, all within the greater scheme of a stable World.

I quote from the Epilogue of his book entitled “Lunuganga.”

“Looking back on the making of the garden, seeing it as it is now, it seems to me to be almost inevitable that it should be there. The first decision to make a garden was taken at a time when – to me – the world seemed stable, almost anything one wanted to do seemed possible and the time was there to do it.

For many years the garden had grown gradually into a place of many moods, the result of many imaginings, some simple, some complex, offering me a retreat to be alone or to fellowfeel with friends, whilst an added pleasure is one of seeing and feeling the reactions to this place, from puzzlement to the silence of contentment, from the remarkable comment of a friend of a friend “This would be a lovely place to have a garden”! to the words of the lorry driver who walked around the garden recently – when his bricks were being unloaded – and then said to me “But this is a very blessed place”.